

## Chapter 1 -Packing

The night shadows swept over the land. Naviton, the third planet in the solar system, remained below Arret's horizon. An ancient spirit in a vintage castle awakes to a prophesy foretold, yearning for resolution.

*"An innocent stranger from another world will change the future," she foretold. "Crystal fragments from the medallion will create a whole. "Once a leader is chosen, your people can be released from this curse."*

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As the cooler temperatures of winter set in, campfires and personal braziers remained fueled throughout the ahman tribal villages. Deep in the mountain, a small village of ahman people settled in for the night, except for one.

Xenfer, a shaman, prayed to the ancient universal spirit of past ahmans who settled on this arid land. The spiritual leader laid several religious artifacts on a small nightstand. The ahman waved a hand over the icons including a small screw from a ship said to belong to the first ahman leader, Petro, who discovered Arret. Next, a couple of native nuts in their shell represented the survival food Petro had his people eat. A carved camicock beak and a varacook tooth finished the list of worshipped artifacts from battles Petro conquered to survive.

"I stand with my ancestors and ahmans who have sacrificed themselves against the perverted petrolians," Xenfer murmured, arranging the religious icons in a row. "Once we were outcasts, now it shall be we who triumph."

Petrolians evolved from genetically altered ahmans to perpetuate their survival. Their scientists found a way to divide their descendants into two sexes, rather than stay as one and degrade from inbreeding. Many ahmans refuse the conversion. Some were killed for their beliefs.

Xenfer covered the remnants of the ahman past with a soft dark cloth. As the shaman prepared to retire for the night, a member of the tribe tapped on the supporting pole outside the tent door.

"Yah, what is it?" Xenfer asked, turning toward the tent flap.

A younger ahman, dressed in leather britches and a woolen tunic, stepped inside. "It is I, Zomar, Ser. I have brought food supplies, from Corelé."

"Did you find work in the petrolian town?"

"Yah, I helped one named Ben Shelf-de-Pur. That one paid me in food. We have enough rations for the next few weeks."

"Good, make sure it is placed near our cook's tent. I've sent another scout to check our mountain caches."

"Yah, Ser. I also was given this," Zomar said, extending a hand to the shaman. "You may have it."

Xenfer plucked the shiny stone from the ahman's hand. "What is this?"

"A crystal, my Lord. I was told it came from Ottopenda."

Xenfer held the glassy stone in front of the lamplight hanging in the center of the tent. "Yah, I heard the humans went there against my advice. Nothing good can come of that visit. I fear they have unleashed a curse upon us," Xenfer said. "This, I feel in my soul. Thank you, you have done well. You may leave."

"Sleep safe, my Lord," Zomar said, backing out of the tent.

Xenfer admired the crystal again before lifting the nightstand cloth to place it in the center with the rest of the religious items.

The shaman whispered a few prayer words and covered them again with the dark cloth. Xenfer turned down the brazier in the center of the tent and extinguished the oil lamp hanging above. Upon removing the outer camicoock cloak, the ahman slid into the raised bed.

During the cold night, sleep was not restful until early morning as visions appeared in Xenfer's mind.

Shards of crystals covered the carpet. A figure stepped closer to the sleeping figure in the bedding. Xenfer saw many crystals moving either by themselves or by someone's hand into a circle. *"And there shall be a new king over the land, and a new way of life,"* a hushed voice spoke.

As the form of a hand crept across the artifacts, Xenfer woke with a start.

"Who goes there?" the ahman shouted. The spiritual leader tried to stand but remained unsteady by the sleepy haze. Cautious of the crystals from the dream, Xenfer glanced around the floor. No crystals were seen in the shallow light from the dying brazier embers. The shaman lifted the cloth to check under the covering of the religious items. All seemed safe.

The ahman jumped from the bed and ran to the door flap covering the opening of the tent. Xenfer stepped outside and glanced around at the modest campsite. A lone piaka dashed into the bushes, but no stranger lingered nearby.

"Who dares to enter my home and run away?" the ahman leader called.

A robust ahman dressed in varacook skins, carrying a long spear approached Xenfer. "What is wrong?" the guard asked.

The ahman leader looked at the ahman guard. "I guess nothing. I must have had a bad dream," Xenfer said, preferring not to describe what may have been a vision. "Return to your post."

The guard nodded. "Yah, Ser. I will watch the grounds for intruders."

"Yes, yes, do that," Xenfer replied as he entered the tent.

The shaman looked behind his meager furniture in the space provided to make sure nothing was out of place. Xenfer returned to the rumpled bed. After staring at the hand-woven carpet for some time, the ahman dozed off.

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Many kilometers away in the small town of Corelé, Nathan, rolled his twenty-year old body over in his bed. He was half asleep when hushed voices caught his attention. He thought his family was talking in the next room. The aroma from fried cabo meat aroused his hunger. He stretched his lean frame on his back, thinking his mother must be making breakfast. While his eyes remained closed, a distinctive voice whispered, "*The crystals must come together.*"

"Huh?" he groaned, opening his eyes to the glow of sunlight beaming across the floor. In the haze of his sleep, he thought he saw a shadow pass over his clothing draped on the nearby chair. His medallion sparkled under the shaft of light from the top of the dresser. He ran his fingers through his tousled black curly hair. As he moved his leg, something caught his attention under his blankets.

"Squeak!"

"Nathan flipped the covers away to reveal a small furry hominin piaka under one of his knees. When he lifted his bare leg off the small hairy creature, it scurried off the bed. At one time, these creatures were once regarded as low-minded animals until he discovered they understood the ancient phirmian language of the ahmans.

"Sorry, little guy. I didn't know you were there," he said, watching the piaka ran across the floor and through the open bedroom doorway.

The piakas were no more than a foot high when standing. When the city council ruled they should take care of the creatures, the town's people came together and built mounds behind several of the petrolian buildings to accommodate the creatures during the winter.

Nathan's mother, Alice, knocked on his door. "Time to rise and shine. Today is the day," she said, stepping away from the racing piaka who made his escape across the kitchen floor. "Where did that one come from?"

"I guess with the cooler weather, he snuck into my bed last night to keep warm," Nathan said.

Outside his window, a rover drove past their cabin. The motor's humming sound brought him to the task of today.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" he exclaimed, jumping out of bed. "I'm going with Shirley to see her father." He snatched his dark blue shirt from the seat of the chair and slipped it over his head. "Do I still have time?"

"Yes, calm down and finish dressing," his mother said, smoothing a blond strand from her eyebrow. "We'll have our breakfast, first. Your father and I are going with them as well." Alice returned to the kitchen while Nathan continued to dress.

When he picked up his pants from the floor, a shiny object rolled out of one of his pockets. He stared at the two-inch crystal spinning on the floor. Nathan forgot he still had it after his trip to the planet of Naviton, better known locally as Ottopenda. He scooped up the glistening stone and slipped it into his pocket.

As he glanced around the bed and floor for the rest of his clothes, he yelled, "Mom, where are my socks?"

His mother returned and sighed. She pointed to a well-used pair draped over the back of the chair near his bed. "Please change into fresh ones before we go," she said and left the room.

Nathan searched the middle drawer of his dresser for a cleaner pair. He raised his eyes to the blue stoned medallion, plucked it from the dresser top, and slipped the chain over his head. He sat

on the chair and pulled his socks on, and then his boots over his feet. When he entered the kitchen area of the cabin, he noticed his little sister, Debra, setting the pitcher of cabo milk on the table. Cabos were cow-like beasts of burden the ahmans brought from their home planet, Ahmantec.

Debra wore a red flowered shift, which hung below her knees. Her auburn hair hung straight around her shoulders. As if she forgot something, she spun around and entered her bedroom.

Nathan tucked his necklace under his shirt and sat in the chair near his father, Mike. He reached for the plate of berry bread slices and grabbed two of the confections.

Mike took a drink from his hot mug. "I still can't believe Robert killed that ahman, thinking he was Gothur," he said.

"I can't either," Alice said, pouring the red citrus juice into their glasses. "Robert's always been nice and respectful to the ahman people here."

"Thank goodness his term on the ahman farm is a far better sentence than an execution." Mike's dark brown hair glistened with a few strands of silver in the morning sunlight.

Nathan drank his juice avoiding his parent's conversation. He helped himself to a spoonful of scrambled camicock eggs from a large platter.

The domesticated camicock birds raised on farms were easier to manage than the wild ones in the mountains. They grew larger than an ostrich and used as a pack animal.

"Poppi did make a wise decision," Alice said, sitting across from Nathan.

Debra returned from her bedroom and slid into the empty wooden chair.

Alice turned to Mike. "I heard there will be a vote on the governor's position next month," she said, offering the bread to Debra.

"Yes," Mike said. "I hate to see Poppi go, but we knew the position was temporary."

"Will we get to vote, Dad?" Nathan asked, cutting a strip of camicock meat in his plate.

"I don't know if we can," Mike said. "When I see ViTel, I'll ask him." He placed a small crystal on the table in front of Alice. "Oh, this is for you."

"It's lovely," she said, admiring the rainbow reflections. "What is it?"

"A souvenir from Ottopenda," he said.

"I'm going to see Shirley, first," Nathan said, drinking the last of his citrus juice.

"I think she's at DiLane's, picking up the berry bread she made yesterday. She wanted to bring it on our trip," Alice said. "I offered her to bake the loaves here but she wanted to use the DiLane's larger oven.

"Thanks, I'll catch her there," Nathan replied, standing.

Nathan reached for his jacket, lying across the arm of the couch when his father rose from his chair.

"I'll round up everyone that is going this morning," his father announced, slipping one arm into his heavy coat.

"Who else is going besides us?" Alice asked, gathering one of the used dishes.

"Besides a few of our ahmans porters, Zoni, Charlie, Logan, Jerod, and Sam indicated they wanted to go. Zoni will continue to the pinnacle cave. That one wants to bring back some of the old computers we found in there from our last trip."

Nathan slipped his jacket over his shoulders. "I'll go and find Shirley," he said, opening the cabin door.

"What about me?" Debra said, still sitting at the table.

Alice turned to her daughter. "You are staying with DiLane," she said. "I think her son, Peter, will come with us or go with ViTel on the railroad."

"Phoo. I never get to go anywhere," Debra groaned, folding her arms across her chest.

"You will someday," her mother said. "Pack your things."

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In DiLane's home, Shirley Bender loaded a packed bag with a few loaves of the berry bread she baked yesterday for the trip. Charlie Dane, the local cook, informed her he was acquiring the rest of the food supplies they would need.

"Do you know if ViTel will come with us?" Shirley asked, folding the wrapped bread into the canvas bag.

"Not this time. He's overseeing the railroad expansion," DiLane replied. "I hope the tribal ahmans don't cause a problem like they did last time."

Shirley studied the petrolian's close-knit eyebrows under blond ringlets. "I'm sure he'll be all right," she said. "I heard he's taking several ahdoolians with him."

DiLane relaxed her jaw and nodded. "Yes, they are much stronger than the other species of ahmans or petrolians."

"I see most are in service as security guards," Shirley said. "I suppose the other ahman species such as perops, phirmians, ahs, and piathians are capable, but they aren't as strong as the ahdoolians."

"Yes," DiLane sighed. "Even so, some of the tribes could turn dangerous if they feel threatened by our people."

As Shirley turned to leave the warm room, they heard someone rap on the open door.

Nathan poked his head inside and asked, "Are you ready?"

"I am," Shirley replied, holding the bread pack under her arm. "Thank you, DiLane, for your help."

"You two have a safe journey," DiLane said as the humans stepped outside on the porch. "Don't let the varacooks eat you."

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Litha, the owner of a small clothing shop, rose early this morning. She slipped into her woolen red dress and boots for the walk to Gother's cabin. Both petrolians became close friends and much more.



Life eased for her and DiLane since they didn't have Amado and Verdock, the past emperors, to deal with. As consorts to these rulers, she and DiLane were always in conflict for attention. Once the emperors died, and their stations dissolved, their friendship grew. DiLane married ViTel, the temporary governor, and Litha opened a clothing store for ahmans and petrolians alike.

Litha glanced through her window to check on the weather. She noted the cooler air of winter formed a heavy mist along the street throughout the town. She couldn't see any sign of rain from the dark clouds above. Rain would be a welcomed sight on this parched planet. She turned her door sign around to read 'Closed' from her front porch.

Litha turned and walked past the sales counter to enter through the curtained area from her shop into her residence. She removed her heavy woven jacket from a closet and swung it around her shoulders. After Litha latched the four sliver coat buttons, she lifted her fur hat and adjusted it over her dark hair. Once she completed her ensemble with her black knitted gloves, she stepped out the rear exit from her residence and locked the door.

As she entered the main street, she saw a line of rovers near the boardwalk, waiting to take the Carone party into the mountains. Zoni, an ahman, sat in one of them at the console. She observed the owner of the mercantile store across the street, lifting an election banner to hang from the porch roof. A few petrolians passed her as she walked through the street.

She wanted to see Gothur off if he was traveling with the Carones. Though she was much older than Gothur, she held a similar attraction toward him as she held for his father, Verdock, but without the vengeance. Verdock was a ruthless emperor after his brother died. Many hated him for treating the ahmans as slaves.

Litha, strolling past the rovers, turned down an alley toward Gothur's home. He lived with his parents, Roth and Zirah when

they were in town. Last, she heard, they were back in the mountains, educating the tribal ahmans about the new train bringing modern conveniences of comphones, and food supplies.

As she drew closer to the front of the building, she noticed a light emanating from the solitary window. She removed one of her gloves and rapped on the front door.

A curtain from the window parted for a moment before Gothur opened the door and stood before her.

"Well, this is a nice surprise," he said, gesturing her inside. His broad shoulders filled the doorframe. Gothur's brooding eyes pierced her heart. She inhaled.

"I thought I'd catch you if you were leaving today," she said, removing her other glove.

"I don't know if I am, but I thought I'd pack a few things, just in case."

She waited for him to kiss her. When he didn't, Litha stood with her arms akimbo. She watched him throw a few personal items into his pack. She glanced toward the solitary wooden table off to the side of the room. In the center, she noticed a few shiny objects.

"What are these?" she asked, reaching for a glistening stone.

"Just stuff. That's a crystal from Ottopenda. Do you want one?"

"Are you sure?"

"I have plenty of those things." He shrugged and turned away from her.

She chose a teardrop shape she could wire wrap for a necklace and admired the reflections. "So why do you have to go?" Litha asked. "I heard ViTel will leave in a couple of days. We could have the town to ourselves before then."

"Sounds tempting but I prefer to volunteer," he replied, packing a long sleeved shirt into his bag. "Every time that Nathan goes on one of these trips, something happens and he gets peculiar."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, lifting her warm fur hat over her head.

"He sees things and I want to know why."

"Like what?"

"He has visions and those piakas follow him wherever he goes."

"I've noticed that," she said, pocketing the crystal into her jacket. "Maybe he's sick in his head. Could that be the reason?"

"If it is, his kind doesn't seem too upset. I haven't understood why they don't put him away," he said.

In the past, Ahmans and petrolians alike didn't have the patience required to deal with unfamiliar behaviors in their society. New laws written two thousand years ago made the ahmans realize the disabled could benefit their society. The petrolians and ahmans alike needed to rely on each other and rebuild their population after the ahmans from ahmantec discovered them.

Gothur glanced at the wall clock. "I better hurry."

"I just saw the rovers in front of the Carone cabin. Zoni was the only one with them at the time.

"Then it looks like they are getting ready to leave. Will you miss me?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

"May—"

Gothur grabbed her around her petite waist and planted a passionate kiss on her lips before she could answer. "You were saying?"

She took a moment to catch her breath. "You—you will be careful, won't you?" she asked, clutching her chest.

"I'm always careful around humans and ahmans," he said, returning a smile. "I should return in a few days."

He kissed her again, broke away and gathered his pack before rushing out of his cabin. Litha placed her fur hat over her black curls. She slipped her gloves over her four-fingered hands, a common trait among petrolians and ahmans. She smiled at the

memory of his passionate kiss. She hummed an old tune to herself as she closed the front door and made sure the latch locked before she strolled back to the main street.

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On the ahman's farm owned by Far-Too, Robert Bender raked the last of the hay cuttings into the baler. Since Poppi sentenced him to this farm six months ago for killing an ahman, he developed a liking for the quiet agricultural routine. He felt fortunate the governor banned him from Arret for life as soon as the next ship could take him back to Mars.

In addition to harvesting hay, he helped Far-Too with the caring and feeding of the camicock birds and pee-haus animals. The tranquil landscape cleared his thoughts as he replayed that fateful night.

*"Did I really kill that ahman?" he always asked himself. "I remember I saw him. I thought the ahman was Gothur, but it wasn't. The next thing I knew, that one laid dead at my feet on the ground. And then, there was my knife. How did it get into the fire pit?"*

Over and over he would grill himself with these questions until he had to give up.

The farmer and two other ahmans approached him as he tossed more hay into the back of the baler.

"I have a message for you," Far-Too said, holding a communique in hand.

"Yes?" Robert paused to hear what the older one wanted to say.

The ahman unfolded a sheet of parchment and read, "Your daughter and friends are coming to see you. Your friends will take you back to Corele' for transport off Arret. An outgoing ship will arrive in three to four weeks."

"Does it say who else is coming?" Robert asked, worried that his sentence may have changed for the worse.

"No, it is signed, Mike Carone."

"Thanks. I'll get as many of my chores finished before they arrive," Robert said, sliding the pitchfork under the layer of hay.

"They should be here tomorrow. Don't worry. I have strong ones here to help you finish," Far-Too said. "You have been a good worker, Robert. Better than some I've hired in the past."

"Good to hear that."

"Before you go, can you fix a piece of machinery for me?" Far-Too asked. "I know you are familiar with radios and computers. I'm not."

"Sure, what is it?" Robert asked, removing his thick gloves.

"It's my communicator. The transmitter breaks up when I try to respond."

"It might just be a loose connection somewhere," Robert replied. He was glad to have something he could do within his expertise. He set his farming tool against the fence and followed Far-Too to the main house. He watched as the two ahmans, who arrived with Far-Too, picked up their pitchforks.