

“Going Within, Going Without”

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Chapter One

It had been another long, grueling day, but then again, what else was new?

Exhausted, Zervulian slowly folded her long, prehensile leaves beneath her to lower her stalk trunk to the ground while the rest of the pod began to make camp for the night after their daily journey. She was supposed to help, but her leaves had no strength left in them, and she felt sick. Again. The Revvien would give herself a few minutes of downtime, but then she would have to force herself up again to help or the pod and pod leaders would admonish her for not doing her share. For right now, though, they were all giving her a respectable berth after she'd snapped at some of them a few times that day.

The broad Revyian sky visible above the plain was darkening now that the sun had set, and the surroundings were coming alive with the sounds of insects and crepuscular creatures. The dry air swirled in capricious breezes that rustled the long grasses, and she detected wisps of fragrances from various flowering grasses and vegetation nearby.

While she rested, Zervulian tilted her clear, ovoid seedcase on the top of her body to allow her budstalks to better scan the cloud-specked sky above, but it was still too light out to see the particular star she looked for every night. She hoped she could fight her exhaustion long enough to stay awake until it was visible, but after today, she wasn't sure if she could. She let out a low, vibrating hum, willing her sickly, protesting body to stop aching and life in general to stop being so blasted miserable.

A familiar bag made of sewn-together rubbery leaves floated jerkily, hesitantly, in the air toward her as if of its own accord. Zervulian waited until it was within reach, and then she grasped it with one of her dark red prehensile leaves. At the sight of the bag, a tiny glimmer of warmth struggled to crack through Zervulian's crankiness. Like always, the bag's arrival meant her best friend was watching out for her.

Soon her budstalks spotted Vroonze, though her leaves detected the sound vibrations first as Vroonze tramped through the tall grass toward Zervulian. One of Vroonze's dark green prehensile leaves at the base of her blue stalk trunk was upraised to presumably help with using her personal Force to guide the light leaf bag to Zervulian. A few other prehensile leaves were carrying a bigger and much heavier bag made of woven vines. Vroonze had just enough leaves left over to walk.

With a thud, Vroonze dropped the vine bag next to Zervulian. “Whew!” Vroonze took a step away and then let her stalk trunk fall to the ground in a controlled collapse. “I thought you were closer to the main part of camp,” she said to Zervulian.

“Once we stopped, the edge here was far enough for today,” Zervulian grumbled with a low thrum. “I didn't see the point of going even farther. Today was tough.” She was about to continue her rant but realized just in time where her words were going. Zervulian stopped

quickly, scolded herself, and then hurriedly changed the subject by indicating the two bags. She raised her speaking vibration to a more normal tone. “Thanks for bringing these all the way over. It’s just what I need. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Sure,” Vroonze said. “I figured you might have been more tired than usual today. Thought it might help.” She directed her budstalks to the sky above. “Is your star visible tonight?”

“Not yet,” Zervulian said, “but it should be once it gets dark enough.”

“I hope so.” With a hum, Vroonze gathered her leaves and pushed herself back onto them, lifting her stalk trunk back up. “I have to go help with camp. I’ll see you a bit later, okay?”

“All right,” Zervulian said.

She watched Vroonze go. Not for the first time, Zervulian felt a pang of envy. Like all the other Revwiens in their nomadic pod, Vroonze was tired after a full day of trekking across the plains, but neither she nor any of the others were as utterly spent and depleted as Zervulian always was.

It wasn’t a matter of conditioning. Zervulian and Vroonze were the same age and had grown up together in this pod. Except on Gathering Days, everyone in the pod traveled the same distance. The true cause for the discrepancy was a matter of extreme unfairness that Zervulian had never been able to understand.

When all of the Revwiens in her pod absorbed nutrients from the soil, they felt better. Replenished. Stronger. But when Zervulian absorbed the nutrients from the exact same soil, she felt worse. Weaker. Sometimes it made her feel unwell and shaky. It had been like this ever since she could remember. Her body was constantly hurting, constantly stressed, constantly fighting... something. She didn’t even know what. It had impacted her growth, coloring, and physical development, and keeping up with the healthy Revwiens of her pod was nearly impossible.

It might not have been so bad if the pod actually had a destination in mind and was genuinely going somewhere. But if they were, no one had ever answered her questions of where that was. So day after day, step after laborious step, all she could do was wonder where they were going and why. Maybe it didn’t matter to the others, but when it cost her this much, she wanted to know what the point of expending all this effort and energy was.

She fought back a flare of bitterness and tore her budstalks away from watching Vroonze go, feeling guilty for directing that envy toward her best friend. Vroonze didn’t deserve that. Besides, Vroonze was the only one in her pod who truly watched out for her. The others didn’t understand how difficult it was for Zervulian to travel so much; she might as well have been trying to convince them that gravity affected her and only her differently. Any podmates that did have some understanding tended to shrug off her condition in their typical fatalistic way, which did her absolutely no good with the problem at hand.

Her ever-present frustration toward the others, her body, and the galaxy usually made the others try to avoid her. That didn’t bother her, but it did bother her when Vroonze got caught in that negativity, even accidentally, and Zervulian was glad she’d stopped herself before inadvertently blaming Vroonze for her extra level of tiredness today. Usually Vroonze would use her limited personal Force abilities to assist Zervulian and make it easier for her to move across the grasslands, like Vroonze had been able to lift the leaf bag. But for the last two days, the pod leaders had directed Vroonze to walk with them at the front of the pod so they could talk with her non-stop, and she’d been unable to help Zervulian lagging in the back. Vroonze hadn’t had a choice, and it was unfair to pin Zervulian’s problems on her friend.

Still resting her pale green stalk trunk on the ground, Zervulian thrummed a deep hum

again and directed her attention to the sewn-leaf bag she held. She opened it and took out a bundle of small, empty bags made of treated pitcher plant flowers and set them aside.

Next she turned to the heavy vine-woven bag that Vroonze had dropped beside her. Inside it was a large collection of various leaves, flowers, vines, and seed pods that the tribe utilized during their daily travels for everything from water gathering to medications to protection from some of the grassland's herbivores. Every member of the pod got a new basic set whenever the collection bag got full, and sorting the items into the individual members' bags from the collected supply was considered a tedious grunt job. Zervulian had no qualms with it, though, and she appreciated having this task to do for the camp when she didn't have the energy for anything more physical. She began working.

She hoped that Vroonze could walk with her tomorrow. The assistance would be nice, yes, but she really just missed spending time with her best friend. Talking and laughing with Vroonze always took Zervulian's mind off of her stressed body and tiredness.

Like most days when she felt rather poorly, she didn't have the mental energy to actively keep some particularly insidious worries buried, and they wormed their way into her thoughts while she went through the motions of her mindless, repetitive sorting task. Had today been a preview of her future? Was this what it was going to be like for her when Vroonze was no longer part of the pod?

For years, Vroonze had made no secret about the fact that she wanted to study the Tyia philosophy and become a Thuwisten. Since she could already control some of her personal Force, Zervulian knew it was only a matter of time before Vroonze would go to the jungle to study Tyia. Zervulian tried hard not to think about that inevitable day; while she truly wanted Vroonze to be happy and accomplish her dreams, she was also terrified at the thought of being separated from her. Life in this pod without Vroonze would be... Zervulian's leaves shuddered and she did her best to push the notion away for a little bit longer. Yes, that day would come, but her present was miserable enough without prematurely adding misery from the future as well.

By the time Zervulian had finished the sorting and bagging, Vroonze hadn't yet returned. The camp was growing quiet as most of the pod members settled down to go dormant for the night. And this was finally the moment Zervulian had been waiting for.

The night sky was dark to her budstalks and lifeless to her leaves. No sunlight shined and struggled to power her leaves' faulty nutrient conversion process. But Zervulian didn't care. She focused on the glittering stars spread across the inky blackness.

She knew them well: the patterns, the constellations. Her budstalks traced the path through the familiar specks until she spotted the larger Mytaranor sector. From there, it was simple to spot the star she looked for every evening during the seasons it was visible.

There it was. So tiny, and yet so huge.

Kashyyyk's star.

She hummed in contentment and let her thoughts drift far away from Revyia to the place she was certain was so much better.

Ever since she'd first heard about Kashyyyk from a Revvien at a Gathering who had returned home from a visit to Coruscant, Zervulian had been captivated by it. She could imagine the planet orbiting that star, but try as she might, her imagination couldn't *quite* capture what the gigantic wroshyr trees must be like. Zervulian just couldn't conceive of a plant so huge, so massive, so tall. How could the stories she'd heard about wroshyr trees be true? How could they grow so big? How was that even possible?

She wanted so badly to see them with her own budstalks. A visit to Kashyyyk would be a

dream come true.

She'd tried. Before every Gathering she'd done her best to convince her pod leaders to let her go with another pod that sometimes came in contact with the off-worlders who flew to Revyia in their cold metal ships, but her pod leaders never allowed it. They always cited Zervulian's health as the reason: if her body couldn't properly handle the nutrients from her native soil and the sunlight from her own sun, how could she hope to absorb *anything* from alien soil with strange minerals under an alien sun producing light with different wavelengths? It would be a death sentence. Zervulian would starve.

Zervulian never quite believed that line of thinking, though. If wroshyr trees were really that big, then Kashyyyk had to be a good place for plants to grow. It had to be doing something right. She was sure she'd be just fine there for a visit. Besides, the only time her pod leaders acknowledged her health problem was when they used it to deny her the chance to travel to Kashyyyk, and it rankled her.

Her dream of visiting Kashyyyk wouldn't happen. The pod leaders had made that clear. She was stuck here. But maybe one day Vroonze would be able to travel there and come back and tell her all about the wroshyr trees. That would be the next best thing, and Vroonze wouldn't be stuck here like she was.

Zervulian didn't know how long she'd been fighting dormancy and gazing at the star when Vroonze settled down into the grass next to her. "Sorry I took so long," Vroonze said. "Looks like you've got a good view tonight."

"Yeah." Zervulian noticed something odd in Vroonze's voice, a trilling sort of excited vibration, and she looked away from Kashyyyk and focused on her friend. "What's going on?"

"The pod leaders were just talking to me," Vroonze said.

"Again? What could they possibly still have to tell you that they haven't already said these last two days?" Zervulian asked.

Vroonze bounced slightly, as if the words were alive inside her and eager to escape. "They said that in a couple of days, we're meeting up with a Thuwisten who's going to bring me to the jungle to study with them!"

The entire galaxy crashed into Zervulian. It was the ultimate topper to a day where she hadn't thought she could feel any worse, but the universe had just proven her wrong. Apparently that future misery had just been getting a little head start on becoming present misery. She couldn't react for a very long moment, but at last she pulled herself together and pushed the awful feelings down. She would be glad for Vroonze and proud of her. Besides, once Vroonze left—much too soon, by the sounds of it—then Zervulian had the whole rest of her life in which to feel sorry for herself. She forced her words into a happy-sounding vibration. "Vroonze, that's wonderful! You're going to be the best Thuwisten on this whole planet."

"That's not all!" Vroonze said.

Zervulian felt shriveled inside. There was *more* to this nightmare?

"The pod leaders said you could come with me!"

Again, Zervulian couldn't do anything for a very long moment. While before it had been fueled by shock, this one was fueled by incomprehension. "...What?"

"I told the pod leaders I wanted to bring you with me to the jungle, and they agreed," Vroonze said, seeming to enjoy Zervulian's reaction. "It'll be so much better there for you, Li. They stay in one place. No more constant traveling. And they have a healer. Maybe they can help you feel better."

"But... how can I go live with the Thuwistens? You know I'm not a Tyia-adept like you

are,” Zervulian said. She refused to get her hopes up yet.

“It’ll be fine. There will be something there in the settlement you can help with. They know you might be coming, and they’ve already agreed.” Vroonze paused, and then added a bit more hesitantly, “You... *do* want to come... Right?”

“What? Yes, yes! Of course I do!” Zervulian exclaimed before Vroonze could rescind the offer. “Thank you!”

“Great! Think of how much fun this will be, and how much we’ll learn!” Vroonze said. “I can’t wait! So here’s what the pod leaders told me we’ll have to do in the next couple days to get ready before we go...”

They spent a brief time going over details until Zervulian’s exhaustion pushed its way through the gamut of elated emotions. The pair paused their planning for the night, with a promise to continue in the morning.

As Zervulian finally settled down, she looked at the star of Kashyyk until she drifted off to dormancy. She could have sworn it was twinkling more brightly than before.

It had been a long time since Zervulian had been excited for the future.

She quite liked this feeling.

Chapter Two

Once at a Gathering, Vroonze had been listening to a Revvien who had traveled offworld and was telling anecdotes about the different fleshy beings he’d met. She remembered him trying to explain the odd phrase he had heard some non-Revviens say: that their “breath caught in their throat” or “it took their breath away” or some variation of that wording. It had never, ever made sense to Vroonze. Did beings who didn’t use leaves for respiration have such trouble with it? Where their breathing organs faulty? How could air become solid or elusive for them? Was it a conversion process gone wrong? How did they survive when something so fundamentally required to live was so difficult for them? The notion behind the phrases had actually frightened her younger self, and she was glad of her leaves’ simple, reliable respiration process.

But today, stepping awestruck through the final meters of the narrow path through the last of the jungle’s undergrowth into the edge of the Thuwisten settlement, she almost understood. Maybe this feeling was what that phrase meant.

The cacophony of the jungle they had trekked through for the last three days somehow became quieter, muted. The jungle’s chaotic undergrowth was thinned out and tamed into a sort of pleasing aesthetic where the plants were directed and shaped into useful functionality without losing their natural beauty. The buildings and small dwellings of the settlement were a part of the jungle, not an invading blemish on the landscape like she’d heard offworld buildings were. It was an outward reflection of the Tyian harmony that the Thuwistens internally strived for.

It was like the harmony was manifest, palpable. Vroonze could almost feel it physically.

She couldn’t believe she was here. Finally. She couldn’t wait to learn how to find that harmony for herself and help others find their own peace. Hopefully, one day, she could ease some of Zervulian’s burden as well; it was hard seeing her friend being unhappy and hurting so often with no way to stop it.

She let out an eager hum, bounced in excitement, and turned to help Zervulian through the final few meters of undergrowth where the path hadn’t been cleared recently. Even with Vroonze’s assistance, these last three days had been hard on Zervulian. Walking across the plains

was one thing; forging through thick jungle underbrush was quite another. Vroonze suspected Zervulian couldn't absorb nutrients from the jungle's soil very well either, and sunlight beneath the canopy was scarce. But Zervulian had pushed on with a dogged determination she'd rarely shown in their former pod, and she'd been in a better overall mood despite the difficulties. She'd even been downright pleasant to their Thuwisten guide, Roovnel.

Vroonze had peppered Roovnel with question after excited question for the last three days about what it was like to be a Thuwisten, what they did each day, what it felt like to join a bond-circle, what the history of the settlement was, how often the group in this settlement interacted with other Thuwistens, and anything else she could think of. He'd humored her, but most of his answers took some form of, "You'll learn that in your studies."

Halting and scanning the settlement with his budstalks, Roovnel gave a short, high-pitched hum. Vroonze and Zervulian stopped beside him. Vroonze easily sensed Zervulian's relief at being out of the thick growth and taking a break.

A short time later, a Revvien came toward them from within the settlement. She wore a thin belt of pouches similar to Roovnel's, and her deep purple stalk trunk and purplish black prehensile leaves helped her blend in with the depth of the jungle. Even her appearance seemed more harmonious with the world than Vroonze's blue stalk trunk and dark green leaves did.

"Roovnel, welcome back. We thought you would have been back yesterday," the newcomer said.

"We... made slower progress than expected," Roovnel replied. Vroonze felt a flare of irritation at the underlying blame being cast when the help he'd offered Zervulian in navigating the jungle more easily had been minimal at best. She was about to speak up when he continued and cut her off. "This is your new student. Xerrell, this is Vroonze and her friend Zervulian. Vroonze, this is Xerrell. She'll be your mentor and will help with any one-on-one teachings outside of the group classes."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Vroonze and Zervulian," Xerrell said. She lifted two of her prehensile leaves and then formed a small circle with the split manipulation strands on the ends. Roovnel had taught Vroonze that formal Thuwisten gesture already, so she and Zervulian were able to easily perform it in return.

"It's wonderful to meet you as well, Master Xerrell," Vroonze replied. A little thrill ran through her as she said the words and formed the circle.

"I'm sure you're both tired after your journey. I'll show you to your dwelling, and you can get some rest. Tomorrow we'll talk and determine how to approach your studies." Xerrell turned to Roovnel. "Thank you for bringing them, Roovnel. I'll take it from here."

Roovnel formed the circle with his leaves and departed.

Xerrell waved one leaf toward the settlement. "This way," she said.

Vroonze followed eagerly, trying to take in every single detail. She didn't want to rest. She just wanted to get started.

For the first time in recent memory, Zervulian awoke from dormancy on her own terms.

At first she was confused about where she was and what time it was. Very little sunlight reached her leaves— was it still nighttime? And why did she have a sense of being penned in and trapped?

Slightly alarmed, she forced herself to full consciousness and looked around, and it took a few long moments for everything to come back to her and start making sense. She was in the small dwelling she would be sharing with Vroonze in the Thuwisten settlement. The walls of the

dwelling blocked out most of the meager sunlight that managed to make it through the jungle's canopy, and while they gave a certain sense of security, they also made Zervulian feel uneasy. A lifetime spent out on the wide-open plains had taught her how to spot danger coming from a long way away, a necessity when she couldn't move very fast. Now, danger could be a mere meter from her on the other side of the wall and she would never know until it was too late.

Zervulian shuddered a bit and tried to turn her attention to the dwelling. She'd been too tired the previous day to care about anything beyond the comfortable bed of long dried grasses she'd immediately fallen into. Across the small dwelling from her was an identical bed, now empty except for a note. Vroonze's personal pouches and belts lay next to the bed. Zervulian's pouches mirrored them next to her own bed.

She started to immediately get up to grab Vroonze's things to take them to her, but caught herself and stopped. No, they weren't going to get left behind by the pod here. The items could stay there and Vroonze would still be able to get them later. She and Zervulian would be returning to this same place tonight, and tomorrow night, and the night after that.

It was an odd thought. She wasn't used to physical permanency.

But if it came with the benefit of not having to spend all of today walking somewhere else for no reason, Zervulian was all too happy to adjust to it.

Zervulian achingly pushed herself up from her bed and tried to limber her fronds a bit. She'd overdone it the last three days in the jungle, but it was all worth it to get here. She would take things slow today and conserve what energy she had left. She also felt a bit wilted and decided to get some water.

First she took a look at the note Vroonze had left. It explained that Vroonze hadn't wanted to interrupt Zervulian's rest, and she'd left for her first study meeting with Xerrell and would be back to check on Zervulian in a little while.

It made her a bit anxious, but she made herself leave her belt pouches behind like Vroonze had done. The entrance to the dwelling consisted of a curtain of thick, leafy vines. Zervulian gently moved them aside and stepped out into the Thuwisten settlement.

The first thing she did was make sure she knew how to find her own dwelling again. The dwelling was a cove formed by living, wooden plants twined tightly together and shaped in their growth to become the walls of the living space on the jungle floor. Small blue flowers grew on the moss covering the outside of the dwelling's branches. Other dwellings were nearby, but they had different colored flowers.

Her leaves were shaky as Zervulian walked toward what seemed to be the central area of the settlement. Small clearings held groups of meditating Thuwistens. Some groups of Revwiens closer to her age sat under large woven leaf canopies while listening to an instructor. Zervulian didn't see Vroonze or Xerrell among them.

Even in the relatively thinned-out settlement, Zervulian still felt a little disoriented. The sheer noise of insects and creatures in the jungle was much more than she was used to, and while the immediate claustrophobia had diminished when she left her dwelling, the trees of the jungle still felt too dense, too close. It was darker with most of the direct sunlight blocked by the canopy, and she'd already begun feeling the effects of that diminished amount during the journey here over the last three days. She hoped the worst of the physical effects was due to the exertion from walking, and she could perhaps learn to cope with the rest if she could stay in one place now and accumulate energy instead of constantly spending it. But that canopy... She'd felt her first small pang of loss the first night in the jungle when Zervulian discovered that the canopy thoroughly blocked not only the sun, but the stars as well.

A familiar sound vibration reached her leaves, and she headed that way to discover a clear stream gurgling through the main part of the settlement. Small logs for seating and treated wooden buckets along the banks indicated this was the local source of drinking water. Zervulian dipped a leaf into the babbling water and sensed its wonderful coolness compared to the humid jungle air. Zervulian absorbed as much water as she could and felt marginally better afterward.

She rested on a log for a few minutes while her budstalks took in more of the sights. Opposite the learning areas were large, old-looking buildings made of wood, leaves, and packed soil. At first glance they seemed to be supply areas and dispensaries.

With an effort, Zervulian pushed herself back onto her leaves and headed that way.

The first building had no one around, but the second one had a red Revwien putting inventory into clay pots at the front of the building's opening. Determined to make a good start in the settlement, Zervulian straightened up and modulated her speaking frequency to the most pleasant one she could. "Hello," she said.

The red Revwien looked up at her. "Hello," he replied. "Here for supplies? What do you need?"

"I'm Zervulian," she said. "I just arrived with my friend, who's going to be studying here. Is there anything I can help with?"

The Revwien put down the seed pods he held and came naturally upright. "Nice to meet you, Zervulian. I'm Rennvez. As for your question... I'm not sure. No one told me to have anything ready for you, so I don't have much left undone this morning. Is there anything in particular you're looking to do, or did the universe just lead you to me? If it's the latter, you should be warned that the universe is overrated and it likes to pull pranks on unsuspecting sentients."

Zervulian laughed and was slightly surprised to find she could do that with someone other than Vroonze. "More the latter, but only because you were the first one I saw."

Rennvez thrummed. "I see. Sorry. The universe has it out for you, then."

"I knew that already."

"Really? That's not good. You still look young enough where that should come as a horrible, horrible shock." Rennvez seemed to consider things for a moment. "Since my revelation didn't blow apart your fundamental concept of the universe, but only solidified it, that means you might have had a life like mine. Pity. In that case, have you ever tried telling the universe to—" The course of action he drily went on to suggest for the universe involved language that would have scandalized the elder members of Zervulian's former pod.

Zervulian listened in fascination, and when he was finished, she gave a negative gesture with a leaf. "I've told it things of similar intent, but not with those particular words. I'll try it if it'll help, though." She tilted her seedcase curiously. "Are you allowed to curse the entire universe? Aren't you a Thuwisten?"

"I'm not a very good Thuwisten."

Zervulian laughed again before Rennvez continued, "So anything in particular you want to do?"

This time, Zervulian's gesture was ambivalent. "Not really. I'd prefer something not too physical. I'm really good at sorting and organizing things, though."

"Organizing things, huh? Then maybe I do have something you could work on. Come on." Rennvez took a large jar of glow-moss, motioned with a leaf, and led Zervulian toward the back of the building. There he ducked into a smaller room, and Zervulian followed.

She was amazed at what the glow-moss illuminated inside. There were several rows of

records written on different types of dried leaves, reeds, and wood-based flattened pulp. Significantly more records were piled haphazardly into clay pots and wooden boxes that were stacked everywhere on the ground and along the walls.

“This is our records room,” Rennvez said as he put the jar on a central table. “Well, it’s the new records room. The old one was damaged in a storm, and we had to grab everything and move it out fast. Those few shelves are organized, but everything in boxes and pots has to be put in order and put away properly. It’s something we need to have done but no one’s ever got the time to do it. Always something else happening, you know? But if you want to do something and like sorting things, maybe you could work on this for now. What do you think?”

“Oh, this would be perfect, thank you. I’ll get started right away,” Zervulian said. “Is there any particular organizing structure I should use? Sort by subject? Date? Author?”

Rennvez twisted one leaf uncertainly. “Not sure. If you can decipher how the other things are already organized, go ahead and follow that. Otherwise, well, any sort of organization is better than what we have now.” He indicated the chaotic pots. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be out front, a beacon for more wayward souls.”

Zervulian hummed. “Thank you.” Rennvez left, and she got to work.

For such a calm, stationary place, Vroonze’s first day was a nonstop rush. There was so much to see, so much to do, so much to learn. She’d been asking Xerrell question after question of how things worked here. She wanted to do it all that instant.

Which led to massive difficulties with the final assessment exercise Xerrell did with her: meditation.

When Vroonze started bouncing and her leaves began twitching yet again after another attempt lasting about thirty seconds, Xerrell called it off. “Vroonze, have you ever done serious meditation work?” Xerrell asked.

“No, Master Xerrell,” Vroonze answered, chagrined. How could something that looked so easy be so hard?

Xerrell let out a low hum. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected. Most newcomers from the plains start out that way. The nomadic lifestyle doesn’t lend itself well to long meditation sessions. We’ll work on that quite a bit to get you started. You need to learn about and experience harmony within your own Tyia before you can join the harmonies of other Thuwistens in a bond-circle, and the way to do that is to quiet your thoughts, learn about yourself, and find internal peace through meditation.”

Vroonze had no idea how she could do that when there was so much to experience and think about here, but she inclined her seedcase. “Yes, Master Xerrell.”

“We’ll start that tomorrow, and you’ll also join the group classes on the history and theory of Tyia philosophy. They’ve already begun, so you’ll need to do some extra studying to catch up. For now, though, we’re done for the day. Go explore like you’re wanting to do so badly.”

Vroonze pushed herself upright on her leaves. “Thank you, Master. Good evening.” She formed the circle with her leaves, waited until Xerrell returned the gesture, and then left.

Vroonze headed first to their new dwelling. When she’d checked before, her friend was out.

This time, though, Zervulian was there, resting in her bed. She was a slightly paler green than normal, and Vroonze hoped it was only due to the recent trek through the jungle. Zervulian looked up when Vroonze entered. “I hope you’ve already shown them that you’re the best

Thuwisten on the planet,” Zervulian said. She sounded pleased but tired.

Vroonze laughed softly. “No, not by a long shot. My meditation skills are... sorely lacking.”

“Meditation?” Zervulian said. “You have to do that here?”

“Yes, it’s a fundamental part of learning about Tyia,” Vroonze replied. She took one of her belt pouches and fastened it around her stalk trunk. She’d felt oddly vulnerable without them today.

Zervulian tilted her seedcase, considering. “Well, I think I could learn to like sitting and doing nothing for a long period of time.”

Vroonze playfully threw a few stalks of dried grass at her. “Meditation isn’t ‘doing nothing.’ It’s hard.”

“Oh. Well, then, never mind.”

“But my skills for moving things with my personal Force are above where Xerrell expected them to be,” Vroonze said proudly. She bounced a little in excitement.

“And why shouldn’t they be? You get lots of practice,” Zervulian replied, throwing the grass stalks back at her.

“I came by a couple times to check on you, but you weren’t here,” Vroonze said. “Did you have a good day today?”

“Yeah, I was helping organize their records room. I’ll be there again tomorrow unless there’s something else I should be doing.”

“Xerrell didn’t mention anything to me about it, so if you found something you like, I’d stick with that until someone says differently. It sounds like my day tomorrow is going to be pretty full, so I wanted to go explore the settlement now and get some water, maybe some soil. Do you want to come?”

Zervulian made a negative gesture. “Thanks, but no. You go ahead. I’m not feeling great, so I’m going to get some rest.”

“Do you want me to bring anything back for you?” Vroonze asked. “Some water might help, or a bit of soil.”

“No, thanks. I got some water on my way back, and I tried some soil but I think it made it worse. Nothing new. I’ll be fine. Go have fun.”

“Well, then one of the things I’ll do now is find the healer and ask when she can see you.”

Zervulian bobbed her seedcase. “That would be good. I didn’t see the healer’s dwelling when I was out earlier.”

“All right. If you need anything, just call.”

Zervulian made some shooping motions with her leaf. “I will, now go explore already! I know you, Vroonze. You’ve been fit to burst to see everything since we got here. I’m surprised you made it this long. Go on before I have to throw you out!”

Vroonze bounced a bit more, then exchanged farewells with Zervulian and eagerly went out to get acquainted with her new life.

Chapter Three

Zervulian let out a low thrum of a growl when two oblivious Thuwistens stepped directly into her path, laughing and carrying on. Whether they heard her or sensed the negativity aimed at them, Zervulian couldn’t say, but she didn’t care, either. All that mattered was the end result: the

pair noticed her and quickly moved out of her way. Zervulian unsteadily pushed past them. Luckily she was nearly at her destination.

She was close enough to the supply area that apparently Rennvez had noticed the event from where he sat at the front transaction table, writing in his ledger. When Zervulian got there, he commented drily, "I see that in your few short days of being here, you're plunging straight in to making new friends."

Her last shred of patience and self-control that morning went into modulating her vocal frequency to something neutral; she didn't want to snap at Rennvez yet. "I didn't mean to. I'm not feeling well." It was all she trusted herself to say at the moment. The truth was that she felt fairly miserable, aching, and shaky, and it had been getting worse since arriving at the settlement.

Rennvez studied her, and this time his usual sardonic dryness was absent. "You do seem wavery. Can I help?"

"No, this is typical for me. I'll be fine." Zervulian wasn't sure if that was true, but she said it anyway. "Supposed to see the healer tomorrow morning." She started toward the records room in back but was stopped almost immediately by a question from Rennvez.

"You lived in the plains, right? Are you getting enough sunlight?"

"Actually, no, I don't think I am," Zervulian replied. "The canopy blocks everything."

"That happens to a lot of our new arrivals until their bodies adjust," Rennvez said.

"Happened to me at first too. Listen, go to the stream and follow it north about two hundred meters. There's a spot where the stream widens enough for the banks to separate pretty far and the canopy to break. You can get a good, full dose of direct sunlight there."

"Really?" Zervulian thrummed in relief. "That sounds great, thank you. I'll head there later."

"If you're feeling as bad as you look, you should probably go there now," Rennvez said. "Why wait and make yourself more miserable for no reason?"

"Because I have to work and do my share around here. If I wait until I feel well to do that, it'll never happen."

Rennvez tilted his seedcase slightly. "I think I'm beginning to better understand our first meeting. But really, you have my permission to delay your work for a bit to help yourself feel less lousy."

Zervulian hesitated, weighing his words against what had been ingrained in her by her former pod.

"Honest. Go," Rennvez said. "I'll just worry about you otherwise, and if I'm distracted, I might make a mistake in my ledger. We do not want that."

The dryness had returned with the last two sentences, and Zervulian relaxed. "All right. But first, as long as you're here, I wanted to ask you about this old record I found yesterday."

Zervulian shakily led Rennvez into the records room and indicated the old parchment where she'd set it aside on the table. "It mentions something about a city here on Revyia, but that doesn't make sense. There isn't anything like that here, is there?"

"Ah, you found a copy of one of the ancient records," Rennvez said as he read it, trailing a leaf delicately, almost reverently, over the parchment. "There's nothing like that here anymore, no. But long ago, legend says that there was. There have been many stories passed down about our powerful ancestors. I'm surprised you haven't heard them."

"I might have heard a story or two at a Gathering when I was a sprout, but it only sounds vaguely familiar," Zervulian said. "My pod leaders had little use for stories."

“Pity. Our history is quite fascinating. Before we became a nomadic species, our ancestors built grand cities and powerful artifacts. They learned a great deal and became very wise. Most of that knowledge was lost over time, and some Revwiens believe that the reason we became nomadic was due to some inner part of us searching and trying to find that wisdom again.” Rennvez rolled up the parchment and handed it to Zervulian. “Why don’t you take this with you while you’re getting some sun? If you haven’t heard the legends, you might enjoy reading it.”

Zervulian tucked it close to her stalk trunk with a leaf. “I think I will. It does sound interesting.”

“Take your time. I’ll see you when you get back,” Rennvez said.

Zervulian headed out, deep in thought at the intriguing notion of powerful ancestors with cities and artifacts. She took a drink at the stream and then followed Rennvez’s directions. She moved slowly, still feeling unsteady on her leaves, but soon reached the canopy break.

The warm sunlight felt wonderful as it bathed her. Zervulian let out a low thrum and found a fallen log to rest on while her leaves soaked up what they could of the sunlight.

She also felt happy to finally see the sky again. Maybe one night she could come out here to look for Kashyyyk’s star. She missed seeing her stellar friend almost as much as she missed seeing Vroonze these past few days since Vroonze had a lot of catch-up learning to do and was using most of her free time to study. Vroonze tried to spend time with Zervulian too, but even then Zervulian could tell she was thinking about other things. Pretty much all Vroonze talked about was what she was learning about Tyia and its history and how exciting it was. And that was to be expected. Vroonze was too much of an achiever, a go-getter, to not throw herself into the realization of her dream. She wouldn’t let herself fail.

Zervulian always liked that about Vroonze. When life seemed like nothing but endless effort, it was good to be reminded that the effort turned into tangible benefits sometimes. She wished she had Vroonze’s tenacity.

Zervulian hummed again, turned her attention to the copy of the old record she held, and began to read with interest. She’d known Vroonze would be busy with her studies here. Maybe learning about these legends would be a good way to spend her free time when Vroonze wasn’t available.

“I love it here,” Vroonze said softly the next day. She was on her mid-morning break from classes and was sitting beneath a fragrant canusaka tree with Zervulian. “It’s so peaceful, and there’s so much to learn.” She gave a contented thrum, then trailed off as issues related to said learning sprouted in her mind and diluted that feeling. “I’m still not really getting the meditation stuff yet, but I know I’ll figure it out. For the rest of it... there’s just so *much*. I’m not sure I’ll ever catch up.”

“You will. I know you’ll get there,” Zervulian said.

“I just wish it didn’t come at the expense of hardly seeing you this week. I just... I have to prove myself to Master Xerrell so I can stay. So *we* can stay.”

“Vroonze, you don’t have to explain yourself to me. I get it. I’m fine. Focus on your studies— that’s why you’re here.”

Despite Zervulian’s words, though, Vroonze wasn’t pacified. Just because Zervulian said she understood, that didn’t mean Vroonze had to like the situation. There had to be a way to pursue her studies without feeling like she was brushing aside her friend, and she vowed to find it. Somehow.

The first step was probably changing the subject to one of Zervulian's interests instead of talking yet again about her Thuwisten studies. "Did you find any more of those ancient records you told me about last night?" Vroonze asked.

"No, but I didn't have a chance yet. I'll look more after our break."

Vroonze turned her budstalks toward Zervulian as the phrasing reminded her of what had been planned. "Wait, that's right, you were going to go to the Thuwisten healer this morning. Was she able to meet with you?"

"Yes," Zervulian said.

Vroonze straightened a bit, sensing some distress and emotional withdrawal in her friend. She also couldn't help but notice that Zervulian had definitely gotten paler since arriving in the settlement, and her leaves looked more shriveled and had a few brown spots on the edges. "And? What did she say?"

A darker emotion flitted from Zervulian, and she fidgeted restlessly with a twig. "She can't help me."

"What? Did she say why? Does she know what the problem is?"

"She said she does."

Vroonze waited, but strangely, Zervulian didn't expand on that. "Li, why are you being so cryptic? What aren't you telling me?" Vroonze demanded.

The burst of anger from her friend stuck out in stark contrast to the peaceful surroundings. "She said she can't help me because my body isn't in harmony with itself, and there's nothing she can do until it is," Zervulian snarled with a low hum. "Load of mulch. Said it's my fault it's like this. I told her it's been happening since I was a sprout and before I can even remember, so how could I be causing it? She insisted I was and I have to fix it. So I asked *how* to get it 'in harmony,' and she said she didn't know because it wasn't her issue, her life, or her personal Force, and she couldn't instruct a non-Thuwisten on such matters."

Vroonze was appalled, and her own hot anger drowned out Zervulian's. "What?! That is *absurd*. Harmony has nothing to do with lifelong absorption issues! I'll go make sure she gives you a *proper* exam and—" Before she knew it she'd pushed herself onto her prehensile leaves to go, but she was cut off and held back by another leaf gripping one of hers.

"Vroonze, no. Stop," Zervulian said. Her friend's anger was muted now, burying itself underneath the low-level despair she usually carried. If Vroonze was interpreting the sensations correctly, there was also, oddly, a bit of fear entwining itself around the other emotions. "It won't do any good or change anything, and really, what does it matter? The healer can't help, just like the pod leaders couldn't help. I'm in the exact same spot I was in before: knowing that I'll be dealing with this for my whole life. Nothing's different."

"But if the healer could do something—" Vroonze started helplessly.

"She can't," Zervulian interrupted. "Vroonze, don't worry about this. You've got your studies to focus on. I'll deal with it like I've always dealt with it. Nothing's changed."

Zervulian gave a little tug with her leaf, and reluctantly Vroonze lowered herself back to the ground. But Zervulian wasn't telling the whole truth: something *had* changed. Vroonze had given her hope that the healer could help, and now that was gone. Vroonze felt terrible.

She didn't know what to say, so they sat in awkward silence for a minute until the teacher for her next class rapped on the large hollow nutshell with a stick to summon the students. She pushed herself onto her leaves again, though slowly this time. "Well, I have to get back to class."

"I need to get back to the records room too. I'll see you later," Zervulian said.

Vroonze bobbed her ovoid seedcase and headed off.

She barely heard anything the teacher said in class. It was a struggle to learn about inner harmony when she was so distracted by the problems encountered by her best friend. The more Vroonze thought about things, the angrier she got. Halfway through class, she vowed to talk to Master Xerrell. Her mentor would know what to do to help.

The moment class was over, Vroonze went directly to Xerrell's study area, a group of trees that had woven vine draperies hung between them to encapsulate the space within. It sounded like there was a soft conversation happening inside. Vroonze gently rapped on the hollow nutshell with the provided stick at the entrance and waited.

"Come in," Xerrell said.

Vroonze pushed aside the entrance draping and walked in. Roovnel was there as well, plus another Thuwisten Vroonze didn't really know past a brief introduction earlier. She believed his name was Willuuni.

"Ah, Vroonze. How are you settling in?" Roovnel asked.

"Fine, Master Roovnel, thank you," Vroonze replied. She offered the circle gesture to the three Thuwistens.

"Good," he said, returning the gesture before looking back at Xerrell. "We'll see what we can find, and I'll talk to you later about it."

"Thank you," Xerrell said. Roovnel and Willuuni took their leave, and Xerrell turned to Vroonze. "What can I do for you, Vroonze? I thought you had another class starting now."

"I do, Master Xerrell. I'm sorry. I'll go immediately afterward, I just really needed to speak to you first."

"About what? Your classes are important."

Vroonze ignored the subtle admonishment and plowed on. "My friend went to see the healer this morning but was told her condition is more about unbalanced harmony than a genuine medical issue, and the healer said she can't help. My friend needs to be looked at from a medical standpoint. Is there another healer here or nearby we could talk to?"

Xerrell tilted her seedcase. "The healer looks at things from a medical standpoint. If she said the problem was unbalanced harmony, then that's what it is."

"But I've known Zervulian my whole life. This issue is physical."

There was a short pause, and the next words from Xerrell were clipped. Vroonze detected some irritation from her mentor. "Are you a healer, Vroonze?"

Vroonze hadn't expected that question. "Me? No, Master."

"Then you shouldn't be second-guessing the healer. You're new here, so I'll give you a pass this once, but listen carefully. Thuwistens are charged to act honorably in all things. That will be expected of you as you progress in your training. But casting doubt on another Thuwisten's intentions implies they were not acting honorably, and is a dishonorable thing to do yourself. It sows disharmony through all the connected Thuwistens and threatens our unified connection to the Tyia."

Vroonze was startled at the serious repercussions of what she'd thought was a simple, benign request, and she stood in silence for a long moment. Finally she said, "I'm sorry, Master Xerrell. I certainly didn't mean any of that. I just wanted to find a way to help my friend." Because wasn't helping another Revvien find peace and harmony the proper thing for a would-be Thuwisten to do?

Vroonze couldn't tell if Xerrell was mollified or not; her mentor didn't reply right away. When Xerrell spoke, she simply asked, "Before you came here, were your pod leaders in charge of everything?"

Confused, Vroonze reoriented herself with Xerrell's new direction and answered, "Yes."

Xerrell flicked a leaf. "I thought so. We run into this problem a lot with students from the plains. Listen, Vroonze. You had a problem, and you ran to me, an authority figure, for direction. Things don't work like that here. Yes, we have a hierarchy of sorts, but it's different than with the nomadic pods. You really need to start working problems out for yourself. You need to cultivate your own inner harmony; no one else can do that for you. The way to do that is to learn about yourself, take charge of your own life and be responsible for it. Then you can make your own decisions, and your own decisions—right or wrong—will lead you to greater self-knowledge, which then leads you to your own inner harmony and understanding of Tyia. Understand?"

Vroonze tried to absorb all that but was overwhelmed. Her thoughts were very crowded at the moment, and all of them were loudly vying for attention. "I'm... not sure I do."

"Then think about it some more and come to terms with it. Now, you have a class you'd better be getting to before you miss any more."

The only answer Vroonze could give was the expected one. "Yes, Master Xerrell. Thank you." She formed the circle gesture and left.

She apologized profusely to the teacher for being late when she arrived at the class already in session, then she sat on the meditation mat in the far corner.

She heard even less of what this teacher said than she had during the previous class.

Chapter Four

The rain had just let up, and the air had a sense of freshness to it. A noticeable, if only temporary, drop in humidity made it a bit more pleasant for Zervulian. The steady rain had felt nice in the clearing upstream; she preferred the unfaltering, uniform sensation of true rain over the annoying staccato plopping of collected raindrops that eventually made their way through the jungle's leaves to fall on unsuspecting Revwiens below.

Zervulian turned her budstalks toward the sound of tromping through undergrowth. At last, Vroonze was coming.

"There you are," Vroonze said before Zervulian could say that exact thing to her. "I couldn't find you."

Zervulian tilted her seedcase. "I told you yesterday that I'd meet you here in the clearing during mid-morning break. I'd thought some sunlight would be good for you too, though it's not exactly sunny right now."

"You did?" Vroonze stopped in thought, then continued, "Maybe. I don't know. Listen, Li, I can't stay for break. I have too much studying to do."

"Again?" Zervulian couldn't prevent her disappointment from sounding. "I thought you'd just gotten caught up in your history class."

"In history, yes. There's a lot I'm still so far behind on, though. I..." Vroonze trailed off and fidgeted with a leaf.

"What?"

Vroonze thrummed, then she said, "This is all just... so new to me. So different. Things I thought Thuwistens did... I thought it would be simple, but it's a lot more complicated. I guess I didn't really understand all the intricacies and ramifications."

"Well, how could you understand all that before? Our pod didn't have any Thuwisten How-To records available for you. You've only been in formal training a little over a week,

Vroonze. Give yourself a little credit and some slack.”

Vroonze rubbed two prehensile leaves together in distress.

Zervulian recognized that action. Vroonze usually did it when she wanted to believe something but something else was getting in the way, and it was never a good sign. Zervulian tilted her seedcase. “What’s really bothering you? You’ve been acting strange these last couple days, ever since I saw the healer. You were so happy before, and now you’re not. That’s why I thought you might need some sunlight. So what is it?”

Vroonze bounced a little and rubbed her leaves together harder, then she said, “I just didn’t realize before how much I don’t understand about Tyia and being a Thuwisten. If I can’t understand those basics now, then all my future classes will be pointless and useless, and— Sorry, Li, I have to go study. I have to figure this out.” She quickly turned and headed downstream back to the settlement.

Zervulian watched her go. She wanted to call out to Vroonze, but too many emotions and words jumbled together and she couldn’t choose which one to act on in time.

Zervulian thrummed deeply, first plowing through the most familiar one, anger. Then she made herself stop and think things through, reminding herself that Vroonze had other duties now. Still, Zervulian was pretty sure that Vroonze wasn’t telling her something, that there was a reason for this turnaround, and Vroonze hardly ever hid things from her before. That hurt. Why was she hiding it? Why wouldn’t she let Zervulian help her with whatever the problem was, like they’d done their whole lives?

With the sun blocked by rain clouds and her best friend elsewhere, there was nothing to keep Zervulian at the clearing any longer, so she headed back to the records room early.

Rennvez looked to be meditating when she got to the supply building. She softened her steps to not disturb him, but he spoke up. “Is break over already? I swear it gets shorter every day.”

“No, break’s not over yet. I’m back early,” Zervulian replied.

“It’s okay to have a life outside of the records room, you know,” Rennvez said.

Zervulian thrummed. “I’m trying, but my friend’s too busy studying right now. She said it’s complicated being a Thuwisten.”

“I can’t exactly disagree.”

Zervulian turned to him. “What can I tell her? What would make it easier for her to figure it all out? What would you say is the essence of being one?”

“By definition, the essence isn’t the complicated part. Everything else is.” Rennvez flicked a leaf through some distracted motions. “The essence is knowing yourself, which means knowing harmony, which means knowing Tyia. The complications set in when others are at odds with or disagree with what you consider to be yourself, or when you’re secretly lying to yourself about who you are. Things like that. Tyia is flawless, but beings are flawed. Navigating that is challenging, especially for those who are still finding themselves, no matter their age.” His motions turned into an ambivalent gesture. “That’s my take on it. But remember what I said before— I’m not a very good Thuwisten.”

Zervulian had interpreted that as a joke the first time, but now she wasn’t sure what to make of it. At last she simply bobbed her seedcase, thanked him, and headed to the records room.

She’d only been working for a few minutes when Rennvez came in. “I get the feeling you could use a little pick-me-up,” he told her. He went to the section of records that had been organized prior to Zervulian’s arrival and rifled through them until he pulled one out. He set that

parchment on the table and began to unroll it. Zervulian leaned closer to see.

It was an old record, and it looked to be another with a story about the ancient cities. He'd already found several for Zervulian over the last couple of days and had been answering her questions about the cities and their ancestors as well as he could, so Zervulian waited expectantly to see what this legend would be about. Though when Rennvez unrolled the parchment most of the way, another small leaflet appeared that had been rolled up with it. Rennvez took that leaflet and put it in front of Zervulian.

It surprised her somewhat. "This is newer material," she said, tracing it lightly with a leaf. "Did someone recopy an old record?"

"Not quite. Look closer," Rennvez said.

Zervulian did. The words were written in a smooth, flowing script that looked more contemporary than the writing in the ancient records. The words were also not a cohesive narrative.

"Are these notes?" Zervulian asked.

"Yes," Rennvez replied. "About a decade ago, there was a Thuwisten here who, like you, took an interest in our ancestors and the ancient cities and artifacts. Her name was Lerrinen. She went through a lot of the old records and took notes on things she learned, connections she made, and theories she had. She got quite involved in the research."

"It sounds like she's not here anymore, though?" Zervulian said.

"No, unfortunately. She left on a mission and never came back, though the mission was completed. There are a lot of questions about what happened to her, and lots of theories if you ask the Thuwistens who knew her. Anyway, she wrote a lot of notes, and you'll find more of them with other ancient records. You might even come across a small collection or two of notes on their own. She was considered very knowledgeable, and I'm sure the notes will have good insights and information."

"That would be amazing. I'll keep watch for them, thank you." Zervulian was already absorbed in reading Lerrinen's notes. Some were choppy, stream-of-consciousness shorthand, but others were more fully developed and referenced other legends and data as well. She'd never expected anything this exciting to be packaged inside such innocuous little words as "a little pick-me-up," and it was doing an excellent job of taking her mind off her talk with Vroonze.

Rennvez hummed. "Well, I imagine my break is almost over now. I'll leave you to your work."

Zervulian barely noticed when he left.

It surprised her the first time it happened.

Vroonze was in a group class, and the instructor was teaching the students more about a ritualistic ceremony and meditation to aid in harnessing their personal Force to move a feather from one end of a log to the other. They'd done this exact same exercise the previous week. Vroonze's classmates were not as skilled as she was when using their personal Force to move something, so it was a learning experience for them. Vroonze participated faithfully and had been pleased to hear the impressed murmurs from her classmates that first time when she made the feather effortlessly move to the other end of the log. She hoped to do even better this time after she'd been studying so much lately.

This second time felt the same as the first... until it didn't.

Vroonze lifted the feather up and sent it on its journey down the log. About halfway across, her personal Force suddenly slipped out of the guiding harness she had on it and flitted

away like a breeze. The feather floated down to the log, its journey aborted.

That had never happened before.

Vroonze could do nothing but stare at the feather with her budstalks until the teacher said, “Vroonze? That’s only halfway. For this exercise it needs to go all the way to the other end.”

Vroonze snapped herself out of it and called upon her personal Force again. It was there; she could feel it. But it was slippery, and it kept dancing around, staying just out of her reach. It took a supreme amount of concentration, but she finally gathered enough to lift the feather and hurry it across the rest of the interminably long log.

“Very good, Vroonze. Next?” The teacher turned to the next student.

Vroonze leaned back, baffled. What had happened? It had to be a fluke. She’d probably gotten too full of herself and let her concentration slip. She knew better now, and it wouldn’t happen again.

Except that it did.

Even with her fully concentrating on trying to prevent it, Vroonze had trouble in another class later that day. She tried once on her own outside of class and had the same difficulty.

It concerned her, but as she’d learned in her classes, concerns were borne from conflict and a desire for control, and that bred discord within oneself. Vroonze tried to push the unharmonious thoughts out of her mind, but that just made the discord worse. Finally she could stand it no longer and decided she needed to fix the problem instead of focusing on her worries. There had to be a logical reason for it, and as she walked back to her dwelling that evening, she vowed to figure it out. That made her feel a little better.

She probably just needed more rest. Since she’d stopped meeting Zervulian for their mid-morning breaks, she’d tried to spend some time in the evenings with her. Unfortunately, then Vroonze had to study after Zervulian went dormant for the night. Maybe that tactic wasn’t sustainable long-term when it meant she got so much less dormancy herself. And she *was* tired.

Besides, the evenings had been getting a little harder lately. In their former pod, she and Zervulian had had shared experiences, but here in the settlement, their paths were starting to diverge. Vroonze was immersed in studying about Tyia, which Zervulian didn’t understand, and Zervulian had been getting more and more fixated on those old legends of ancient cities and relics, which Vroonze didn’t have an interest in. Vroonze hadn’t thought it possible before, but they were starting to run out of things to talk about each day. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to shorten the evening social time and use it for her studies instead of staying awake longer at night to do it.

Vroonze felt a pang of guilt and loss at the prospect, but she wasn’t sure what else to do. Vroonze wasn’t just doing this for herself; Zervulian’s future in a stationary settlement also depended on Vroonze continuing her Thuwisten training, a prospect that seemed to get harder and more complicated as each day went by. Besides, she was still living with Zervulian so it wasn’t like they wouldn’t see each other any more. At some point, when the studies made more sense to Vroonze, she could go back to spending time with her best friend.

She pushed the vine curtain aside and stepped into their dwelling. Like most evenings now, Zervulian was already there, resting on her bed and surrounded by a few records that looked fairly old and her own small leaflets of parchment she was writing notes on. This time she had a map as well. Zervulian looked up when Vroonze entered. “Hey, Vroonze,” she said. Her voice had had a husky sort of vibration to it lately, which happened when she was feeling rather sick. It was the same tonight, and Vroonze again felt a twinge of guilt about the healer. Zervulian continued speaking, but Vroonze was distracted by realizing she hadn’t sensed Zervulian getting

more unwell these past couple days like she usually did. She concentrated and could detect it, but she'd never needed to concentrate to sense Zervulian's emotions and well-being before.

"Vroonze?"

She shook herself out of it. "Sorry, what?"

"Do you remember that waterfall we passed on the way here from our old pod?"

"Yeah, I think so," Vroonze replied as she lowered herself onto her own bed. "Why?"

"Do you think if you looked at it from the right angle that someone might describe it as 'a triad, closed above and open below'?"

Vroonze tilted her seedcase. "Why in all the green would anyone describe it that way?"

"Because there were three separate waterfall streams, and the rocks on the very top looked pretty solid, so that would be the things closed above. But the water was coming out of the bottom, so that would be the open below." Zervulian pointed with a leaf to one of the old records. "I'm trying to track down the location of one of the ancient city sites. One almost sounds like it might not be too far away from here, but all of the landmark references and clues in the legends are pretty cryptic. That's probably why no one's found one of the cities recently."

Or, Vroonze thought, it was because the cities didn't actually exist, but she kept that to herself. It was not for her, as Zervulian's friend or as a Tyia-adept, to steal her best friend's hope or happiness. Privately she thought Zervulian's obsession with these ancient cities was just like her fascination with Kashyyk: a fixation on someplace far away, inaccessible, and idealized beyond all reality to take her mind off of the planet under her leaves. "I'm not sure," was all she said. "Maybe, but there are a lot of ways to interpret a phrase like that."

"Yeah, there are," Zervulian replied. "It's tricky. You'd think they didn't want visitors. But Rennvez told me about a Revvien who used to live here and studied these records, and she made pretty good notes. I managed to find some, and it's been helping me decipher a lot. She was trying to find a city too." She scribbled a few things on her parchment and asked, "How were your classes today?"

"I'm... not sure," Vroonze admitted. "I had problems moving some things with my personal Force."

"Like what, a huge tree trunk? A boulder?"

"A feather."

Zervulian stopped writing and turned her budstalks toward Vroonze. "A feather?"

"Yes, a feather."

"Some kind of... heavy feather?"

"No, just a regular old feather. I had it and then *whoosh*, I didn't have it anymore. I don't know what happened."

"Did someone else use their personal Force to pluck it away from you?"

"No, it wasn't that I lost the feather, it was that I lost my hold on the Force. Like the leaf I was using to hold the feather suddenly got cut off. When I tried again, it was hard to gather my Force ability and focus it. That's never happened to me before."

"What did Xerrell say?"

Vroonze hesitated. "I haven't told her yet. I have to figure this out on my own, and I want to see if it's something I'm doing first. I think I just need a bit more rest." That was the kindest way Vroonze could think of to broach the subject. Maybe Zervulian would pick up on it and understand.

Luckily, she did. "Oh, well then, no time like now, right? Are you going to study at all first?"

“No, I think tonight I just want to get a good amount of dormancy and see if it helps.”

Zervulian bobbed her ovoid seedcase. “All right. I can work on this stuff tomorrow. The ancient city ruins aren’t going anywhere.” She gathered everything into a pile beside her bed and put a leaf shroud over the jar of glow-moss to darken the room.

“Hey, Vroonze,” Zervulian said from the blackness as they both bedded down.

“Tomorrow I’ll see if any of the records I go through have anything about what happened to you. Usually I’ve only been reading through them if it seemed like they might have something about the cities and relics, but I’ll widen my search and let you know if I find anything. Someone else might have already found a solution or something you can try.”

Vroonze felt a warm glow inside competing with more pangs of guilt. “Thanks, Li. I’d appreciate that.”

It only took a short time for her to slip into dormancy.

Chapter Five

Zervulian sat by herself in the sunlit clearing upstream, unsuccessfully trying to concentrate on working on some records. She spent a lot of time there now since it was the only thing that seemed to stop her physical condition from worsening even more. She felt sicker every time she tried to absorb anything from the soil, except for a few specific, bland types of soil that didn’t affect her as badly but didn’t really nourish her, either. When Zervulian refused to see the healer again, Rennvez insisted that she spend as much time in the clearing as she needed to feel better, so Zervulian had begun bringing records with her to sort while resting in the sunlight.

And so, she worked out there by herself. She was used to doing things by herself, even in the midst of a pod. But even then, she’d always had Vroonze. All that time spent by herself had somehow not prepared her for how lonely she felt at that moment.

Zervulian had thought going to the Thuwisten settlement with Vroonze would be the best thing that could ever happen to her, short of actually traveling to Kashyyyk. But everything was getting so much worse, and Zervulian didn’t know how to fix it. She was getting a little desperate, and that heightened the sensation of loneliness, of her against the foul universe yet again.

Zervulian hadn’t found any records yet that contained something she thought might help her friend, and with no clear solution in sight, Vroonze had doubled down with her studies in the week since she’d started having problems moving things with her Force. Zervulian barely saw her at all anymore, and when they did see each other, Vroonze had little to talk about and always seemed troubled.

Zervulian didn’t want to add to Vroonze’s worries and hadn’t told her how much more sick she’d been feeling since living in the jungle. What good would that do? Vroonze couldn’t fix her. The healer couldn’t fix her. Pod leaders couldn’t fix her. No one could.

And that was the largest crux of Zervulian’s current dilemma. With as poorly as she felt living in the jungle, should she try to go back to her old pod, wherever they were, and return to nonstop treks without Vroonze there to help her? Would that actually be an improvement for her? Worse, what if Vroonze felt obligated to go with her and abandoned her Thuwisten studies? Or should Zervulian stay put and hope she somehow didn’t get even more sick?

She didn’t know what to do.

Giving up for the moment on pretending to sort the batch of records, Zervulian gave a

low thrum and moodily pulled a blade of grass from the ground, then tossed it into the stream. She watched as it floated lazily away.

She wished she could talk to Vroonze about this, but it would just cause problems. It seemed like all Zervulian did was cause problems, even though she truly didn't want to. She would love to be epitome of this vaunted Tyian harmony all the Thuwistens were always going on and on about, but no, no matter how hard she tried, it never worked out. She caused problems in her old pod, and she was causing problems here too. It was probably her fault that Vroonze was having difficulties in class. Vroonze was probably worrying about her and getting distracted by trying to think of how to fix things even though it was obvious that there was no fixing her.

Angry and disgusted with herself, Zervulian yanked a clump of grass blades and threw them into the stream as well. How smug and mocking they were, floating away without a care in the world, enjoying a sense of physical freedom Zervulian could never have.

She threw more blades of grass in the stream for no other reason than the fact that she could. It felt like the only thing she had control over in her life.

And the only thing in her life now that offered something of an escape was her research into the ancient cities and artifacts. Growing desperate for that escape in the midst of her unsolvable worries, she forced herself to finish organizing the set of normal records and then hurriedly reached for the latest ancient record she'd found. Zervulian gratefully immersed herself in it, looking for clues, verifiable facts, locations, anything useful. She found even more of Lerrinen's notes appended to this record, and she paid close attention to them and incorporated them into her own notes and observations. Most of what Lerrinen wrote made sense to her, but a few conclusions and ideas she didn't agree with. Still, they were a treasure trove of information, and encountering the notes was starting to feel like seeing a new friend.

This particular old record she was reading was the legend of a beloved Revwien leader from ancient times who lived in one of the amazing cities, and it recounted many of his deeds and exploits. At one point, the leader was injured when a prehensile leaf was severed. That leaf was then regenerated by an artifact, though that particular relic came across as little more than a boring afterthought, so benignly was it spoken of in the legend.

Something clicked in Zervulian's mind, and she suddenly sat upright, intently rereading the text to make sure she'd understood it correctly.

She had.

This artifact had been capable of healing far beyond what Revwien society could do today.

And if one of the ancient artifacts was capable of that, especially if it didn't even seem amazing or unique or noteworthy to the legend tellers, maybe other artifacts were capable of it too. Maybe there were more.

And maybe... maybe... they were still out there somewhere.

What if one of them could help her?

Zervulian stayed very still for several long minutes as her epiphany ricocheted around and she began to think through the implications of that notion. Surely this was crazy. Surely this was a bad idea. She didn't even know where to start looking for a relic like that!

But wait... Yes, she did. She'd already started trying to locate an old city site.

She gently stroked a leaf over her collection of notes as emotions warred within her. Even if she puzzled out the location of the somewhat-close-by site, could she make it there?

Zervulian tightly clenched one of her leaves as she made her decision. This was an option. A possible third choice when all she'd had before were two lousy ones. This... could

solve everything.

She would determine where the city had been. Until that point, getting there was moot. She would worry about that later. What would happen would happen, and all that.

For now, her main task was to figure out exactly where to go to look for her artifact.

Normally, Vroonze believed she would have been able to feel the frustration growing inside Xerrell, but those sensations now were fuzzy, indistinct, the same as the rest of her personal Force abilities. She could certainly feel her own frustration at herself, though, as she struggled to use her personal Force to lift a single, small leaf into the air.

She succeeded, but it required much more effort and concentration than it should have. When she let the leaf float back down to the ground, she stopped for a few moments to let her leaves replenish her respiration level. Usually she only felt this tired and depleted after strenuous physical exertion.

Xerrell slowly circled her student while studying her. Finally she said, "When you first arrived here, you could use your personal Force to lift much more than that. Why is it that four weeks later, when you should be showing marked improvement, you've gotten worse? Are you doing your studies each day?"

"Yes, Master Xerrell, I have been," Vroonze replied. In fact, the worse she got, the more she studied. Unfortunately, it seemed that the more she studied, the worse she got. Even now, her desperation to keep what little was left of her talent from leaking out was causing her to study during nearly all of the time not already spent in classes. She barely saw Zervulian or talked to her much anymore, and she felt terribly lonely. She realized she'd never truly felt lonely before. It was an emptiness that kept reminding her that something important was missing.

Xerrell hummed to herself. "You should have notified me of this problem sooner."

Vroonze clamped down on a new flare of frustration and made her vocal vibration stay neutral. "Master, I... thought I was expected to solve my own problems."

"In your day-to-day life, yes. This goes quite beyond that, and it's affecting your studies and progress, which affects me. If I'd known, maybe we could have fixed it before it got this bad. Are you understanding the precepts of the Tyian harmony so far?"

"Yes, Master Xerrell."

"And yet you're not able to demonstrate them here through use of your personal Force. How is your meditation practice progressing?"

"It..." Vroonze hesitated briefly, and Xerrell spun toward her and locked in on the bit of doubt she was inadvertently projecting. Vroonze continued truthfully, "It's been getting more difficult for me. I'm finding it harder to clear my thoughts and find harmony within myself, especially now that I'm having these troubles with my Force usage."

"Why is it more difficult?" Xerrell asked. "What thoughts are persistent? What's distracting you?"

Vroonze was uneasy, but lying would bring her no closer to solving her problem. "I'm concerned about why I'm having so much trouble now and what it might mean for me, and if I'll be able to solve it or if it will keep getting worse until I have nothing left. And I'm... worried about my friend. She's not looking well, and I miss her."

"This is Zervulian you're talking about, yes?" Xerrell asked. Vroonze bobbed her ovoid seedcase in affirmation, and Xerrell let out a low thrum. "I was afraid of this. Remember when you told me that the healer said her body is out of harmony?"

"Yes. I was hoping you might be able to help—" Vroonze started.

Xerrell cut her off. “That’s one of the difficulties of having a non-Thuwisten here long-term. She’s not actively working toward harmony, and her disharmony is affecting you by distracting you from your own growth and development. We will not turn her away, of course, but if you wish to advance in your studies it would be beneficial for you to not involve yourself with her as much. Limit your interactions. Spend less time around her.”

“What?” Vroonze blurted out before remembering she was talking to her mentor. “But... Master Xerrell,” she continued more deferentially, “my studies have already drastically decreased the time I can spend with her.”

“Then the solution is already in place. Good.”

“But I’m getting worse, not better.”

“Probably because her disharmony is getting worse. That makes it even more important for you to keep your distance until she sorts out her own disharmony.”

“How can I help her do that if I’m staying away from her?”

“Some things she has to do on her own. Besides, right now is the wrong time for you to try to help. You don’t yet have the right tools to do so, and you’ll never learn them if she keeps you from progressing in your training.”

Vroonze didn’t back down. “I don’t want to spend even less time with her.”

“Then you have a problem,” Xerrell said. “Answer me this, Vroonze: how can you keep the air around you calm when you’re standing next to a tornado?”

“Zervulian is not a... a... *harmony tornado*,” Vroonze said in irritation. “And if what you’re saying is true, then maybe if some like the healer or our former pod leaders could put up some wind breaks to help her, it would settle the wind for everyone.”

“And those kinds of turbulent thoughts will unfortunately get you no closer to finding the harmony needed to be a Thuwisten,” Xerrell replied. Vroonze’s muffled abilities detected what felt like a bit of frostiness from her teacher. “That is something you’ll need to work through to make progress. It’s probably also what’s causing your talent regression. I want you to meditate on what we’ve talked about. You may go for the evening.”

“Yes, Master.” Wilted, Vroonze formed the circle gesture with her leaves, left, and slowly went back to her dwelling.

Her friend wasn’t there. At first Vroonze was surprised, but then she remembered that Zervulian had been working with the records late into the evenings several times this week. There were even more maps and parchment leaflets than normal scattered around in some sort of disorganized– unharmonious– fashion on Zervulian’s bed. At least Zervulian had found something she enjoyed. Vroonze felt that ache of loneliness again.

With Zervulian out, Vroonze figured this was as good a time as any to work on her assignment, despite her aversion toward it. She would get it done now and never have to think about it again. Vroonze settled down on her woven mat of dried leaves and vines to meditate.

She silently went through the mantras and ritualistic preparations she’d been taught to clear her energy and focus within herself. That inner harmony was so much more elusive than it used to be. Frustration bubbled up, but she took a few moments to address it and then release it. One thing she’d learned was that whatever was destined to happen would happen on its own timeline, and as much as she wanted to, she couldn’t force this. She groaned inwardly at the inadvertent pun Zervulian would have teased her about.

At the subconscious thought of Zervulian, Vroonze felt the tiniest little swirl of a Force eddy, as if for the barest of moments the inner harmony paused in its plans to escape.

Vroonze waited to see what would happen, but the more she focused on that sliver of

feeling, the less she could sense it. Soon she returned to her mantras and finished up her ceremony.

At first she experimented a little, but when she deliberately thought about Zervulian, whether it was a happy memory or a present concern, that Force eddy did not reappear. Vroonze filed the data away for later and sank into her meditation.

As she'd been instructed, she called upon the Tyia to help her find harmony within herself and within her situation. Once she was calm, Vroonze recalled Xerrell's analogy of a disruptive tornado and Zervulian.

Instantly she felt a sensation like thick, sticky mud. She pulled back, startled, then tried again more slowly.

First she focused only on Zervulian. The emotional mud thinned until it was watery and easy to slide through.

Next Vroonze focused on her last conversation with Xerrell. The mud thickened and pulled at her until Vroonze felt like she couldn't move. It frightened her, and again she mentally retreated.

When she felt like she was clear of it, she hastened through the conclusion rituals. At last she came fully out of the meditation trance.

Shaken, Vroonze sat there for a moment wondering what that had meant. Her meditations, especially lately, were rarely so visceral, and this one in particular had scared her with that unexpected intensity.

She got up and walked out of their dwelling. Judging by the angle of the sun through the jungle canopy, she hadn't been meditating too long, and it wasn't late yet. She walked back to Xerrell's study area.

Xerrell glanced up from a bound wood-pulp book when Vroonze rapped softly on the hollow nutshell by the entrance. "Yes, Vroonze, what is it?" Xerrell asked.

"Master Xerrell," Vroonze started as she entered and formed the circle gesture, "I was hoping you could tell me what I just experienced. It rattled me a bit."

Xerrell gestured with a leaf to the nearest meditation mat, and Vroonze sat. "What happened?" Xerrell asked. She put a marker in the book and at last turned her full attention to Vroonze.

"I was meditating on our conversation as instructed," Vroonze said. "It got more intense than usual."

"I'm glad to hear your meditation skills are starting to improve. No doubt because of what we talked about. Continue."

"Well, Master, I..." Vroonze rubbed two of her leaves together, fidgeting. Xerrell turned a few budstalks toward them, and Vroonze abruptly stopped. She tried to calm herself both inside and out. "When I meditated on Zervulian's influence in my situation, it felt like water. I felt unrestrained. But when I meditated on what we discussed..." Vroonze hesitated, belatedly second-guessing her decision to come to her mentor.

"Yes?"

Vroonze made herself press forward. "It felt thick. Stifling. Like mud. I couldn't move. That feeling frightened me."

Xerrell tilted her seedcase. "There's nothing to fear from a feeling. This is a good thing. Now we know the approach we talked about is the correct one."

"...Master?" Vroonze asked in confusion. That didn't feel right at all.

"Yes. You felt more 'free' when you thought of Zervulian because she's a known

quantity to you. She's your comfort zone. Your friend. You associate her with fun. But you said it felt like water. You can't build anything on water, can you? There's no future there for you. That thick feeling is what you need to embrace now that you know it's coming and can be ready for it. Thick mud versus liquid water? That thick mud is the beginning of the more solid foundation that you need. That's what you need to build your future on. Make it more thick, more solid, and go from there."

"But... Master..." Vroonze ventured. "It didn't really feel like a foundation. It didn't feel like solidity and safety."

"Then you're interpreting it wrong, and the contrast confused you since you experienced it after the more 'fun' feeling about your friend. Meditate on it some more. You'll see that I'm right. You're very inexperienced with meditation, Vroonze, even after all the work we've been putting into it. Come to think of it, one of the instructors is doing a remedial meditation retreat for some of our younger students, and it sounds like it would be good for you to attend it as well to really focus on the basics. It's three days deep in the sacred jungle, away from the distractions of— and in— the settlement." Xerrell turned some budstalks back to her book. "I'll tell him you'll be coming with. It's not for two weeks yet, so you'll still have time to go more deeply with this particular meditation and learn how to turn that thickness into the foundation you need. Now, have a good evening."

It took Vroonze a moment to absorb all of that, but then she rose, formed the circle gesture, and headed out once again.

A tumult of emotions— a jumble of unharmonious thoughts— swirled inside as she walked aimlessly down a random path. Every fiber of her being said that Xerrell was wrong and Vroonze was not misinterpreting her feelings from the meditation. But... Xerrell was right about one thing. Vroonze *was* extremely inexperienced compared to Xerrell, especially when it came to meditation. Who was Vroonze to say that she knew better than her mentor in the ways of Tyia? What if she *was* interpreting the feelings wrong? What if she *was* unconsciously considering Zervulian her safety net and was just afraid of letting go to venture to something greater? Was that something she had to do to embrace the Tyian harmony and become a Thuwisten?

It frightened her to realize that she wasn't sure she could do that, or that she would want to.

That, in turn, made her wonder for the first time who she would be without her goal of being a Thuwisten. She had no answer, which frightened her even more.

And if this worst-case scenario came to pass and Vroonze could not become a Thuwisten, what would happen to Zervulian? Would they have to return to trekking across the plains with a pod? She wasn't sure her friend could go back to that lifestyle with as unwell as she seemed lately.

Vroonze had never been so confused, so uncertain of which feeling was right and which was wrong. She didn't know what to do or what path to go down. Vroonze felt like a disease, as if she was the embodiment of conflict moving like a blight through the settlement's pristine bubble of harmony.

Although, as embarrassing as it would be to be part of that "remedial meditation" retreat, maybe she would be able to find some answers there.

She could only hope. She wasn't sure what she would do if she couldn't.

Chapter Six

When Vroonze had told her about the “remedial” retreat she had to go on, Zervulian saw her chance.

After days of endless research, and thanks in large part to the information in Lerrinen’s notes, Zervulian thought she had a location. Sure, it wasn’t an *exact* location, but it was exact enough, and if the ancient cities were really that big then she would come across the ruins even without extreme precision. It was hard to estimate how long it would take to travel there through the jungle’s undergrowth, but it would be several days at least, and probably longer. The first portion would be retracing part of the way she and Vroonze had originally come to the settlement.

Once she’d felt confident that she had a destination, Zervulian had started to surreptitiously stock up on supplies for the journey. She wasn’t as familiar with what she would need deep in the jungle, but resupplying the basics for her pouches was second-nature to her.

The main problem had been how to go without Vroonze’s knowledge. If there was one thing Zervulian was certain of, it was that Vroonze would not allow her to go off into the jungle by herself. But this was Zervulian’s solution to her own problem, and she didn’t want Vroonze to miss her studies and possibly get in trouble for leaving in the middle of them on her account. Zervulian could make her own decisions, and Vroonze would just have to accept that this time.

If Zervulian left on a normal day, Vroonze would find her missing by that evening and would track her down right away. But this way... with Vroonze going on a three-day retreat, Zervulian would have a large enough head start so when Vroonze did eventually find out she’d left, Vroonze should see it would be pointless to try to come after her through the unfamiliar, massive jungle after so long. Vroonze could stay in the settlement with a clear conscience, and Zervulian would return as soon as she could, hopefully with a healing artifact that would fix all her problems and allow her to stay with Vroonze in the settlement without endangering her own health.

It was perfect.

Still, though, it was bittersweet watching Vroonze fasten her belts around her stalk trunk that morning as she prepared to leave on the retreat. Zervulian wasn’t sure how long she’d be gone or exactly when she would see Vroonze again.

“Three days you said, right?” Zervulian asked.

“Yes,” Vroonze said. “And you’ll be okay? I know you haven’t been feeling well.” They walked out of their dwelling toward the group gathering in the center of the settlement.

“I’ll be fine,” Zervulian said. “Rennvez can help me if I need it. Don’t worry about me. I hope this retreat helps you figure out what you think you need to, because you’re still the best Thuwisten on this entire planet, no matter what they say or how many feathers you can lift.”

“Good Thuwistens don’t need remedial retreats,” Vroonze said quietly as they came within hearing distance of some others.

“You’ll be teaching that retreat by the time you all get back from it, I’m sure,” Zervulian said, trying her hardest to act normal so Vroonze wouldn’t suspect anything. Usually that wouldn’t have fooled her best friend, but Vroonze hadn’t seemed tuned in to Zervulian’s emotions for a while now.

They reached the group, and after some last-minute coordination and forgotten supplies were brought, the group’s leader started them all on their way down a cleared pathway into the surrounding jungle. Vroonze lifted a leaf. “See you in a few days, Li.”

“Bye, Vroonze.” Zervulian returned the farewell gesture, and she felt the same sort of hollow emptiness as when she’d first thought Vroonze was leaving their old pod without her.

It didn’t take long for the retreat group to be lost to sight, swallowed up by the jungle’s greenery. Once they were, Zervulian went back to their dwelling. She took her time with her final preparations just in case the group had forgotten something else and came right back, but soon it was apparent they were gone.

Zervulian pulled her belts out from their hiding place and fastened them around her. The attached pouches were once again full of traveling supplies and water; it felt familiar and odd at the same time. She tucked her map and consolidated notes into a new, large, waterproof pouch. She’d already told Rennvez that morning that she was taking a break from organizing the records for a few days. Finally Zervulian left a note for Vroonze so she wouldn’t worry when she returned from her retreat.

Zervulian left their dwelling and headed to the overgrown path on the edge of the settlement where they’d first arrived. She paused for a long moment, looking at the thick jungle foliage mere meters away. She felt weaker, more exhausted, and more depleted than she had since before coming here, and she wasn’t sure she was physically up for such an excursion, especially when starting from such an energetic deficit. There might not be canopy holes that allowed sunlight through. She would have to fight through every centimeter of brush and vines without help. She would probably feel even worse every single day of this journey.

But... that was going to happen anyway. She would continue to feel worse even if she stayed here and did nothing. This was her chance, her only chance to make things better.

Alongside the nervousness was an excitement at feeling like she was finally able to take matters into her own leaves.

Zervulian braced herself and then plunged into the jungle.

The remedial group’s instructor, Willuuni, walked around the large moss-covered boulder marking the center of the first sacred spot the group had stopped at that morning and came up beside Vroonze. “Is something wrong, Vroonze? You seem distracted,” he said.

Vroonze stopped fidgeting and focused on the soft-spoken teacher. She gave a negative gesture with a leaf. “No, Master. I’ve just felt uneasy since we left.”

“About what?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just this vague feeling of discomfort.” Vroonze gave a low thrum. “I’m sure it’s normal. I don’t remember the last time I’ve been away from my friend for as long as this retreat will be.”

“Well, let’s see if we can work through this together while the rest of the group is working on the exercise, all right?” Willuuni asked.

“I’m sorry, Master. I was trying to do the exercise too, but—”

“Don’t worry about it, Vroonze. I’m here to help you, and you obviously can’t do the meditation exercises if you can’t sink into your meditation. Let’s try to fix that.” Willuuni settled his yellowish-orange stalk trunk beside Vroonze on the ground.

He led her through the beginnings of the meditation ceremony and ritual but stopped before they got too far in. At that point, he started another ritual that guided Vroonze through the steps of how to acknowledge the feeling of discomfort and then release it, thereby clearing her mind and energy.

Vroonze listened and tried to follow the ritual, but no matter what she did to acknowledge or identify or define the feeling, it remained. Understanding and releasing negative,

unharmonious feelings was an extremely basic concept of the Tyia philosophy, and she couldn't even do that right. The frustration with herself made it even harder.

After a few minutes of the ritual, Willuuni asked her how she was doing and if the feeling had dissipated yet. Disheartened and embarrassed at her continued lack of progress, Vroonze told him it was much improved. He bobbed his seedcase in approval and led her uselessly through the rest of the emotional cleansing ritual and concluded the ceremony.

By that time the rest of the students were finishing up their meditation exercise. They spent some time as a group sharing their insights, struggles, and possible solutions. Vroonze remained quiet. After the discussion, Willuuni led them all toward the next sacred spot.

The farther the group walked, the more uneasy Vroonze became.

She tried to focus on the meditation exercises as they traveled from one sacred spot to another to practice different concepts and ceremonies. Every single time, she acknowledged the feeling of discomfort and tried to release it so she could clear out that unharmonious nuisance of a sensation.

However, the feeling got stronger with every meditation session. Soon even identifying it as a typical, general anxiety didn't resonate with Vroonze anymore, and it seemed to defy her attempts to dismiss it or label it as "normal." Vroonze grew more agitated, uncertain of what it meant but wary of asking about it and being told it was something else she was misinterpreting and should embrace, like the "negative muddy thickness" she still couldn't shake even after two weeks of trying to convince herself Xerrell was right. All of her meditation work with her mentor had stalled until she got past her "hang-up," as Xerrell put it. Vroonze was afraid that the future—or lack thereof—of her Thuwisten training would come down to the outcome of these next three days, and every failure to find answers or make a breakthrough that morning made her a little more desperate.

Then, halfway through the first day, the feeling of discomfort disappeared, along with most of Vroonze's awareness of her personal Force. Subsequent meditation sessions did nothing. There was nothing there for her to sense or guide or connect with.

Disturbed, she finally approached Willuuni while they were stopped for another meditation exercise. "Master?" she asked with trepidation.

"Yes, Vroonze?" Willuuni asked. With one leaf he indicated the ground next to where he sat.

She lowered herself to the ground as well and rubbed two of her leaves together in distress. Willuuni waited.

Finally she said, "Something's wrong, and I don't know how to fix it."

"What are we fixing? Maybe I can help."

Vroonze rubbed her leaves together harder, then she said, "That... discomfort I told you about earlier? It... never went away. It kept getting stronger. And now it's gone, but so is my connection to my personal Force. I can't sense the Tyia anymore. It's been getting harder for me to sense it lately, but this is the worst it's ever been."

Willuuni absorbed her words for a long moment before saying, "All right. Thank you for telling me. Let's figure this out." He made some absent fiddling motions with a leaf while he considered.

"I'm sorry I lied about it, Master Willuuni," Vroonze said, ashamed.

"The important thing is that you told me now," Willuuni said. "The rest is a learning experience for you, and that's why we're out here, isn't it? To learn. About ourselves and Tyia.

So, let's learn about this and see if we can help you find your way back to Tyia. What can you tell me about the uncomfortable feeling you had this morning?"

"I kept feeling like... something was wrong. Not like a sense of danger, but more of a sense of something being off-balance. Like if you shorten two leaves by several centimeters but still try to use them to walk with the rest remaining at full length," Vroonze said.

"Was this feeling present only when you were trying to meditate, or was it constant?"

"It was constant, but it got much worse when I tried to meditate and connect to the Tyia."

"That sounds like the Tyia was trying to tell you something. What do you think it was?"

Vroonze didn't answer. She rubbed her leaves together again.

Willuuni tilted his seedcase. "What's wrong?"

"I... I don't think I'm interpreting it right."

"Why not? It's your interpretation. Your feelings. How can it be wrong?"

"Because... I've gotten it wrong before, and I can't figure out how to do it right. That's why Master Xerrell wanted me to come on this retreat," Vroonze said.

Willuuni gave a low, soft hum. "Can you tell me about that other time you 'got it wrong'? What did you feel, and what was your interpretation?"

Vroonze fidgeted. Willuuni hummed softly again and said, "Vroonze, it's okay. I know Xerrell and have worked with her for many years. I know the areas where her students tend to... need another perspective at times. By putting you in this retreat, she authorized me to give that perspective. Everything is fine. Together we will all find harmony."

Vroonze could no longer innately sense if he was being sincere, but all of the outward signs he gave seemed to indicate that the entire Tyian harmony would not implode if she pointed out a disagreement she'd had with her mentor. She hoped it wouldn't. She'd been spooked by such stakes after her error of asking for Zervulian to see a different healer.

"Well," she started slowly, cautiously, ready to stop the instant Willuuni acted like the Tyia was falling apart, "we were talking about my increasing difficulty with using my personal Force to move an object. I'd always been good at it before, but I started having trouble even with simple things. Master Xerrell told me to meditate on a particular solution. I did, and I got a stronger response than I expected. It felt like thick mud where I couldn't move, and it scared me. She said it meant I had to step out of my comfort zone to build my future on that as a solid foundation. That didn't feel right to me. It still doesn't. But if it doesn't feel right because I'm just afraid, then I just have to get over it, don't I?"

Willuuni didn't answer the question, but instead posed one of his own. "Have you been having more difficulty sensing the Tyia since Xerrell told you how to interpret your feelings?"

Vroonze thought for a moment, and then said, "Yes. But that's because I can't figure out how to embrace that feeling I don't like, the way I'm supposed to. I get frustrated because I can't, and then it's even harder for me to find my harmony. Lately I've been wondering if this means I'm not cut out to be a Thuwisten, but if I have to leave, that could have bad repercussions for my friend too."

There. The words were out, and there was no taking them back. Now someone in authority aside from Xerrell would truly know how badly she was doing in her studies and progress. Strangely, though, Vroonze felt lighter at the admission.

Willuuni absently fiddled with a leaf again, and then he bobbed his seedcase. "All right. Here's what we'll do. I don't know why you've had trouble with moving objects, but when we get back I know a few others we can ask. They're better with moving things than I am. I know some things we can try to help you meditate and find the Tyia again, though. Let's get started."

He began the meditation ritual.

Vroonze hesitantly interrupted him. “But... Master Willuuni, this won’t help if I can’t sense the Tyia.”

“Yes, it will,” he reassured her. “Anyone can meditate, even non-Tyia-adepts. And right now, we’re going to be exploring more than your connection to Tyia.”

“Yes, Master Willuuni.” Vroonze settled in and followed along as Willuuni restarted his meditation ritual.

It was hard for Vroonze to calm her mind; the swirling mixture and range of emotions from her fears and recent admission of her shortcomings was too strong. With nothing solid for her to cling to internally, she focused instead on Willuuni’s rhythmic voice as he spoke the ceremony’s passages. Slowly, little by little, she was able to relax and concentrate on his words.

After the standard beginning, Willuuni transitioned to a ceremony Vroonze didn’t know. Shortly after, Willuuni said, “Vroonze, I want you to go back to the feeling that frightened you in that earlier meditation, the one you said felt like thick mud. Can you do that?”

It was simple to recall, but the feeling was blunted, more like an echo or a memory of it. “I think so,” she replied.

“Good. What I want you to do now is feel that feeling while giving yourself permission to listen to your original interpretation of it.”

She tried, but it was hard to get past the two weeks of determined effort in the other direction. Willuuni walked her through a small ritual to help. Eventually she let herself truly tell the feeling that she was afraid of it and didn’t like it.

That sticky feeling lessened, and she felt lighter. And to her amazement, she felt a tiny little Force eddy. Excited, she told Willuuni and tried to concentrate on the eddy, but it stayed out of her metaphysical grasp.

“Good job, but let it go. Don’t try to grab it,” Willuuni said calmly. “All we’re doing is learning what it’s saying and how to entice it back. Now, we’ll work more on your muddy feeling in a moment, but I want to see what will happen if you try to feel the uncomfortable feeling from today and just listen to it. Don’t judge it, don’t try to define it, and don’t try to make it go away. Just be open to what it’s trying to tell you. Remember that whatever you think and feel about it won’t be wrong.” He guided Vroonze through another small ritual.

Slowly the feeling returned, though again it felt blunted, almost drained. Another small Force eddy flitted about. Vroonze tried to concentrate on the feeling and honestly try to understand it without projecting things onto it.

Everything felt like it was tilting, and the bits of emotion she could detect were a sort of emptiness, incompleteness.

“It’s like... something’s missing. Something important,” she said. “And I feel off-balance.”

“Is it telling you what’s missing?” Willuuni asked.

“No... not that I can figure out,” Vroonze said slowly. “But it feels like when I was studying so much that I hadn’t seen my friend for a while and was really lonely.”

She saw Willuuni go more still and settle into a deeper meditation of his own. After a few minutes he stirred again and tilted his seedcase.

“What do you think the feeling means?” he asked.

“I don’t know. If something’s missing, I probably have to find it to put things in balance for myself again.”

“What do you think you have to find?”

“I don’t know,” Vroonze repeated. “Competence? Passion for being a Thuwisten?”

“You’re guessing,” Willuuni said. “Finding your inner harmony and connecting with Tyia is not about guessing: it’s about learning and understanding. To do that, you have to ask questions and listen to the answers.”

“Who am I supposed to ask, though?” Vroonze said. “Does someone know what this missing thing might be?”

“Yes,” Willuuni replied. “You do.”

“If I did, Master, I wouldn’t be sitting here asking you what it is.”

“Follow along with me,” Willuuni said. He started up another meditation ritual Vroonze didn’t know. She almost protested, but finally let out a low hum and complied.

This ritual was longer than the others, and by the time Willuuni got to the end, Vroonze was focused on his words. “Now,” Willuuni said, “just listen. Listen to the deepest parts of your soul, and listen to the harmony in the Tyia. Don’t think. Don’t plug words in to fill the silence. Just listen.”

They sat in silence for several minutes. Vroonze wasn’t sure what she was supposed to be listening to, but she did her best.

When Willuuni spoke again, it wasn’t with the question Vroonze was expecting that had gotten them into this particular meditation. Instead, he asked, “Vroonze, if you could choose to take one action, anything at all, at this very moment, what would you do?”

The answer surprised her, both in the words and in how easily it came. “I’d go back to the settlement.” She paused, and then said, “I don’t know why though.”

“Ah, you started thinking again when you wondered why. But that’s fine— this is something you’ll learn with practice. The important part is that you heard the Tyia and understood what it was asking for. Good job.” Willuuni took them through the conclusion ceremony for their meditation, and then he tilted his seedcase at Vroonze. “Do you know the way back to the settlement, or would you like one of the aides to go with you?”

“What?” Vroonze said, startled. “Master, I know I said I’d go back if I could, but I can’t just leave in the middle of this retreat.”

“Why not?” Willuuni asked. “I’m the leader. I give you permission. Obviously there’s something back there you need to find, and until you do, you won’t get much out of the exercises in the rest of this retreat.” When Vroonze started to protest again, Willuuni said, “I’ll give you a private retreat afterward if Xerrell insists on it. But if you really want to be a Thuwisten, you have to learn to trust yourself and follow the path toward harmony, even when it seems to be inconvenient or doesn’t make sense. Sometimes... especially then.”

Vroonze absorbed the words, weighing them and her options, then she pushed herself up on her leaves and formed the circle gesture with two of them. “Thank you, Master Willuuni, and thank you for your help. I can find the way back on my own.”

Willuuni also got up and returned the gesture. “You’re welcome, Vroonze. I’ll talk to you when I get back, and we’ll work more on all of this together, all right? If what you find still doesn’t make sense, everyone will do what they can to help you figure it out. We’re here for you.”

His last sentences were spoken with more earnestness than Vroonze expected, but she put it out of her mind. Vroonze oriented herself and then started back along the path they’d recently come. Behind her, she heard Willuuni gathering the rest of the students who’d all finished their exercises and had been silently watching the pair for who knew how long.

At least she’d gotten one answer from the retreat. She wondered if she could find the next

one, whatever it was, back at the settlement, or if she would just show up looking like a fool and get sent right back out by Xerrell.

“Rennvez!” Clutching the note she’d found on her bed, Vroonze hurried over to the supply building where Rennvez worked. Her world was collapsing around her, and that awful feeling inside had strengthened, morphed, and twisted into something sharp and painful. “Rennvez!”

In the dimming late afternoon light, Rennvez looked up from his ledger at the front transaction table. “Hello, Vroonze,” he said when she ran up. “If you’re looking for Zervulian, she isn’t working here today, sorry.”

“I know she’s not! She’s gone!” Vroonze exclaimed.

“What? What are you talking about?” Rennvez said.

Vroonze slapped the note down on the table. “She left this morning to go find one of those ancient cities!”

“What?!” Rennvez said again. He quickly read through the note, and he grew more and more still as he did so.

“Where did she go? Do you know?” Vroonze demanded. “I have to go find her. She’s not well enough to travel through the jungle by herself looking for something that doesn’t exist!”

“I... I don’t know where she is. I know she was really digging deep into the research these last couple weeks, but I thought she was just enthusiastic about it. Although...” He trailed off for a few seconds, then said, “Let me contact someone, and then I’ll see if I can piece together where she might be heading from any notes she left behind. Give me an hour.”

“I’m not waiting an hour. She’s already got a full day’s head start! She could be anywhere by now!” Vroonze said.

“Which is exactly why you need to give me an hour to try to find the right direction to go,” Rennvez said firmly. “Otherwise all you’re doing is picking a direction at random and most likely wasting even more time going completely the wrong way. Once I have that, I’ll go with you to look for her. Okay?”

Vroonze rubbed two leaves together hard, but finally gave a reluctant affirmative gesture with another.

“Good,” Rennvez said. “In the meantime, gather supplies for yourself and me, and see if there are any research notes she left in your dwelling that might help. Meet me back here.”

Vroonze gave the same affirmative gesture, then asked, “Who are you going to contact? Can they help? I can do that for you.”

“Thanks, but no, I’ll do it. It’ll only take a minute. Go on, get our supplies and check for any research Zervulian left.”

Vroonze took the note and headed back to their dwelling, the dwelling where she’d expected to find her friend but had instead found only emptiness. If something happened to Zervulian out in the jungle...

Vroonze’s leaves shuddered and she did her best to push the notion away. The prospect of that future was one she couldn’t bear thinking about.

She did what Rennvez asked, all the while hoping they would find Zervulian and wouldn’t be too late.

“Are you sure this is the way she went?” Vroonze asked.

“No,” Rennvez said. “I’ve told you that already. This is my best guess.” He gave a low

thrum as they tromped through the jungle. “Listen, I’m worried about her too. But it’s dark out, and we should stop for the night soon.”

“You can stop if you want. I’ll keep going.”

“Why?” Rennvez said. “We won’t find her tonight– she’s still too far ahead if she’s been walking all day. She’s probably already gone dormant for the night, and if we don’t get some rest too, we won’t be able to make up any ground tomorrow. We won’t be faster than her if we’re stumbling around half-dormant. Besides, you won’t be able to see where you’re going in the dark or spot her trail. It gets pretty boggy in this area at this time of year. Good luck not getting stuck somewhere or having a run-in with an herbivore you weren’t prepared for.”

“Zervulian is out there alone with all that too,” Vroonze countered.

“But she’s not stumbling into them unknowingly, because she probably stopped for the night. Because she’s sensible that way. And she’s probably found a safe place to go dormant. Because she’s sensible that way,” Rennvez repeated.

“Right, she’s so sensible that she ran off chasing fantasies,” Vroonze grumbled. She thrummed in agitation. “Fine. We’ll stop for the night. But I’m leaving again as soon as there’s enough light to see.”

“Fair enough,” Rennvez said. “I think…” He paused for a moment. “I think there’s a small cove not too much farther on. It’s a good place to rest tonight.” He started off in a slightly new direction.

Vroonze followed. “How do you know about a cove? Have you been out here before?”

“Yes,” Rennvez said. “I’ve lived in the settlement for years. I know the area.”

Sure enough, before too long they came upon the cove in a small hillside overgrown with jungle vines and trees. They nestled in and made sure they were protected from the largest herbivores that might find them.

“In the morning after we’ve gotten some rest, we’ll see if the Tyia has any insights for us about where she might be,” Rennvez said.

Vroonze just offered a half-hearted affirmative gesture with a leaf, not wanting to get into the long explanation of how useless it would be for her to try that in the morning. She was surprised at how tired she was after the full day of traveling first with the retreat and then looking for Zervulian. She’d grown quite used to staying in one place since arriving at the settlement.

Her thoughts and emotions were a chaotic, unharmonious jumble as she drifted off to dormancy.

Chapter Seven

It was nearly midday. Zervulian sat under a canusaka tree, resting yet again. She was achy, sick, and downright miserable, and she’d been needing to take more and more frequent breaks to rest, but she was determined to keep going even if it would be slowly. She hadn’t come all this way to stop now.

From where she sat, she looked around to see if she could find a perritan tree, but none were visible. Hopefully she would come across one soon– she’d underestimated how many wretched insect larvae would be trying to bite her in this part of the jungle, and now on the third day of her travels she was almost out of the crushed perritan leaf repellent to rub on her stalk trunk and prehensile leaves.

Zervulian hummed softly to herself. Now that the newness of her excursion had worn off,

she missed Vroonze and was thinking about her often. Vroonze would be getting back to the settlement that evening from her retreat, and Zervulian hoped Vroonze wouldn't be too upset with her when she found out what she'd done.

But to get back to Vroonze, Zervulian first had to keep going and find her healing relic. She told herself she could only rest for one more minute, and then she had to get up and continue, no matter how badly she felt.

Some tree leaves rustled some distance away, discordant from the uniform swaying of the rest of the jungle's foliage in the barely discernible breeze. It was probably just another fleshy jungle creature bounding through the branches, but Zervulian looked anyway to make sure.

The last thing she expected to see there was a Revwien. She was dark green with dark red prehensile leaves, and she wore numerous belts with pouches hanging on them. They reminded Zervulian of the style of pouches the Thuwistens back at the settlement used.

"Hello," the stranger called from where she stood about ten meters away.

"Um, hello?" Zervulian replied, utterly confused. "Who are you?"

"I didn't want to startle you," the Revwien said as she began walking calmly toward Zervulian.

Zervulian forced herself onto her leaves in case she had to flee, but she stayed and watched the newcomer approach. Nothing about her seemed threatening.

"My name is Lerrinen," the stranger said when she reached an easy speaking distance.

"I- wait, *you're* Lerrinen?" Zervulian asked incredulously. "As in the Thuwisten who did all that research on the ancient cities?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I can't believe it!" Zervulian felt almost giddy. "I heard about you, but that you'd disappeared. I've been going through all the notes you left that I can find, and I'm looking for an ancient city too!"

"Yes, I know." Lerrinen gave a high-pitched hum of amusement. "Rennvez told me. Assuming, of course, that you're Zervulian, but I imagine there aren't too many others out here in the depths of the jungle."

"Wait, but- wait, what?" Zervulian asked. "I mean, I am Zervulian, but- what's going on?"

"Rennvez contacted me a couple evenings ago and said he thought since you'd been using my research that you might be heading this general way. He asked me to keep watch for you, so I went out looking. He and your friend are quite worried."

"Vroonze? But she shouldn't be back yet. How- When- *Rrrrrrrr*," Zervulian growled in frustration. "Why is nothing making sense?"

Lerrinen gave another hum of amusement. "If you'd like to come with me to my dwelling, you can rest and I'll explain what I can."

Zervulian gave a small, hopeful bounce. "Did you find the ancient city near here?"

"No, unfortunately, I didn't." Lerrinen's words were soft, but their weight still crushed Zervulian. She barely heard the rest of what Lerrinen said. "But if you'd like, we can discuss the legends and you can show me what you've found while we wait for your friends to arrive. Just because I haven't found it doesn't mean I'm not still looking."

Zervulian felt wilted in a way she hadn't since leaving the Thuwisten healer's building. Now what was she supposed to do? This had been her last chance, her one perfect opportunity to make everything right.

"Come with me," Lerrinen invited gently at Zervulian's lengthening silence. "It's been a

while since I've had company, and it would be nice to have someone to talk to for a bit. Maybe we can find a way to help each other."

Zervulian gave a despondent hum and offered a half-hearted affirmative gesture with a leaf. It wasn't like she had anything else to do or anywhere else to go now, apparently.

All this for nothing.

She followed as Lerrinen slipped easily through the jungle's underbrush.

They walked for several hours and rested frequently. Somehow Lerrinen knew exactly where to move to encounter the least resistance from the jungle plants they walked through, and Zervulian was grateful for the easier traveling. On the way, she told Lerrinen how she came to be out there looking for a relic from an ancient city. She hadn't really intended to tell all that to a stranger, but... well, some part of her didn't really consider Lerrinen a stranger after becoming so acquainted with her research notes and how she thought. Besides, Zervulian found her easy to talk to, like Vroonze and Rennvez. Before she knew it, she'd related quite a bit about her last six weeks in the Thuwisten settlement.

"Sorry," Zervulian said when she realized how much she'd been talking. "I didn't mean to dump all of that on you."

"Quite all right," Lerrinen replied. "Like I said, it's been a while since I've had company, and it's nice hearing something new, not to mention the updates on the settlement where I used to live. I enjoyed listening to you. I've grown rather tired of all my own stories— I know how most of them end. It sounds like you've had a lot of changes and a lot going on these last few weeks."

"Yeah. So... why are you out here? How did you get here anyway?" Zervulian asked. "Rennvez said you never came back from a mission."

"That's right," Lerrinen said. "Like you, I was determined to find an ancient city site. One day I was given a small mission near where I thought a city might have been. I took it as a sign that I should look for it. So I completed my assigned mission, but instead of going back to the settlement, I detoured to this area where I thought the city was. At first I was only going to look for a day or so before heading back, but I always kept thinking that the ruins could be just around the next grove, just past the next river, just beyond the next tree. The next thing I knew, two weeks had passed. I thought about going back at that point, but I found I didn't really miss being in the settlement. I was happy out here, searching for our past, and my connection to Tyia was stronger than it had been when dealing with the others in the settlement. While many of them enjoyed the community there, it was stressful for me. Tyia is flawless; beings are flawed. So, I decided to stay out here. I still work toward harmony in all things, I still strive to learn about Tyia, and I still join in the bond-circle with other Thuwistens. They just don't realize it's me."

"But how can you stay by yourself? Not in a settlement and without a pod?" Zervulian asked.

"It took a while to get used to it, and it's definitely not for everyone. Rennvez brings me supplies once in a while when I really need something, and occasionally I have dealings with a nomadic pod north of here, but otherwise I'm on my own. I've learned quite a bit about myself this way, which is one of the prime tenets of the Tyia philosophy. Besides, I wanted to stay in this area to continue looking for any indications of the ancient city: I still think it's out here somewhere. Plus I admit that part of me was curious to see if anyone else would ever reach the same conclusions I did and look in the same place." She hummed in contentment.

“I used your research, though, so of course I came to many of the same conclusions about the location as you did,” Zervulian said.

“Ah, true enough.”

Eventually they reached Lerrinen’s dwelling. Like the dwellings in the Thuwisten settlement, it was sculpted and formed by living, woody plants and trees. Numerous disorganized clay pots and wooden buckets outside held supplies and water. Through the open entrance, Zervulian noticed a fair collection of parchments and leaflets inside. A couple unrolled ones were filled with that same flowing script she was so used to seeing.

“Welcome to my home. Please, sit,” Lerrinen said, indicating a thick grass-woven mat in a cleared area outside the dwelling’s entrance. “Rest. I expect Rennvez and your friend will be here soon. I told him to meet us here.”

Zervulian sat, her thoughts once again heavy as she realized she was no closer to knowing what to do when Vroonze got there now that her plan to fix everything was nothing but dust.

Lerrinen offered her a bowl of water. Zervulian thanked her and gratefully absorbed the cool liquid.

“You mentioned that you were looking for an ancient relic to help with a health issue,” Lerrinen said as she took back the empty bowl Zervulian gave her.

“Yes, that’s right. I can’t absorb nutrients well, and the healer couldn’t do anything. I’m just getting worse, and there’s nothing else I can do about it. A healing relic was my last chance at fixing it.”

“Would you mind if I try sensing anything about it through the Tyia? Being self-reliant means I’ve had some unexpected lessons in healing.”

Zervulian gave an ambivalent gesture. “Go ahead, if you’d like.” It wouldn’t do any good, but it wasn’t like she had anything better to do at the moment, and getting scolded again for somehow causing her poor health wouldn’t even register through her depression about not finding an artifact.

Lerrinen bobbed her seedcase, then she settled herself on the ground in front of Zervulian. She gently took three of Zervulian’s primary manipulator prehensile leaves in three of hers, then she gave a low hum and went still. After a moment, she began to speak a meditation ritual that sounded a bit like the ones Zervulian had heard Vroonze practicing.

The ceremony went on longer than Vroonze’s did, and it soon transitioned into different ritualistic words that Zervulian hadn’t heard before. With nothing else to do, she waited.

It seemed like forever before Lerrinen began to stir again. She brought herself out of the meditation trance, tilted her seedcase, and released Zervulian’s leaves. She hummed in thought.

“Wait here, please,” said Lerrinen. She rose and walked around her dwelling toward the back.

There were muffled sounds of rummaging and clanking, then after a couple of minutes she returned with a large pot that had a plant growing in it. She set it on the ground in front of Zervulian, then sat opposite her.

“This is a firepod plant,” she said. “Have you ever heard of it?”

“No,” Zervulian said curiously as she studied it. It had reddish, bulbous seed cases and broad leaves that tapered to a point.

“It’s not found around here; the soil is too acidic for it to grow wild. However, it thrives in an area around a large river basin to the south. The seed pods are quite useful as pigments, but if I want to grow them, I have to bring their soil with.” She indicated the rich, dark brown dirt in

the pot that had more of a clay texture than Zervulian was used to seeing. “Try absorbing some nutrients from this. I can get you some water to dissolve it in if you’d like. But I think you might find this soil easier on your system.”

Zervulian tilted her seedcase and warily turned her budstalks toward the soil. Nothing in her life that started with the words “absorb some nutrients” had ever been a positive experience for her, and she wasn’t looking forward to feeling even more sick than she already was.

Finally she figured that she was going to feel sick regardless of what she did, so she probably had nothing to lose. She lifted a leaf and tentatively placed it in the upper layer of soil.

Ten minutes later, she still couldn’t believe that she wasn’t feeling worse than she did before she absorbed the soil nutrients. She wasn’t feeling good, but she did feel slightly better than she had. She wasn’t sure that had ever happened before, and it was, frankly, astonishing.

For the first time since meeting Lerrinen, Zervulian forgot her disappointment about the ancient relic. Hope began to trickle in and fill that empty chasm. As the minutes passed with no negative effects, it filled up more and more.

“I... think it’s working,” Zervulian said incredulously yet very softly, as if the words might puncture reality and make it all come undone. Amazingly, reality held.

Lerrinen bobbed her seedcase after patiently waiting for Zervulian’s assessment and said, “If this type of soil works for you, it might take some time for your system to realize it’s actually getting what it needs, so don’t expect miracles overnight. But take it slow, and I think you’ll be feeling a lot better overall very soon.”

Zervulian hummed in excited happiness and gave a little Vroonze-like bounce. “This is *wonderful*, thank you! I had no idea this kind of soil was out there, or that it could make such a difference! How did you know how to fix it?”

“During the meditation, the Tyia showed me some imbalances in your body. It looked like what I’d experienced in the Tyia with the firepods.”

Zervulian’s thoughts were zipping everywhere like startled flashbugs, but one problem managed to gain a roothold. “But... you said this soil is in the south? How do I get it? Do I have to live down there now?” Zervulian asked.

“You don’t have to live down there if you don’t want to,” Lerrinen replied. “I can show you where to find the soil, and we’ll transport what you need. Maybe we can find another source that’s closer, too.”

Before she could pull out a piece of parchment to start drawing a map that very instant, Zervulian heard the increasing sounds of something pushing past fronds and branches in the jungle nearby. Lerrinen didn’t seem concerned by it, so Zervulian hoped it wasn’t a danger, especially now that she finally had good prospects for the future. It was coming right for them and getting closer.

“Zervulian!” Vroonze called from that direction.

“Vroonze!” Zervulian called back excitedly. She quickly pushed herself onto her leaves. “Over here! Wait’ll you hear what—”

“Wait’ll you hear what—”

“*Zervulian!*” Vroonze interrupted angrily as she stomped down the path as fast as she could toward her best friend. “What in *all the green* possessed you to come all the way out here and scare me to a husk and I swear if you ever do this again I— I—”

She stopped immediately before Zervulian who, paler than ever, had started to approach but then stopped at Vroonze’s outburst and had gone very still. Vroonze thrummed a deep, low,

gutteral sound, and then the fury was overtaken by overwhelming relief at seeing her friend alive and safe. Vroonze quickly reached out and grabbed Zervulian's three primary leaves with her own. Zervulian flinched back at the sudden motion. Vroonze held her leaves tightly, and her next words were pleading. "Please don't ever do that to me again."

She felt raw. Almost two days of searching for Zervulian had caused a lot of guilt and fear to cycle through her, even with Rennvez trying to reassure her. The sheer happiness at seeing Zervulian again started to soothe the emotional wounds and fill that gaping emptiness inside, and a few tiny flickers of her personal Force started flitting around within her.

"I didn't mean for you to worry, Vroonze," Zervulian said softly. "I thought you'd still be on your retreat today, and I was hoping to be back soon. Why aren't you there?"

"I went back to the settlement on the first day. I had more problems sensing the Tyia, and the teacher helped me realize I needed to go back for something. That's when I saw you'd left, and Rennvez and I came after you. Now, your turn. Why did you go out looking for this ancient city?"

Zervulian twisted one of her free leaves. "I wanted to find an ancient relic that could heal me so I could stay in the settlement with you," she said. "I've been getting really sick there, Vroonze, and I didn't see any good options for myself. But look— I might not need a relic anymore! Lerrinen thinks this kind of soil might be better for me, and so far it's been fine! No bad reaction yet!" She pointed to a pot with a reddish plant in front of a small dwelling.

Vroonze stared at the potted plant. "Really?"

"Yes!" Zervulian bounced slightly.

"That's wonderful, Zervulian! Give me a minute, then tell me all about it." That was major news, but Vroonze was too overwhelmed with everything at the moment to properly take it in and react. Next to the pot stood Rennvez and another Revwien. That seemed like a simpler thing to deal with, so Vroonze let go of Zervulian and turned her frazzled attention to them. This had to be the Revwien that Rennvez had told her they were meeting and had located Zervulian, though Vroonze still didn't know what anyone else was doing way out here.

"Lerrinen, this is Vroonze," said Rennvez. "Vroonze, this is Lerrinen."

They exchanged the circle gesture in greeting, and Vroonze said, "Thank you for finding Zervulian."

"Certainly," Lerrinen said. "She's a tenacious one to make it all the way out here on her own."

Zervulian turned to Rennvez. "Rennvez, when you first showed me her notes, you never told me you knew Lerrinen. Or that she was still alive and living out here."

"No, I didn't. It's not my place to tell a secret that belongs to my former mentor," Rennvez said.

"I don't understand," said Vroonze. "Why is it a secret?"

"It's... a long story," said Lerrinen. "I don't feel like things would go over well in the settlement if they found out, especially after all these years."

"But... why?" Vroonze insisted. "That doesn't make sense. Wouldn't they be happy to know you're alive?" She would have been devastated if Zervulian had consciously decided to keep her fate secret from Vroonze for some reason. That had been one of the hardest parts of the last few days: the not knowing, and not knowing if she ever would know.

"Maybe," Lerrinen said slowly. "Honestly, sometimes I think I should never have kept it a secret in the first place, though at the time I thought it was for the best. We had some strong personalities in the settlement back then, and I didn't believe I could advocate well enough for

myself to stick to my decision if confronted with that. Being out here alone isn't exactly typical Thuwisten behavior on my part. But, right or wrong, I made the decision I did, and it's taught me quite a bit about myself, both good things and bad. After all, Tyia is flawless—"

"—Beings are flawed," Rennvez finished.

"You could come back with us," Zervulian said eagerly. "Even just for a visit."

Lerrinen hummed softly. "Maybe one day I will. It's dishonorable to hold on to this secret, I know, and it hasn't been fair to Rennvez with some of the awkward spots I've put him in as a result, but..." She twisted a leaf in distress. "There would be consequences I'm not ready to face yet. I've grown quite a bit in my pursuit of Tyia since coming out here, but I still have my shortcomings to work through. Well," she continued, abruptly changing the subject and turning to get a couple bowls of water, "it would appear we all have a lot to talk about. Please, sit. Welcome."

They talked well into the evening, though Vroonze was quiet for most of it. Mainly she contentedly watched and listened as Zervulian and Lerrinen talked each other's leaves off about ancient legends and relics and had several good-natured arguments about interpretations of odd phrases like that one about the triad. Occasionally Rennvez would interject with some dry comment, though it always seemed to be perfectly timed and calculated to stir up the winding-down debate into another frenzy.

Zervulian was the happiest Vroonze had seen her in a long time. Her voice still had that husky vibration, but in just a few short hours she'd seemed to gain some energy, which she then promptly expended in her excited discussion.

Ultimately, Zervulian's exhaustion was the only thing that stopped her from talking even longer. She didn't fall into dormancy as much as she plummeted into it, fighting it every step of the way. It left an odd sort of depleted silence hanging in the air, and it was only then that Vroonze noticed how noisy this part of the jungle was at night with insects and amphibians.

The three of them softly went out into the small front clearing to give Zervulian a chance to rest inside Lerrinen's dwelling. They sat and listened to the cacophony for a short time.

"Zervulian's lucky to have you, Vroonze," Lerrinen said quietly.

Vroonze fiddled with a twig. "I won't be doing her or anyone else much good if I can't get my connection to Tyia sorted out."

"I'm sure you will," said Lerrinen. "Didn't you say one of the teachers helped you on that retreat? Who was it?"

"Master Willuuni."

"Ah, Willuuni." Lerrinen's voice took on a happy vibration. "He'll help you work things out. Listen to him. Actually, he played a big part in my decision to stay out here." The vibration dropped a little. "I do miss him."

"How did he influence your decision?" Vroonze asked.

"Willuuni was the one who helped me trust in what I was hearing from the Tyia," Lerrinen replied. "He wasn't my mentor, but I often went to him for help and advice. He tried so hard to teach me to follow my own path, but I was rather meek and never stood up for myself for any reason. I also had always had a very weak connection to Tyia and my personal Force. They tried to toughen me up by having me mentor Rennvez when he arrived, but while I could advocate for him fairly well, I still couldn't do it for myself and it all made me even more anxious. When I got out here after that mission, I had a little taste of what it was like with all of that pressure gone while doing something I really wanted to do. It really strengthened my

connection to Tyia, just like Willuuni had been trying to tell me it would for so long. I decided to do my best to follow the rest of his advice and go where I thought the Tyia was leading me. So I stayed out here and made my own life.”

“All right, but I still don’t understand what the problem is with going back and letting them know you’re okay,” Vroonze said. That notion had been grating on her all evening.

Lerrinen thrummed and twisted a leaf. “I didn’t want to lose this. This peace. This feeling of harmony from being myself, which is what Tyia is about, isn’t it? But what do you do when the true selves of two or more Tyia-adepts are at odds with each other? For instance, in the case of my former student here.” She indicated Rennvez.

“At last, a sensible topic,” Rennvez interrupted.

Lerrinen ignored him. “He feels truest to himself expressing some thoughts using strong language, while another Tyia-adept might feel truest to themselves advocating for and insisting on only using respectful language. How do you find harmony in those differing views without compromising the self-acceptance Tyia endorses? It can get exhausting, and there were lots of strong, differing views when I lived in the settlement. Once I realized what I’d be up against in telling the others I wanted to stay out here, I didn’t think I could succeed. So I thought it would be best to simply keep it a secret. And then...” She twisted her leaf some more, and her vocal vibration softened. “Have you ever made a mistake that only got worse as time went on, and every day that goes by makes it that much harder to correct it? That’s... where I am. And even though I miss him, the thought of facing Willuuni again makes me shudder. Despite his advice to listen to Tyia, he has very definite opinions about what that involves for a Thuwisten. This—” She waved a leaf at her solitary dwelling and the surrounding area— “is not it.”

Rennvez let out an exasperated hum. “And like I’ve been trying to tell you for several years, he’s not like that anymore. For all the green, he teaches beginning students now. I think it rattled him when you disappeared. He’s not as opinionated as he used to be.”

“Master Willuuni was opinionated?” Vroonze asked in confusion. “Are we talking about the same Master Willuuni?”

“See?” Rennvez demanded of Lerrinen. “If you don’t believe me, then believe her. He would be glad to see you again. So would the others.”

Lerrinen rubbed two of her leaves together hard and stayed quiet.

Vroonze tilted her seedcase and said, “Listen, I’m not a Thuwisten, and I’m not even sure if my connection to Tyia is going to come back, but if you’ll let me, I’d like to help. If we work together, maybe we can find a way for you to tell the others what happened and that you’re alive and well. Then you won’t have to hold on to this secret and the guilt anymore. That can only help, right? Otherwise it’s just going to keep getting worse for you. Maybe... I don’t know, we could meet with one or two at first in the jungle so you don’t have to face the entire settlement at once. We could have a small private retreat with a couple from the settlement like Master Willuuni said he could do, and we could meet you somewhere. Keep it small and controlled until you’re more comfortable with their reactions.”

Lerrinen rubbed her leaves together some more, then at last she quietly said, “I would like that, Vroonze. Thank you. Just... please be patient with me and realize it’s not going to be something I can run out and do tomorrow after a quick pep talk. I know it looks simple from the outside, but... it’s not. Especially after this long.”

“All we can do is try.” Vroonze was pleased Lerrinen was giving her the opportunity to help, and she suppressed a hum of contentment.

“Well, it’s getting late, and both of you are probably tired from traveling,” Lerrinen said.

“As you saw before, my dwelling is a little cramped with all of us inside, but please make yourselves as comfortable as you can in there. It’s quite safe for dormancy.” She pushed herself onto her leaves, and the other two did the same. She walked to her dwelling.

Rennvez followed. As he walked past Vroonze, he said in a low voice, “And you think you’re not a Thuwisten.” He entered the dwelling.

Vroonze stayed outside by herself for a short time, amid the continuing cacophony of insect sounds. Helping Lerrinen felt right. Having a strong friendship with Zervulian felt right. And if that’s who she was, she would have to remember that a bit more often from here on out.

Maybe she would need help from Master Willuuni in trusting her instincts more and determining when to follow Master Xerrell’s lead in learning about Tyia and when to follow her own path. Lerrinen was both a good and bad example of how things could go right and wrong in those respects, and Vroonze vowed to do her best to learn from it. Maybe Rennvez could help as well by being a reality check for her when needed.

Being a Thuwisten was complicated. But... it no longer seemed impossible.

Vroonze hummed at the welcome, fluttering feeling of a small Force eddy inside, then she walked into the dwelling for some much-needed dormancy.

Three days later, Vroonze and Zervulian followed Rennvez through the jungle toward the Thuwisten settlement. They were each carrying several large clay pots full of the river basin soil. Vroonze turned her budstalks to Zervulian beside her and was glad to see that despite the current exertion, Zervulian looked better than Vroonze had seen her in quite some time. “You’re sure you’re okay with going back to the settlement?” Vroonze asked.

“For the tenth time, yes,” Zervulian teased. The sensation was still somewhat muffled, but Vroonze detected some playfulness in her friend. “This supply will last me a while, and then I’ll go get more.”

“*We’ll* go get more,” Vroonze corrected.

“Right. So, what, do you keep asking me because you don’t want me back at the settlement? Sending mixed signals here, Vroonze, with the whole ‘coming after me’ bit.”

“No, of course I want you there,” Vroonze said. “I just wanted to make sure you didn’t feel... stuck anymore.”

“No. As long as you’re not studying nonstop.”

“I won’t be. I’ll still need to study, but it’ll be in much more moderation. I’ve got a better handle on things now,” Vroonze promised. Another little Force eddy joined the growing dance. Vroonze was heartened to feel her connection to Tyia continuing to strengthen, and she used her personal Force to guide a small stick off the ground into the air in front of them before setting it back down. In the back of her mind she continued to mull over the discussions she’d had with Lerrinen about how they could work toward her revealing her secret to the others.

“Now, Zervulian,” Rennvez said from ahead, “just because you’re going to be researching ancient things for Lerrinen, that doesn’t mean the rest of the records room can be neglected. It still needs to be organized.”

“I know. I will. It might not be very fast, though,” Zervulian replied.

Rennvez thrummed. “Figures. No one ever has time for that records room.”

“Well, since I’ll be making some of your secret supply runs out to Lerrinen when I bring her my research, maybe that’ll give you some time to work on it.”

“No. I’ll never have time for that records room.”

Zervulian gave a high-pitched hum, then she turned her budstalks to Vroonze. “Hey,

Vroonze,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Know what Lerrinen told me?”

“Something tells me I’m going to hear that phrase a lot.”

“She said there’s a nomadic pod she trades with occasionally, and some of them have been off-world. They still interact with off-worlders, and sometimes a few pod members decide to travel in their ships. Lerrinen knows where the pod goes for various Gathering Days, and she could put me in contact with them.” Zervulian hummed again in happiness. “Maybe one day, when you’re finished with your training, we can go see the wroshyr trees on Kashyyk.”

Vroonze thrummed, enjoying the feeling of harmony in herself and in her best friend. “I’d like that, Li.”

The End

Revision A

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