

THE TYMOREAN TRUST
BOOK 2

GREAT ONES

By
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PLEASE NOTE

I use Australian spelling throughout. You will see ou's (colour) and 'ise' not 'ize' (realise) as well as a few other differences to American spelling.

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Great Ones

Chapter 1 - Under Attack

The two red headed figures in dull brown travelling robes, crouched behind a clump of bushes and drew their capes around them. They were at the base of a steep uphill path, and scanning back along the narrow valley towards the open plain beyond. With their vision adjusted to see into the far distance, they could make out the farmers driving bullocks in straight rows, ploughing new fields. Further away, there were fields already sprouting with the new season's crops.

"There is nothing following us," Kryslie commented quietly, and added mentally, "Except Frest, of course." She brought her focus closer, and scanned the steep sides of the hills that enclosed the valley. Her eyes flicked to where their guard was trying to blend into the rock face - and failing.

Her brother Tymos concurred, also in a quiet voice. "There is nothing out of place, but I'm uneasy."

"Mithas says that the aliens don't know of this valley," Kryslie commented.

"I wouldn't assume that," Tymos warned. "I even doubt if our elders know all that the aliens' technology is capable of."

"True. Their aircraft move around undetected by our ground radar or the satellites. They could have flown over this area."

Instinctively, she glanced skyward. Nothing marred the azure blue of the sky, no clouds, and no shadows as cloaked planes flew over. However, a spy plane could be so high as to be only a pinpoint, and still able to see clearly, a lone person on the ground.

Tymos caught his sister's mental image and replied silently, "And two red heads would stand out like a forest fire. Could that be what we sense?"

Kryslie shrugged. Their unease was too nebulous even to be a premonition of trouble. However, it was the reason why they had not argued with Allyn, another of their guards, when he insisted on scouting ahead up the trail. Even while trying to be unobtrusive, Allyn, Juan and Drake, stood out like guards on parade. If someone or something was aware of their presence, she and Tymos hoped the watcher would reveal its presence. Nothing had.

Without waiting further, Kryslie secured her travelling cape behind her, covered her head with the hood, and began to climb. The first part of the uphill trail was more like rock climbing, but there were plenty of places for toes to rest and hands to grip.

Tymos waited until she was twice his height above him before starting after her. Frest would watch their backs until they reached the actual zigzag trail, and then follow. Up higher, still a length or two above Kryslie, an actual path was cut out of the rock face and it led to the cave that was their immediate destination.

Mithas, leader of one of the reclusive mutant tribes, called it his 'back door', though it was only one of many entrances to the maze of tunnels used by his people. When he had agreed to let them return and talk to him, he had warned them that the 'front' entrance was being watched.

As if aware of his thoughts, Kryslie's mind voice asked, "Why do you think the aliens are watching the other cave? Surely they don't expect us to go back to a place where we were captured."

Communicating that way meant that when Tymos answered, the open communicator did not relay his answer to their guards.

"It doesn't seem logical," Tymos agreed. "Perhaps they are waiting to see if the Governors send a punitive force there."

“Which Kellex would expect if, after we escaped from his men again, we found our way back to the Estate,” Kryslie proposed. “Let’s assume that Kellex thinks we are still alive and didn’t crash with the plane...we are a long way from home, he would expect us to have no way to communicate ...”

“He’ll be looking to find us again before Father does,” Tymos interrupted her. “I am going to assume that Kellex knows we are still alive and is doing everything he can think of to find us.”

Kryslie did not pause in her climb, it was child’s play to her, but Tymos paused to glance each way along the narrow valley, before taking his next upward step. He hadn’t gone very far when he sensed his sister had stopped climbing.

“Bro?”

“What?”

“Something is wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

Kryslie didn’t answer, but now he shared her nebulous feeling through the deep twin bond. In moments, the feeling spread to become a feeling of pressure in his gut. That feeling he knew well. It meant a ground tremor was coming. He had felt it all too often before, but this was the first time since he had left the Royal Estate. He sensed Kryslie begin to climb faster. She wanted to be off the rock face before the pressure built to an uncomfortable level, and before the tremors began.

He shared the sentiment, even though the pressure usually eased when the tremors began. He too began to climb faster, and without losing concentration on the climb, he sought to distract himself and let his tense abdominal muscles relax.

He felt this way whenever there was a ground tremor, and in many cases, the tremors were too slight to be felt by other people. The Tymorean Elders called it ‘planet sense’ and it was one of the rarer abilities of those endowed with the Guardians’ mystical power. It was the ability to feel the insults done to the planet as a physical sensation.

Tymos wondered what possible use it was. However, apart from his sister, the Elders could not recall anyone in recent history that had also had the odd gift. The only reference they found to it was in mentions of the Great Ones of legend and that was nearly a thousand years ago.

The ability to see in the dark and to use UV and IR light to see, another gift he and his sister shared, was much more useful.

As he reached for the next handhold, Tymos had to stop. He suddenly wanted to double over, as pain blossomed in his gut. Instead, he gripped the jutting rock as hard as he could. He dared not let go when he was twenty feet up a near sheer rock face, and whilst he knew his stomach was not expanding like a giant balloon, it did feel like it was about to explode.

He felt the first faint tremors and anticipated the exquisite relief, but the tremors grew stronger and the pain remained.

“This can’t be natural,” Kryslie thought at him. “It must be the aliens doing this.”

Tymos felt the effort it had taken to form the thought. He sent his agreement as a feeling, and not in words. They had suggested to the Elders that the tremors were the covert work of the subversive invading aliens. Moreover, many of the tremors had caused cracks in the vital water storage basins but although their idea was taken seriously, no evidence had been found to prove it. Nevertheless, it fit with the other guerrilla tactics the aliens were using to demoralize the population of Tymorea. Hit and run, Tymos thought to himself, refusing to show themselves and fight.

The tremors were increasing, and the rain of coarse sand hitting his head was feeling like grit and small stones.

“Prince Tymos!” The voice was Allyn’s coming over the comm. unit, but Tymos ignored it. He didn’t have the energy to speak, even if he could formulate an answer. It was all he could currently do to hold on when the whole mountain seemed to be bucking and heaving like an unbroken stallion.

The pain in his gut surged, shooting pain to all parts of him, making his mind black out for an instant. He became aware of Frest's horrified exclamation over the comm. as the rock face slid past him, less than an inch from his nose. Instinctively, he let his legs collapse when his feet hit the valley floor.

Seconds later, he felt Kryslie thud down beside him and glimpsed her curling into a ball, to hold herself tightly. Her muscles were twitching spasmodically, like his own were. He copied her posture and tried to relax.

"Prince Tymos, are you alright?"

Frest sounded frantic, as he ran out of cover to kneel beside him.

"Watch our back trail!" Tymos forced out through gritted teeth. Even the ground seemed to be heaving, but now the pressure in his gut was easing. If Frest would let him concentrate, he could start the biofeedback pain-relief technique. "Is Mithas alright?" he thought at his sister.

Kryslie didn't respond immediately, but Tymos knew she was reaching out to find the mutant's mind. This common ability had brought Mithas to trust them, and sever his allegiance to the aliens.

"Shaken," she thought finally. "I don't think he felt it so much inside the mountain. He says he will wait until we reach the cave before appearing. He tells me he has a boulder blocking the back of the cave, and Allyn and the others didn't notice there was a tunnel there."

Kryslie uncurled, but stayed lying on her side on the ground. Her pain had eased to acute nausea, and she could still feel faint tremors.

Tymos whistled softly, just enough to get Frest's attention. He hadn't gone far, just to where the rock face had a natural man sized concavity. It had some boulders and scrubby bushes providing cover for his lower half, but the rest of him, clad in the dark brown of the palace guards' uniform, was a distinct contrast to the light brown rock and the grey green of the spiky leaved bushes.

Kryslie caught her brother's eye and then looked skywards. In the twin bond, he sensed, "He's going to have to learn."

Frest was hurrying towards them, flicking his gaze from them, back to the view to the farmlands. He was twitching with worry, and Kryslie had the distinct feeling that he was holding himself back from wringing his hands.

"We should go back to the palace. This is a bad idea," he blurted. "Look at your hands, your clothes, your face..."

"Frest! We're fine," Kryslie insisted. She forced herself to her feet, although she was not yet feeling ready to stand. She couldn't help wincing when she straightened.

"But you fell nearly thirty feet...and you are hurt!"

"Nothing worse than what we've been after some of our lessons with President Reslic or his brothers," Tymos insisted. He was also talking to Allyn via the communicator. "No. Stay up there. We will be up shortly. This mission is too important to abandon."

"What do you think you can do, Prince Tymos? Make all the mutants suddenly like us? They are in league with the aliens, we can't trust them," Frest said. "They have never listened to your elders, what makes you think they will listen to you?"

Tymos stood, keeping his face from betraying the lingering soreness in his muscles. "We have already made friends with Mithas, who we will be meeting today. He has invited others to listen to us. If you are afraid of mutants, you may stay down here and guard our travel packs."

Frest's mouth dropped open, and then snapped shut. Finally, after several attempts to speak, he said, "My duty is to guard you and Princess Kryslie."

"Guard then, but don't interfere," Kryslie snapped.

In the three days of travelling with the four guardsmen, neither Tymos, nor Kryslie had succeeded in convincing the older men that a close guard was not necessary. To the guards, they were the Heir Designates of High King Tymoros, and it just wasn't done to let them have no

guard at all. Indeed, if they were back at the Royal Estate, there would be guards, or teachers or attendants always near them.

However, away from the palace, Frest, Allyn, Drake and Juan, were out of their usual environment. They were highly experienced guards, but they were unused to open country and being away from instant back up.

Their attention was chafing, but they had agreed to an escort for the sake of their Father. They did not want to add to his fear for them - that they might be caught and turned into enemies, as three of their sibs had been. For escorts, the only option had been palace guards, for the units of the Tymorean Peace Corps were stretched thin dealing with alien sabotage, and tracking down the perpetrators who were as hard to see as ghosts or wisps of smoke.

Tymos leant back against the rock wall and closed his eyes. He simply wished they would ditch the uniforms and dress like commoners. Anyone seeing them would know instantly that some member of one of the three ruling families was nearby. However, so far, the four guards had resisted the idea.

“Can you get us a drink, Frest?” Kryslie asked. “I need something to get the rock dust out of my mouth.”

Once he had moved off to where the packs were hidden, Kryslie said softly, “It was only the surface layer that was affected.”

Tymos realised that she was right, and the giddiness he was feeling was from the roiling, unseen energies of the planet. When he sought deeper into the ground, the aura was calm, like a still lake.

He reached out for Kryslie’s hand and together, they drew on the calm energy and felt themselves recover their own energies.

Deep within the twin bond, they shared the sense that this was one of the advantages of the planet sense.

“Prince Tymos, are you sure it is safe to climb up,” Frest blurted, as he handed a drink flask to each of them. “The rock could be loose.”

Tymos looked skyward as if counting to ten before speaking. In fact, he was sensing the feel of the mountain.

“We will take it slowly and carefully. I think all the loose rock fell down. Once we reach the trail we will be fine.”

It wasn’t quite that simple, but the fading tremors and the residual strangeness in his gut wouldn’t hinder him. He hoped to be up past the initial climb before any aftershocks manifested.

Tymos capped the drink flask and handed it back to Frest to hang on his utility harness. “We’ll get started. I’ll go first; Kryslie will be next, then you.”

After another careful scrutiny of the area around them, with the only movement being Frest’s jerkiness, and the only smells on the breeze being from the sun heated rock, the soil, and the spiky mint smelling bushes, Tymos began his climb. Kryslie followed more closely than before.

The mountain on this side of the ridge was formed of steeply rising rock, as the valley was carved out by an ancient, long vanished glacier. The track above was formed partly from natural erosion, and partly from someone chipping rock out of the way. It was left looking as natural as possible, with small rocks littering the ground.

This time they made it to the trail, and gave Frest the okay to come up. He took longer to make the climb and needed help to clamber onto the ledge. Although breathing more heavily than usual, he assured his charges that he was ready to continue.

With a natural sense of balance, honed by the physical training given to all the Royal children, Tymos and Kryslie kept up a fast pace. Frest, no longer used to the extra stamina needed for the steep climb, soon dropped behind.

The trail zigzagged up the rock face and for the most part, someone walking up it was exposed. There were sections where outcropping boulders screened the trail, or where the scrubby bushes found root space in cracks, but these were few and far between. Tymos wanted to reach the cave as quickly as possible.

They paused at the second abrupt change in the path, to check how far back their guard was, and were about to start up the next section when Kryslie asked, "Do you hear something?"

Feeling a shiver of warning, they both crouched down, and drew their capes around them, so they might seem like boulders from a distance. Frest, breathing heavily and making enough noise to startle roosting birds into flight, finally caught up to them. He was about to speak, but Tymos used the Guards' hand gesture for 'silence'.

"Listen," Tymos directed, in a quiet voice.

Frest made a visible effort to quieten his laboured breathing.

"Can you hear that high pitched sound?" Kryslie asked her brother.

She saw him go still, and then remove the communicator earpiece.

"Yes, but I thought it was some kind of feedback from the communicator," Tymos admitted.

"I can't hear anything," Frest stated. "What are you talking about?"

Kryslie ignored the question and continued exchanging ideas with her brother. "The mutants wouldn't be causing it; they don't have the technology, or the learning."

Tymos flicked his sister a mental image of Mithas's mutant kin, as they had appeared the previous week, toting alien weapons.

Mentally Kryslie countered, "Old, worn out, power drained and only useful as clubs." Then she spoke aloud. "It has to be something the aliens are doing. And I bet they don't realise anyone can hear it."

"Hear what?" Frest demanded. He was starting to look around, glance everywhere, as if beginning to sense danger.

Relenting, Kryslie explained. "I am hearing a very high pitched noise."

Frest stifled his disbelief and tried to sound decisive.

"Princess Kryslie, Prince Tymos, we need to keep moving, we are too exposed here."

"They can't possibly know that we are here," Kryslie said aloud as she scanned the area below them and looked at the sky. The volume of the high-pitched noise was increasing as if the cause was getting closer.

Tymos abruptly turned his head as he smelt a whiff of hot metal. "Down!" he told Frest.

A light shower of gravel began to rain down on them, and more tremors rocked the mountain. Frest's face bleached to white.

"Allyn," Tymos spoke sharply into the communicator. "Use the signal boost, call the Estate, have Xyron or Reslic check for unsanctioned satellites or drone probes in this area. Something is emitting a very high frequency sonic signal...Allyn, do it now!"

Mentally, Tymos told his sister, "He wanted to argue with me."

"Idiot," she responded the same way. She was instinctively estimating how long it would take the request to be acted on and the source to be located and destroyed. The tremors were increasing in strength, but this time they hadn't felt the inner pressure.

"Shouldn't we keep moving upwards," Frest suggested.

"No," Kryslie overruled him. "There is something close that is targeting this area. I can hear it, hovering. If we move, it might come at us."

That silenced Frest. He squatted down next to his charges and allowed Tymos and Kryslie to concentrate on senses, or instincts, other than the normal five and listen for inner prompting from the mystical, god-like Guardians of Peace.

The ancient beings who had bestowed the 'Royal Power' on the first Triumvirate Governors in Tymorea's earliest history were the source of great wisdom. Their presence was very real to

those whose power was strongest. Tymos and Kryslie let the subliminal messages coming to all their senses form into a need to act. Tymos suddenly grabbed Frest, and pulled him up the track. Kryslie followed closely behind him.

Frest had no breath to protest or demand a reason for the sudden movement, and when they stopped again, he was too surprised to speak when Tymos pushed him hard against the rock wall, in a position where there was a slight rock ledge above them.

A very loud ominous, “CRACK”, followed by several more, had both Tymos and Kryslie looking up as if seeing through the ledge and up the face of the mountain.

Frest heard the sound of rocks sliding, and tried to struggle free.

“Keep still,” Tymos ordered, but it was absently, for his face showed signs of concentration.

Frest saw the first of the stones, gravel and loose rock sliding over the ledge, and knew bigger stuff was coming. “We can’t stay here.”

He wasn’t answered, but he began to become aware of a purple glow around him. The rocks that seemed to want to bounce into their shelter touched the glow and rebounded - continuing to bounce down to the valley below.

The heavy stuff, a mess of cracked-off rock, finally finished falling past them. Tymos eased his weight off Frest, and gave him shivers by turning to glance down at the trail on the level below.

“The trail is still okay, just a little of the light stuff is there.”

Frest found his voice, “It was fortunate that you had a protective force screen on, Prince Tymos. I didn’t know you had one.”

“When we left Dira, to start the tour, Father gave us one of the ones taken from the aliens that infiltrated the Estate,” Kryslie admitted. She watched Frest straighten and was aware that he was relieved to have figured out what Tymos had done. The she added, “But, that stopped working when they turned an EM pulse on us.”

“How...” Frest started to ask, how they had created the protective effect, but an explosive blast, deafened him, drowning his voice. At the same instant, his eyes were blinded by the brilliance of a fireball. He changed his question to, “What was that?”

Echoes of the explosion were reverberating between the rock faces of the two mountain ridges. Then a faint shadow passed over them, accompanied by the faintest smell of burnt jet fuel. Frest turned his head in the direction the cloaked jet had gone.

“That was whatever had been causing that sonic barrage - being blown up,” Kryslie said calmly.

“Something flew over,” Frest insisted.

“Yes,” Tymos agreed. Then to distract the Guardsman, he said, “Come on, let’s go.”

Into the communicator, he spoke a short sharp command, “Allyn, be quiet. We’re fine.”

This time, Tymos kept his pace to one that Frest could match, but only because he was aware that the sonic barrage may have caused more fractures.

Frest was quiet until they were three quarters of the way up. “How did you do that? It felt like a force shield.”

“Think about who we are Frest,” Kryslie suggested. “We are not Father’s Heir Designates for nothing. Our power is a lot stronger than yours is, and are sensitive to the aura. We have found we can actively draw on it, and feel when there is a disturbance in the ambient energy field.”

“Oh!” was all Frest could think of to say. He was embarrassed now, because it was his job to protect them, not the reverse.

Kryslie swore deliberately, startling Frest because she shouldn’t have known those particular curses. She finished with, “We have been trying to tell you we can look after ourselves.”

To end the subject, Tymos and Kryslie increased their speed. However, they continued to discuss the events with each other using their telepathy.

“It probably wasn’t us, specifically, that they were after,” Tymos proposed. “It might be some other type of intended sabotage.”

“True, but that thing didn’t cause the first quake. More likely it was to make the cracked surface rock break off,” Kryslie proposed.

“To try to block the mutant’s ways in and out? How could they expect to block them all? Bring the mountain down?”

“The aliens in their infinite arrogance may not have thought of multiple exits. It might be spite if they had the idea that the mutants helped us,” Kryslie suggested.

“How could they think that? We were far away from here when Jon helped get us off their ship,” her brother disagreed. “And they left the mutants incapable of helping us.” He gave a mental shrug. “The reason isn’t the issue right now. My concern is that, whoever sent that drone, will probably know it was destroyed. We don’t know if it had sensor capability and saw us or not. Either way, the aliens will probably come to investigate. Those in the next valley are nearest. It will take them at least a day to get here so we have to finish here before then.”

“I’ve warned Mithas,” Kryslie said a few moments later. “He will have a lookout in case the aliens try to find a way through the tunnels.”

Chapter 2 - Mutant Friend

Allyn, Juan and Drake, the other three Guard escorts, were arrayed around the entrance of the head-high cave, guarding it and kicking some of the rubble from around the entrance. Tymos was two paces ahead of his sister when he reached the level section of the trail. The path continued further up the hill.

“Have you checked further up?” Tymos asked before Allyn or the others could speak. He held his tongue about the foolishness of kicking rocks off the ledge. Not only might they hit someone below, but if the aliens came up, or flew over, the clear area would betray the fact that someone had been there recently.

“Of course, Prince Tymos,” Allyn seemed offended. “It dead ends at a dried up water basin.”

“Fine, let’s get inside,” Tymos directed, walking between the guardsmen and going in. Allyn made to follow immediately and then stopped, realising that etiquette required him to allow Kryslie to precede him. She in turn, while aware of his embarrassment, gave no sign and simply followed her brother.

The interior of the cave was dark, once the rock overhang blocked the sun. Allyn activated a hand light and shone it around. “This cave has been used before, quite recently. There are places for rush-lights. Those remains over there still smell of burnt oil.”

“Why don’t you relight the rushes,” Tymos suggested mildly. “And sit them in the holders?”

Frest, following them inside, moved to obey. He could only make two of them burn, but that gave enough light. The rushes smoked a bit at first, but the smoke seemed to be drawn out of the cave entrance.

Kryslie automatically studied the cave. She saw that the walls of the cave had been smoothed, and alcoves had been excavated all around. It made it hard to pick where the tunnel leading into the mountain began. She moved and let senses other than the common five, search for a place of difference. As she succeeded, she sensed Mithas waiting for her mind touch, and invited him to join her.

As if unaware of his approach, Tymos gave directions to the guards. “Three of you, go and find positions where you can observe the approaches from the east, north and west.”

“Prince Tymos, with respect, we have orders to guard...”

Kryslie decided to forego tact. “If you were not two hundred percent sure that this cave was safe, you would not have let us in,” she pointed out. “We will be out of sight while we wait for Mithas. He has sent messages to the tribes that are within a days travel from here. Representatives are on their way. You are to watch for them, report, and stay out of sight. Understood?”

Allyn tensed with disapproval. “Yes, Princess Kryslie,” he said stiffly. His mind was betraying his belief that she should have gone back to the Royal Estate with her father. His mind was practically shouting it.

Keeping her voice even, Kryslie told him, “Allyn, we may be the Heir Designates of His Majesty, but we are neither brainless nor untrained. No matter what you think.”

His mind shouted, “But you’ve only been on Tymorea for a year.” His face went red.

“Yes, we were quite old when we arrived. Yes, we had all sorts of odd human notions. However, President Reslic has been our personal trainer since then. I expect you know what that means.”

He did, and mentally winced as Kryslie went on, “Governor Xyron has personally overseen our learning program and Father has made sure we know how to behave. Everything he knows about diplomacy, negotiation, and leadership, he has shared with us. We are the best people for

this task. We have already befriended Mithas, and he will listen to us more readily than to any other official envoy.”

“But you are still children...”

“Allyn, we are not children!” Kryslie said sharply.

Allyn swallowed anything else he wanted to say. He directed Frest to remain in the cave and went with Drake and Juan to observe the approaches.

Frest looked uncomfortable, as he stood watching the High King’s heirs. Tymos turned and spoke to him.

“Relax, won’t you,” Tymos invited.

The younger Guardsman began to obey, but then yelped and quickly drew his stunner. Without looking around, Tymos pushed his arm down.

Eyes wide with fright at seeing the newcomer, Frest tried to protest, “Prince Tymos there is...”

Kryslie had seen Mithas emerge from the hidden tunnel and greeted him warmly. “Mithas, thank you for your offer of help.”

Once Frest seemed ready to trust the stranger, Tymos turned his attention to Mithas, but spoke to explain to Frest. “When we escaped from Warlord Kellex, one of the Aeronite commanders, Mithas helped us get a message to Father.”

“Little Royals helped us first,” Mithas announced. “Prove they more friend than dark eyes.”

Frest opened his mouth as if he wanted to speak, and then shut it. His mind revealed that he did not want to offend the apparition that had appeared from solid rock. However, the mention of ‘dark-eyes’ had reminded him of the aliens that had infiltrated the Royal Estate and attacked the guards in an attempt to abduct the High Kings heirs.

Tymos sensed the worry and decided to explain further. “Mithas may not look like the common conception of a mutant, but I can assure you that he is no longer in league with the aliens. His mutation is not obvious. He is a telepath.”

Frest stiffened again, his apprehension growing.

“Tark and Gorren look like mutants,” Mithas said blandly as two more figures emerged from the hidden tunnel. Frest’s hand jerked back up to aim his stunner at the figures.

“Put it down, Frest!” Tymos ordered. “When Kellex sent his warriors to get us back, he proved how little he regarded his allies. Mithas offered to assist us to make contact with other mutant tribes. We must work to get them all on our side.”

Mithas spat a glob of saliva at Frest’s feet. “More than then. False friends don’t care if us dead. Little Royals did care. Protected us, treat us as people. Help them I will. Promised. Old allies, liars are.”

Slowly, Frest lowered his weapon. The three mutants did not make a threatening move, and he saw that both Prince Tymos and Princess Kryslie were relaxed. He still wasn’t completely convinced because he was swallowing convulsively. Though that might have been because both Tark and Gorren did look like the stereotype of a mutant - both were short, heavily muscled in a craggy way and their facial features were twisted and distorted.

The lack of trust did not anger Mithas. He was used to that reaction from Tymorean commoners. He took amusement from saying, “Tark has pretty daughter. Not like him.”

Instead of reassuring Frest, it made him swallow harder. It made him even more nauseous to think that some woman had mated to this...this gargoyle, and that the mutants were so unstable, physically, that they couldn’t breed ‘true’, or consistently.

Kryslie took pity on the young guardsman. She was empathically aware of how he was feeling. “Why don’t you keep watch from the cave entrance? You will have better radio reception from there.”

“Yes. Yes, mam,” he agreed whole-heartedly. He gave the three mutants a long searching look and turned to obey.

Mithas chuckled quietly. "Others not far. We get place ready. Tark and Gorren move rocks for seats. They strong."

His mind implied, "Not the brightest."

Tymos watched as the two mutants hefted boulder sized rocks from within the alcoves. He decided not to help. He was a guest. Mithas nodded with satisfaction, and amusement.

"This our greeting place. Leave it rough we do."

Kryslie watched Tark flip the boulder he was lifting, and place it in the centre of the cave. Gorren did the same with his burden. Now the rough looking boulders proved to have smooth bases, roughly concave. When there was a loose circle of five stone seats, each with a small rock table between them, Mithas remarked, "We not uncivilised savages. We bring guesting stuff too. Expected it is."

"I am suitably educated," Kryslie admitted dryly. "Our studies did not tell us much about your lifestyle."

"Big Royals don't visit and you little Royals not sweep us under mat," Mithas said.

"No, we won't ignore the mutants," Tymos promised. "You are Tymoreans, and we must all act together to remove the alien infiltrators."

"You not like big Royals. Good it is that the king whelped two smart ones and kept you hid."

"Indeed," Kryslie agreed, sensing that Mithas was blocking some of his memories. She wondered why but it wasn't time to push the issue. She asked instead, "Tell us about the leaders you invited."

The shrill squawk of feedback from a handheld radio drew all eyes Guardsman Frest. He blushed as he fiddled with the control pad.

Seeing no immediate threat, and identifying the cause of the noise, Prince Tymos turned back to his conversation with Mithas. The mutant dropped his hands from his tormented ears and glanced over his shoulder at his two fellow tribesmen.

"Women you are! Noise is only," he growled at his tribesmen who still had fingers jammed into their ears.

Princess Kryslie stepped away from her brother and walked to Frest. "I assume Allyn has returned. Go and tell him to come here to report."

Frest seemed eager to comply. He nodded his head and turned abruptly, not quite running out of the entrance of the cave.

"Like us little, that one," Mithas murmured to Tymos.

Kryslie heard the remark and added a comment of her own. "As much as they like being ordered around by children." She waited by the opening for Frest and Allyn to return.

Mithas chuckled. "Like you, me, they not. See they do, outside only."

Tymos grinned wryly. Mithas had sent that comment mentally.

The mutant went on, "Pity it is, too weak to think distant, need squawk box to talk it."

"Our way is more discreet," Tymos agreed, feeling a shiver of premonition. He heard Kryslie add her own comment, as booted feet trotted up the rocky path to the cave. "If they are not careful, the aliens will triangulate our position. If any of them happen to be nearby, they will have heard that squawk."

Guardsman Allyn came to a halt at the cave door.

"Come in, Allyn," Kryslie invited, walking without concern to stand next to her brother. She watched Allyn glancing around as he tentatively moved forward. Frest would have reported the unexpected arrival of the mutants.

"For the Guardian's sake, Allyn, will you stop acting like Mithas has invited a dozen enemies in here since you went out? Give us your report before we die of boredom," she continued.

Allyn jerked as if he had been insulted, but he covered his reaction by bowing to the two Royals.

“Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie, Drake and Juan have seen mutants, er, people, approaching from north and north east. There is a third group coming from the west.”

“Numbers?” Tymos barked the question in a tone he copied from the Tymorean President, Jono Reslic.

Allyn reacted to it. “Five or six in each group,” he reported.

“ETA?” Kryslie asked, copying her brother’s tone. Allyn twitched again.

“An hour or an hour and a half.”

Tymos gave the next direction. “Tell Drake and Juan to scout the back trail of the groups they are watching. Have Frest do the same for the third group. Tell them to keep all transmissions as brief as possible and to keep out of sight. We do not want to scare off our guests. When they return, after our guests have arrived, they are to find observation points outside of the cave.”

“Yes, Sir,” Allyn managed to give the accepted response.

“And you,” Kryslie added, “Will return in here and wait in the small side cavern off this one.”

Mithas, aware of the thoughts that Kryslie had kept to herself, added, “Mutants see fancy clothes and run back away.”

Allyn kept his face impassive. He had, during the past two days, refused the suggestion that he exchange his Palace Guard uniform for dull coloured travelling clothes and cloaks like the Tymos and Kryslie had adopted, though his companions had muddy brown coloured cloaks to put over their uniforms.

His acknowledgement came through clenched teeth. “Yes, Sir.”

With out requesting permission to depart, he turned abruptly and left the cave.

“Let’s deal with Allyn after this meeting,” Tymos proposed. “I estimate that the visitors will arrive sooner than he allowed.”

Mithas chuckled again. “Mutants run fast.” He then ordered his hovering tribesmen to, “Get guesting drink ready and bring two long, hooded capes for the little Royals.”

He grinned at Kryslie and explained, “Little Royals don’t scare mutants, only big ones. But you not short little and fire hair give you away.”

Kryslie gave a wry grin. “You are right, Mithas,” she admitted aloud.

Allyn returned to the cave, firmly controlling his instinct to glance around, but his jerky movements and rapid eye motion betrayed him. He spotted two more figures in grey hooded capes and almost drew his hand weapon.

Only when one of the figures lowered their hood and turned so the torch light glinted off red hair, did he realise who the figures were. He bowed stiffly and reported. “The groups are moving faster than we estimated. They will arrive in half an hour.”

Tymos nodded. “Wait in the inner cave.”

Kryslie deliberately stressed, “You will not interfere, and you will need neither sword nor stunner.” She met the guardsman’s eyes until he nodded stiffly and retreated to the inner cave. He paused but did not acknowledge when Mithas said, “Big Royals wouldn’t send little Royals if they not able to talk right.”

“A point Allyn had better think on while he is waiting,” Kryslie thought at her brother. “He is a palace guard, and not of high enough rank to second guess President Reslic.”

His real problem was that he was that he was twice the age of the ‘children’ he was guarding, and had children of his own.

Chapter 3 - Meeting

When Mithas sent messages to the tribes within a days travel from his stronghold, all he said was that he needed to discuss matters of grave importance to all mutants.

Such meetings were rare, as the tribal leaders had the responsibility to protect their tribes. For safety, larger groups of mutants seldom came together. Curiosity, along with the need to discuss concerns of their own, caused the leaders to agree to meet with Mithas.

Each brought along one or more of their elder advisors, and were not perturbed when they arrived at the cave and were greeted by Mithas, flanked by two silent figures. The anonymous figures clad in grey rough spun fabric robes, with their faces hidden by the hoods, served refreshments to each guest on their arrival.

When all the expected leaders had arrived, Mithas began speaking to the standing guests.

“Know I do, your tribes need you. For coming, my thanks. Need I have, our allies to discuss.”

“Imply you do, them you trust not,” one of the newly arrived leaders challenged, as he picked a place to sit. The other visiting leaders copied the action, keeping their advisers standing behind them.

“Say as I do,” Mithas confirmed. “Seventeen years I lead tribe, and my father before. Allies claim, our saviours to be. Serve them I have.”

“Claim, Mithas?” came an instant challenge.

“Yes, Dormar,” Mithas confirmed. “Have they done for you more than make promises?”

“Weapons we have,” Dormar countered.

Mithas snorted. “Discards only. Good as club, is all. No protection from other weapons.”

“You slow then Mithas. Just run faster,” Dormar chuckled at his own wit.

“If rubbish make you happy, no use talk,” Mithas retorted.

“What concerns you, Mithas,” a different leader, the oldest, asked.

Mithas turned away from Dormar and addressed the others. “Ambush we did, troop of guards. Allies pleased, but not care that many of tribe killed or hurt. Royals hunt us, catch some. Catch me and elders. Our saviours care not. Only when my tribe don’t obey without us, forced allies were, to help.”

“So help they did,” Dormar stated boldly. “Why you grumble?”

“Why? Sent they did, little, little commander. My son have more sense. Lucky he was, to get me free. Orders he had, to leave others to rot and torture. Care not for them. We only free when baby prince announced. When guards distracted.”

“Warlord Zorrec say, baby no threat for years,” the youngest leader offered. His name was Faush.

Mithas smiled grimly and did not react to the comment. “Read mind of little commander, I did. He think we only good as sword food. Us ugly, good riddance.”

Dormar drawled, “War it is. Dying happens.”

“Rather live for promised reward,” the elder leader responded.

“As do I, Jenmar,” Mithas said.

Dormar grunted, “What your point, Mithas?”

“Point is, Warlord Kellex claim he take every prince from tyrant king. He couldn’t get new babe. His warriors caught by Royals, so my tribe people freed to be caught or killed instead.”

Growls came from several throats as the leaders took in the insult to Mithas.

“Say you do, allies just use us. How you know?” the remaining leader demanded.

“Little commander tell me, Gors. He assume we keen to die for Warlord. Mind say we not important. They wanted babe and the kings other get.”

“Babe no threat. What others,” Dormar demanded.

“Tell later, point is, not allies who took other princes.”

Mithas heard two mental exclamations of “What!” and his back began to prickle, though he did not turn to glance at his presumed guards.

“Who then?” Gors demanded.

“Brother of father,” Mithas said.

There was a bark of laughter from several of the advisors.

“Clown one? Keep changing his face?” one asked.

Mithas glared in the direction of the speaker. His anger at the memory he was going to share was only apparent to the two figures standing behind him. Keeping that anger hidden, with difficulty, Mithas slipped out of the common mutant dialect and used the dialect of the Tymorean commoners. “Allies sent uncle to get first two. Boy and girl. The ones about ready now to lead our saviours. Allies challenge him to change into two bodies, to look like little Royals. He wasn’t very smart. Uncle died. Allies say he was too damaged to live. Now I know he died so Royals think children dead, not taken by allies.”

“Clever that was. So what the others,” Dormar asked, fascinated.

“Father sent after oldest two. He only look little strange. Went to spaceport where King was on tour. He got near Princes, with thing allies give him. Then trader shuttle crash on him, kill princes too and lots of commoners.”

Dormar shrugged. “People die. Common, Royal, no loss. Father die hero.”

Mithas growled, angry at Dormar’s reaction. He continued doggedly. “Other one, eleven years ago. They took my younger son, a baby of three days - because he look normal.”

Dormar suddenly stopped grinning.

Mithas went on, “Told I was, honoured. I would give up my son, and for that sacrifice, I would be rewarded with a prince to raise as our ally. While our tormentors would raise mutant to destroy them.”

“I do that easy,” Dormar claimed. “Sons only fight and drink.” Then he suddenly stared at Mithas. “What they do? You only one son.”

“They switched children. Their medicine doer went to town where Royal Consort in labour. She was birthing too early. My child, a healthy boy, died three days later. Because he died, allies did not give me other. My son’s inner organs shrivelled because of some foul brew our allies gave him. When I protested, they warn me to keep helping or tribe would die.” Mithas’s voice was unsteady, but he went on. “I stay quiet until now, because my tribe is family. Too precious to risk. Until now, I think only allies can help us get better life. But it’s been twenty years and we still scratch dirt to exist. We are not equals of allies but slaves of no importance.”

Mithas spat into the centre of the circle of seats to make his point.

“Nothing ever given us,” Dormar said. “Earn it we must. What other get of king is there? We find them and keep ourselves. Heard of babe, not others.”

“Soon to kill the accursed ones anyway,” Faush claimed brashly. “Be in front of allies I’ll be. Honour that is.”

“How will you be honoured, if die you do?” Mithas countered.

“Okay, inflated brain, what think you we do?” Dormar asked.

“Think we must, best for tribe,” Jenmar proposed.

“My point exactly,” Mithas nodded. “But we must think if our best interests still lie in serving these allies of us. Or if we can do better in our own way.”

“Nowhere we got before allies.” Faush said. “Tormentors die now.”

“More of family die now too,” Jenmar retorted as he moved stiffly on his seat. His face contorted as if with pain.

“Weapons we have, spears less better,” Dormar said.

“Purpose we have,” Gors added. “Allies know much we don’t. Ideas good.”

“Good ideas,” Mithas echoed. “Have you stopped to think, that before we met allies, before we began to kill and capture for them, peace we had? Now, we are hunted like criminals, by the guards from the palace, feared and hated by the common people. We fear for our tribes – afraid of reprisal. Afraid of failing our allies – because of their anger.”

“Soft you got, Mithas,” Gors accused. “I send strong son to take your tribe. Heard grumbles that you let Royal brats escape. You lost chance to bargain.”

Mithas shook his head, aware of the presence of those “brats” behind him. “They were the kings get, ones Kellex only just learnt of. We caught them when the allies could not keep them. Felt their minds I did. Trust them I do.”

“Traitor!” Gors and Dormar yelled in unison, rising to their feet. Their so far silent elders growled their agreement.

Mithas raised his voice. “When I felt their mind, I knew I could no longer serve the allies. I agreed to serve them instead. When they knew that we would be killed if we let them escape – they allowed themselves to be captured. We were treated with gas, then paralysed by our allies so we had no chance to bargain - even had I wanted to – and just so they could get children. They did not trust us, and they feared the power of the children. Children! Our allies are scared of the Governors, scared of their children. They went and left us helpless. The kin of the children helped me, one of the Governors – cured the paralysis, so I could guard my tribesmen until they recovered. They helped me, even though I had captured their children, and they still did not know if those children were alive or dead.”

“Governor, scum, how did they know you got brats?” Dormar demanded.

“I sent message. Allowed two commoners to go free – one had been tortured by allies to near death.”

“Commoners! No waste.” Gors shrugged. “Brats gone, even better. Allies won’t fail twice. But you! You break covenant of mutants. You deal with tormentors....such treason.”

Jenmar looked at Mithas, his face having gone pale and damp. He tried to stand and speak, but only a hiss escaped his lips.

Without a word, one of the grey hooded figures moved from behind Mithas, and went to Jenmar. He began massage the older mutant’s shoulders. Jenmar slumped on his seat, but colour began to return to his face.

“Touch him not, traitor scum!” Jenmar’s fellow tribesman tried to drag the hooded figure away, but succeeded only in removing the hood to reveal brilliant red hair and a face with out any distortions. “Kill him not!” the man began to pound on Tymos’s back.

Recognition of the lineage of the revealed person brought instant bedlam. Gors and Dormar leapt for Mithas, still seated on his seat, but the second grey grey-hooded figure moved faster and stood between them and the target of their wrath. Faush skittered nearer the way out.

Then Kryslie removed her hood.

“Be seated again!”

“Obey you! We NOT!” Gors roared.

“Very well, stay as you are then. However, I will not let you harm Mithas.”

“He is traitor to us! Dealing with you scum.” Gors told her, inching forward, hand on a hidden weapon.

“Hides behind girl child!” Dormar taunted, doing the same. He watched for Kryslie to start to react.

The two mutants, both hefty and ready for a fight, were within inches of Kryslie when a new voice stopped them. They turned and stared in surprise.

“Fools you be. Mithas has chosen right.” Jenmar was on his feet, standing straight, and looking as vigorous as he had ten years before. Tymos moved away, waiting.

“Minds I can’t read, but acts speak to me more than fancy words. Allies laughed at me. Asked my son if they should kill me so a stronger man could rule. My son is loyal, so I live and my mind is not feeble. When the pain came just then, and chest was on fire – I thought that the

allies would have their way. Then I felt the hands and the pain began to go, and the other pain, that bends my joints and aches all day and all night.”

“They trick you!” Gors snarled.

“Why will an enemy of us, choose to help me – an old dying man – and give me years more of life? Like you said of commoners – mutants, no waste.”

Faush edged back to the table.

“If they wanted to trick me into helping them, enough it would be to help me a little - long enough to get home. To die there. Our allies would not even do that much for me. Instead, I will be leading tribe for years yet.”

“Listen more, I won’t,” Dormar said, turning to walk out of the cavern.

“Two tribes no more are friends,” Gors added, turning to follow. Faush looked undecided, but he was the youngest leader.

Just as they reached the opening, Tymos spoke, thoughtfully, as if he didn’t understand something.

“Your allies. Do you really know what they are?”

“Care not!” Gors replied. “Hate you they do, and kin of yours.”

“Since allies, we strong. Weapons given. Land we will have, lots and lots, then grow much we can. Rich we get, telling of you.”

“I suppose you would be very rich, if you could keep your life,” Kryslie said gently. “Didn’t you listen? Mithas captured us – you heard how they treated him. Your allies treated us worse, by drugging us as well. But we escaped and now they are trying to blame him for their mistakes. The soldiers of your allies took us away, while Mithas and his family were helpless. So they could not have helped us escape from their flying ship. So when you go and tell your allies where we are – and get to keep the richness of your life, what do you think will happen?”

“Rich we get!” Dormar repeated.

“Is that all? Suppose they don’t find us – these infallible allies of yours?”

Dormar shrugged. “Care not.”

“You should,” Kryslie said. “First, they will kill Mithas and his tribe for harbouring us. Then, when they can’t find us, they will take their anger out on you and your tribe. They will not reward you for worthless information.”

“Mithas tribe – traitors – no waste. As for rest – believe you not. Tell we will.”

Dormar and Gors began to stride to the door. When Tymos spoke again, they paused, but did not look at the speaker.

“One thing that I learnt talking to Mithas was how much he, as the leader of his tribe, cared for them,” Tymos said evenly. “He was greatly concerned for all the tribes when he had proof of your allies’ duplicity. I am sorry that you care so little for your own people. My sister and I have no wish for innocents to be killed.”

Dormar snorted. “You not prove to us, allies not friends. My own mind, I follow.”

“We do not mindlessly obey our elders, though many think we should. We were taught to see facts and see truth. We give you that same right. We will not force you to believe us.”

Dormar’s second snort was less forceful. Before he began to move on, Kryslie asked, “Who did your allies say they were?”

“Friends,” Gors said loudly, “Outcastes like us. Hated by you – for darkness of eyes.”

“Where did they come from?” Kryslie asked again.

“From far away, to help us, and us help them.”

“I assume that as concerned friends who know their tribal area better than the newcomers, you have watched over them and helped them when they were in trouble?”

“Help they don’t want,” Dormar muttered. He didn’t deny that he watched their activities.

“Government scientists have proven that your allies, who we were unaware of until some months ago when a space craft landed, are sneaking around our world, playing games with our weather, performing acts of sabotage that cause tremors in the ground and cracks in our water

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