

COSMIC PAWN

CHRONICLES OF
DRAGONDOM & BEYOND

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LESLEY M. LAWS

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Cosmic Challenge



Athena spoke to Aisha before leaving her.

“Every few millennia, there is a reckoning, a challenge if you like; set out by what on Earth you call the old gods. It is a time when champions from across the known Universe are called to face challenges and the winner’s side, will hold sway, so to speak until the next champions match. Dark, Light or Shadow striving for the upper hand.

You, still as part Earthling, but also able to function as a Federation of Galaxy commander and trained elven recon operative, you are a perfect challenger; with the ability to overcome the other challengers including those of the Darker Lords. You I believe, as a side game, as a Cosmic Pawn would indeed put the cat amongst the pigeons.

I, Athena, will call you my champion, and add you to the listings, but as the Unknown Warrior. Not by your name. No, that would give the game away, so I think I will simply enter you as the Unknown Warrior or better still as Shieldmaiden of the Gods.

I will see you again. Soon.”

A Note from the Author

Living within the Quantum Space and Time continuum. Understanding Zero Point and that there is far more in play at any time than we see or even contemplate from a human perspective in our normal lives on Earth at this time. Aisha finds herself no longer constrained by our norms in *Chronicles of Dragondom & Beyond*.

Join her now as she is drawn into different Quantum Timelines, different dimensions and Universes through these Challenges. They come at a time when it is known the antagonists, the Old Empire have moles, deep cover agents in high places within the Federation of Galaxies and way beyond. Possibly on every inhabited planet. Who can be trusted?

Cosmic Pawn, and the following three; or four books are slightly different as there are Challenges. Aisha has been called in by the Ancient Gods, Athena chose her to be her champion and thus she has been thrown in, for a time she takes her role as Shieldmaiden of the Gods. It is time for the Old Empire and the All That Is and thus the Ancient, what we call gods, to once again have champions to choose where the Balance is for the next several millennia.

Aisha is a piece on their chessboard?

She is being tested, she has to succeed for the sake of every planet, every species of freedom loving creatures including humanoid hybrids, Galactic Federation members

and yes even us on Earth to keep that freedom to laugh and exist without slavery and destruction.

She is not allowed to work with her usual team or Little One, but she finds both numerous adversaries ready to stop her; permanently; but also underground or renegade groups ready to fight alongside her.

Maybe we all are doing this unconsciously in our dream state?

Have you ever wondered? Have you ever tried to Quantum Jump? If not, then come along for the ride.

Let's jump in to Cosmic Pawn.



*And so it begins...
The call has come
A young woman,
An Earthling, fused with All the Cosmic forces
So long held unknown within
Has now been thrown into the Game.
Never alone, but having to find
Those who have a similar mind.
The renegade, the survivor, the Freedom fighter.*



Infiltration

This sortie into the desert of Rondaria is simply to see if the dark agents of the evil Darkling have infected either the land or the natives here. It is a worrying visit after the almost deadly encounter previously in which dear Belzar had nearly lost his life. While not within the containment zone around Zor, knowing the danger of dark agents having previously been witnessed here, regular checks were being kept. A small dragon Force flying without their riders had sent back word to the Operations headquarters in No Time on the edge of the Quarantine Zone which now covered this sector of the All That Is.

The follow up was deemed important enough for

Dralinmer, High Wizard in the Cosmic Council and Grand Wizard of Dragondom and Arionel, along with Beloldwen the Grand Sorceress of the Elven and Elemental Kingdoms and myself, a commander in the Special Operations Group and a dragon rider, together with my dragon partner Little One to check it out.

Now the dawn was not far away, and we were sitting in a small but secure cave; halfway up a conical shaped rocky outcrop, standing high out from the undulating desert landscape that stretches out to the distant blue-black escarpment, and the jagged peaks of the mountains beyond. Here we were on the opposite side of the planet to where the problem with the Fortress had happened.

Below, and just coming into view, as the light started to filter through turning the sky a pastel lilac, was the striking circular stone portal through which we arrived. Its massive granite standing stones remind me of Stonehenge, back on Earth. This is the main entry point to this zone of the central desert of Rondaria.

Little One left earlier to check out the entire area from the sky. Dragons have the unique ability to feel and smell out evil. Even a small trace will make their nostrils tingle. At this time in the All That Is, they alone are the first line of defense against the evil Darkling. The Timeless war to keep the balance of good and evil has reached a new phase and is becoming ever more urgent. We have to succeed against the Dark overlords.

Now I was sitting slightly to the side of the entrance waiting to feel the connection in my heart if Little One detected anything. While I waited I looked warmly towards the old wizard and the feisty elven sorceress. We are using voice-speak to communicate rather than telepathy as it is less likely to be picked up if there are dark agents already in the area, or if they have already placed a listening relay which is what we have anticipated.

Dralinmer is sitting with his back against a boulder, his long grey beard coming almost half the way down his chest and seeming to rest within the ornate filigree of his large medallion of a phoenix that he wears. His dress code as usual is plain. A flowing robe in earth brown below a full-length cloak which while lightweight would also have hidden within it any trick he may need. His walking staff with its gnarled head and large quartz crystal held in the cage like roots is quietly resting alongside him in easy reach. Beloldwen is sitting crossed legged not far away. She is wearing, the same as me, the standard elven suit for battle made of a magical gossamer light fabric that is impervious to most weapons. Her walking staff is also alongside her and her elven features and pointed ears are catching the dancing blue light from the elven flame she set up in the center of the cave to allow a gentle light. Suddenly Little One's eye surrounded by his beautiful purple scales appeared in my mind's eye. He had found something. I fully opened our private heart connection.

"I have found another unregistered portal not far from you. I only found it in the base of the escarpment when it opened, and the energy signal hit me as strange. I am circling in camouflage mode, so they do not see me. There are four humanoid warriors, definite darkling implants. What do you want to do?"

He waited for my reply knowing I would use voice-speak with the others. They had obviously seen and felt the stiffening of my demeanor when Little One said there was contact, and it was darkling. We had worked long enough together to know every change. Both were watching me now and already had their hands on their walking staffs, Beloldwen had also manifest her own elven cloak into being, this allowed the wearer to be invisible, and it could also be used with the chameleon like camouflage it possessed, to blend totally into any background with simply a thought from

the wearer. Dralinmer's ice blue eyes sparkled.

"Get the coordinates from Little One that would get us to the portal, and we will translocate there first then follow his lead if he keeps in touch with where they are going."

I did, and as I walked over to join the other two, I ensured my light-sword was firmly in place on my back, over my own elven dress cloak, and its shorter brother was on my hip along with the boleadoras and my magic pouch. They both watched me and grinned.

We touched, and in a puff of smoke, the three of us re-materialized in the dark shadow below the escarpment only a few feet from the still open portal. Instinct drove me to my knee, ready to materialize my energy shield, my hands also primed in case an energy freeze bomb was needed, Beloldwen was also primed like a panther on the final stealthy steps moving in on a quarry. Behind us and not phased at all stood Dralinmer.

With a flick of the wrist and then blowing gently over his open palm a cloud of fine magical dust swirled in the air.

"Now, let us pick up the residue of our dark friends and see who we are up against so there are no nasty surprises."

As the sparkling magical cloud found what it was seeking the shadows of the darkling soldiers became visible to us. They had come through the portal and didn't seem to be at all worried to check if they were alone. They obviously had used this portal many times. Now we watched as the figures started to move off, none of them was much below seven feet tall. At this point Dralinmer froze them in place so we could take a closer look at them.

Humanoid, yes, dressed in one-piece desert suits to blend with the area. Their heads where not human, in fact they were not like any of the more local species that any of us knew, but we knew deep down what they were. The heads where those of spiders. Red Spiders. This must be one of the

newest and most dangerous of the darkling slave gatherer species that we had seen signs of. My heart skipped a beat. The name Ares popped into my head. If Ares was really the leader of these ruthless soldiers, then he is obviously up to something again. But why out here in the middle of nowhere?

Dralinmer grunted.

“Well, it looks like we are in for some excitement again. I hope you two are ready and remember you need to be really on your toes with this group. I still believe my hair went two shades greyer when we took this species on last. At least this time we don’t have the black magic of the High Priestess and Sisterhood of Athena, to contend with at the same time.”

Beloldwen laughed quietly.

“Well at least now we know to watch out for them sending webs like projectiles to tie us up. Last time that I believe, came as an uncomfortable and rather sticky surprise.”

She blew at the holographic images and they disintegrated, falling like grains of sand to the desert floor.

“Okay. Let’s go and find out what these creatures are up to, I smell a wicked game afoot. Go on Aisha, lead the way, after all you are the one with the unique connection to both Little One and Ares’s sister, Athena.”

Now it was Dralinmer’s turn to tease me. Mind you he had only heard what had happened from someone else, he had not been there at the time. Maybe, the gift she had given me might prove useful going up against these darklings, I hoped so, but then I also hoped that with luck no extra help would be needed.

The darklings had a good start on us. Little One was still ghosting their movements and relayed them to me. It seemed as if they had a destination programmed in and were not deviating from the path they had set themselves. So far no scouts had been sent either ahead nor left to guard the

rear, a sure sign they felt there was no one else around. Still, it was a bad professional lapse for any group going into hostile territory. We at this time had the upper hand when we caught up to them and I had no intention of them detecting us. Their spider senses could well be tuned to pick up vibrations through the ground, similar to a spider feeling a fly on its web. It was my turn to use some magic, and just to be sure, I used a spell. I drew my short sword and touched the blade to the ground just in front of where the holographic image had been, as I cast the spell I gently pushed it in turning it into my favorite hickory wood wand.

*“As the sun now brings the light,
Show us that which hidden be,
Silver thread of spider silk,
Glow upon the sand for me to see.”*

And there it was. A continuous carpet stretching off into the distance, shimmering along the path we would have walked, no rear guard was needed because the spider senses would detect our every step.

I gently removed my wand and, once more as my short sword, placed it back in the scabbard on my hip.

“I think we had better fly, don’t you?”

It was not so much a question as an observation which came at the same time as both Beloldwen and Dralinmer shape-shifted into ravens.

I turned to the portal that the creatures had used to enter and feeling inside my hidden pocket drew out several miniaturized pieces of obsidian, bringing them back to size I placed them both on the sand in front of the portal and also into the outer edges finding small cracks on the rock-face into which to wedge them. This would seal the portal to any darkling without sending alarm bells to the other end of the link, at least, not until they attempted to actually exit at this end. Time now to join the others as we all took silently to the sky.

We flew high, allowing our excellent sight to enable us to keep in touch with our quarry and each other, Little One was still with them and from up here we could see the edge of his transparency as he remained in camouflage mode.

The four beings had turned in a southerly direction from their original trajectory when they stopped on a small mound with an old windswept tree. Ancient as it obviously was surviving here in the desert, maybe a reminder from better climatic times. No one looked up, nor did they halt, it was as if they had a mission and could not stop until it was completed. Where were they going? Why?

Looking back from where we had started, the escarpment now was only a narrow strip on the horizon. The sun was now nearly halfway between the largest of the three moons that this planet had. We were still in the first half of the daylight time here; I looked back down as one of the other two ravens flew in close and drew my attention towards the ground again. We were not using any other communication methods, so this basically was drawing my attention to something new happening below.

The figures below had stopped again, this time in a small depression, shaped like a circular amphitheater. Now, one of them had removed something from within his desert-suit, I caught the glint of something small in his hand and then he knelt down and seemed to be brushing the sand away from something. The other three, seemed to be doing the same now, but separated as if working in a specific semi-circular arc with maybe ten steps between them. The leader being the central key. Suddenly a very low vibrational sound could be heard. Then the leader moved from his position and aimed for the space which would make up a fourth marker on the circle around his Central key.

Suddenly Dralinmer screamed in raven and flew like a dart at him, pulling up as soon as he had caused them all to

look up. Now he materialized as himself on the rim of the depression where they were. His walking staff pointed at them as if he was ready to blast them to oblivion if anyone moved. In fact he was holding the leader in a freeze ray. The others went to move towards him and Beloldwen and I materialized as ourselves on the rim of the depression behind them. They swung around and the first web flew from the wrist gland of the one nearest Beloldwen. She threw out an ice bomb and the web wrapped around it and fell short as a frozen ball. Now I ducked, and as the three of them ran to re-group near their still frozen leader, it became apparent that whatever he had been stopped from completing, was so important that they were willing to do anything to complete the cycle they had started.

“Aisha. A containment cube *please*.”

Boomed Dralinmer as with his wand he threw another of the creatures through the air and it landed on its back. There was a hissing, clicking of the mandibular as it screeched before landing. So great was its rage and the force that two webs were automatically ejected, both went skywards in no particular direction. The next second however these turned to fire and burnt up before landing close to us. Little One was fully visible and was joining in the fun.

“Cover me.”

I threw the thought out to all concerned as I needed to concentrate on the containment cube. I materialized my own walking staff and centering my power within me I charged the crystal in the head of it. As the force flowed from my core, so the crystal started to throb with diamond white light. I couldn't afford to make a mistake, I pointed it and started the flow of power to create a fast-setting crystal glass containment cube to hold them captive, but unharmed. Starting from just below the sand, it was important to stop them turning that key. That was when I found the metallic

lock and the inserted key. With my mind's eye I traced this all the way around the depression. It was a large entrance way. Sealed at present, but with the twist of that final key it would open and there was no saying what would be released. Without thinking I raised slightly the depth and curved the base of the cube, but instead of only creating a containment around the one. I aimed to put the crystalline base of the cube between them and all the keys. The sand shivered and moved below their feet and they looked down in horror.

I had started to raise the sides on the cube when the air turned into a blast of static blue and the entire depression started to shimmer. There was no time to think. I simply joined all my inner power with my external force and closed my eyes. I called on the goddess Athena for help. After all it was her brother Ares who ran these creatures. I had to stop them from teleporting or doing anything else which would prevent us from capturing them.

The next thing I knew I was watching from above. The electric blue was still there, like a cloud and I could still see the outlines of the spider headed creatures and they had raised their voices together and the sound was both vocal and telepathic. Dralinmer and Beloldwen had created a holding shield above, which was holding everything in place, and I was completing the crystalline cube, but, what was different was that both I and the force that flowed through my walking staff crystal were fused with the whole. The final corner was almost closed, but they hit it again and again, so I had to put more power through, I re connected myself into one. Now everything went white in a flash so great it was like a star exploding. I was thrown several hundred feet backwards, up and over the area where I had been standing and almost lost all my breath when I landed, my light-sword pressing hard into my back. I was one again with my body.

I coughed and pulled myself up on one elbow. Little One landed and his massive head seemed to simply float

inches from my face.

“Are you alright?”

I could hear the concern in his voice. I nodded, still gasping for air and started to try to get up, slowly sitting, I tried to clear my head. I now looked back over to where I had been standing before the flash. Standing there now where Dralinmer and Beloldwen, looking at me. Dralinmer looked a little disheveled, his hat and his beard seemed to have smoke coming from them, as did his cloak, Beloldwen didn't seem to be fairing very much better. Both simply stared at me.

“By Zorgon. Where did that burst of power come from?”

Beloldwen looked over her shoulder back to where, I hoped, the spider creatures, still remained. Dralinmer simply stormed down towards me, held out a hand and gripped me by the elbow.

“No time to sit and rest. You have work to do. We *all* have work to do. Now, you created that mess. Lift it out of there, check everything is in fact intact and can't escape and then let us find out why they were here.”

He lifted me to my feet with one fast movement.

“Do it.”

I looked at my old teacher and was about to apologize but then I saw his eyes. Those icy blue eyes were trying hard to hide a look of amusement and pride. He coughed and turned away, heading back the way he had come. I hate spiders. Especially dinner plate sized red- black, hairy spiders. But that is what I saw when I looked into the containment cube where the four darkling soldiers should have been. I could hear the scratching and clicking of their feet as they tried to escape their confinement. I could hear the clicking and squeaking, the clacking of their mouth pieces and felt all their eyes boring into me. I used my wand and a spell just to give me that extra self-confidence and ensure success.

*“Rise you gently from this space,
Move aside, not more than fifty pace.
Gently place inches from the ground,
Hold these safe from harm
Till sanctuary is found.”*

The whole, large cube began to gently rise. For a split second the spiders inside stopped. It was as if they felt the movement and were not sure how to act. Higher it rose to safely exit the depression and clear the rim of the sides, now as I held it as if in a tractor beam it moved out to the side then glided to a halt near Little One.

He looked at me.

“Ugh. I suppose you want me to babysit these, things?”

I smiled, knowing he was feeling the darkness seeping out from them and knowing also he was needed to do so as we were not ready to open a vortex until we knew more about what we had stopped. I turned and watched a dust devil, a favorite creation of Dralinmer’s if he wished to move sand or earth in any quantity. As it danced around the depression it hovered up the surface and like a see-through hoover simply held it in a suspended vortex before moving off to the side and dropping it.

Now the depression was a convex dome with five slightly raised key points. Four keys, which had been turned in their locks were clearly visible. The final one was in Beloldwen’s fingers. Dralinmer stood in thin air slightly above the center. He was looking down and into the central zone. He grunted.

“Aisha, time for you to try and see through this, see if you can see and feel, hear what is below, without simply remote viewing.”

I looked at him. I had never done anything like that before, had I? The look on his face told me not to ask, just do. Beloldwen nodded when I looked at her for support. I was

about to go solo on something new.

“Concentrate on it. Not on the surface you see but beyond it. I think you humans call it x-ray vision.”

I swallowed and took a deep breath. I also called on all I could think of in the universe to help me, including Athena. This latter was new for me but felt right in the circumstances. Then I relaxed and allowed myself to unsee the surface of the portal door with the keys. Slowly, things seemed to shimmer, and I let it happen. Then I could see a dark place, I opened up further, now I was in the ground, I had gone too far. Backing up I was once more in a downwards sloping corridor with steps leading down to a doorway. The door was solid rock and was closed.”

“Look beyond it.”

Dralinmer’s voice was a long way off, but, I did as he said. I allowed my mind to bore a hole through the door, bit by bit the other side came into view. A rough-hewn room, more like a cave with a water source, a raised catchment pool with a slight emerald green light emitting from it and to the side some narrow side corridors. In some of the walls there were also cut out nooks. I pulled back.

“Right, that was not bad for a first time, however, I would not like to follow you into battle based on what you have just done.”

I looked at him. What had I missed?

“Do it again, but this time remote view. Start below this seal, then once you reach the bottom doorway, start again from the other side of that.”

I started to center myself and then it dawned on me that I and the old wizard were alone. Little One, the containment cube and Beloldwen had left. I still felt Little One’s connection to me and now allowed myself to slip beyond the sealed entrance on which I stood.

I sensed a musty odor, a slight dampness in the air which considering we were in a desert seemed strange. The

stairs were rough-hewn and compacted and the walls were, at a guess about six feet apart leaving a wide expanse to walk down. On the sixth step there was, on either side, a slight indentation. I had noticed none of this last time. I looked closer, and noted that each indentation, was the entrance to a burrow which now I noted, was home to a serpent which obviously waited for someone to pass. These energetic beings, for that was what they were, pure energy wrapped in a form would have been able to move like lightning and likely strike a deadly blow to a physical being. I cautiously moved on.

The next six steps held similar traps, although each were at different heights so if one got past the first and expected the next to be in a similar position then that pair would land the blow, first at ankle height. I heard the words Achilles tendon. Then at knee height, head, neck and shoulder. Presumably no matter what size the trespasser, these energetic guards would stop them. The last step was clear. I now looked at the stone door and as with the other things I had missed before I now noted above the door in the central stone was a carving of an owl. One of the signs of Athena.

To the side of the door there appeared to be a bronze metal ring, countersunk into the rock, yet placed in such a way as to entice someone to turn it, or pull on it. Now I attempted to use the x-ray ability Dralinmer had made me use the first time. This time however, I used it to see if anything was connected to the ring and to my astonishment found it worked.

A mechanism was connected to it. If it was turned clockwise, that in turn operated levers and pulleys which would have landed the seeker cascading down a hidden slide as the area on which they stood opened and swallowed them. Turning it anti-clockwise closed this mechanism off keeping the ground solid under foot and also linked to a very old but

very perfect mechanism that would float the massive door open, giving access to the cave I had seen before. I had to go on. I had to see what was in this cave that warranted such measures of security. Visualizing myself the other side of the stone door I was met by Dralinmer in person.

He was sitting on the edge of the pond stroking the head of a beautiful bearded, full-maned water-lion, actually it was a type of Panlong dragon that I had heard of but never seen.

“You took your time. Go back and meld with yourself, then translocate to where you stand now, then I will explain.”

He turned away and continued his conversation.



The Journey Begins

Now in solid form I stood near the door and watched Dralinmer. I also looked around me as there must have been a reason he said specifically to land where I now stood. Three steps ahead of me, on the floor was a narrow bridge leading to the main section of this cave. Either side of this bridge the ground fell away into what appeared to be the abyss. I also noticed that the bridge did not take a direct route, but was at an angle, so as I looked at it, the landing place on the other side was at an angle slightly to the right. On a clock face this would be at the two o'clock space. Obviously my thoughts were open.

“You are right. But do not cross the bridge. That is a trap for the unwary. Take the number of individual traps you

found and subtract them from the number you imagine this end of the bridge would mark on a clock face in an earthly twenty-four-hour day. That is your starting point. Then, taking the fact that you would have fallen into the abyss if you had turned the door ring clockwise, walk across the abyss on a path that would be equal to the visual bridge path, yet anti-clockwise from the twelve o'clock. Most important of all, trust."

I took a deep breath and telling myself over and over again that I was safe I took a step forward into the open abyss. My foot rested solidly in mid-air. An invisible bridge held me and one step at a time, one-foot in front of the other I inched forwards. The lion Panlong and Dralinmer watched me silently. Once over I walked to them and looked into the waters of the pond.

"Greetings Aisha. Yes, I know who you are for it was foretold that it would be you who would come."

The lion Panlong bowed his maned head slightly.

"You may call me Drondicles, for that name was given me by the goddess when she fashioned me for this task."

I now bowed my head keeping eye contact with him as I had been taught by Master Weng-Choo.

"Greetings Drondicles. It was indeed a path that took more than normal understanding to enter and if I had not asked the goddess for her help I may have failed. Thanks also to you and my teacher here for the answer to the final puzzle."

I felt him in my heart center, as with Little One the dragon connection is based within the core of the heart and is warm and inviting. Now I felt Dralinmer watching me.

"Are you ready to complete what you have been brought here for?"

I looked at him a little confused.

"When you braved the diamond white flame in the mystery school run by the Daughters of Athena and survived,

you became a chosen one of the goddess, and as she gave you her gift which now you are learning to master, you also added her to your learned teachers on this journey within the Ancient Cosmic Prophecy. Now, she wishes you to take another step forward and I have agreed to help you as you may need some assistance in coming to this.”

He paused and his head turned slightly to one side, his icy blue eyes held my gaze, as if weighing me up, a second of pride flashed across his face. Then it was gone.

“So, are you ready? On this I may not come with you, and anyway, you are far better suited to the world of the Panlong than I am. I prefer to keep my feet dry, so to speak, but I shall remain here for your return.”

I had already learnt on this journey to go with the flow. I could feel a movement in my arm, just under the skin and looking down saw that where the amulet given to me by the goddess Athena had melded into my body, now there was a shape moving below the skin, like a snake. I was being called. So I took a deep breath to quell my inner nerves and climbed over the edge of the pond, lowering my avatar into the icy water alongside the maned Panlong. As the water flowed over me and I allowed my head to fully submerge I automatically changed into a more suitable avatar, the mermaid allowed me to breathe under water and would also allow me a heart centered telepathic connection to all water beings on this journey. I was ready, lastly I touched the hand of my teacher and left him sitting alone in the cave as I followed Dronicles down into the depths.

The feeling of the water on my flesh was invigorating, and I felt my whole body coming alive. The deeper we went I noticed that the light did not change. The light emerald green light appeared to be emanating from the very walls of the tunnel as we now continued in a horizontal, narrowing tube-like tunnel. The maned Panlong slithered forwards effortlessly and I followed just out of reach of his tail. Now

the tunnel was narrow enough that I could no longer see past my guide and I was unable to swim with my arms, allowing only my tail to propel me forwards. Suddenly, almost like a cork out of a bottle I was in open water and we both surfaced. Where were we?

Everywhere was bright, but not with blue sky and clouds, there was still a greenish tinge to the light yet also yellow and it was warm. In my mind I could only liken it to as a child playing in the garden at home and making a camp using a pastel green bed sheet hooked over some chairs, this was the same light as in there, looking at the sun through the sheet.

“This is as far as I take you.”

My guide’s voice spilled gently into my mind.

“I will go with you to the beach head and there you will take the path, do not leave it, neither to the right nor the left, keep always to the main track. Your destination is the temple on the hill which you will see in due course. When you get there do not go directly in, but, sit upon the third step from the bottom and ask within yourself for the next directions. There is a guide awaiting you there.”

I was about to answer when I became aware that the final part of this message had been passed by dragon-rider connection through the center of the heart space. It was not to be overheard by any.

As the sandy beach came closer and the water became only deep enough to cover my mermaid avatar I willed myself to change. This was something I had learnt to master so it simply happened, and I was never, as in the early days, found embarrassed by lack of clothing. Now I stood on the sand, the water still lapping around my ankles but now I was dressed in country style skirt and gypsy bodice over my elven light weight suit. My cloak now, in keeping with the rest of my costume was short, but within it the hidden pocket carried all my possible needs in miniature. Lastly I brought

my walking staff into full size, checked my short sword on my hip and felt for my light-sword, which now nestled in the pocket. The fact the Panlong had gone to the most secret link for part of the last conversation told me that there may still be some unexpected excitement to come.

I turned to my guide just in time to see his head go below the water surface. I closed my eyes and going into the deepest part of my heart-mind I reached out to say thank you, and ask a question, but he came through first, strong and direct to the point.

“Aisha, you have the gift of the Goddess, if at any point you are lost, or find a choice of track and both seem the same. Look to your gift from her and it will direct you. Do not allow yourself to be drawn from this path before you reach the temple. While this world is protected, there may be those who wish you to fail to reach the objective of this journey. Stay centered and remember you are here for reasons only known to the goddess, not even her brother has managed to break the codes. I shall wait here, yet, I also know you may not come back this way. May the goddess and the universe give you speed and good fortune.”

I could not reply for he broke the connection completely. Now I felt truly alone. Time maybe to look around before dashing off into whatever lay ahead. Visually I tuned in to all around within a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree zone. No I would not risk turning bird as I had a feeling there was something here to counter such things. For now I would follow the path on foot, however, maybe it would be prudent to do so invisibly. No magic involved, no magical signature left for others to feel, I simply turned the elven cloak inside out and it automatically reversed its size to ensure I was totally invisible from any eyes.

Leaving the beach and stepping forward on the path I became aware more of my surroundings, the vegetation was

definitely more tropical here than I had seen on many of the lands I had been to. Yet, it also seemed larger, almost one might say pre-historic, or what I perceived prehistoric to be like. Large three-foot-long leaves, on giant fernlike trees, Mushrooms and other fungi the size of family dinner tables, I suddenly thought I would hate to meet the bugs that ate these. Then quickly changed my thoughts so they didn't manifest in front of me. Although not fast enough, as when rounding the bend in the track that was hidden by the exotic foliage of a flowering bush, I stopped in my tracks at the sight of an enormous caterpillar sat atop a mushroom humming to himself.

He was purple and his stomach area was a lighter hue of lilac. The spots on his sides where his spiked sensitive hair sprouted from where made up of rings of black surrounded by red then electric blue. Horned antennae on his head, while short where vivid bright cherry red. His head was turned towards the path that I was walking on. I felt his smile although I did not see it. I stopped dead in my track, not sure if he had detected me somehow.

"Tis a long time since one such as thee has walked this land. I do declare I feel your presents on every hair yet can see you not."

Perfect voice speech, although a little slurred, it still took me quite by surprise. Yet, I hesitated to be drawn into showing myself or answering.

*"Come, come now don't be coy,
Come sit a while with me and enjoy
A sliver of my hospitality.
A slice of mushroom to open your mind
And send you skipping throughout our land.
Come, please, sit here beside me now,
Then later you may then continue happy on your way,
'Tis so rare we have outsiders here,
Come sit and talk of what you know*

Bring us news of off world joy, and devious action..."

I had to stop my thoughts with care, for this reminded me of things from Alice-in-Wonderland, and yet, the final words of his speech and the warning from the maned Panlong ran screaming through my mind. No, I would not succumb to friend nor foe on this journey for there was much I had left behind, and much more I had to do, so eating mushrooms that would send my head no doubt into orbit, for I was already walking in other worlds...no. Time to walk on as if I had not heard him.

Softly as if walking on rice paper back while learning with Master Weng-Choo, I passed and heard him growl and rumble as he realized he had failed. On turning back, there was nothing there, just trees and ferns and oversized mushrooms.

Many tracks seemed to cross my given path. Many had animal and humanoid spore printing, yet I felt none close at hand. Yes, I heard them, I heard laughter and also screams and cries for help. Yet I could not, would not leave the path, it was almost as if I was walking in a twilight place between two worlds, two dimensions within the same space. The path being the divide and to go to either side would draw me into that timeline. I was being tempted. The words of the Panlong before he left me rang in my ears.

"Do not allow yourself to be drawn from this path before you reach the temple. While this world is protected, there may be those who wish you to fail to reach the objective of this journey. Stay centered and remember you are here for reasons only known to the goddess, not even her brother has managed to break the codes. I shall wait here, yet, I also know you may not come back this way. May the goddess and the universe give you speed and good fortune."

Focus. Only one thing now could enter my mind. The path on which I walked, and so I touched the living gift from

the goddess which rested under the skin of my sword arm and as it moved, I too moved forwards.

At first the tests were aimed at memories and calls from my Earthly life and aimed to make me leave my path to give assistance or to run into the arms of those I loved and missed, my parents. Then they aimed with surgical precision to the very heart of my empathy and the call of lost souls in danger and torment. Next the voices of my dear teachers calling me to leave the path and come to them, at first asking, then demanding, yet still I walked on. The center of the path below my feet, one step at a time, trying to close out all I heard. One step at a time.

I had closed down my mind from all around me, closed and locked the gates to the connectivity that allowed others to know my thoughts. Closed down my telepathic connections and gone silent to all the universe around me. I had gone within and drew now on all the strength of all I was, I am, and knowing now that whoever they were who tried to stop me and played even now with my mind, knew who I was, there was no longer any need to hide. I drew off the cloak of invisibility and stood tall and proud, centered and ready in my full warrior self. A light warrior, dragon rider, commander of a special unit. Around me I ensured a full body electric blue energy shield was in place and visible. My light-sword was in my hand and fully charged the bright diamond white blaze of the blade was almost blinding. I was ready.

For a split second there was silence, then laughter that range through the air and vibrated down and into the very ground where I stood. Rolling through the air like thunder, on and on and on, then in front of me the air shimmered and the veil shifted, there was the temple.

I had passed the test, or as I saw it now through my mind's eye, I was a pawn on the chessboard of the gods and so far I was one step ahead, the queen was obviously on my side.

I stepped onto the third step, the width and distance between them being unusually large and waited.

The peaceful feeling was easy to make one feel there was no need to hold protection in place, but, I had been there before and now instinctively kept up my guard. Looking around in the rich yellow-green light it was as if I could hear a gentle soothing music floating all around me but could not work out where it came from.

The temple stood slightly elevated above the surrounding tropical jungle of fern trees and palms, of dense undergrowth and giant toadstools and mushrooms. Here on the steps which now I noticed were almost alabaster in texture, veined with a golden cream, rich and yes, flecked with tiny shards of sparkling crystal which caught the light. Looking up to the exterior columns of the small temple these too were created in the same material and for a moment I wondered if this in itself was a figment of my own creation, my own imagination, and then the voice.

“Welcome to our kingdom of Arborum. My name is Artour. There is no need for your protective shield here for you have been welcomed and passed the tests so designed to weed out the undecided from the true.”

I turned back the way I had come and there at eye level to me, while still standing on the ground fully three steps below me, stood a blue being. She, for in form it was female in a long flowing gossamer robe of pastel blue-green with earthen tones mixed in almost as if the material was a galaxy in the making. Her flesh was pale blue and her eyes wide, almost almond shaped and dark pools of soft yellow with amber flecking, her hair worn like an avian cap of feathers. She bowed her head slightly and then moved silently up the staircase and past me.

“Come. I have been instructed by the goddess to take you into the inner sanctum and give you the instructions given to me by our protector, the goddess Athena.”

Her voice was a sing-song tune, yet below I detected a purr which would be more in keeping with a Lyrian feline. As we reached the exterior pillars she turned and looked down at me smiling.

“I know I do not have to tell you that everything is a hologram, that what you see is not what is truly here, yet, for you it was what you would have expected. Come, stay close and let us enter my world. Please, before we do, may I touch the ‘gift’ the goddess gave you, to activate it for this sacred space?”

A little confused, yet feeling no harm was meant to me, I removed the gossamer arm-guard from my sword arm and watched as her massive hand gently moved across the moving form, below my skin. I felt a tingling run throughout my being and watched in mild astonishment as emanating out from the area of my subcutaneous friend my flesh started to take on a slightly sky-blue coloration. Next everything seemed to stretch, and I could feel my entire avatar changing. The feeling was strange, I had never felt anything like it in all the changes I normally made between the various avatars that I could utilize as I shape shifted. I looked up at her questioning, but then couldn't believe my own eyes as I was now nearing her own immense height. She cocked her head slightly to the side and looked at me.

“Mm, yes, I think that is more in keeping with our home.”

Then I heard a peal of gentle laughter as she turned back towards the entrance area to the temple and led the way.



Arborum

We walked into the coolness of the shadow between the pillars. The air shimmered and when it cleared we were standing on a rock ledge high above an ancient forest. The sky was rose tinted, and the air was fresh but humid. Below there seemed to be nothing but the never-ending canopy of mighty trees.

“Welcome to Arborum. Now before we leave let me instruct you a little as to why I chose to intervene and change your avatar rather than allowing you to systematically do it from what you saw.”

She smiled at me and I could feel a true gentleness in her heart. She spread her fingers to show me what she meant. Amazingly, and I had not noticed, the elongated, almost

pianist fingers were webbed. A thin but obviously strong membrane between each finger rather like the hand of a toad, or foot of a waterfowl, yet something was different. She flexed the long fingers and from nowhere the top part of each finger appeared to be made of tiny hooked bristles. Within a circular sucker.

“Oh. Is that for holding on?”

I felt a little stupid, but I was getting a flashing picture of blue beings jumping between the trees in the canopy and the hands gripping into the fibers of the bark, similar to a gecko. Able to literally stay in place even upside down. I shook myself back into the now. Artour was looking at me.

“You are very receptive, and yes, we live much of time in the canopy, the trees are our friends, our home and in many ways provide all our needs as well as our protectors. The goddess has been very generous to us and we are thankful for this. In our history, occasionally there have been times when we have had outsiders venture in via portals, occasionally the veils thinned and then we had to be ready to protect ourselves.”

She looked away, unable to hold eye contact. I felt something was wrong, but she was not ready to tell me. Was this why I was here?

“You will be called Nee-shar-tar while you are with us, you are an honored guest sent by the goddess and that is how I will introduce you, for many are nervous of strangers. I hope you can accept this small deviation from the full truth, yet, there is truth within it, not deception.”

Now I felt her sadness and placed my strange hands on her arm and said I understood. When I touched her skin I felt clammy and cool to the touch, I smiled at her and she nodded slowly. Then took a deep breath and looked out over the crazy drop down to the canopy and let forth a sound like I have never heard before. A mix of the vowels a-o-u, but running together, in an elongated sound that emanated down

deep within her. Her head and neck stretching outwards as the sound flowed from her.

“You can fly?”

“Yes, I can fly. I can fly as a dragon rider, I can fly with or without my own wings, I can, if it is easier translocate as long as I know where to and know the area is clear.”

I watched her mouth open as if she was truly surprised. Then a sudden panic crossed her face.

“Please, you must not talk of these things here, do not even think openly of them. No I meant; I was asking if you would be able to fly alone on the back of one of our flying lizards or squirrels, no more than that.”

She looked away and called the same call again out into the vast expanse in front of us. Far in the distance two specs came into view. They seemed to rise using thermals, from the land of trees below. Now, Artour pointed to them.

“They come. When they come along side simply jump onto the back and your hands will automatically grip and create not only a physical connection but also a telepathic connection to the lizard. This is our way; we live in harmony with our world.”

I nodded and waited, watching as two dragon sized flying lizards came in alongside, one behind the other. She jumped and landed squarely on the first and as it moved off in a steep curved dive towards the trees below my mount came in and letting caution to the wind I too jumped and allowed myself to become one with my ride.

Unlike dragons these creatures connect to the mind, not the heart-mind. I felt the almost bullish attempt to meld without asking in a language with which I was not familiar with. For a second I did not allow it and then I felt a confusion which was almost simultaneously connected to the flight pattern of my ride as it seemed to falter instead of following its mate. So I opened part of my mind, allowed it to absorb