

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face on the right side, looking towards the viewer. She has striking green eyes and is wearing a futuristic, glowing white headpiece with blue light accents. The background is a dark, starry space with faint, glowing patterns. The author's name, 'JANE LINDSKOLD', is printed in a light green, sans-serif font at the top. The title, 'ARTEMIS INVADED', is printed in the same font at the bottom. A quote from David Weber is centered in the middle of the cover.

JANE
LINDSKOLD

"One of the very best things
Jane Linskold has ever done.

I enjoyed it enormously."

—DAVID WEBER, *NEW YORK TIMES*

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ARTEMIS
INVADED

ARTEMIS INVADED

JANE LINDSKOLD



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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To Jim
Here we go again!

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1

Forbidden Areas

“‘Forbidden,’ you say? That sounds promising.”

“Yes, I think it is. Look at this codex, Griffin. Maiden’s Tear has been a forbidden area since before the slaughter of the seegnur and death of machines. There were other such prohibited zones, but they were not as absolutely off-limits as Maiden’s Tear seems to have been.”

Adara the Huntress looked to where two heads—one deep gold, the other a warm, dark brown—were bent with excited concentration over the map spread between them on the polished boards of the long table. Two heads, two men, two friends, both of herself and of each other.

Terrell, the dark-haired man, rubbed a hand against the bristles of the not-quite beard that usually adorned his face, even though he shaved at least twice a day.

“I asked, but couldn’t find out much about the place,” he continued. “Maiden’s Tear was forbidden territory in the days of the seegnur. Since then, it has been shunned by our people.” Terrell looked uncomfortable. “You see, Maiden’s Tear was where many of the seegnur met their deaths.”

“And not one loremaster has explored the area in the five hundred years since?” Griffin Dane asked incredulously. “Not one treasure hunter? I’d think they’d be eager.”

“Not one who is admitting it,” Terrell replied. “We of Artemis take prohibitions seriously. Some say obedience to the commands of the seegnur is bred into our bones.”

Terrell shifted uncomfortably, his brilliant blue eyes looking away from Griffin. Adara knew why Terrell had trained as a factotum, that ancient profession whose first duty had been to act as guide and advisors to the seegnur when they came to Artemis during those long-ago days when the planet had been the most exclusive and sought-after destination resort in all the empire. All who lived on Artemis knew that those halcyon days had ended some five hundred years ago with the slaughter of the seegnur and death of machines.

What only a few knew, Adara and Terrell among them, was that the catastrophe on Artemis had been the beginning of the end for an interstellar empire so vast that their planet in all its rich variety was by contrast less than the smallest spot on a frog’s foot. All technology had not been shut down, and it had been on Artemis, but, even though ships still braved the dark oceans of the void, they were a leaf boats powered by a boy’s breath to what had gone before.

Yet the end of the seegnur had not meant the professions created to serve them had become useless. Even today, the factotum’s training was both wide and deep. Factotums knew how to set up

comfortable camp, no matter the surroundings; how to marshal mounts and servants; how to treat injuries. Additionally, they could advise their employers as how to best interact with the peoples of the various regions. Factotums were a font of trivia, not all of it useless. This eclectic training had kept the profession of high value, even after the seegnur ceased to visit Artemis.

What had only been rumored about the factotums was that, beneath their superficially normal appearance, the best of the profession were as adapted as any hunter or dive pro, reshaped on some unseen level, the better to serve the seegnur who had created Artemis and all upon it.

Not long before, Terrell had learned that this rumor held truth. Adara knew he still struggled with what he had learned, but his discomfort had not been enough to drive him away. Instead, thirteen days after the catastrophe that had ended with the vanishing of the Old One Who Is Young and the flooding of the complex the Old One had called his Sanctum Sanctorum, Terrell sat across the table from the man who had unsettled his world, planning the next stage in their journey.

Griffin, a tall man, golden-haired with warm brown eyes, his skin regaining the tan it had lost during his enforced residence in the Old One's subterranean complex, now rested a finger on the possible destination.

"If no one has been there, how do we know for certain whatever was there wasn't completely destroyed? It's a long trip to make for nothing."

"The lore says thus," Terrell began, his voice falling into the prescribed cadence. "After the slaughter of the seegnur and the departure of those who had slain them, a small band ventured into Maiden's Tear, for they felt that enough that had been prohibited—from flying craft to weapons that fired lightning—had been seen over the preceding few days to permit some bending of established regulations. When they returned, they reported that they had found no one alive in that place, not man, nor woman, nor child, not Artemesian nor seegnur. Following the rites for burial in such terrain, they had dealt with the corpses, so that these would not breed disease. As they had done so, they experienced great unease. Some heard ghostly voices speaking in the winds, warning them away. As soon as possible, they retreated.

"After, so says the lore, the members of this band admitted to great puzzlement as to why the seegnur had fled from Crystallaire, where they had been attending a wedding, to Maiden's Tear. The band had thought to find a fortification or even a weapons cache. All they had found was a single small structure. Although this structure was of exceedingly hard stone and appeared undamaged, it was not large enough to shelter more than a few adults. A mystery, then, and one not to be profaned by either professions or support. The original prohibition was declaimed again. Those who administered the region swore to maintain it until the seegnur should come again."

Terrell bowed his head briefly. When he next spoke, his voice had lost the cadence of lore. "Anyhow, that's what I heard about Maiden's Tear during my training. The same tale was repeated to me when I questioned the loremasters, both those based locally and those who have been pouring in to Spirit Bay ever since word of what happened here started spreading. It's likely a formal conclave will be held before long. I don't need to have the gift of foresight to know that the end result will be the Old One's Sanctum Sanctorum—both the landing facility here on shore and the base out beneath Mender's Isle—will be declared off-limits."

Adara nodded. “I have heard similar rumors. Only the fact that the Old One Who Is Your established himself in Spirit Bay before any current resident was born will save the locals from being proscribed.”

Griffin grinned. “That and the fact that if the loremasters condemned the residents of Spirit Bay they would also need to condemn a considerable number of their own order. The Old One was very popular with many of the more liberal-minded loremasters, something they are all too eager to deny now that they cannot ignore the extent to which he violated the proscriptions.”

Terrell nodded. “Although no one but ourselves and Bruin—and the Old One—know that you came from beyond the void and bear the seegnur’s blood, still your tale of having been held captive by the Old One, especially combined with what was discovered after his Sanctum was flooded, has sorely injured his reputation.”

Griffin returned his attention to the map. “So, unless I am willing to give up any chance of contacting my orbiter, I’m going to need to look elsewhere for remnants of the seegnur’s technology. This forbidden area—haunted or not—seems my best bet. I know you two have said you would help me, but I don’t want you to feel obligated. You’ve done so much for me already. I could ask the Trainers to suggest a guide...”

Adara tossed a cushion across the room that caught Griffin squarely in the face. “Seegnur,” she replied with mock formality, “this huntress begs leave to travel with you.” She laughed, her amber eyes dancing. “It’s no longer about you and your desires, Griffin Dane. Both Terrell and I have our own reasons for wanting to know more about what the seegnur left behind. Since the slaughter of the seegnur and death of machines, the people of Artemis have lived in waiting. Whether or not any of us asked for it, with your coming, that waiting has ended.”

Terrell nodded. “She’s right, Griffin. Matters have evolved beyond hoping we will find some technology you can reactivate. We need to know exactly what your coming has awakened.”

* * *

Griffin went to bed that night thinking how lucky he was to have made friends like Adara and Terrell. Stranded as he was on an isolated world with no hope of rescue in the foreseeable future, he could have fared much worse. He might have been buried in the landslide that put his ruined shuttle permanently out of reach. He might have died in the lingering winter of the mountain heights. He might have met up with people inclined to react with fear, rather than with curiosity, toward those who were different.

Instead, he had been rescued by Adara—slender but strong, quick thinking if given to odd moments of self-doubt. He grinned to himself. And could he deny her beauty? Amber eyes that caught the light like flame; long blue-black hair; sharp, fine-boned features. No ... He couldn’t deny her beauty. He saw it even in the cat’s-eyes pupils and the claws her adapted nature let her form at the tips of her fingertips. Someday, he hoped, Adara herself would learn to see her adaptations’ beauty, rather than considering only their usefulness.

Griffin was drifting off to sleep, cushioned by the warmth of these thoughts, when the assassin came for him. Griffin didn’t know exactly what alerted him that something was wrong. Perhaps he

heard some sound his subconscious couldn't account for. Perhaps he felt the change when the assassin's body momentarily blocked the flow of air from the open window. Whatever warned him, Griffin opened his eyes in time to see a darker figure against the darkness looming over his bed, hair upraised.

Griffin rolled to one side, narrowly escaping the blow that struck down where his head had been. As he dropped to the floor, he heard a dull thud against his pillow.

Momentarily, Griffin considered shouting for help, but the thought died in mid-breath. They were staying in one of the outbuildings on the Trainers' property. A cry would surely bring help, but it might also awaken small children or some of the old folks to whom the Trainers gave a home. A yell would also surely alert the dogs—the Trainers had dozens.

Even as he put distance between himself and his attacker, Griffin realized that anyone who could sneak in through a compound overrun with guard dogs was very dangerous indeed. Therefore, instead of calling out, Griffin counterattacked, his body coming to the conclusion that this was the best course of action even before his thoughts had taken shape.

Griffin viewed himself as a scholar—a historian and archeologist—but the Danes were a warrior clan. In truth, Griffin had learned to fight hand to hand before he had learned to read. Right now he was seriously angry, every bad thing that had happened to him since his shuttle had crashed boiling up and fusing until it was embodied in the figure seeking him in the darkness.

Surging up from the floor, Griffin struck for what his brother Alexander had humorously called the man's "vulneraballs." Either the man could see in the dark—Griffin had met those on Artemis who could—or he was just lucky, for he turned enough that Griffin's blow caught him on one thigh. When he staggered back a few paces, Griffin swung for his midsection. This time he landed a satisfying blow, and the man began to crumple.

Or so it seemed. Griffin was readying a knockout strike when his would-be assailant dropped, rolled, then rose in a graceful leap that carried him up and out the open window. Griffin listened for a crash or some other indication that the man had hit the ground but, if there was one, it was covered by the sudden baying chorus of howling dogs.

Griffin started to rush for the window, halted, and was making a more cautious approach when Terrell burst in, lit candle in hand, unclad except for a pair of loose trousers barely secured around his waist.

"What the..." he was beginning to say when a slender figure darkened the window.

"What..." Adara began, but Griffin cut them both off.

"Someone attacked me. Left by the window. Do you..."

It was his turn to be cut off. Adara dropped from sight. Griffin knew that she and her demiurge, the puma Sand Shadow, would be looking for any trace of his attacker.

Terrell sighed and crossed to light the candle near Griffin's bed from his own. "If whoever came after you is to be found, Adara and Sand Shadow will find him. We'd better go tell the Trainers who has the dogs all stirred up."

* * *

A short time later, Griffin, Terrell, and Adara gathered in the single room that made up the ground floor of the small building they had been given to use by the Trainers. With them was Elaine Trainor. Her husband, Cedric, was still quieting the dogs.

“No one was hurt,” Elaine said, taking the indicated chair, “although a couple of the guard dogs are suspiciously groggy. We’re guessing they must have been darted, since they’re trained not to take food from anyone who doesn’t give specific commands. Whoever hit them had to estimate the dose and we’re lucky they didn’t make it too strong. The dogs were already coming around when Cedric found them.”

“I’m so glad,” Griffin said. “We’ve proven to be unlucky tenants for you.”

“We knew you had enemies when we invited you to stay here. We’re grateful that you aren’t angry that you weren’t better protected. We were sure the dogs would keep you safe.”

“I don’t blame the dogs,” Griffin insisted. “I’m only sorry I didn’t get the bastard.”

“Tell us,” Adara said from where she sat on the ledge of an open window, half in and half out. “what happened.”

Griffin did, ending, “While you and Sand Shadow were trying to track the fellow, Terrell and I searched my room in case he dropped anything. We found this.” He held up a neat cosh, leather sewn around lead shot. “Happens that I recognize it. It looks very much like one that belonged to Julyan.”

“Julyan?” Elaine asked, seeing that the name meant something to her three guests.

“Julyan—once called Hunter,” Adara said, her voice stiff with suppressed emotion. “He was a senior student with Bruin when I was in the middle of my own training. He left Shepherd’s Call some years ago. I heard nothing of him until he resurfaced here in Spirit Bay as an assistant to the Old One, Who Is Young, working on the secret base on Mender’s Isle.”

Griffin mentally filled in what Adara did not say. Julyan had also been Adara’s lover and had thoroughly broken her heart. He’d also tried to kill her not long ago, but if Adara didn’t care to talk about that ... Still, he felt fairly certain that Elaine, her thin features as sharp and alert as one of her own greyhounds, guessed that something had been left out.

Griffin continued, “Julyan enforced the Old One’s rule on Mender’s Isle. He carried this cosh as a means of subduing without killing. I’d thought whoever came into my room meant to kill me, but now I wonder.”

Terrell nodded. “Certainly, the Old One could want you dead. You know things about him that would ruin what little reputation he has left. Apparently, though, he may value you more alive.”

Adara cut in. “Even if the cosh didn’t point to Julyan, there’s reason to think he might have been your attacker. His hunter’s training would have given him the skills to slip in here unseen, to climb up to your window, even to drug the dogs, since part of our training includes techniques for taking prey alive. When Sand Shadow and I tried to trail your assailant, we had no luck. Julyan would have known how to blur his trail to fool even another hunter. Given the number of dogs here, especially the trained trackers, he certainly would have taken precautions to mask his scent in advance. Sand Shadow was checking outside the compound, but I’m guessing she will have no luck.”

Elaine’s disappointment showed. “We were going to suggest tracking with one of our hounds, since—excellent as she is in many things—Sand Shadow is not a scent hunter. If this Julyan was trained by

Benji Bear, though, then it's unlikely even one of our best could find him—not if he took advanced precautions.”

“Julyan is a ruthless man,” Terrell said. “It's best you and Cedric not attract his attention any more than you must.”

Griffin agreed. “We were lucky this time. I think we need to leave Spirit Bay soon, before anyone else gets drawn into our troubles. Next time someone might get hurt. We may be in as much danger on the road, but there, at least, we won't involve the innocent.”

“I think we'll be in less danger on the road,” Adara said. “In the wilds, Sand Shadow and I are much more in our element. It will be far harder for anyone to sneak up on us.”

Elaine looked torn between protest and reluctant relief. “But where will you go? Back to Shepherd's Call? To where your friend Lynn took those you freed from Mender's Isle?”

Griffin hesitated, wondering how much to tell. Terrell spoke with absolute confidence. “Best you not know, Elaine. Best for all of us, if you don't know.”

* * *

“You failed ... No matter. Capturing Griffin was a long shot at best.”

Julyan wanted to protest, wanted to point out that he'd gotten past all those damn dogs, gotten right into the room with Griffin, that even with Griffin waking up unexpectedly as he had, he would have managed. Who could have known that the man was a trained fighter? Griffin had shown no sign of being anything but docile during the twenty or so days he had resided against his will in the complex beneath Mender's Isle.

Julyan wanted to say, “I did perfectly what I set out to do. How could I know a lapdog would turn out to be a mastiff?”

But he didn't. There was a mocking expression in the Old One's cool grey eyes that forbore protest, which made Julyan feel certain that his explanations would be dismissed as excuses.

”We're not giving up, are we?”

The Old One gave a thin smile. “We are not, although I think it wisest if we delay. All the indications are that Griffin and his escort will soon leave Spirit Bay. I have some idea where they might be headed.”

“Where?”

“Crystalaire, or rather, somewhere in the vicinity of Crystalaire.”

Julyan searched his memory. The name made him uneasy. In a moment, he remembered why. “That's where many of the seegnur were gathered when the attack came, isn't it? There was a wedding. Those who were not slaughtered outright fled for the hills. They died, just the same.”

The Old One nodded. “There is a prohibited area near Crystalaire called Maiden's Tear. Both historians and loremasters have speculated that the seegnur fled there because they believed something in the vicinity would help them against their enemies. No one knows what, but clearly they did not find it—or perhaps they did not have time to find it.”

Holding back an instinctive shudder, Julyan asked, “But why do you think Griffin and the others will be going there?”

“Because Griffin Dane is searching for remnants of the seegnur’s technology. That is what brought him to my Sanctum at Spirit Bay. He doesn’t desire mere relics, such as are in any loremaster museum, but more or less undamaged machines. As with my former home, there is little evidence that the widespread destructive measures employed elsewhere were used in Maiden’s Tear—even though they were used freely in the town of Crystallaire itself. Where the hotel stood—the one in which the wedding was being held—there is nothing but a crater.”

“Nasty...” Julyan said.

“I still have friends among the loremasters. Fewer, true, but there are those who continue to reveal my knowledge. From these, I have learned what maps and archives Terrell the Factotum has consulted. The evidence confirms my conjecture.”

Or you conjecture based on that evidence, Julyan thought. You still long to be thought wiser than any other, despite your recent failure.

He glanced quickly at the Old One. He didn’t believe the Old One Who Is Young could read minds, but a man did not live as long as the Old One had without learning to read people as easily as some men read print.

Julyan wondered that he could fear a man as much as he did the Old One. The Old One was small and neatly built. There was something fussy in how he had trimmed his pale blond hair every few days, so that the short cut remained similar to those shown in representations of the seegnur. When the Old One had dwelt in his Sanctum, he had affected clothing that evoked the seegnur. Although now he was a fugitive and had adopted attire that would not excite comment, he remained meticulous in matters of grooming.

The Old One looked like the sort of man Julyan—large, strong, in perfect condition—could breeze with one hand, but Julyan knew from experience that the Old One could throw him across the room.

Yet that is not why I fear him ... Even when I doubt he knows as much as he claims, I am continually uneasy. I know—few better—how he uses those around him. I am useful to him, so he treats me well, but I have seen him step on others with as little concern as I might step on an ant. Even now, unwelcome where once he was revered almost as a king, exiled from his home, I cannot help but fear. The Old One remains a power in the land—perhaps in this whole vast world. Certainly his facilities beneath Mender’s Isle shows that his ambitions are unlimited by more normal concerns.

The Old One’s research had led him to conclude that the seegnur’s technology had possessed an incorporeal element, that the most sophisticated devices had not been controlled by switches or levers or push pads, but by thought. He had also believed that the adapted might hold in their genes the ability to breed those who could use the seegnur’s devices. Implied in this theory was the idea that those systems had not been completely disabled by the attackers, as had always been held by the loremasters, but that, with the right operators, it could be made to work again. The Old One had set about to create those operators—and had resorted to imprisonment, rape, murder, and other atrocities even without any certainty that he would achieve his goals.

The Old One gave no sign of following Julyan’s thoughts, only said mildly, “You will come with me?”

Julyan nodded. “If my reward will be as you promised. I get you Griffin. You give me Adara.”

“I promise.” The Old One’s smile was thin-lipped and cruel. “Griffin has proven solid bait to lure Adara the Huntress in the past. I will get her for you—and deliver her to you better than a captive. With Griffin in my hands, I will have the means of making Adara your willing slave.”

* * *

Well, this will be a journey through the maze of memories, Adara reflected, as she checked the condition of their saddlebags and related tack.

Molly, the pale red chestnut mare who was Griffin’s mount, hung her head over the half-door of the paddock, supervising Adara’s preparations. Beyond her, Tarnish, Adara’s own smoky grey roan gelding, and Midnight, Terrell’s black gelding, were methodically ripping hay from a rack, as if aware the slow, easy days were coming to an end.

First, Julyan, now ... I wonder if Terrell realized that the route he has suggested will take us through Ridgewood, where my family lives? I can’t remember if I ever told him where I grew up. Probably not, since I have lived with Bruin since I was five and Shepherd’s Call is home. That’s the problem with traveling into the mountains. Unless you’re willing to go by more difficult routes, everything narrows down to a few passes.

I could suggest an alternate route, but that would mean explaining why I don’t want to go through Ridgewood ... And that would mean admitting just how insecure I am when it comes to my family. I’m a woman grown now, an official huntress. Surely, I can face ...

Adara’s memories of her early childhood were scattered and diffuse. Her family had farmed and herded sheep. Adara was the second child of five. Initially, she had suffered no more than any young child with a talented older sibling but, eventually, she had come to realize that the differences between her and the other children were more than age.

I could see in the dark, Adara remembered. *All the other children were afraid of the dark, but I wasn’t. What was there to fear? I was as afraid as anyone else of the creatures who came to prey on our flocks, but of the darkness itself? I liked it. It hid me, protected me, allowed me to sneak away ...*

With her more adult perspective, Adara contemplated the child she had been. *I suppose I was a nuisance. I think I knew it even then. Was that why I was so certain—no matter what my parents said when they sent me to Bruin—that they were getting rid of me? Because I knew I’d been bad?*

“What,” asked a voice inside Adara’s head, **“is ‘bad’?”**

Adara jumped, startled enough that she nearly dropped the harness she had been inspecting. Thirteen days was not enough time to get used to someone reading your mind. It was enough time to learn that ignoring the fact didn’t do much good—especially when your new friend was the very planet upon which you lived.

The huntress was still not completely certain what had awakened the planet Artemis from the long sleep that had come with the slaughter of the seegnur and death of machines. She did not think that Artemis was a machine, precisely. Perhaps that was why Artemis had slept when so much else had died.

Or maybe more will awaken. Adara shivered at the unsettling notion.

“Bad...” Adara shaped the words inside her head—at least her relationship with Sand Shadow had

been good training for this sort of communication. She'd long ago learned not to talk out loud herself. **"You certainly don't ask easy questions, do you? Bad is the opposite of good. And good is well ... Good is what is optimal for a given situation."**

The not-voice sounded puzzled. **"So bad is the least preferred choice for a given situation. Therefore, when you think how you-the-child were bad, you were not acting according to what was preferable? Why would you have done that?"**

Adara sighed. **"It's not quite that simple. The child me was acting according to what I wanted to do—what was preferable for me. But I knew that what I was doing wasn't what my parents would have liked—so, to them, my good was bad. Since I knew I was behaving in a way that might be fun for me at that moment, but that might have consequences that wouldn't be so much fun later, I knew I was being bad, even when what I was doing seemed good. Does that help?"**

"No." The word was accompanied by an image of bubbles rising to the surface of the water, the slowly popping, one by one. **"Yes. Maybe. What is good. What is bad. These are not precise. What is good for the owl is bad for the mouse. What is good for the wet is not good for the dry."**

"Something like that," Adara agreed. **"But a lot more complicated."**

"Ah..." And just as suddenly as it had manifested, the sense of another presence faded away.

One of these days, Adara thought, I'll have to teach her social conventions like "hello" and "good-bye." Maybe I'll even manage to explain that it's not polite to probe someone else's mind, especially when they can't return the favor.

She remembered some of the dreams she had experienced as Artemis learned to touch her mind. They had been bizarre precisely because they were filtered through a sensibility that didn't find the images bizarre at all. Adara had talked a little with Griffin and Terrell about their nascent telepathic link. Once the two men had accepted that their minds were able to communicate when they were asleep—thus far they had not managed any contact when awake—then the communication had not been all that different from what Adara shared with her demiurge, Sand Shadow: images augmented by an occasional word.

Communication with Artemis was easier than communication with Sand Shadow in that the neural network—as Artemis had initially identified herself—understood words and used them easily. However, it was complicated because, compared to Artemis, the way Sand Shadow thought was positively human. Sand Shadow hadn't needed to have good and bad explained to her. The puma had understood the concepts in a very basic fashion: bad was what got you hurt; good was what got you fed. The intricacies of different bads and goods could be presented as variations on a theme.

Since Artemis did not really understand hurt or hunger or desire or any of the dozens of impulses named and nameless, that drove other living things, Adara was discovering that she must start from a different foundation.

Foundation? Adara laughed softly to herself. *More as if I must mold the bricks to make the foundation before I can even build a foundation. Still, Artemis is rather sweet in her strange way. I'm not going to push her away while she learns to toddle about in the dark.*

* * *

They left Spirit Bay two days after the attack on Griffin. By Artemesian standards, they were a group of eight: three humans, three horses, one mule, and Sand Shadow, the puma.

Initially, Griffin had found this manner of reckoning very odd.

Sand Shadow was certainly an extraordinary individual. Not only could the puma communicate mind to mind with Adara, she had been adapted so that her front paws possessed rudimentary fingers and thumb. The earrings of which the puma was so obviously proud had originally been meant to help her train in finer manipulation of those digits. Sand Shadow might not be as intelligent as a human—but if she wasn't, Griffin wasn't going to be the one to say so.

The three horses—Tarnish, Molly, and Midnight—were not adapted, although they were specially trained and would tolerate a puma as a companion. Sam the Mule was as ornery as any of his kind, but his strength and tenacity made him a valued addition. He was trained to carry a rider, as well as baggage, so could serve as a stand-by mount if any of the other three needed a respite.

Although, Griffin thought, Sam would have some say as to who his rider would be. If Tarnish or Molly couldn't carry a rider, then I'm guessing Terrell would turn Midnight over to one of us and ride Sam. Sam might be trained to carry a rider—as long as that rider is Terrell.

Although they had left Spirit Bay somewhat shorter of supplies than they had intended, neither Terrell nor Adara seemed particularly concerned.

“We're past the thin times of spring,” Adara explained, “and will be traveling through the lowlands for a good number of days before we go into the mountains again.”

She gave Griffin an impish smile. “We kept you well enough fed during harder times, seegnur. We might even fatten you up before we reach Crystallaire.”

“And there are any number of small villages where we can stop if we find we forgot something vital,” Terrell added.

“I noticed those on the map,” Griffin commented, shifting his rump in the saddle, earning a critical look from Molly. “I thought that Artemis was supposed to be mostly pristine wilderness. From orbit it still appeared to be so, but this area seems well settled.”

“Remember, Griffin,” Terrell said. “Five hundred years have passed since the days of which you speak. Although we of Artemis have tried to live as if the seegnur might return any day, when it comes to our survival—well, we've had to make some changes. Even in the days of the seegnur, there were areas given over to the raising of crops and food animals. Most of these were sequestered where they would not interfere with the sports and entertainments that brought the seegnur here. I suspect heresy though some would have it—that the seegnur used their technology to make sure that picturesque villages in outlying areas were kept supplied.”

Griffin nodded. “And without that technology those supplies wouldn't arrive ... Yes. I can see what things needed to change if the population was to survive. Were many areas abandoned?”

“Some,” Terrell agreed. “Especially those that existed mostly to provide a stopping point along the way to some particularly isolated spot. Others lost population. Crystallaire, for example, was a renowned beauty spot, one where the seegnur who came to Artemis to partake in strenuous sport could leave more delicate companions. In those days, Crystallaire supported several very fine hotels and restaurants, as well as a fleet of pleasure boats and like amenities. Today, there is one hotel. Although

the views are still magnificent, the reason the area remains settled is because the lake offers excellent fishing. Fish and timber are the basis of the local economy, not the views.”

“Not all settlements declined,” Adara added. “Shepherd’s Call, for example, was smaller in the days of the seegnur. Then it was little more than a stopping point for those who wished to hunt and s in the mountains—or try the rapids on the river. Today, we support ourselves and supplement what we cannot grow by trading—mostly wool, but also hides and furs.”

“Don’t forget, Adara,” Terrell said. “Another reason that Shepherd’s Call has done so well is that it boasts not one but two professionals: your own teacher, Bruin, and Helena the Equestrian, with whom I was studying. People come from great distances to learn from them or—in Helena’s case—arrange for her to train a mount or to buy one of her protégés.”

“Like our horses—and Sam,” Griffin added, patting Molly on one reddish-gold shoulder “I’m certainly grateful Helena let us take them. Without Molly, I wouldn’t be much of a rider.”

Adara laughed. “Even with Molly, you aren’t much of a rider, but you are improving. While we’re traveling, I’d like you to ride Tarnish for a few hours at a time. He’s more patient than Midnight. Molly’s so well behaved you’re not going to expand your skill—and there may come a time when you need to ride without a coach.”

These first days of their journey were very pleasant. As Adara had promised, the hunting—even in the settled areas—was very good. Often she and Sand Shadow would leave for long stretches, returning with a brace of rabbits or game birds. Sometimes she left the hunting to Sand Shadow, and picked berries or gathered wild greens.

“Is Adara safe out there alone?” Griffin asked Terrell one day when the huntress was later than usual rejoining them. “We do have enemies.”

“She’s safer out there”—Terrell waved a long arm to indicate the rolling green that surrounded them—“than we are here on the road. We’re much easier to find. Still, I have a feeling that even we are safe for now. The Old One and Julyan took a chance at grabbing you in Spirit Bay, where I’m guessing they had a bolt hole or two. My guess is they’re watching us, waiting to see where we go and what we learn. You’ve found some interesting things in the past, seegnur. The Old One will not have forgotten that.”

“Watching us?” Griffin looked around nervously, causing Tarnish to snort and crow hop a few paces to remind Griffin of his place.

“Tracking us, rather,” Terrell said. “They’ll ask about us along the road. By now, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Old One has a pretty fair idea where we’re headed. There aren’t many reasons for us to head this way—not unless he thinks Adara wants to introduce us to her parents.”

He chuckled at Griffin’s open astonishment. “That’s right, you wouldn’t know and Adara certainly wouldn’t tell you. Her parents are settled on the outskirts of Ridgewood, a town right along our route. In addition to food, they raise sheep, llamas, and alpacas. Adara’s mother has some fame as a weaver. These days, I’d say much of the family’s income comes from selling exotic wool blends and the products of her loom.”

“You sound,” Griffin said, aware that a certain stiffness had entered his voice, “as if you did some research.”

Adara was the one problem in his relationship with Terrell. Rather, it was Adara the woman—rather than Adara the Huntress, the companion along the road, and the friend—who was the problem. Adara had been the first person Griffin had met after his shuttle had crashed, stranding him on Artemis. She had been his protector and guide. They had shared a tent in the cold reaches of the mountains, nearly died together in an avalanche. All of this would probably have been enough to create a bond—even if his rescuer had been big, burly Bruin, rather than lithe, lovely Adara.

But his rescuer had been Adara. At first, Griffin had thought Adara might have been interested in him as a man, even as he couldn't help but be interested in her as a woman. However, she had not encouraged him. Was this because of Terrell? From a few scattered comments, Griffin suspected the two had been lovers—if only briefly. Certainly, Terrell remained interested. The two men's dreams did not touch as often as they had when Griffin had been a captive and Terrell his lifeline, but there were hints, images, some of them astonishingly erotic.

So now Griffin looked over at Terrell and repeated his statement, inflecting it into a question. “You sound as if you did some research.”

Terrell gave a rueful smile. “I won't deny it. There can be few secrets between us, seegnur. Before you plummeted out of the skies, I was doing my best to convince Adara to marry me—or if she wouldn't marry, then to at least consider me as a serious suitor. She wasn't encouraging—but she wasn't sending me away, either. Then you arrived and, well ... We both know how the world has spun since.”

Griffin bit back the question he wanted to ask—although he wasn't sure he wanted the answer. *Are you sleeping with her?* Instead he managed a casual shrug.

“Adara has made clear that she's not interested in courting games.”

Terrell nodded. “Julyan resurfacing isn't going to make matters any easier. I'd hoped he'd drowned.”

Griffin agreed. He'd gotten to know Julyan fairly well, enough to understand how charming he could be—and how utterly ruthless. The charm made it easy for Griffin to understand why Adara had fallen in love with Julyan, back when they both had been Bruin's students. It was harder for him to understand what emotions Julyan awakened in her now. Did she still love him? Hate him? Feel something else entirely?

He decided to pretend that what Adara felt didn't matter but, looking at the flash of Terrell's white teeth, he knew he hadn't fooled anyone, most especially himself.

Interlude: Not Absolute

Bad, Good

Good, Right

Right, Left

Left, Abandoned

Abandoned, Wild

Wild, Uncontrolled

Uncontrolled

Bad? Good?

2

Ridgewood

When they were a few hours' ride out from Ridgewood, Adara slipped from Tarnish's saddle and handed the reins to Griffin. "Sand Shadow and I will go ahead. I'll find out if there is room for us at my parents' farm and, if not, where we can set up our tents."

She saw Griffin glance at Tarnish, obviously wondering why she didn't continue riding, then, obviously, answering the question for himself. Adara slipped away without offering confirmation.

So Griffin's figured out I'm nervous, that I'd like to be able to sneak in and check the place out first. What of it? My home is elsewhere now. Wouldn't it be rude of me to assume my parents could take me and my friends in at such short notice? True, once I knew our route, I did write ahead to warn them, but ...

Sand Shadow flicked Adara an image of the two of them skulking in enemy-filled darkness through the maze of passages beneath Mender's Isle. Even without words, the inference was obvious: "You don't want that. Surely you have nothing to fear here."

"Are you so certain?" Adara muttered. "The Old One's minions could only kill me. The blow my family deal out can cut into the soul."

Sand Shadow huffed in exasperation. During the year and a few months since they had bonded, they had visited Adara's family only once, and that briefly. They had gone for the wedding of Adara's younger brother, Orion, to the daughter of an itinerant river trader who had thought settling down on a farm would be ever so much nicer than living on a boat. Using the puma kitten as an excuse, Adara might not have even attended the wedding, but Bruin had insisted.

The puma's memories of the event were the enjoyable ones of a kitten who had been much fussed over. Adara's were less so. She also had been fussed over—both for having passed her training and for having bonded with Sand Shadow. However, that fuss had reminded her once again how she was so far apart from her family. Nikole was married and had little ones of her own. Hektor and Elektra had come in for quite a lot of teasing about when would their weddings be ... No one had teased her.

I felt myself a stranger. Many of those attending the wedding had never been farther than Spirit Bay; most had never been even that far. Most followed some variation on the work done by the parents and grandparents, back to the days of the seegnur. I was a huntress.

Had lingering memories of the events surrounding Orion's wedding led Adara to that imprudent tumble with Terrell the following midsummer? Had she been seeking proof that she was marriageable?

even if she chose not to marry?

She shoved those thoughts away, concentrating on circling back and around the village, on finding cover where any but a hunter would have sworn there was none. In time, she came to her family holding, out some distance from the village itself. She swarmed up a tree. Those dots on the road would be Terrell, Griffin, and the mounts. They would need to thread through the village, so she still had time, although wending through memories had slowed her feet.

Sending Sand Shadow an image to wait for her—her family’s livestock would not be acclimated to the scent of a puma as were the animals who resided near Shepherd’s Call—Adara loped down the hillside to the sprawling farmhouse she barely remembered as “home.” A sheepdog barked, more warning than in threat. At the dog’s summons, a figure stepped out the back door to see what had aroused the creature. For a moment, Adara didn’t know him, then he turned slightly and the lines of his cheek and jaw were familiar.

“Hey, there, Hektor,” she greeted her youngest brother. “You’ve grown again.”

Hektor—now, Adara scabbled through her memory, seventeen?—knew her right away. “Adara!”

His pleasure at seeing her was so obvious that Adara felt ashamed of her snake pit mind. This was the brother born after she had gone to live with Bruin, yet he treated her arrival as a cause for celebration.

Hektor stuck his head inside the door. “Mom! Dad! Adara’s come at last!”

The patter of feet on wooden floorboards, a flooding out, arms and hugs and kisses. Her mother Neenay Weaver, grabbing her, holding her as if she were still five, and not half a head again taller.

“We’d heard something of what happened in Spirit Bay, even before your letter came. We heard you were involved. Willowee’s father brought news, turned his boat right around as soon as rumour reached him at one of the river ports.”

Adara’s father, Akilles, tall and lean like her, hair dark as her own, though showing silver now (Had that all come on since the wedding?) Wordless except for the hug he gave her and the brightness of tears in his eyes. Sister Nikole, baby on her hip, a toddler by the hand, grin brightening her face. Little Elektra, budding into womanhood, unsure in her young woman’s dignity whether to join in or stand back. Orion, holding his Willowee by the hand.

When the tumult ebbed, Adara asked her mother, “I wrote that I am traveling with two friends. We have three horses and a mule as well. Is there room for us?”

“Plenty.” Neenay gave a casual wave of her hand. “You know we built a cottage for Nikole and Stanis when the babies came. None of us could sleep for all the fussing. We just finished a cottage for Orion and Willowee...”

Adara noticed for the first time that her brother’s wife was rounding out in front.

“Folks in Ridgewood are saying we should rename the area Weaverville,” Hektor cut in with a chuckle.

“So there’s plenty of room in the main house for you and your friends. We had good moisture last winter, so you can put your animals to pasture. There’s space in the stables, too. Your choice.”

Elektra said, “Did you bring the kitten?”

Adara smiled. “Cat now and a big one, too. Yes. Sand Shadow is with me, but she’s staying out in

the hills for now. Her scent frightens livestock who don't know her."

Elektra's eyes asked a question she was too uncertain to ask. Adara answered it.

"Would you like to greet her? She's been wondering if anyone remembers her. She remembers a lot of you with great fondness."

"Can I? See her, I mean? And do you really know what she remembers?"

Adara felt that alienating uncertainty again, determinedly pushed it away. "I don't know everything she thinks, but we've been practicing. I know enough to know she remembers her visit here and being fussed over. She understands that she'd scare all the hens and cows, so she's fine with staying in the hills, but I'm sure she'd like a visit."

An image from Sand Shadow flickered into her mind: Terrell and Griffin passing through Ridgewood, turning onto the road toward her family's lands.

"I should go down the road and meet my friends," Adara continued.

"Can I come with you?" Elektra asked, glancing between her mother and Adara.

"Can she?" Adara asked.

Neenay smiled. "I think we can handle clearing up from supper without you, Elektra, but mind the mess you make up for it tomorrow, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered both sisters at once, then giggled as if they weren't ten years apart in age and nearly strangers.

* * *

Not surprisingly, Terrell and Griffin were a great hit. True, Nikole did give Adara a long look or two as if wondering what games her sister was playing with two such handsome fellows, but both men had the gift of making themselves pleasant. Griffin was introduced by the tale they had evolved when they had stayed with the Old One. He was a member of a family who had lived isolated in the mountains somewhere vaguely near Shepherd's Call. They had become friends when Terrell and Adara had escorted him to Spirit Bay because he had desired to meet the Old One.

Questions regarding the upheaval in Spirit Bay—the flooding of the Old One's Sanctum and the revered personage's disappearance—were so based on garbled rumors that answering them was easy enough without going into uncomfortable details. When some element of the conversation became awkward, Terrell showed a factotum's gift for turning the discussion in other directions while appearing to give a complete reply. The full truth would mean explaining too much that must be kept secret, including Griffin's true origin and the existence of the unfortunates who had been born as a result of the Old One's experimentation.

When, toward the end of evening, Neenay Weaver beckoned for Adara to come with her, Griffin was deep in conversation with Akilles, Willowee, and Orion about the manner in which this region was governed. Willowee, who had grown up on one or another of her family's watercraft, proved to have a sophisticated view of the differences of rulership in theory and in practice.

Terrell held the rest spellbound with tales of his travels as he had trained to be a factotum. Watching her littlest sister, Adara wondered if Elektra—like Sashi in Shepherd's Call—was counting through the months until she would be fifteen and of legal age to propose marriage.

“I’m taking Adara out to show her what we’ve done since she was last here,” Neenay called. “We’ll shut up the hens while we’re out.”

Adara suspected that Neenay was taking this opportunity to probe after which—if either—of the young men might be a candidate for future son-in-law. The grin that quirked Hektor’s mouth and the knowing look on Nikole’s face confirmed her guess. However, when they were safely away, and Neenay had led Adara to the pleasant, well-lit building that was her new workshop, Neenay surprised her.

“Adara, the time has come for me to tell you things I hoped I would never need to raise.”

Adara was about to explain that she understood where babies came from and that she knew to take precautions, when Neenay went on.

“I never told you why we fostered you with Benjamin Hunter. However, now that the Old One has been discredited I feel I must. Why don’t you sit there?” Neenay gestured to a heap of cushioned patchworked from what must be scraps of her own weaving. “I’m more comfortable behind my loom.”

She slid into the chair, and her hands began moving the shuttle and the beater bar through the routine with a practiced rattle and thump.

Adara thought, *Putting a wall between us again, even if the wall is only spun wool. But what is the wall about the Old One?*

As if reading her daughter’s mind, Neenay said, “Would you be surprised if I told you that the Old One tried to play matchmaker for me, some years before you were born?”

Adara made no attempt to hide her astonishment. “You knew the Old One?”

“I did. When I was about Elektra’s age, my parents sent me to Spirit Bay to stay with my mother’s older sister. Auntie had a shop there—still does—that specialized in exotic dyes as well as weaving. I was among her students. The Old One was one of her customers, for he loved the subtle colors she blended. Indeed, he often brought her oddities—fresh shellfish, peculiar nuts, exotic flowers. They would discuss for as much as a half hour at a time how a certain color might be extracted and the best way to fix it.”

Neenay sighed, her gaze distant, her fingers moving as if they had eyes of their own. “Given your recent experiences, I don’t expect you to believe me but, for those of us who worked in the shop, those visits were like visits from a king. The girls in particular could get quite silly, for the Old One was—suppose ‘is,’ for he doesn’t change—very handsome in his own way. His slim build and measured manner were quite a contrast to the farm boys most of us had grown up with. He was even grander than the rich tradesmen who came to buy my aunt’s cloth.”

Adara reassured her. “The Old One is not my type, but, yes, I believe you. He can be very compelling.”

Neenay’s lips shaped a small smile of gratitude. “The Old One was not my type either but nonetheless, I was flattered to be among the small circle he chose to talk with from time to time. One day, he brought with him a young sailor, a handsome fellow with raven-dark hair and light brown eyes. This Jor asked me to go dancing with him that evening. He was quite flattering in his attention for the few days he was in town, before his ship sailed again.”

Adara felt dread rise, making her heart flutter. As if in answer to her apprehension, Sand Shadow

leapt in through the open window and settled at her side.

Burying her hand in the puma's plushy fur, Adara asked, "Do you mind her here? She circled to avoid the flocks."

Neenay shook her head. "She *has* grown, hasn't she? No. I don't mind. Now, let me go on ... When Jor was off to sea, the Old One came by the shop. He found some pretext to get me alone, then asked me what I thought of his young friend. I said I liked Jor well enough and that seemed to please him.

"The Old One hinted that he would smile upon our making a match, that he might even take an interest in our children—arrange for their education and suchlike. I wasn't at all certain I wanted to wed a sailor—they're gone so often—but Jor was in port often and it was fun to go about with him. He was a free spender, though somehow I gathered that the Old One helped line his pockets.

"I might even have married Jor—my aunt was pleased with my work and hinted that someday he might become her partner. That would make staying in Spirit Bay more inviting. However, fate had strung my loom with other threads. During one of his visits, Jor brought with him his cousin—Akilles was his name. They were much alike in appearance, but as unlike in temper as whirlwind and a hearth fire. Since you are Akilles's daughter, you know which lad I wed.

"Jor eventually married one of the other girls from the shop. The Old One lost interest in me as soon as my preference for Akilles was known, but he remained very interested in Blithe and Jor. Even after I had moved to Ridgewood with Akilles, Blithe and I corresponded. She had her first child about the same time I had Nikole, her second a year later.

"Now I must skip a few years. Jor was lost at sea when you were about two. However, the Old One continued his patronage of Blithe. He was very interested in the children, especially the second, a boy who showed some signs of being adapted. The Old One offered to adopt the boy. Blithe refused. The Old One offered to send the boy to a special school he had founded for adapted children. She refused this also. Then the boy vanished—apparently drowned, although from birth he had swum like a fish.

"Blithe was not stupid and she had a weaver's mind for patterns. When she learned that other children had disappeared, other children in whom the Old One had shown an interest, she grew nervous. She grew more nervous when she learned that no one seemed to know anything about the special school. Soon after Blithe, too, vanished, along with her older child.

"Most people accepted the story that Blithe had moved to be away from the seas that had taken both her husband and her son. I said nothing but, based on her letters, I think she was either killed by the Old One or given a chance to be with her son if she agreed to cut off all contact with the outside world.

"When you, Adara, showed signs of being adapted, I hoped no one would notice. You, however, were a determined little thing. There was no keeping you in if you wanted out—and you would insist on roaming about after dark. The bias against the adapted is not strong in Ridgewood. We are too close to those areas like Spirit Bay and Crystallaire that the seegnur frequented, and the seegnur favored the adapted. But I feared for you. What if the Old One took an interest in you? Would you, too, vanish?

"I confided in Akilles, showed him Blithe's letters. Though it broke our hearts to do so, we decided the best way to protect you was to hide you in plain sight. Bruin trained hunters. Far from being biased

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