

# Different Destinies

a novel

By Elegwen ó Maoileóin

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[back cover]

It's hard to live your life when demons keep infesting every being in sight. Enlightenment might save you, but to find Enlightenment isn't that easy. With a galaxy filled with political manoeuvrings, assassinations, treaties, backstabbing, plots and seductions, how's a being to find any *truth*?

*Different Destinies* traces the steps of many beings looking for the truth:

A newly assigned Pleasuredom mistress is unexplainably recruited to aid one the galaxy's greatest religious and political figures. Called to overthrow the plans of other Parties, she becomes a pawn in a battle of cosmic forces.

Left behind in the carnage of a slaughtered village, a child begins a path of revenge on the being that destroyed her tribe.

Two lovers share their souls together every night, yet they hide the very secrets which have set them on a course to collide and lose the thing they each love most.

A retired General has become one of the most powerful Senators of the galaxy. Life would be perfect, except that there's an assassin hired to kill him, his bribes go awry, and his Prime Aide gets kidnapped by one of the hidden masterminds of the Galaxy.

Follow these beings as their daily lives weave and twine with each other! Watch as each venture to discover their destinies on paths of darkness and light!

*The first in The Enlightenment Saga, Different Destinies introduces the new worlds and races of Galactic Destiny – a universe of light and dark, good and evil, Enlightened Masters and Infesting Demons.*

## Prologue

The General for the Galactic Republic's elite branch of the army waited to meet a Master. He had met Humans before, of course, even some important ones. But he had never met an immortal. At least, the General assumed the Master would be one of the immortals. Isn't that what it meant to be a Master? All Masters were mystics, and though they still used technology, they knew secrets - the secrets to powers and energies some of which technology was still uncovering. Even machines weren't immortal.

The robed Qera servant had led the steel winged General in through a back entrance. A General of the Republic was not meant to be involved in shady dealings, and most dealings with Humans were shady. Or, at least, a being never really knew the nature of such dealings: good, bad, legal, illegal. Humans followed their own codes, being the oldest race in the galaxy, the only race to have *lived* with the Ancients and to have been taught by them. The crystal bodied servant was a mystic too. The Ajira could tell. The Qera reeked of that inner knowing all mystics prided themselves on. Inner arrogance more like it! Aalam respected what mystics could do, but that didn't mean he had to like their characters. The fact that a Republic General was here, about to meet a Master, was indicator enough that something was sketchy.

The Qera stepped from an opaque crystalline door that melted away into the walls as he approached.

"Master Idyrius will see you now, General Aalam."

The General stood, the same height as the Qera; of greater worth, however, being from an older and more important race. Aalam knew this; not that it mattered. While race was always relevant, beliefs were the measure of a being. Everyone knew that once Enlightened, race became

pointless. Something about all beings coming from the same essence - or some such story. All the Ancient races had agreed on it. So all that mattered was how close or how far one was from Enlightenment. Since the Ancients had taught that beliefs were important, politics had become the defining feature of the galaxy. A being was what a being believed. And Aalam believed in the Republic, and in, well...he was still figuring some stuff out. Ideology couldn't be decided over night. At thirty years of age, Aalam still had time to decide. Though, he thought, he did like his drugs.

"Yes you do, indeed," the Human said as Aalam approached.

"Excuse me?" Aalam said.

"I was just commenting on what you said," Master Idyrius said.

"I said nothing." His voice was hardened and far louder than the average soft spoken Ajira. His voice was the voice of one used to issuing commands and orders.

"Well, you thought it. So close enough I say!" The Human said, and smiled.

"Have a seat, good Senator." Idyrius indicated a hovering crystal stool. There was no back on it, nothing to impede the Ajira's folded wings.

Aalam began to move, "but I am not a Senator, Master. You know that." Only respect kept Aalam cool. Arrogance seemed to exude a lot of heat; it also left a nasty taste in his mouth; and this Master simply overflowed with arrogance.

The Master smiled again, kindly, "I know many things, Aalam, and they're not all as restricted to petty rules like time and speech as you would imagine them to be."

"Fine with me," Aalam spoke slowly.

"Good, now sit down."

Aalam did so.

The robed Human returned to sit behind his desk. "Aalam, I have a favour to ask of you."

Aalam sighed. "I am a General in the army of the Galactic Republic, my duty -"

"Yes, yes," the Human interrupted, "I know about such things. Now, do me a favour Aalam." The Human met the Ajira's eyes - one natural, one augmented by an implant. "All those thoughts rushing through your head, rattling around in your SateX drugged brain: put them aside. Assume I know them. Can you do that for me, Aalam?"

Aalam just stared at the Human, murderously.

"Yes, even those thoughts." He smiled. "And, they are all welcome."

"Fine." The General relented, not glad to be cowed. He cast his eyes to the floor.

"I have a new drug." Idyrius spread his hands and paused. He watched Aalam with quite a bit of joy as the Ajira looked up at him, a single obvious thought crowding out all others in his mind. Idyrius smiled and answered the thought. "Of course you can try it."

The luminescence that entered Aalam's natural eye could only be described by one word: glee. His mechanical eye was wide, registering the various heats in the Human's body, as well as numerous other energy waves in the room. There were no outgoing signals; nothing from inside the room was being relayed elsewhere.

The Human Master pulled a pill case from his robe and stepped toward Aalam. Idyrius lifted the metal lid and showed Aalam the five black pills inside. "It's called SatietyEX, and believe me when I say it will bring the galaxy to a new level of fulfillment."

The Ajira began to reach for one then stopped his fingers. "What do you want from me?"

"Why, assistance in legalization, of course. This ought to be the new SateX; it's the pill of the future."

"But why do you think I will be of good assistance in this? I am not in politics, I am a General." But then Aalam realized.

Idyrius just smiled.

"You want me to become a Senator, you said."

"You will become a Senator, Aalam. That is what I said. I do not make the future, just see it." He smiled, "well, most of the time."

"In the Party of the People."

"Indeed."

"And you think this will work?"

"It may." Idyrius sighed, "and it may not. But I must try."

"Can I know why it matters?" Aalam got his militant tone back. "Can you tell me what this is really about?" Though just a military being, Aalam knew there were always more to things, to absolutely every single thing. His augmented eye squinted.

The Human laughed. The laughter of a Human can be the most mocking sound in the galaxy, masters of emotions as they are, wellsprings of depths and variety of feelings that no other race possessed. Some thought them unbalanced, often crazy, and even psychotic. But no one doubted their power.

"My aerial friend, the pieces are in play. They are spread before you, like so many zeros and ones. Learn to read the signs, the markings that are traced by the galactic spirit upon every microcosmic form; if you can read the one being, you can see the display of all." Idyrius smiled again, reading Aalam's mind. "Yes, it is mystical gibberish, I know. But if it makes sense and helps you along, so be it." The

textured Human fingers reached into the container and picked up a black SatiEX pill. He held it out to Aalam. "We must be pragmatists, good Senator. We must do what works!" His eyes gleamed as Aalam dropped the pill into his mouth, paused a moment, and swallowed it.

"How does this work? Should I lie down?"

"No," he shook his head. "Follow me."

Idyrius led the Ajira through the door. Down a hallway and eventually turning left, Aalam followed the Human through another door that melted into the wall.

The General stood in a room, similar to the Private Rooms of the Pleasuredoms. Only this room was even more lavishly furnished. Pillows and divans were everywhere. Curtains of a lush fabric spread to reveal several being sized windows that showed the planet's landscape. Three bars strategically positioned throughout the room supported numerous decanters of all the beverages a being could want. And a brazier stood in the very centre of the room, thick smoke wafting from its shining metal. The scents filled Aalam with desires. The embers of his desires were ignited more by the sight he saw in the room's most decorated niche. Two oiled and skin tinted female Ajira lay stretched on divans. Their gossamer clothing was draped in designedly revealing styles.

"Enjoy yourself, dear Senator," Idyrius handed Aalam the pill case. "Do give one to each of your playmates. I want you to see the kind of experiences that await the galaxy once SatiEX is on the market."

Aalam and the Human looked at each other. Then the Ajira stepped into the room and walked toward the waiting females.

"You two beauties want to see what I have brought for you both?"

They slid from the fabrics covering their soft seats and glided on tiptoes to the General.

"My servant will assist you later, Aalam. And we shall be in touch. And Aalam, something to consider in the aftermath of the fun you are about to have: that gibberish you mentioned earlier, it is the codex to immortality, you know. Perhaps, one day, when you are not quite so young, such things will matter more to you." Idyrius smiled and exited.

Aalam heard the door cover over again. He sighed, and might have regretted his general situation if his immediate circumstance were not so appealing.

"Who wants to go first?" He asked his pretty new friends.

## Part One

### **The New Chain**

**PLEASUREDOM L7-29**  
**Outer Core, Sector 23**  
**Planet Nefal VII**

Lasca stared above her through the glass semi-sphere dome. The clouds were visible. Beyond them, the stars and planets shone in her imagination. Somewhere in the distance was Nefal - her race's planet of origin - the most leisurely cement covered planet in the galaxy, where the economy was good, the people pleased and the AI System was in charge.

Here, on Nefal VII things were different. Soon they would be very different. But through the pollution haze of the atmosphere no stars could be seen.

Lasca spread her feathery wings and stretched her naked legs on the divan. The thin robe of a Pleasuredom mistress draped to the top of her thighs. The gossamer fabric was a translucent pinkish hue to match

the pink tint placed on her wings by Caliana, the Moderator of L7-29. That had been during her first week here, a part her installation into Pleasuredom L7-29 meant beautification of whatever kind the Moderator thought appropriate; as well as any training. Of course, the System would not have assigned her here were she not naturally inclined to this kind of work. She was given Assignment by the System a month ago. Lasca was just now settling in.

Life was hard for an orphan. Even harder when you looked like Lasca did. Not to mention her un-augmented wings. That whole, "naturally feathered" look was *in* these days; especially with your tech-kings and cyber-bunnies. Of course, most Ajira could not actually afford to be 'natural' if they wanted to fly. The laziness of the Ajira race over generations had led to muscle loss. Only rare anomalies could fly now without augmentation. So the trick was in the subtlety: to augment without any technological similitude.

Lasca sighed and sipped her red juice. She smirked. It was probably like deflowering a tasty innocent, for a being to be serviced by a 'natural' like her. But in that case, as she gazed to her outstretched wings, why the hell did they tint them *pink*? It was absurd. And, they didn't fly. She was truly 'natural', no augmentation. Maybe she could afford the tech, one day.

*Leisure for pleasure*: the System knows best. So here she had been assigned. To rub the backs of battle-weary Jur, who rattled off questionable tales of honour and bravery; to listen to the melancholy of planet-faring Shorem who, despite their relenting to implants and technology, whined to the stars about the forests and drum circles back home on Ashari; to give obeisance and a leering respect to the utterly noble, high and mighty Tumba royalty, who swaggered in their broods, a Tasathi priest at their side; sometimes even the odd human, with tales

far-fetched and filled with pithy wisdoms sprinkled like pepper on your wings, corset and face - and you'd try not to laugh or sneeze at the pride of them: this was her existence, from now till forever. Or, until the System said otherwise!

Childhood was over, work was her life now. Even if work was just *leisure for pleasure*. You tried to listen to a prattling Jur or console a lamenting Shorem for a four hour session, midwife to their desires. *Pleasure, indeed!* Still, the leather and satin divan felt good against her skin, barely covered. And the scented air cooled her skin as the red juice kicked in, filling her body with a fiery sensitivity. The berry juice would make a person sweat if the air control didn't compensate with a cool breeze. Such things were all very well planned in every Pleasuredom.

Lasca licked her lips: the red juice was sweet and spicy. She drank some more and stared up at the clouds. The drink finally went to her head, and her vision blurred to a softer haze. The clouds lost their shape and she arched her back as she felt a nice sort of tingling, like a serpent coiling at the base of her spine. She sighed into a moan. *Maybe...maybe...*

*Maybe, pleasure is not so bad.*

The door opened. Lasca turned her head around to see Caliana. The Pleasuredom Moderator and executive supervisor for the Private Rooms stood there. She personally oversaw all the mistresses of this, the most expensive part of a Pleasuredom.

"Lasca, your next appointment is here."

*Ancient of Days! Let it be a Qera. They just sit there and ask questions and philosophise. They only come when it's a Herald*

*accompanying a diplomatic party and they get dragged along for some leisure time.*

A large figure stepped inside.

"This is Thao, of Temple J'ros -"

"- Prime Aide of Senator Azo."

Lasca gulped through her muddy vision as the looming, cloaked Jur stepped into the room.

"He has paid for a full session, and optioned your day, Lasca," Caliana smiled. Her one natural eye glistened. The chromed one stared blankly. "Take care of him. He has travelled from the outer sectors. And I suspect he could use some leisure," Caliana looked to the Jur, "and pleasure."

Caliana smiled at Thao. "Does all appear in order?"

The Jur placed his ceremonial black iron staff against the wall. His draconic hand fell to his side. "All is well." He gave what could only be a Jur's smile to Caliana.

"I will leave you to your mistress then. Lasca, perhaps some red juice would be appreciated and I am sure you could help Thao with his heavy cloak. He must be sweltering beneath it." She dipped her head and turned. Caliana's wings, lined with a graceful metallic façade and ribboned with support augmentations, folded back as she exited into the hallway.

Lasca rose and approached the ten foot tall draconic Jur.

"May I take your-"

"No!" He growled and Lasca froze. She sensed the fierceness in him. Beneath his cloak she could see all his muscles tense and flex. The Jur were easily angered...too easily angered.

She didn't move. He paused. Then Thao turned and swept the cloak from his body and tossed it over one of the several cozy chairs in the

Private Room. The Jur liked to make scenes, to cause skirmishes, to evoke emotions. They also liked to kill. So Lasca didn't move.

Thao looked at her and the room, fierceness in his eyes. His left arm still hurt from where the curved blade had torn into it. The bandage was soaked through. Lasca saw this and tried to look away respectfully, but his gaze caught hers.

He stared at her. She looked at the ground. This was her training; but more than that. She stood in a gossamer shift, and this Jur was like the picture from a War mag: massive, powerful, brave and far-travelled. He was certainly more impressive than the couple of young braggadocio bucks she had serviced, sent to the Pleasuredom by their new Imperators to get a taste of the potential rewards the Emperor might bestow on faithful servants.

Thao stepped forward and Lasca shivered. Her black hair caught a generated breeze - generated to set certain moods - and wafted in front of her face. She shivered again and his deep voice spoke.

"I am sorry, mistress. I am here from a long travel, a wandering of sorts; I need rest. Could you...?" He stepped forward again. He was now two feet from her, and his hand raised gently to brush the hair from her face. Talons lifted the flesh of her chin to make her gaze meet his again. "Could you indulge me," he rumbled. "I need it, need it greatly."

She saw the slit-like lizard eyes pierce hers. Maybe it was the red juice, or maybe the air conditioning wasn't high enough, but she felt the sheen of sweat break out across her skin. Her throat dried and she could only whisper: "yes."

"Grand," Thao rumbled and abruptly dropped her chin. She nearly hit the ground as though the Jur had been holding her body up. He flung

his travelling bag onto the ground and sat upon her leather-satin divan. His own wings stretched out, muscles rippling through them.

Lasca only paused a second. She moved to a cabinet where the supplies were kept. There were many bottles of CALM, the serum or drug taken by nearly every Jur that traveled. On their home planets, it was less needed. Duelling and blood slayings were a part of life. But in the cosmopolitan cosmos, the Jur needed to be a little bit more controlled.

Sitting beside the divan on a stool, she placed Thao's arm in her lap and tightened a rubber cord around his bicep. In seconds the syringe had pushed the drug into Thao's veins and the serum travelled quickly through his large body. His eyes caught hers and squinted.

"Oh, you are sweet, my dear." That infamous smile showed his frightening teeth. "Mistress, you are sweet and...pink!" Thao drifted into the CALM.

Lasca gently lifted the Jur's arm and placed it on her stool. She had a couple hours now. And then, like most Jur, he might want some petty veneration, or to have her listen to his vainglorious tales, or be pleased. Then again, and she looked at his left arm. Perhaps Thao was different. He also had optioned her day. If he wanted, if he could afford it, she might be with him for a while, all night long.

At least all this would change soon. The chain was opening. The intragalactic pharmaceutical corporation LFP-Technologies had invented the *latest thing*: a new drug. And instead of marketing it to all the System run Pleasuredoms, such as this one, they were opening their own chain, with exclusive provision for the drug on their premises. The Board of Health had cleared all this. In a month, every Ajiran planet and several in Sector 1 would have LFP Pleasuredoms on them. LFP-Tech was taking over. She went to her juice table. Into her cup she decanted

more red juice and picked up the new copy of PoP Weekly. The *Party of the People* was promoting the Pleasuredom chain; naturally, as most shareholders in LFP-Tech were card carrying PoPers (as many beings called them). And while the shareholders numbered among all the races, the board of LFP-Tech was strictly Ajira, and a Tumba: Senator Doruda. But he was more of a priest than a politician. Every week some sermon could be heard on the intragalactic waves. He was the one who actually first said *yes* to the accusation that "Dope the People" was an agenda of the PoP. In fact, he turned around the criticism against the PoP and made it a vote winning slogan. *"Why be drug free and sad, when you can take a little pill and be happy? Do we outlaw red juice, or eye implants in the blind? Why neglect a solution to complex life problems? Statistics show that it is the depressed who are first corrupted by Shadow! Leisure for pleasure - it's not about laziness, it's about living!"* It was something about his voice, sultry and strong.

Lasca was a-political, but she was one of many females whose unspoken fantasy would be to have read bedtime stories by the dreamy Doruda. Of course, his religious beliefs were absurd. What fool would ever choose to die for someone else to live?

Lasca looked at the drugged Jur. She smiled. He seemed so harmless there, knocked out: CALMed.

Whatever he wanted, she was sure it would be nothing new. Though only a month at this instalment, with three to five appointments a day she had seen and done most things that might occur in a Pleasuredom. Well, a System monitored Pleasuredom, at least. There were always the private ones. Very expensive, uncontrolled by the primary System. That meant the policing programs were not allowed access, though all the social and bureaucratic systems still were let in: assignment management, taxation, drug control, safety and security, corruption

marking. No Ajira owned anything that was outside the System. *The System is satiety.* Again, she recalled, that was about to change.

She smiled, and poured more red juice. Healthy, vitamizing, good for the skin: the most common of Ajiran opiates ran sweet and spicy over Lasca's tongue. She curled up on a love seat and opened a fashion magazine. Her eyes gazed, marvelling over the latest in wing augmentation technologies.

*"Now smoother, sleeker, stronger. The combat ready AV-21: whether you want to go gliding over scenic Valleys of the Galaxy tour, fly off to the Nefali islands or engage a Jur in the sparring arenas. The AV-21 is here, for all your aerial needs. Impress your friends, and shine in the sky. So graceful - they're almost natural. The AV-21. Now only 104,998. Make an appointment, upgrade with WAT, today!"*

More juice went down her throat. Her buzz returned. The Jur had a way of frightening the buzz away. Now the clouds were smudgy again.

### **The System is Satiety**

A roar shocked Lasca from her opiate daydream.

*"Wha-I'll-kill-them-you-finished-hordes-now!"*

She gasped as the decibel sent a chill across her skin and shook the glass from her already slack hand.

A smash - as the crystal hit marble.

"What! Where? -"

Her eyes stared wide at Thao as he looked around. His body responding less violently than his vocal chords; the CALM had some effect at least. (A stronger form was in production.)

The Jur narrowed his eyes as he saw her.

"Oh...yes. You." He grumbled.

She slowly rose, her wings shook once as if to throw back her fright.

"You are in Pleasur -"

"-I know where I am...mistress. I came here, remember? I may be old but I'm not ancient. Hmm. Not yet, anyway." He sat up slightly.

"Can I get you anything, sir?"

"Hmm, what was that you just wasted?"

"Uhm, red juice. There's more."

"Good, bring me some of that. I've been drinking grains for too long. Some berries ought to be a blessing of a change."

Lasca went to the shelves and took a larger glass, one designed for a Jur's draconic hand by the Qera crystal smiths.

She handed Thao the red juice. He quaffed it and smiled. His hand put the glass on the side table where his arm had rested in its tourniquet. The needle and vial were now disposed. The room was orderly except for the shattered red juice glass that Lasca had just dropped.

"And what would you like now, sir?"

The Jur looked at the floor: gazing off. She heard his heavy, CALMed breathing.

Lasca stepped forward. Her movements fluid, relaxed. A Jur was safe when CALM; not to mention the additional serenity that came from red juice opiate.

"Hmm?"

"I...I would like something, yes." His eyes rose from the floor to follow the trail of her legs, up her body to meet her eyes.

She stepped very close to him. He drank the rest of the red juice. The base of the glass grazing her gossamer shift as he brought the rim to his maw and poured in the bright red juice.

"Yes...?" She smiled a smile that offered any pleasure that he in his leisure might desire.

"I need you." Thao said, with desire but also a sigh.

"Do you now?" Lasca raised a playful eyebrow. She let her hand fall to the side of his scaled head and caress down his neck to the bulk of his large shoulder. Her hand was fine and delicate upon him; the natural, un-augmented Ajira seemed fragile before the beast.

"How do you need me then?"

He was not like the young Jur she had serviced. If any race was to be dangerous to the mistresses it would be a Jur, angered by some insult only sensible to their culture. But, once they desired something they felt safer. And Lasca felt desired now; plus, Thao was older, drugged on CALM and high on red juice.

"What do you want of me...?" She purred as her hand caressed bravely along his maw.

"—To join me. Now."

Her eye lids flickered open.

"I have a job for you Lasca. I have a mission." He arose. "I have seen *it*, heard *it* calling." He towered over her. Though sedated, a passion — perhaps fanned by the red juice's liquor — spread through him like a flame; she could feel it on her hand. The intensity in him seemed to spread down her arm and across her skin.

Her eyes widened more and she withdrew her hand. He caught her arm.

"What is this—what is this about—what do you want?"

She pulled; but the Jur's hand tightened around her soft arm.

He yelled: "I am your friend! I am your ally! Do *not* pull away from me!" Lasca felt a force in his voice that emitted more authority

than she had ever known. But who was he? What right did some customer have to subject her in this way?

"Why?"

"Because I saw you...," he growled, "in a dream."

His maw was so close to her face, if he had been any other race she might have thought he were about to kiss her. But in his case, more likely he would bite off her head. Except...he was her *friend*? That's what he said: *friend*. How was *that* supposed to work?

She weakened in his grip, her strength drained by the tightness of his hand around her. "I don't have any friends," she whimpered.

The Jur's other hand embraced her to him. "Yes you do, Lasca."

"Who, who are my friends?" Her eyes were intense, angry.

"We are. You have us now. You are one of us." Thao looked into them, clear, natural, un-augmented.

"One of whom? I have no family."

"The Enlightened are your family, the Old Ones - they are with us all, Lasca."

Her mind whirled. "The Ancients! They left - abandoned us, to the Ke'Ras, to demons!"

"No, Lasca," Thao pulled her to him.

She felt his presence around her. She heard his words. He spoke well, and with love.

"The Ancients are with us - the Party - it will never abandon you!" His voice dropped to as much a whisper as a Jur could manage. "Only together can we survive. In the end...it is us or them."

Thao's words filled a void in her that she had not known was there.

Against Thao's chest Lasca felt her body become limp and weak, but sheltered and safe. It was a feeling no drug had ever given her, a feeling no drug could ever replace. She felt her eyes moisten.

An hour had gone by. Thao's time had come up and so he'd optioned her "day." They were together in the Private Room of Pleasuredom L7-29 until morning. That time would be needed, Thao had said. She needed to hear him, and then she needed to follow him. She must escape.

She sat across from him. Her translucent gossamer shift was now covered by a warmer dressing robe usually worn after activities slightly more exciting than crying into the chest of a Jur.

Sometimes things don't go as planned.

"But what about the System?" She asked, drinking some more of the red juice.

"Ah," the Jur smiled. Lasca now accepted that this was a smile. "*The System is Satiety*. No?" He laughed, and a Jur could never laugh quietly. He had bought and paid dearly for the confidence and soundproofing that a Private Room afforded its customers. "Lasca, I do not disagree that *the system is satiety*. Everyone needs order. Your race needed a System to survive and to rebuild after the decimation the Ke'Ras brought to Nefal. But this is politics, and does not concern races. The Ancients have always taught we are all one in spirit. Enlightenment is the same for a Jur as for an Ajira, for a Qera as for a Human. Strange, I know, but true - that is to say: *we must believe the Ancients.*"

Thao spoke well. The CALM was thoroughly in his system now, and would maintain an equilibrium in his body that made him more amenable to other races. She remembered the well known racist joke, not extinct in Ajiran society: a Jur without its CALM was like a dog without a

leash. After all, it was Ajira who had invented the drug; though the entire Republic had helped the Jur to see CALM's value, when it came to being relaxed and sociable around other races of the galaxy. She kept these stray thoughts to herself, of course. Thao did speak well; and this made sense, now that she knew he was a pilgrim and a recruiter.

"So, the Black Iron Party, then?"

"Indeed. My Lord showed me their views when I was avowed to him over three decades ago. They make sense. *Togetherness, unity, strength*: all these things must hold true if we are to resist the corruption that the demonic Infestations spread continually, creeping as doom throughout the galaxy."

"But I am not political."

"Yes, you are."

Lasca looked defiant. She appreciated the right to her own views. The System says: *Be yourself: Express!* Despite having a bureaucratic and organizational governing System in-charge of their planets, the Ajira were all radically independent minded.

Thao, smiled again. "Politics are to us as evil to the Ke'Ras: necessary for existence."

Lasca shrugged. "So why me and what was this dream?"

Thao sat back again on the divan, his wings relaxing more behind him. He assumed the pose a grandfather might take. She felt the familiar jealousy of the Ajira: Thao's wings let him fly, hers were just pretty. "I travelled, Lasca, travelled far to the edge and to the home world of the Shorem. There, on Ashari, I met a prophet, a Mashem. You know of these?"

"Yes, I have read the *Ashari Triduum*. And in school we had to hear of the Mashem mystics that re-awakened the Ke'Ras and began the Second War."

"Of course, anyway...I went there. In a small jungle near one of the greatest bodies of water on the planet's face I met an ancient Mashem. There are few of these whom any know. Most have left us or were slain in the Second War. She did for me the Sheki Rite. As they say, 'in drum and smoke, in dance and song, I beheld the Vision and Dream.'"

Thao arose suddenly as though bitten by a spider.

"I had a Vision, a Dream - to be honest I don't get how the Shorem tell any difference. I think they're just words, you know?" Lasca smiled at him. "But for all the ceremony and brouhaha, I did see something true. Truly! I beheld something..." His reptile eyes flickered wide at her. "...I saw you." And if it were not for your System I doubt I would have ever found you -"

"- but those files are confidential!"

"Argahaha! Sure they are!" The Jur laughed again, loud, even for a Jur; fortunate that the walls were soundproof.

"Confidentiality, mistress Lasca, is a false comfort that is given to society. But this is not about society and the everyday being. This is about politics. " His eyes were alight.

"Okay." She smiled.

"Lasca, I know this is hard to accept. I know you want to stay in the System and in your leisure and comfort. But I am not asking you to abandon your System, nor your race. I am asking you to choose a side in the fight against darkness. You know what I mean? The Ke'Ras may be quelled, but they will return. They, in fact, already have."

"What! The Ke'Ras - they're back - when -"

"No, no, Lasca. The Ke'Ras don't come and go." His words came quickly for a Jur. "The Ke'Ras are inside us, as well as outside. They are a force that cannot be crushed with mere weaponry and armaments; we need to change our lives, to grow, we all - all the races - all beings

- we all must Enlighten ourselves. This is how we will crush the darkness...in our own hearts, in our spirits."

She breathed in.

"Do you know about SatiEX?"

Her head spun to face Thao, in surprise.

"What?"

"Yes, I know, it seems odd. Why should an old Jur care?"

"But, that's the new drug that LFP-Tech has invented and is using in its new Pleasuredom chain."

"It is."

"What does that have to do with the Ke'Ras? Why would another drug added to the millions we already have be important?"

"That is what I have to show you. It is also why I need you. Lasca, you are important, to me...and the Party."

Lasca blushed. Against her pink tinted wings and in contrast to her violet black hair she seemed more colourful and bright to the travel wearied Jur. Thao had not expected to enjoy his jaunt to a Pleasuredom. They were not his kind of thing. Wandering, war tactics, ceremonial duelling, even Party debates were more physically stimulating to him than the lusty pleasures of the Domes. However, as he looked at this young beauty, the barely eighteen year old Ajira, he felt feelings: fondness, perhaps.

Lasca was looking at the ground, her eyes lost, her mind in thought.

"So, how can I help, exactly?"

"I need you to get hired into the new Pleasuredom chain, acquire incriminating test results of the drug's trial period. Many will be leaving System run Domes to gain the benefits of working for the LFP

Tech chain. Getting hired will not be hard. Others will be working with you; but we need someone on the inside."

She looked quizzically at Thao. "Why me? Surely you could have found an Ajira with more experience, some kind of professional spy or something. I, I'm not even an experienced mistress."

Thao knew what she meant. It took years for a mistress to learn all the arts and skills of leisure and pleasure. There were degrees of pleasurable activity that could take years before the mistress engaged in; even then, it was always her choice how far she went with anything. At least, such were the traditional rules of the Domes, now well enforced by the System. The beautiful Ajira before him was still innocent of many things. Thao needed to explain, "Because I saw you in the Dream."

Lasca pursed her lips. "Oh."

"And SatiEX? Are you going to show me why this drug is so dangerous?"

"I will." He did not sound excited.

He reached into his bag and removed a package.

Her eyes widened. "You have it here? How'd you get that?" Her breath quickened in exhilaration. For all the ominous feelings Thao had affected concerning this drug and the corporate and political intrigue surrounding its invention and upcoming distribution, Lasca loved to try a new drug. Just like all Ajira.

The Jur smiled. "Again, mistress, things are kept from citizens that cannot be kept from the Party." Worlds of secrets swirled in his eyes. She could see there were many things to know in the galaxy; and for a moment Lasca had the shrinking sense of how small she was in the grand scheme.

"Huh." She exhaled deeply, and Lasca began to see, for the first time in her admittedly young life, the power that came with signing on to a Party, a belief, an ideology. She made a deduction: commitment equalled power and, hence, influence. Influence, this is what she lacked. She was a part of the system, and not just the Ajiran bureaucratic System - the AIs that monitored and ordered their societies - she was a part of the galactic system, the political system. For an eighteen year old Ajira Pleasuredom mistress this was all quite a big realization. And she really wanted to try this drug.

The Jur had removed from the leather package a small plastic casing. He opened it and pulled out a small black pill.

Her eyes showed her longing. The Jur seemed oblivious to how deeply ingrained the Ajiran desire for drugs was. He looked up at her, his eyes saddened.

"SatiEX," he said.

She withheld a smile. "And you want me to try it?"

He looked grimly. "No."

"But -" she began almost in panic.

"but you must. We all must. All of us who are engaged closely on this mission; there is no way to understand the depth, the danger this drug will bring if we do not each experience its...," he wanted to say *evil*, but Thao knew rhetoric, knew how influencing a being's ideology worked. You must draw the outlines, but always let your mark put a name to the shape. "...effects."

Lasca stood up. "Now?"

Thao considered. "I would prefer, and this is a personal preference, to wait for another environment. I think it would be better for you, and...for me."

"Why?" She acted now like an eager child wanting its sugar stick.

"Hmm. Lasca," the old Jur said, "if you are willing to leave the Dome with me now, you'll be free to try it when you want. Even as much as you want! If you trust my heart, I know you will see the truth behind our cause. Will you come?"

Lasca shifted her posture. She really wanted to take the drug. They had till morning - it must be enough time to recover. *But what if it wasn't?* Thao probably had a ship waiting, and... "Let's go."

"Do you have your things?"

"No, they are in my suite. Shall I get them?"

"Too risky. We must walk straight out of here, and once you are in the new chain they will use their influence to re-acquire your possessions from the Pleasuredom."

"Really?"

"Yes. LFP-Tech and its partners, in business and politics -"

"- the PoP?"

"Right. They will have more influence than you care to imagine, once the chain opens in a month. And I must have you prepared to begin your mission there. I must train you. You must learn our beliefs, and the vision of the Black Iron Party.

"Let's go then. But can we really just leave?"

"You are with the Prime Aide of a renowned Senator. We are within my lease on your time. Truly, they will be angry when you do not return, but, 'til morning you are mine. And especially with this new chain opening, they cannot risk losing clients - especially senatorial delegates." Thao looked to the mistress, the wide, toothy smile shone again: "Power and authority, Lasca. That's what this game's about."

The Jur rose. His wings shot out rapidly and then pulled in behind him. He extended his hand and she took it to follow him. By the door he grabbed his staff and they walked out into the corridor.

