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Colony Earth (The Alterran Legacy Series, Book 1)
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Chapter 1

THE ALTERRAN LEGACY SERIES

Book 1: Colony Earth

By

Regina M. Joseph

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The Alterran Legacy Series Is Available in Print and Kindle Formats

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Foreword

In ancient human history, an explosion of knowledge of agriculture, building, and steel weapons occurred suddenly, without explanation, and the human population prospered and grew into civilization. According to clay tablets found at ancient cities of Sumeria, the cities were founded by

“those who came from the skies,” who dwelt there and gave knowledge to the citizens. The tablets reveal that “those who came from the skies” had lived on Earth far longer than the age of Sumeria. The principal leaders of “those who came from the skies” were half-brothers Enlil and Enki, who reported to their father, Anu, who ruled on their home world.

The beginning books of this series serve as a prequel to the decision of this race to take an active interest in managing the development of humankind and imagines why an advanced, technological society could have been governed by a small ruling family, while weaving in ancient mythology and recent geological discoveries.

CHAPTER 1

THE HUNTING PARTY

“Land in the clearing directly below,” Lil commanded his ship as he grimaced at the unpacked campsite beneath him. At times like this, he regretted that he’d softened Alterran discipline, but conditions on Earth had left him no choice. Only a tensing of his clean-shaven jaw betrayed his revulsion for the task that lay ahead. Fearful for their survival because their advanced weaponry and food supply might soon be exhausted, he’d ordered his most trusted guardsmen to prepare for this hunting experiment. Three transport craft followed his sleek, silver, triangular *tri-terran*, none of them disturbing the clear blue sky with their invisibility. Descending, he admired the magnificent northern glacier distantly gleaming in the morning sun. Immersion in pristine nature is the only redeeming feature of this planet, he sighed. After landing, he paused a moment, bent his head reverently, stroked his imperial insignia, and whispered, “And so it begins...” Memories flooded his mind of his proud, ancient heritage; he was a direct descendant of the venerable Zeya, who’d ushered in their glorious Age of Wisdom. Now, all that noble achievement might well be lost. He cherished the memories a moment, felt rage rising at the unfairness of his people’s senseless loss, and then cast them aside to focus on the hunt. The survivors’ lives, even the preservation of a glimmer of their civilization’s existence in the restless evolution of this universe, rested on his shoulders.

Standing at the hatch, he straightened his stance and embraced his calm, inner certitude learned from his ages-old training before announcing, “En.Lil.” Recognizing his self-assured voice, the ship’s controls caused the hatch to swing silently upward. A crisp breeze swept through the cabin, rippling his form-fitting silver uniform. He sniffed the pleasant smell of lavender. Squinting into the blinding light of the rising sun, Lil quickly donned his eyewear, fleetingly annoyed at the necessity of physical exertion. On Alterra, the electronic system known as the Net that blanketed their physical world would have instantly implemented his desire for eyewear. Stranded in this primitive prison, he’d made many unpleasant adjustments, never complaining about fulfilling his command duties, even though they required personal interaction with the guardsmen. So different from the life for which he’d been trained. In one lone respect, he was grateful—at least his people had a chance at life.

Although the lower peninsula was warming after being released from the glaciers’ icy grip, the early morning temperature remained frigid. Shivering, Lil felt the nanobytes convert his clothing into the same tightly woven green-and-brown tunic and leggings worn by his troops. For this experiment, he’d had the replicator create knee-high black riding boots like those pictured in ancient histories, only simulated to appear as leather—a material forbidden on Alterra, but one that they’d need to learn to refine in the unpleasant days that lay ahead. He found it sadly ironic that an advanced

society had reverted to scouring its ancient legends for survival guides. Near his shoulder glowed his cherished insignia of the purple sacred triangle, which evinced his imperial rank as second named successor to the supreme leader of Alterra. His destiny was to rule after the reign of Anu, his father. Disembarking, he became visible outside the colony for the first time during his centuries on Earth.

His guardsmen, having spent two days in the meadow preparing, were ordered to prepare to hunt with a wolf pack, horses, hawks, and ravens. He had no guide for reverting to primitive living; it might not be their fate, but it fell on his shoulders to plan for contingencies. Mimicking Earth hunters, the men had created a deep trench toward which they would stampede their mastodon prey. Not yet completely abandoning their weaponry, they'd cut the trench with a laser and carried their soundguns programmed to stun. Lil forbade them to rely on soundguns alone; in the future, if his people couldn't produce power to regenerate the fuel cells, the guns would become useless.

On the perimeter, the hunters' saddled horses stood ready, obeying the newly learned *mencomm* command for discipline. The gray wolves watched in the tall grass, with pointed ears alertly waiting to be summoned, while the hawks circled high overhead and ravens blackened the trees nearby. Twenty guardsmen, lounging around a flickering reddish globe that simulated campfire, ate their breakfast rations. Their unpacked tents and equipment lay strewn about. Normally rigidly disciplined, the men felt exhilaration from their days in the meadow, outside the shield of the Net. A few even succumbed to merriment, using the only objects at hand. Entertaining them was Erjat, a mine guardsman half as tall as the others, who wagered that he'd throw a glowglobe farther than his companion, Mika, would. Mika grabbed the orb from Erjat's hand and balanced it atop his finger, causing it to twirl as rapidly as a twister that he'd seen in his scouting. Drawing back his arm, he threw it in a high arc. Rainbows spewing like colored lightning lit up the expanse of the meadow. The globe danced in the brisk wind along with the leaves of autumn, slowly losing its spin and eventually floating to the ground about fifty yards away. Azazel, the tallest guardsman, laughed and shouted, "I bet one night duty on Erjat."

Beside him, Tamiel grinned, slapping his hand. "You're on!" He looked forward to besting Azazel for once. Erjat ceremoniously bowed with his globe to his jeering audience, but seeing the captain materialize in the meadow, abruptly jerked upright.

Cutting a path through the chest-high foliage with a laser embedded in his dark glove, leaving a charred black streak in his wake, Lil strode toward the unpacked camp. The bushes rustled with scurrying small animals, and escaping multihued birds angrily squawked as they darted away. Nearing his guardsmen, his piercing, cobalt-blue eyes flashed disapproval; he caused his eyewear to become temporarily transparent to deliver his message. *So on Earth as on Alterra, discipline must always be maintained.* The white-haired guardsmen, their normally clean-shaven faces now stubbly, grew silent and fell into line, reflexively cringing with remembrance of the searing punishment they would have received at home. Standing at attention, they gave their captain the sacred triangle salute of respect. Returning their salutes, Lil inspected the line, trusting that, with his recent experiments at building personal rapport, his displeased stare would serve as a sufficient reprimand. Stopping before the tall, hawk-nosed man whose distinctive features, taller height, and muscular physique distinguished him from the others, he asked, "Azazel, how did the tunic program perform? Are these garments functional?"

"Excellent, sir. They insulate well and provide camouflage." His dark eyes focusing straight ahead, Azazel replied formally, yet with a hint of surprise and more inflection than the usual monotone. The past few days had produced many surprises. At first, detachment from the Net had caused them disorientation. Although on Alterra the Net permeated the entire planet, the Alterrans hadn't yet felt a need to expand beyond their colony, ships, and mines on Earth. Here in the meadow, a few men

couldn't stifle the anxiety of isolation until Jared activated the mental connection, or *mencomm*, which permitted telepathic communication. For Azazel and most others who'd adjusted, their increasingly independent mood matched the vibrancy of their verdant surroundings. Azazel, more than any other, was absorbed by the fantasy of stepping into his beloved ancient legends, every one of which he had saved on his recorder.

Since embarking on his experiments, Lil had pondered the men's newfound enthusiasm and wondered if he welcomed it. The structure of their society had been carefully controlled by his family for so long that he couldn't remember a time of spontaneity. Theirs was a time of change, however unwanted, and he decided to be tolerant; to see, for once, what would unfold without his detailed direction. "Resume your duties. Break camp and be ready to go in five minutes." Tamiel exchanged a grateful glance with Rameel that their commander made his own rules, feeling an odd emotion—trust.

Climbing a hillock covered in autumn wildflowers gently swaying in the breeze, Lil saluted his first officer, who stood near the forest path at the head of the double-breasted line of saddled horses. The animals stood with the discipline of trained battle horses, even ignoring the menacing ravens silently lining the branches of nearby trees. "Good morning, Jared," he said amiably, removing his gloves. "It is beautiful here, is it not? Much better when not blurred by cloaking."

"Absolutely, sir," replied Jared with a salute, one of the few men permitted to address him. "And this forest is thick with songbirds, sir. You'll enjoy them."

"Why so many ravens?" Lil asked, gazing at the numbers of chillingly alert birds staring at him. He instructed his tunic to transform into a protective shield if one so much as flapped a wing at him. "We only had implants for a few."

"Sir, we implanted only six. The others follow their lead. We don't know why." Unnerving, Jared thought, as if they were a controlled army. He patted the neck of a saddled, chestnut mare, which the day before he had taught to obey at his mental command. All the horses caught in this meadow had been spotted mares, except for one black stallion that ruled like a king. "These horses are fully prepared for the hunt, sir."

"Good." Lil took a deep breath of the fresh air and admired a dense flock of pigeons passing overhead. "It's amazing what's developing on this planet after the glacier's long reign. But we're here to work. Discipline is a little lax, isn't it?" Lil asked, raising his eyebrows and tilting head toward the glowglobe incident.

"They're excited, sir," Jared replied with a bit of his old fear of the House of En. "After we overcame withdrawal, they diligently applied themselves as you'd expect. Their game this morning was a trifle, sir." Regretting the too-assertive response, he diverted attention by ordering a hawk to perch on his outstretched glove. Being linked with the birds, he much preferred the hawk, which killed for food, to the ravens, which gave him the uneasy feeling that they'd kill for amusement.

Lil scowled. "A trifle? *Nothing* is a trifle." In his own mind swelled his grandfather's derisive laughter at the foolishness of permitting the slightest leniency. *All things are connected, En.Lil. Do not be swayed into inaction because the infraction is seemingly small. An ocean is comprised of individual droplets of water. Let nothing go unchecked.* He felt his stomach muscles tighten, and he fought down the unwanted voice in his head. Grandfather, your methods won't work here. Lil wouldn't extinguish Jared, he needed him. Lil's course was set. He had to move forward, no matter what the cost, no matter what he had to endure. Glancing at the animals, he said with a hint of sarcasm, "Everything *other* than the camp is ready?"

Jared straightened into formal military stance, relieved not to be punished. "Yes, sir. Horses and wolves have accepted the implants and are in position awaiting our thoughts. We can observe through their eyes. The hawks have located the herd exactly where you predicted." He momentarily closed his eyes. Feeling men and animals becoming linked as one through *mencomm*, he gazed through a hawk's eyes as it coasted toward the sparkling river that gushed with late summer glacier melt. He felt the hawk's eyes sharpen as it floated over a grove of tall oaks to a small meadow and spied a small mastodon herd, which casually grazed during a pause on its southward winter migration. Jared opened his eyes. "Perfect timing, sir. I'll have the camp packed in a few minutes."

"Don't keep me waiting," Lil snapped impatiently, although he actually welcomed having a few moments to admire the clarity of the landscape. He'd long observed the lands of Earth but always through the hazy glaze of his invisibility shield. He studied the awakening meadow filled with colorful autumn wildflowers, where the early morning mist still lingered in patches. Craggy hills spotty with crimson and yellow-leaved bushes rose opposite them. "Alterra used to be beautiful like this," he whispered softly with nostalgia as he plucked a wildflower and twirled it. In the forest, ribbons of light streamed through the thick limbs of the fir trees, illuminating the animal trail they would take. Startled, he blinked hard. Did he see shadows moving among the trees? Activating extra sensors embedded in his eyes at birth, he amplified his view. The shadows had vanished, and scans using the sensors in his clothing found no sentient life. "Jared," he demanded through *mencomm*, "have you thoroughly searched this area for Earth people?"

Pulling the lead horses into position, Jared replied, "Yes, sir. All precautions have been taken. Our instruments found nothing, and Azazel led a team that searched with the wolves and hawks." Jared omitted the eerie feelings the men had experienced since the sensors had provided no explanation. Mika had rubbed his neck, exclaiming that something cold had tickled him, but then Mika was always joking. He'd come from guarding the mines, where discipline among the few, isolated guards had been relaxed.

Lil, having been trained in his original youth to observe the slightest nuances, didn't doubt his senses. He swept with sensors while peering through the foliage. Detecting nothing further, he reluctantly ceased; perhaps he wasn't accustomed to the clarity of being uncloaked. Impatient to conclude his distasteful task, he turned away from the forest and asked, "Yamin is recording everything, per protocol?" Lil had considered abandoning protocol to hide their actions, but his ingrained duty saw the importance of an accurate historical record. Would historians perceive him as traitor or savior? It depended on whether any historians lived to tell the tale. At the moment, history was his to mold.

"Yes, sir," replied Jared, hoping that the captain would appreciate the disciplined horses, which were captured only two days ago running wild in this meadow. Seeking the captain's approval was a new motivation, even though all the men remained wary. The House of En was feared, and under successive generations of supreme leaders leading to Ama, Lil's grandfather, they'd deployed technology to become increasingly oppressive. "Yamin found a way to record *mencomm* so that we preserve the animals' visuals, as well as our own. He brought aerial recorders to capture a three-dimensional view with full sound."

"Good," Lil said evenly, although pleasantly surprised that his tolerance enhanced the performance of a few. He commanded aloud so all could hear, "We move out in ten minutes."

The guardsmen packed the remaining camping equipment, using their tunic controls to float their tents above their heads and fold them into small squares. Mika caused the wolves to catch the floating squares in great leaps and then race one another to the uncloaked hovercraft to deposit them in his hand. "Everything's a game with you, Mika," scolded Azazel. "You've spent too much

time at the mines.”

“It’s good practice,” he said, laughing. “All in the line of duty, my friend. Just like Yamin.” Mika pointed to Lil’s adjutant, who was levitating the remaining glowglobes and camping equipment into the ship as if he were conducting an orchestra.

Closing the hatch after the last equipment was stowed away, Yamin reported, “We’re done, Captain. Permission to send the ship to the trench?”

“Granted,” Lil replied, thinking his own departure order to his *tri-terran*.

Picking up swords and knives that glinted in the morning sun, the men tucked them into pouches on their horses. Azazel grabbed the gleaming sword from the scabbard slung across his back and performed a flowing series of lunges and jabs leading to a pose in an ancient fighting stance as the others pointed at him, laughing.

“Now who is fooling around?” jabbed Mika, strapping his own hardware around his waist. “What legend are you fantasizing this time?” He donned a helmet that fit tightly over his elongated forehead.

“Enough!” snapped Jared, his angry order ringing in the men’s minds. Not yet accustomed to the mental communication sounding in their minds as loudly as a shout in the ear, with wide eyes they jumped to stand at attention. Jared angrily strode past them, trying to emulate the captain’s icy stare through suddenly transparent eyewear. “The captain has been indulgent. Far more indulgent than he’d be on Alterra. Mount your horses.” Using *mencomm*, Jared summoned the wolves, who leaped from the tall grass to sprint to his side, startling the horses as the men were attempting to mount. Rameel was thrown to the ground, and he got up shaking dirt from his clothing, a petulant look on his face until the nanobytes cleaned them. Only a few days before, these wild horses had been stalked by the wolf pack. Now, with the implants controlling their minds, they were partners. Jared closed his eyes, concentrating to calm the horses. Use of the forbidden *mencomm* was new to him as well, but he’d learned to control the horses better than the others had. Approaching the horses hesitantly, the men mounted, having learned to ride only the day before.

“Finally,” Lil muttered to himself; at least Ama would never learn of this incident. It would be bad enough if his father or the Council knew. *Grandfather, I perform my duty*, he thought defiantly. If the House of Kan discovered his action, they’d use it to rekindle their claims to the Alterran leadership, a risk he discounted because surely no Kans would long survive. Jared handed him the reins to the black stallion; it tossed its head and defiantly snorted that it was the leader. Unfazed, Lil pulled the reins tight, stared into the stallion’s eyes, his eyewear again becoming transparent, and asserted his control over the animal’s stubborn mind. Still proud, the stallion calmed, standing straight and perfectly still, awaiting Lil’s command. He donned his helmet, stuck his booted foot into the stirrup, and swung into the saddle; he’d absorbed riding instruction from the Teacher. Like his men’s clothing, his boots and tunic had been programmed to grip the animal’s side and cushion his ride. Looking at his men’s faces, he saw their mixed emotions. Tales of ancient legends had always been popular on Alterra, and now they were living one. Azazel and Kamean openly enjoyed it, while Rameel went along only out of distasteful necessity.

“Communicate only by *mencomm*,” he ordered. They galloped closely through heavy forest, the hawks and the racing wolves guiding them. Lil felt his horse’s muscles through his legs. Jared, riding beside him, zapped low-lying branches with his laser to clear the path. After traveling several miles, a sharp squawk from the leader hawk signaled Lil to focus through its eyes. Seeing the steep downward slope leading to the forest’s end, he ordered the group to slow its pace. As they slowed to

stop, they failed to notice the crude shelter covered with foliage, in which two Earth women were awakened by the noise.

Keeping their mental connection, the hunters silently dismounted. Following the path to the forest's edge, they stealthily emerged to scamper soundlessly down the steep hillside, taking up covered positions behind rocks or heavy brush. Lil slid on his belly behind a boulder, flanked by Jared and Azazel. They peered over the top using their eye magnification to study the mastodon herd watering by a small pool near the swollen river. Lil saw the terrain through the hawk's eyes as it floated lower in the breeze and circled above the herd. A suspicious sentry bull lifted its nose, sniffing for predators. Smelling nothing in the wind blowing the tall grasses, the bull indulged in a bite of juicy tree leaves. Calves playfully chased one another within their mothers' circle. The migration trail that had once thundered with huge herds was becoming more sparsely traveled as the mastodon numbers dwindled. These wary survivors stayed close together, the males guarding the perimeter.

Jared ordered the wolves to creep through the tall grass downwind of the herd. When the wolves were in position, the hunters observed through their eyes. "Look at the tusks on that big bull," Jared said through *mencomm*. "He's so big he couldn't have fought during the mating seasons." The bull weighed about five tons, with pointed ivory tusks that extended five meters. From their observations of Earth people, the Alterrans knew that the tusks and heavy hide were valuable prizes.

"He's the leader," Lil observed, scrutinizing the animal through alternately wolf and hawk eyes. "When we make him bolt, the others will follow." Finding a wolf distracted by a squirrel, he said irritably, "Jared, get the mottled gray one nearest the river in line."

Jared gently nudged the mind of the youngest wolf, Gor, while being careful to avoid over-stimulation. *Mencomm* worked better with the more intelligent birds. Gor, his favorite, obeyed. Through his eyes, they now saw a coughing calf, hidden under its mother's belly, being gently stroked by her trunk. With all in position, Lil closed his thoughts to others, desiring to observe in private a moment longer. The guardsmen had extensively gathered data about Earth and its creatures, which their scientists studied at their nearby colony. Glaciers had once covered this entire area, leaving the rapidly rebounding Earth rich in nutrients that fueled the burgeoning life. In this area, they'd recorded diminishing herds of mastodon, while the numbers of other mammals were exploding. The herbivorous mastodons migrated north in the spring for the lush summer vegetation. With their massive size and fearsome tusks, their only predators were hominids; from observing them, he'd had the idea for the trench. After a kill, the hominids' women quickly took over, leaving nothing on the carcass behind. Their teamwork and efficiency had impressed him.

Lil flipped around. From behind, he had heard crackling twigs. Studying the tree line, he detected no motion. Reengaging *mencomm*, through the horses' eyes he spotted two young Earth women crouching low in the bushes. In recent missions when flying in his cloaked *tri-terran*, he'd seen these two gathering plants close to a village north of his colony; he hadn't known that they foraged so far. The pair had caught his attention because their appearance differed dramatically. One was tall, nearly to his shoulder, with light complexion and light, straight hair, while her short companion, resembling what he'd observed of the local tribes, had a dark complexion and black, curly hair.

"They must have heard the horses and followed us," Lil said with an irritation that pierced every guardsman's mind like a sword prick. "Search for others." Closing his thoughts, he clenched his teeth and wondered, *What else will go wrong today?* "One bad deed leads to another," his old teacher Jahkbar had preached during his true youth. He'd been groomed to rule a technologically advanced, cultured civilization, not to personally command small Guard units roaming a primitive planet. This post was Ama's cruel trick. He scanned the brush, switching to the hawks' eyes as they dashed through the trees. He found no one else lurking in the dense brush, although he noticed

unnatural shadows again.

“Sir, revealing ourselves to Earth people violates the Non-Interference Directive,” Azazel warned, wondering why they hadn’t adapted their individual bubble transporters for the hunt; they could then have remained cloaked until the need arose to fire a weapon or to touch a surface outside the bubble. Lil, like all the House of En, never explained his actions. Although he might be a named successor, his father, Anu, was the ultimate authority on Earth; if they made it back to Alterra, Ama would be merciless toward their actions, whatever the merits of their motives. “I recommend that we abandon this experiment and return to Hawan.”

Lil snapped, his cobalt-blue eyes blazing in such fury at Azazel’s boldness that Azazel felt them burning into him. “You should have discovered them before we began. Be glad that I’m forgoing punishment! They’ve already seen us, and this experiment is too important to abandon so quickly. Proceed according to plan.”

“Sir, respectfully reconsider,” Azazel protested, knowing that none of his companions would dare to express a contrary thought. “When they tell their people, they’ll search for us. If Anu finds out, we’ll receive more than a pain lesson. I recommend we deal with this problem now. Since we have no way of keeping prisoners, we must eliminate them.”

“I’ll answer to my father and the Council, not you,” Lil rebuked him, tempted in his indignation to apply discipline there on the spot. He caught himself, realizing uncomfortably how ingrained the instinct to inflict corporal punishment had been inculcated in him through the millennia of his training. He would find other methods to end disciplinary laxness; to his last breath, adapting to Earth would *not* mean abandoning harmony and stability. On Alterra, no guardsman would have dared to question his orders; no one would on Earth. “They’ve done nothing wrong. Causing unnecessary harm is forbidden by our law. Move on.”

Azazel, carefully controlling his thoughts from the cold fury that he recognized as Lil’s probe, dutifully resumed viewing the herd. In prior Earth missions, he had never expressed his thoughts, even though he’d felt that the House of En could use his advice. *Mencomm* must unleash suppressed thoughts, he realized cautiously. He was a fool to believe Lil’s promises; his House planned eternal rule.

Controlling his anger, Lil ordered evenly, “Jared, prepare the wolves to attack.” After Lil focused on the leader hawk and assured himself that the herd’s activity hadn’t changed, he ordered, “Men, return to the horses.”

Passing the hiding women, the hunters mounted the horses. Following the captain, they descended the steep hillside, navigating around bushes rather than cutting a swath by laser. Metallic recording spheres floated alongside. The hunters regrouped in a clearing at the hill’s base, which was hidden from the herd by small boulders, remnants of mountains broken by the glacier. Ahead, down the jagged path veering through the rock bed, lay their trench and waiting ships. The hunters spread out and hid behind foliage while Lil and Jared rode to a higher vantage point. Lil planned to see if the animals could organize themselves to carry out general attack orders. Lil commanded, “Begin.”

Chilling howls came from the wolves scampering to encircle the herd. Straining to see into the tall grass, the bellowing mastodons became nervously entangled as they jostled one another to form a tight defense pack. The hawks and ravens swarmed over the lead bull’s head, viciously tearing into his ears, now dripping blood. They teasingly zoomed to safety, circling back to attack the eyes of one and the exposed skin of another. Rearing on his massive hind legs, the furious bull swatted his trunk into the swirling cloud, only to see its amorphous black shape part and reform into a deadly triangle

ripping a hole into the hide of the screaming, pawing female beside him. She staggered and fell. The fiendish ravens soared high into the air as if they were molecules of a single organism covered by a shadowy blackness, blocking Jared's commands, coalescing into a taught, undulating vertical shaft with a fine downward point. The dark, pillow-like cloud swirled above the herd, its target the unlucky female. Swooping down, they bored into her wound, entering her body and flying out through her terrified mouth until her tattered body tore apart. Having tasted death, the ravens triumphantly squawked and ominously hovered above the bull, which bellowed at them and thrust his trunk through the air.

"Jared, control those blasted ravens!" Lil demanded, appalled at the carnage; they were doing this for survival, not to become savages.

"Captain, when that black shadow appears, I lose contact," Jared explained as levelly as possible, his voice not betraying that his stomach was churning with shame at the thought of being responsible for the raven killing machine. After a moment, he added, "I'm feeling contact again. I'll stop this right now, sir."

"Disperse them and disable the receptors," Lil snapped. "Yamin, be sure that the recorders capture those black shadows."

"Yes, sir," came Yamin's voice through *mencomm*. "The sensors aren't providing any data to explain them."

The swarm ceased the attack, fluttering at eye level to brazenly taunt the bull while moving slowly toward the hunters. Slipping away from the herd, the enraged bull pursued. The hidden wolf pack sprang from the tall grass, growling and nipping at his heels. He spun in circles, lashing out with his tusks. Goring a wolf with his tusks, he tossed it through the air. The wolves reformed at the bull's rear, snarling and nipping at him. Shaking his injured head, the bull galloped to rejoin his herd. Agitated, the mastodons jerkily paced their tight circle, raising their trunks to angrily trumpet at their attackers. Mothers closely guarded their calves.

Watching through wolf eyes, Jared instructed the wolf pack to avoid the bulls, not wanting to lose another; the implants were in short supply, and they might depend on these animals in the future. The wolves again circled the herd, gradually coming closer until they could nip the heels of undefended females while the swarming hawks distracted the males. In disarray, the mastodons loosened their circle, and the sickly calf separated from its mother. Frightened and coughing blood, it bolted down the river trail with the wolves racing in pursuit. Unable to find her calf, the mother repeatedly bellowed until she glimpsed it in the distance. Clouds of dust rose as she gave chase, catching the lead bull's attention. With the ravens no longer attacking him, he pursued the female, swiftly overtaking her with his powerful stride. Alarmed at their leader's disappearance, the remaining mastodons stampeded in a panic. The wolves skillfully guided the sickly calf toward the waiting hunters. The two Earth women ran along the crown of the hill, carefully navigating low boulders while carrying their spears and bags of plants, keeping the escaping herd in sight as it rounded the bend. They slipped down a dried streambed and slid behind a copse of bushes to watch more closely.

The calf passed Erjat and Mika, who were hidden behind dense foliage and low-lying rocks sharing their vision with Lil. Through wolf eyes, Lil saw that a sharp bend in the path caused the calf to be hidden from the herd. At his order, Mika and Erjat dug their heels into their mares and raced from hiding to divert the startled baby toward their trench. The bull and female rounded the bend, drawing close, hesitant to diverge from the migration route. Tamiel emerged from the trees and gave each mastodon a low-level soundgun blast. The frightened bull resumed its flight, and the

female followed. The herd thundered behind, maneuvered by hawks and wolves. With the boulder wall growing taller and the winding path ominously narrowing, the lead bull slowed, sensing danger. Azazel dismounted, his muscular legs jumping from boulder to boulder. Eyeing him, the bull skidded to a stop. Feeling cornered, it put its massive head behind a small boulder and began pushing it to clear a path to flee from Azazel.

Azazel waved and shouted by *mencomm*, "Tamiel, look out!" Having shoved the boulder aside, with a snort the angry bull charged Tamiel. His horse reared frantically, its eyes wild with fright. Even with the leggings' grip, Tamiel wasn't able to hold on. Before he hit the ground, his tunic transformed into a protective cushion. Hesitating only a second, the avenging bull charged Tamiel. Azazel jumped. He thumped on the ground between Tamiel and the bull, aimed his gun, and shot a stream of condensed sound waves. Stunned, the bull's head bounced as if he'd run into an invisible tree. He staggered and his eyes became glazed, blood dripping from his damaged ears. Azazel didn't lower his gun. Recovering after a few moments, the bull shook his injured head and bellowed defiantly, ready to resume the attack. Azazel shot again. The bull, yielding to his pain, reluctantly trotted away. The approaching herd, too frightened to slow, thundered past. Azazel called his horse and swung on its back, racing to catch up.

As the gaping trench came into the escaping bull's view, he skidded, attempting to stop before his left foot reached the edge, where the soil crumbled under his weight. The bull grabbed a sapling with his trunk, but the limbs snapped. Sliding over the edge, he tumbled with a loud thud, breaking his neck. The baby and its mother, skidding and unable to stop, shrieked and plunged, the mother breaking her legs and the baby falling on her, moaning pitifully with pain. Dismounting by the trench, Rameel shouted aloud, "What in Zeya's name have we done?" Chest heaving, he ended the animals' agony with a soundgun blast set to kill. Rameel dropped his arm, slid to his knees, and vomited.

The approaching herd separated and slowed in time to avoid falling, a few by diverting a run around the hole. Others confronted the snarling wolves.

"That's enough for one day," Lil ordered, riding down the steep slope to the trench. His stomach was churning with revulsion, but his face showed no sign of it and his mind blocked Grandfather Zeya's castigating voice in his head. *I merely do my duty*, he thought to dispel the unwelcome taunts. Of all the voices ringing in his head, criticism from Zeya stung the most. It had been Zeya who'd returned immense tracts of Alterran land to harmony with nature. As if provoking him, the ravens filled the branches of a giant oak tree. "Jared, I want those disgusting ravens destroyed at once."

"Yes, Captain," he said, concentrating on the menacing birds, abhorring their taste for blood. He exploded five implanted ravens before the frightened flock flew away. "One got away, sir."

"Evil things," spat Lil, listening to the snarling wolves. "Call off the wolves."

On Jared's order, the wolves stopped attacking, gradually leaping to the boulders to wait for scraps. A surviving bull bellowed menacingly and skirted the trench, joining the others who trumpeted in mourning. Gathering along the trench, the hunters congratulated one another, abandoning *mencomm*. Rameel shook his head, sending disgust throughout their minds. He overheard Kamean exclaim, "That was amazing!" The guardsmen weren't accustomed to physical danger, protected by the shield of their rarely malfunctioning technology. Lil showed only by the clench of his jaw that he'd perceived the joy in Kamean's voice. For millennia, his family had dampened people's passions and steered them into a peaceful, harmonic frame of mind. Scientists had frequently proclaimed that Alterrans' peacefulness was conclusive evidence of having attained evolution's supreme level. Sadly, his action might inadvertently prove that the seeds of violence still lay dormant within them.

"What a day!" cried Tamiel, patting his horse's sweaty neck and delighting in his bond with the beautiful spotted mare. He could sense his fellow guardsmen's warm feelings for their horses, even for the hawks and wolves; to a man, though, they hated the bloody ravens and were glad to see them gone. Feeling grimy from the sweat and dust, he made his tunic cleanse his body. His unsoiled tunic returned to its original shape. Yamin dismounted, trailed by the floating recorders, which he repositioned to capture the animals' corpses. "Hey, Yamin." Tamiel touched his finger to a small wound on his forehead, which trickled blood down his cheek. Taking a thin tubular device from his tunic, Yamin touched his forehead, causing the wound to vanish. "Thanks."

"Lucky for you that Azazel was close," Rameel grumbled, shaking dirt from his gloves while his tunic cleaned itself. His unhappiness that it had been up to him to kill the squealing animals pervaded his companions' minds. Kamean or Azazel, he believed, would have been unbothered. Lil had had to have Jared persuade Rameel more than the others to participate, designating him to organize the project. Concerned that they'd underestimated the danger of primitive hunting, Rameel agreed to participate only when Lil permitted them to carry soundguns. It'd been odd to negotiate with one of the House of En, and he'd been astonished when Lil had listened. Primitives were highly skilled, in their own way. Lil hadn't commanded anyone's participation because his plan intentionally violated their law.

Abandoning *mencomm*, Lil wanted nothing more than to end this disgusting experiment. Rameel assumed his usual management of operational tasks. He directed the first craft, now uncloaked, to hover directly above the trench. The cargo doors opened, and devices were lowered lift the carcasses. Azazel removed the scabbard and sword from his back and slid into the trench. As he guided the straps probing the animals' bodies, like snakes slithering to grasp the proper spot, they became rigid to lift the animals. Rameel dangled them, letting blood drain before taking them back for dissection. Shouting came from the hilltop. The young Earth women, spilling plants from their bags, slipped and slid down the steep slope, yelling and waving.

"What do you suppose they want, Captain?" Jared asked.

Azazel, covered with rapidly disappearing blood, peered up over the trench's edge and grumbled, not intending the captain to hear, "You know my position on this."

Annoyed but choosing to ignore him, Lil activated his tunic's universal translation device. He held out his gloved hand. "Stop where you are. What do you want?"

The women, taken aback by the stranger's sharp tone, not in the common tongue but their own language, quickly slowed to a stop. The black-haired woman, little more than half as tall as her companion, was wide-eyed with fright. She lowered her eyes and tugged pleadingly at her friend's arm to flee. Lil studied them, taking the opportunity to discover what these hominids would do when his people permanently revealed themselves. On Alterra, the Net would have told him their names, full histories, and physical readings, and he could have easily converted their essence to nanobots and hurled them away. Here, he had only his eyewear to detect cursory physical readings, he thought with irritation. The women showed no sign of virus or harmful bacteria; Ki had coated the Guard's skin, although he hadn't been sure whether Earth people could be infected by Alterrans when outside their shield. The shorter one's blood pressure was spiking with fear, but the tall one's readings, matching her firm stance and determined facial expression, showed that she was angry, not frightened. Planting her feet firmly, with hands on her hips, the tall one raised her chin haughtily in challenge and glared through emerald green eyes into the covered eyes of the white-haired strangers. Flicking away her companion's arm, she openly studied the line of hunters, not wincing at the sight of their pale, luminous skin or superior weapons. As if reprimanding servants, she demanded, "Strangers, this part of Albion is *our* land. You've stolen our animals! My people need

these large ones. They're becoming harder to find. Give them to us, thieves!"

The shorter woman whispered, "Alana, run. They'll take us to be slaves!" She steadied her stance, guarding against movement toward her, her hand slipping to a chiseled stone knife tied in sinew encircling her tiny waist.

The astonished men didn't respond, ignoring the women's intrusion and making no outward sign of the surprise and curiosity reverberating in their collective *mencomm*. Not having been visible to Earth people before and with no villages nearby, they hadn't planned for this contingency. Lil, self-assured, relaxed and continued to study this unique specimen. He'd known that the filthy Earth people staying in this area planned their hunts, a slim sign of intelligence. But so did wolves. This well-proportioned woman with clear skin and delicate facial features, he supposed, would be considered beautiful even by his own people. She bore weapons but had the hubris to feel that her mere words cast a sufficient attack. She reminded him of his saucy little pets.

Unaccustomed to being ignored, the woman narrowed her eyes indignantly, pointed her ivory-ringed finger and scolded, "You've not even thanked the animals' spirits for giving their lives for yours." Growing bolder, she pointed to the trench and admonished, "You don't know what you're doing! You'll ruin the kills unless you dress them right away." She folded her arms, replanted her feet firmly, and stared icily.

Wondering if she spoke a grain of truth, the hunters glanced at one another until Azazel began a low growling laugh that infected them all. The young woman's eyes darkened at the men's disrespect, glaring as if throwing daggers. Lil had thought his men's appearance would scare away any Earth people crossing their path; she must perceive sufficient resemblance to mistake them for mere travelers. Remembering the women who followed the Earth hunters, he reasoned, these creatures could be of use, furthering their experiment. "We mean your people no harm," he said in a courtly manner, but without smiling. "We traveled from afar and don't know your customs or that you claim these hunting grounds. We, as well, need these animals for our survival."

"You have trained animals and that, that...thing," the taller woman argued, waving her hand toward the soundgun. "You couldn't possibly need these animals the way we do!" She put her fists on her hips, expecting to be obeyed.

Unaccustomed to arguments from Alterrans, let alone primitives, Lil became amused. If he were to rule this world, he'd need to manage the primitives, no matter how much he disliked it. Forcing a smile, he changed his tone and said as if to a small child, "If you help us prepare the animals for transport, we'll deliver one to your village."

The guardsmen were nervous. Among today's many violations of the law, this one could have the severest consequences. Her tribesmen might well believe her tale after seeing, tasting, and feeling a huge animal that had appeared in their midst. Unknown pathogens could plague either of their peoples. And violating the direct orders of Ama would result in painful punishment if Lil were to abandon them to save himself. The guardsmen distrusted the House of En, and Lil's unorthodox command style, although welcome, wasn't yet proven. Unable to stand idly, Azazel leaped from the trench in a single bound, projecting through *mencomm*, "Captain, you've no idea where this will lead." Lil sent a flash of anger at the man who'd dare confront him. Tempted to inflict punishment, he knew that Azazel was his best guardsman and that guilt weighed heavily on them all. He'd asked his most trusted men to violate the law to fulfill his vision. Accepting the consequences, Lil suppressed his ingrained habits.

"We all agreed to this experiment," Lil said sternly through *mencomm*. "Now its success is in

jeopardy. When I deliver the animal, the ship will be cloaked. When the carcass becomes visible, her people will assume the animal was a miracle sent by one of their gods.”

Turning to the women, Lil spoke aloud as if to small children, extending his arm toward the carcasses in the trench. “Will you help?”

Rameel lowered the animals, and Azazel jumped in to position them. Exchanging suspicious glances, the women inched forward to see into the trench. Flies already swarmed. Finishing, Azazel raised his arms, scowling at the sticky mess from the animals’ blood. He backed away and caused his tunic to clean itself. After wiping his bloody hands on the tunic, the new stains disappeared. The taller woman picked up his short hunting blade with the jeweled handle and marveled at the strength of the metal, gleaming as it reflected the sun’s rays. Touching it, the short woman exclaimed, “Ouch,” when she pricked her finger while barely brushing against its sharpness.

“How will you carry the entrails?” the tall woman demanded, shielding her eyes in the bright sunlight.

Rameel, having planned to discard them, now thought better of it and gave Yamin an order to find something. Yamin returned from the ship carrying a container that he handed to the women. The tall one felt the container, puzzled by material that was neither stone nor clay nor made from animal parts. She nudged her friend to follow her. They slid down into the blood-soaked trench, climbed around the dead animals, and motioned for hunters to follow. With gestures, the tall one directed where to make their first cuts. Smirking, Azazel sliced dissecting lines through the animal’s belly. The shorter woman gasped, “Like a knife cutting water!”

When Maya fumbled with the skinning knife at her waist, her friend touched her hand to stop her. “Use theirs.” Seeing Azazel’s sheathed short knife hanging from the strap of his scabbard, she vigorously motioned for him to give it to her, while tugging to separate the hide that he’d slashed. Smirking again, he handed it to her. The tall one narrowed her eyes, displeased by the men’s smirks and bad manners since she was doing them a favor.

The women expertly expanded the cuts of each animal, reaching in to extract the intestines, which spilled out on the ground with undigested leaves from the animal’s morning meal. The removed organs were placed in the box, and the excess was drained and reinserted into the body for transport.

“Yamin, include everything in the record, no matter how uncomfortable it is for us,” said Lil. “We need to examine the events of this day in detail.”

“Yes, Captain,” he replied, repositioning the spherical recording devices that hovered over their heads.

Completing their work, the women shook blood from their hands and delicately stepped across the slippery rocks. Rameel lowered the cables, but they slipped and the animals fell and had to be reattached. But one by one, the animals were eventually hoisted into the holds of the hovercrafts.

“They’re making a mess,” the tall woman whispered to her companion, studying the men and their goods carefully, trying to remember the shape and use of each strange object that they used. “They have fantastic tools, but they must not have done this before.”

Holding up her bloody hands and pointing to her legs, the shorter woman said to a guardsman, “I’m sticky with blood. I need to be cleaned.” She expected to be ignored, having heard stories of slaves who were treated worse than animals. These strangers with their superior ways no doubt owned

many slaves. Instead, the guardsman handed her something he called a towel and demonstrated by rubbing it on his arm. She looked at him skeptically. Did these men not know anything? Still, not wanting to be impolite, she took the towel and hesitantly wiped as he had shown her. "Aggh!" She sucked in her breath with fright. Magic. The blood and grime instantly disappeared, leaving her skin and clothing as if they hadn't been blood stained. She put her head down and whispered, "Look, Alana, it's magic! Stronger than Drood's." She finished wiping her clothing, looking askance at the guardsmen, who studied her as well. "You try it!" she exclaimed, shakily handing the towel to her friend. She rubbed her hands over her clothing with a look of desperation, attempting to remove any taint of magic.

"Much here is magical," Alana muttered as she climbed from the trench and cleaned herself in long, deliberate strokes. Studying the guardsmen, she noticed that their clothing was clean. "Maya, their clothes clean themselves." After she watched the last carcass disappear into a flying ship, unnatural shadows caught her attention. "Maya, look where the horses were. The Droods are watching. The strangers don't see them, or they don't care." Alana's hand unconsciously touched the pouch around her neck with her talisman, and she whispered, "Protect me from the Droods." Funny, she thought, she was more afraid of the Droods than of these strangers with their magic. Maya simply shrugged her shoulders dismissively, her mind too numb to comprehend what the Droods might do. If Alana weren't with her, she'd have run away the moment she'd seen these men.

A loud bellow rang out; a bull had snuck back. Seeking revenge, the bull pawed the ground, shook his head, and charged. Azazel started for his gun that had been carelessly tossed near his horse, but the raging bull was too quick. He snatched Kamean into the air with his trunk and hurled him into the trench with all his might and fury. Reaching his sword as the closest weapon, Azazel slashed the bull's side. Having scrambled to retrieve their soundguns already packed away, Rameel and Tamiel came running, blasting him. Trumpeting defiantly, the bull reared, absorbing the pain. After continuing blasts, he succumbed and ran, shaking his injured ears. The hunters leaped to rescue Kamean. During his fall, his tunic had transformed into a cushion that protected his body, but his exposed head had a deep gash, from which blood flowed profusely like the mastodons they'd killed.

Reaching him first, Yamin laid a finger on his bloodied neck. "He has no pulse!" he cried out, eyes searching for the captain. With confusion, he felt Kamean's limp body and worried about his deadly pallor, with no clear idea what to do. He'd never known anyone to die, and the thought petrified him. Rameel climbed down, began lifting the injured man, and picked his way over the blood-soaked ground.

"Put him in my *tri-terran*," Lil ordered, standing at the edge of the trench. "It's fastest. Quickly! Tamiel, get Kamean to the infirmary before his aura expires." Rameel transferred the injured man into the arms of Erjat, who disappeared into the invisible ship with Tamiel. Within moments, there was a whirring sound followed by a blast of wind as they flew away.

"Wrap this up," Lil commanded, his voice and expression never changing from his constant calm, self-assurance. Inwardly, he felt as if he were caught in an Alterran mud pool, slipping and sliding uncontrollably among a sea of mud snipes as he sought to maintain his balance—it had been one of Jahkbar's favorite training exercises during his first youth, to teach him control under the most unpredictable of circumstances. Nothing was going as planned today, and he wanted to leave before anything else happened. "Rameel, fly the bull back to Hawan and deliver it immediately to the Ministry, to Ki himself. Azazel, you fly the ship with the calf and deliver it immediately to Ki as well. Jared will take care of the animals. The rest of you return with one of them." Rameel motioned for most of the hunters to board his larger ship. It soon disappeared, and the women again heard whirring followed by a blast of wind.

Regretting his commitment but unwilling to break his word, Lil strode to the women, speaking rapidly. "I'll deliver one animal to your village, as I promised. Return there immediately." He abruptly turned toward his ship, ordering it to prepare for takeoff.

Alana caught up with him and matched his stride. "You can't do that. It'll take us at least two days to get back. The animal must be promptly handled or it will be no good. You must take us with you!" She stamped her foot and glared at him.

"Sir," Azazel warned, "one mistake is leading to another! You can't!"

"Azazel, you're of course right," he replied shortly, using all his control to hide his agitation at both the primitive and Azazel. Although he wouldn't admit it, he needed Azazel, the only guardsman with a pure military background and unique skills. As a hobby, he studied ancient battles, martial arts, and weaponry. It had been Azazel who had produced their sharp swords and knives, although they'd originally been created as theater pieces. Worse, he couldn't deny that Azazel was right.

Lil curtly informed the women, "You must return on your own," and resumed his stride, wondering how his father would react if he learned about today. With his father's usual detachment from operational details, Lil counted on him to overlook their routine reports, just as he overlooked the rapid depletion of their food inventory, making Lil bear the burden of finding a solution.

"You asked me to help you," Alana shouted angrily, catching up to him again, "and I did, even though the entire kill rightfully belongs to my people. Right now, my entire village is out tracking mastodon." She ran before him and walked backward to see his face, but was frustrated that she couldn't see his eyes. "You've stolen the very herd that they hunt! You can't give us one animal and then let it spoil!" She pounded her fist into her side and again stamped her foot, with visions of flies and maggots filling the carcass, followed by scavenger birds. This man was more stubborn than even her father, Ewan. But she knew that she always won him over in the end. "You're obviously well fed. We're not. I demand that you take us, as well."

Lil ignored her, preparing to leave and expecting her to give up.

The women whispered to each other. Instead of abandoning their pleas, Alana matched Lil's stride and walked beside him. Maya struggled to keep up behind them. Softening her tone and leaning her head closer with her long tresses blowing in the breeze, Alana whispered, "I know you don't want my people to know about you. I'll create a story that I prayed to the gods for help; they answered our prayer with this animal. I give you my word that I won't tell my people. They won't look for you if you take us." She waited, expecting him to relent.

With Lil ignoring her, she firmed her lips with determination and pursued him. "You probably live far away from here, anyway. Perhaps even up there." She pointed to the sky with a knowing smile and raised eyebrows that implied that she knew his secret. In her childhood, she'd loved the hearth stories about the mystical creatures that appeared in the starry sky. "However," she dictated with authority, "you may never hunt in our land again."

A flash of exasperation crossed Lil's face, and he glanced at Jared, who stood nearby with the horses, awaiting the captain's order. "Wait here," he told the adamant woman. He spoke quietly to Jared, "We've made a mess of this, I'm afraid."

Jared nodded thoughtfully, surprised but honored to be the captain's confidant. "We've interfered with her village's food supply."

Lil thought for a moment and shrugged with resignation. "Regardless what my father might say

about our actions today, I'd prefer to honor that portion of the Code that I haven't yet offended—to help the weak and cause no harm." He paused to give a rueful laugh. "I've offended all my family today, so it won't matter if I give these women a ride. At least some good will come of this if we help her village survive. Our fellow residents of this lonesome planet."

"No one but you, sir, would dare do this," Jared replied with a deep breath, glad that Yamin had taken all the recorders with him. If blessed Anu heard this conversation, nothing would save him.

"For that reason, I'll do this alone." Returning to the few remaining men, he ordered, "Azazel, we're done here, go back now. Take the remaining guardsmen other than Jared with you. I'll bring the last ship."

Azazel looked at him quizzically but said no more. After the men boarded, the ship disappeared. When the whirring and wind ended, Lil said to the women, "We didn't intend to cause you any harm. As a sign of our honor, I'll take you as well."

Alana folded her arms over her chest with a pleased glare. "Good."

Lil studied her indignant stance. He'd been certain that if any Earth people saw them uncloak, they would die of fright, their hearts bursting. Or they'd scream uncontrollably and run away. Nothing like her reaction, which was more than simple bravery. It was almost as if she'd seen his kind before. Not all Earth people were evolving at the same level. She had the self-assurance of nobility. "You were right. I don't want your people to know about us. We must deliver this animal without being seen."

"Everyone is out tracking the herd," she said, putting her finger to her lips in thought. The wind blew her hair, and she pulled it back from her face. "Other than us, that is. We've been gathering plants for preserving the meat and for medicine." She felt the pouch slung around her waist and was dismayed that most of her medicinal plants had been lost. "Ugh!" She scrunched her face in dismay and gazed at the trail she'd taken for any trace; this place was far away from her village, and she might not make it back before winter. If her people became sick, how would she take care of them? But there was no time to search. The captain was far ahead, and she signaled Maya to catch up.

Approaching the hovercraft containing the last mastodon carcass, the captain extended his arm to herd his charges inside quickly.

"Is it safe?" asked Maya, pulling back, her lower lip trembling. "The others disappeared."

Lil laughed, thinking that if this one had been alone, she never would have had the courage to leave the bushes. Taking her readings, he saw that blood pressure was spiking again and her heart was racing. "I assure you, they're fine. They were there. You just couldn't see them. If you've changed your mind, I understand," he said, hoping that was the case.

"You go first," said Maya, crossing her arms over her chest and planting her feet. Alana was always talking her into things, but not this time.

Lil walked up the ramp and turned around with his arms up. "See?" He was amused that the tall one came along as if it were an everyday occurrence. Lil was amazed that her readings showed perfect calm. The black-haired woman, alarmed at being left alone, closed her eyes and followed, one trembling step after another.

Lil called to Jared, "Bring back the wolves and the horses." They'd created a barn at the base of their mountain colony for these animals where Jared would keep them, out of sight of the other colonists.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I'll check on the injured wolf on my way."

The last hovercraft was relatively small, its cargo hold barely large enough for the mother's body. After removing his helmet and gloves, Lil pointed to the seats in the rear and made a sitting motion to explain, and then went to the cockpit. The women exchanged surprised glances at seeing his elongated forehead. They sat for a moment in the dim light. Already the animal was beginning to smell. With no windows in the cargo hold, they snuck out and boldly slid into the rear cockpit seats, careful not to make a sound. Lil grimaced, although he smelled their floral scent, not a foul stink. It doesn't matter, he told himself shaking his head; this disaster will be over soon. They had to fumigate anyway because of the carcass. On his command, the ship rose vertically and smoothly flew at low altitude. Lil glanced over his shoulder to see if they were frightened by the flight, but he found their big eyes intently studying only him. He quickly looked straight ahead and pretended to be busy directing lights on the control panel.

As the ship left the ground, the women gasped with astonishment as they whizzed over the treetops, the images changing so rapidly that they became a blur. After a moment, the tall, light-haired woman tapped him on the shoulder. She withdrew her hand quickly, surprised at a strange energy emanating from him. Undaunted, she asked without fear, "What do they call you?"

"Sit back." Lil snapped with a slight turn of his head, irritated at the trouble they were causing him. Nevertheless, he unwillingly noticed the minty smell of her breath.

The coldness of his command startled Alana. Tempted to lecture him on manners, with restraint she haughtily raised her chin in offense and slid back, folding her arms under her breasts.

Lil resumed pretending that the controls required his constant attention. Nonetheless, he wished he were cloaked to study this fascinating pair. It was like finding diamonds when you were looking for coal. Earth people were disheveled and dirty, yet here were specimens that were clean, their clothing was well made of sewn hide and furs, and they spoke in sentences with clear diction. Sneaking glances as he moved around the control panel, he noticed that the taller one's intelligent green eyes were framed by long, untangled golden hair. The shorter woman's darker complexion and black hair more closely fit his expectation, although she, too, was well groomed and her long, curly hair was untangled. Even their fingernails were trimmed and clean. Each had a tiny bag tied around her neck, and they touched them from time to time, silently moving their lips as if it gave them solace. Each carried a spear made with thinned, pointed stone, and in their leggings, he could see a hidden stone knife. How many other knives might they have hidden?

The golden-haired woman peered over his shoulder, almost touching him but drawing her hand back cautiously, saying in a conversational tone as if she'd not been rebuffed, "My name is Alana, daughter of our leader, Ewan, Earthkeeper acolyte to Zedah and Yoachim, and the medicine woman of my people. This is my friend Maya, daughter of Gwi, granddaughter of Marita the Midwife. Maya is our village's Caller." Pausing to await a response that didn't come, she demanded with irritation at his poor manners, "Where are you from?" Even the most isolated tribesmen knew the common courtesies. She wondered whether all his village's women had died, leaving no one to teach his tribe of young men.

Not waiting for him to answer, Maya giggled shakily. "I've never seen men as tall as you. You're even taller than Ewan and Alana."

Alana leaned over his seat, trying to peer into his face. "Your hair is very light, lighter than mine, and so is your skin. It almost seems to glow." Refraining from poking him, she thought that he looked very clean, unlike the Albion tribesmen not taught by her father. Alana had never been able

to tolerate the smelliness of the men living nearby. She sniffed him and thought that he smelled like her scented soap. Lil grimaced at her sniffing and shifted forward to distance himself. Behind his back, Alana returned the annoyed face but slid back into her seat.

“All your men are good looking!” Maya ventured, emboldened by Alana’s move. “Nearly everyone looks alike, especially with that white hair. Why do you cover your eyes? How does your clothing change shape?”

“Your clothing is unusual,” Alana interjected when Maya paused for breath, “and your weapons are made of a metal that I haven’t seen since I was a small child. It’s not found around here.” Her last remark piqued his interest, but he remained silent. “How did you control the animals?” Undeterred by his silence, Alana observed. “Only Drood can do that. And the machine that shoots sound...” Her voice trailed off, thinking of the litany of strange things that she’d seen today.

Growing tired of his silence, they turned their eyes to the changing landscape passing outside the window. The distant glacier appeared at eye level, and the plain before it was flat. Lil flew at a low altitude over an area rich in game among the small, scattered lakes left behind by the melting glacier. “Look at all those reindeer, Maya. We should tell Maliki to hunt there.”

As Alana had promised, her people weren’t home. She pointed to a spot near the center hearth to leave the carcass. Lil opened the cargo bay door and mechanically hoisted it. Before leaving, Alana said, “As I said, I’ll tell my people that our prayers have been answered by the gods. No one will look for you.” She reached into her bag and handed him something, determined to show better manners than he had. “Thank you. May the Mother guide your way, stranger. Please accept this gift—the bark of the white willow tree. It’s valuable as a painkiller.”

He took it from her, nodding curtly.

“Oh, I need to fix this,” Alana remarked with a broad smile, pointing to her legging and crouching down before he could respond.

Smirking with annoyance, he folded his arms, crossed one long leg over the other, and waited. Alana pretended to tug at her legging, casting innocent glances to study this inscrutable man. *His voice is not harsh, yet he acts with the firm authority of one whose words are never questioned. He’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, but he’s so arrogant with his constant smirking. He thinks he’s superior to us, like an experienced warrior treats a raw apprentice. Even so, he’s young, no older than I. He wears no beard, like the men of my lost island. His forehead is very long. I wish I could see his eyes. He’s only a head taller than I am, and he’s muscular yet slender, not stocky like most in this land. Of course, she chided herself, he isn’t from here. No one here has these magical things!*

“Are you ready yet?” he smirked impatiently, gently waving her to the door.

“Good-bye.” Holding her spear, she reluctantly slipped down the ramp. *The first attractive man I’ve ever met, and he pays no attention to me.* Maya giggled with relief and hugged Alana when her feet touched the ground. To the eyes of the only unseen villager present, a woman too old and infirm for hunting, Alana and Maya had floated down from the sky, and the mastodon carcass had simply appeared out of nothing. The old woman peeked through her hut’s entrance flap and trembled with fear. What magic was this? Was this evil or good? “Are they working with the Droods now?” she whispered aloud with a scowl, shaking her gray-haired head. Perhaps the rumors that Alana would mate Drood’s son were true.

Sighing with relief, Lil commanded his ship to depart. At last, he had time to reflect on the day’s

events. The huge mastodon barely took the wolves seriously, although the birds had performed feats he hadn't anticipated. The wolves would be more effective with smaller prey like elk or reindeer. The horses easily became one with the rider. Even though he hated the hunt, he looked forward to riding again. Today was a start. Nothing about this path would be easy. He would *never* use ravens again. He needed to review the records to study those mysterious shadows. He had to check on Kamean's resurrection. Why had Alana seemed more intelligent than others? An Earthkeeper acolyte and medicine woman must be positions of some significance. Perhaps that was why she had the temerity to confront him, he thought, laughing.

...excerpt...

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