

ASSUMPTIONS – Prologue

It had been 12 years since she had come of age and had unceremoniously been sent off to make her way in the world. After casting about for a suitable career, she'd joined the Planetary Survey Division of the Alliance military. Three orbital survey assignments later she was finally getting a posting to a planet side survey.

“Boots on the ground people, we need as much information as possible before a decision is made to admit a new world to the Alliance.” the briefer had said. “Your first priority is to find and stalk a local. Learn all you can from direct contact with them.” The briefer was a retired Alliance Marine and still spoke like one. She'd found herself constantly typing on her armlet trying to find the definitions of military phrases and words he used. She also knew because of the constant diversions she'd missed part of the briefing. She felt uncomfortable sitting in the briefing room with the 30 other survey members also about to head out to their assigned worlds. Crowds made her nervous, the only time she felt comfortable was when she was back on her ship, alone.

The jump through Hyperspace was uneventful and she used the time to sleep learn the local language of Alnatek, the world she'd been assigned. She didn't really like sleep learning a language; the ear buds didn't fit her ears properly and were extremely uncomfortable to wear. On more than one occasion she'd pulled them out, in her sleep, and missed parts of the language. She wasn't sure how much of a stumbling block that was going to be once she got on the ground.

Trying to make contact with the locals had been a complete disaster for the first 6 months she was planet side. Every species she'd encountered had run from her screaming. She had gotten so frustrated with her inability to make contact she'd kicked the runabout hard enough to leave a foot shaped dent in it. Maintenance Section would be asking questions about what happened to the equipment. Looking at the dent, she was beginning to think that planet side work wasn't as easy as the briefer had alluded to.

She'd been overflying one of the trackless masses of pine forest on the southern continent when the computer on the runabout indicated a sentient species was just a few hundred meters away. He was shorter than she was at about 2 meters in height. Long, snow white hair and beard made her chuckle when she saw it flowing in the breeze. Ankle length robes of rude brown fabric and sandals were the only clothing she saw. A sword and dagger hung from a thick sword belt with a pack and walking staff completing his accoutrements. He was traveling alone, looked to be of an age where making contact with him would be easier than her failures with younger subjects.

She followed him for several months, just a few kilometers behind, drifting at treetop level in the runabout when he was on the move, on the ground when he stopped. With the stealth flyer she'd deployed, for close in observation, she'd learned a great deal about him. He wouldn't hesitate a moment to kill a snared animal to eat but gently used the tip of his dagger to extract a winged insect from a spiders web and release it. He would sit motionless near the edge of a cliff and watch the sun rise or set, smiling to himself. She also started to learn things about herself. She felt emotions she couldn't identify, couldn't put her finger on as to what they meant. She grounded the flyer at night, while he slept, so any sounds it might make didn't disturb him. If he

turned in his sleep, she would reposition it so she could still see his face. Once, when he stumbled crossing a small stream, she cried out and almost stood up in the runabout she was so concerned he'd hurt himself. He had shot back up out of the water almost immediately, dagger in hand and looked directly at the flyer. She froze staring at the screen in the runabout, how could he have known where the flyer was? She'd accidentally switched the flyers comm link from passive listen to active voice; he'd heard her cry out! She wasn't ready to make contact yet, she was still afraid he'd run like the others. When he turned away, still seeking the source of her cry, she quickly moved the flyer and switched the comm back to passive. She'd lost sight of him completely one day after a strong gust of wind had sent the runabout spinning, and was very alarmed until she located him skipping small stones across a pond. From that moment on, she had two flyers in the air at all times, programmed to follow his infrared signature, she was not going to lose sight of him again. She had no clear understanding of what any of her actions meant and decided to ask the ship's database next time she was in orbit.

He was climbing a tree, one day, which she thought was rather odd behavior for someone his age, when the branch he was standing on suddenly snapped and he fell.

He had sat motionless, as he had on countless mornings, and admired the sunrise; the brilliant reds laced through the clouds warned him of approaching ill weather. He'd be needing to find a place to shelter tonight for certain or sooner, perhaps. Looks like it'll be wet hair again tonight, he had thought. He'd need to wrap his sword and dagger in the oil cloth from his pack before the rains started. Thinking about the care of his weapons made him smile. Funny how he took just as good care of them now as he had back then, he commented to the sword. Back then, he thought, how long has it been? After thinking on it a moment more he figured it to be at least 35 years since he turned his back on war and just walked away. Thirty-five years wandering the world, seeing sights that brought joy, sorrow and wonder had brought him more understanding and contentment than he'd ever felt in his younger years.

He'd covered most of the northern continent by his tenth year of wandering. Taking passage on a longship headed for the southern continent had seemed advantageous, but a feeling of unease had kept him awake the first night at sea. The captain had decided it'd be more profitable to sell him into slavery than take him south, an error in judgment that had proven fatal. The crew, on the other hand, thought taking him where he wished to go was much more profitable and dropped him off at the nearest beach after 3 weeks at sea. The incident made him chuckle, he still wasn't sure if the crew had been more relieved he'd dispatched the captain or just gotten off the ship.

The deep pine forests of the southern continent's mountains had produced the strangest of happenings. He'd heard noises, not the singing birds or the wind in the trees but a low humming sound. Very similar to the tiny birds that had lived in the gardens of his homeland, but he never saw any of them. When he stopped to look for them, the humming also stopped. When he started moving again, the humming would resume. He finally summed it up to getting old and dismissed it. Hopping from rock to rock, crossing a stream, he'd lost his footing and stumbled. He'd heard a cry of alarm so piercing and distinct he threw himself upright out of the water, dagger in hand, looking for the source. All was silence in the forest; all he heard was the babbling of the stream around his legs. More getting old hearing things, he wondered?

He'd had no luck with his snares, sling or hooks for 5 days. Nothing to eat beyond chewing on young pine branches, that didn't go a long way but it had kept his stomach from growling at him. During the fifth night, he'd felt a slight movement, almost a delicate finger touch on his cheek, and smelled a faint odor of sulphur. There wasn't enough starlight and the Moon had yet to rise, so he hadn't seen anything. In the morning there were 2 metal squares, a little smaller than the palm of his hand, sitting on top of his pack next to him. Looking closely at them, he discovered they shined like polished metal but moved like fabric. Writing, glyphs, symbols of some sort, in a language he couldn't read, were on the top, sides and bottom of the squares. He didn't know why but he understood the nick in the edge and the arrow that pointed away from it. Pulling the two apart, he found a square of yellow cake inside. It smelled delightful, almost as sweet as the pastries from his youth. Being the cautious soul he was, he took a small crumb off the end and tasted it. Pure Heaven, the flavor was excellent. Waiting a few moments, to make sure there were no ill effects, he smiled and took the cake out of the metal. It wasn't very much, no more than a few bites, he thought of eating the other, if it were indeed the same, but decided to save it for another time. He was quite surprised that he wasn't hungry for the remainder of the day. The same thing happened again, at the next New Moon, when he'd had no luck hunting. The

same feeling of movement nearby, the same delicate touch on his cheek, the same faint odor of sulphur, only this time there were 4 of the cakes on his pack in the morning. Months early, in an alehouse, the locals had told him the mountain forests were haunted. Perhaps they'd been right. Holding up one of the cakes, he had shouted his thanks to the generous ghost who thought it fit to feed him.

The going had gotten tougher and far steeper. The slight chill of autumn in the air, in the mornings, had bothered him more than he wanted to admit. Finding no suitable spot to survey the area, he'd finally decided to climb the tallest pine he could and see what the terrain had to offer for easier traveling. He was a good 20 feet up, still climbing when he heard the snap of the branch he was standing on and the world started tumbling as he fell.