



Prologue

Deep within our Galaxy there lies a small and remote planet unlike any other.

Seen from the surface of its small moon, Lexia appears dominated by one large landmass with two smaller neighbours out of sight and out of reach across its deep blue oceans. This landmass is known as Alemar; its inhabitants are spread widely across a lush and varied landscape.

Alemar is blessed with idyllic conditions. Dozens of fresh-water lakes that are fed by large mountain ranges are scattered throughout the vast grass plains, providing the small communities with fish and water in abundance. A large variety of game from the plains supplements their healthy and varied diets, and the land itself is ideal for farming. The land also provides ample raw materials for their crude forges, while the rock from small open quarries keeps the stonemasons busy carving figurines for rituals and ceremonies. The many forested areas supply the wood needed to build houses and compounds, as well as being home to the medicinal plants required for healing.

It is therefore a mystery as to why there are so few inhabitants in a place that can only be compared to paradise. The answer becomes evident when visits to a

tribal forge, always within a sturdy compound, reveal a variety of deadly weapons emerging with an angry hiss from the forge's water trough.

Swords of all sizes, suitable for adults and children as well as male and female, are produced in quantity to replace those damaged by the frequent practice. Spears both short and long, for throwing as well as stabbing, are lovingly repaired to maximise their effectiveness.

Every tribe is in constant readiness for the tribal wars that occur only too frequently and always result in devastation for all concerned. Communities are often decimated and are either completely erased from the face of the planet or merge with others similarly afflicted to form new smaller tribes from which to make a fresh start.

Even the strongest tribes occasionally suffer reversals by seemingly weaker opponents; Alemar's past is littered with such battles and lost tribes. Many tribal Chieftains are fully aware that complacency is as deadly as any opponent, which explains the constant practice in the art of battle.

Children are taught from an early age how to handle a variety of weapons. By the time they reach puberty they are expected to be familiar with them all and have a preferred weapon of use in battle. They are also taught the history of their tribe, however long or short that record is, as well as how to carve and draw symbols used to record victories in their temples and homes.

One such compound sits between a large lake and close to the foot of a mountain range. Rell is the home of the Phoenix, one of the fortunate tribes that have a history measured in generations rather than months or

years. It is a proud community with a rich past primarily based on achievement rather than destruction. For many generations it has played a key role in keeping the peace between people at war, during lulls between the savage battles that have ravaged the area. Many alliances have formed as a result of the Phoenix tribe's interventions; although often short-lived, these attempts generally make time for the tribes concerned to take stock and regenerate before plunging into battle again.

As a result, the Phoenix is one of the largest and most prosperous communities, preferring peace and growth to war and thus rarely exposing its population to the death and destruction suffered by most of the others.

Although not involved in battle as often, the Phoenix tribe is still considered formidable in the art of war. Weapon practice still plays a major part in their day-to-day life; their larger than normal size helps deter most of the potential opponents. Because the men have a greater life expectancy, they have become more adept at trades such as carpentry, stone carving and working with metal. Their compound is high and sturdy, their temples are large and impressively decorated with carvings and their weapons are of good quality. They are able to farm larger areas of land; fresh fish in abundance is available on their doorstep. Everything they need is close at hand and well protected; they are a fortunate and growing community in a land full of strife.

The Phoenix was so named following past encounters where they were almost wiped out in battle and each time barely recovered from the ashes of destruction. It is said that on each such occasion a large red bird was seen rising from those ashes before flying high towards

the mountain peaks nearby and disappearing. It was as a result of these mythical sightings that the nearby mountains were declared as the Home of the Gods and they remain out of bounds. It is also why everyone in the Phoenix tribe wears a red feather in homage to their history.

Their Chieftain is well aware of past brushes with extinction, particularly that they always threatened at a time when the Phoenix were both numerous and prosperous, much as they are now. It is with these thoughts in mind that they maintain their guard. It keeps them vigilant and strong as they strive to prevent such disasters from happening again.

Even his daughter Reena is put through the tough daily routines. If anything she is made to work harder, to emphasise his determination that everyone needs to play an equal part in the community.

Even in such a prosperous community, life is tough. Destruction is always lurking in the background, waiting for a weakness that will grab hold and shake everything loose, until there is nothing left but ashes again.



One 'The Rescue'

At the age of twelve Reena was three inches taller than the tallest boy her age and a good six inches taller than any of the girls her age. She was as strong as any child two or three years older and had the intellect and wit of someone twice her age. Simply put, she was an exceptional child as well as being the daughter of the popular and much loved Chieftain, Koss. Her long hair, on top of her extra height, made her easy to spot and instantly recognisable. Although she was a tall girl Reena was lithe rather than muscular; her training regimes kept her fit and agile. No other young female in the tribe had the benefit of Reena's height, looks and intellect and so she was seen by many of the elders as a symbol of good luck.

Any other child in her position would have revelled in her talents and strengths, but not Reena. Resentment by the others kept them at bay; so she had few close friends with whom to grow up. While the other children played, Reena spent extra hours on chores within the compound, weapon practice, or her favoured pastime, drawing. She loved to draw animals and to make up stories using the symbols she had been taught, or make small carvings for her father.

The extra time spent on this and her amazing enthusiasm and dedication gave Reena an early understanding of Phoenix tribal history. She was intensely proud of both her Father and the tribe itself; the long history kept her immersed in her readings for many hours. She regularly visited the temples where she could look at the carvings depicting that history; at twelve years of age she had a remarkable understanding of the reasons why the Phoenix had prospered.

She spent many hours asking her Father questions about other tribes and their history.

‘Father, why did this happen?’ was a typical question. Another was ‘why didn’t they consider peace then?’ or ‘if they knew that people would die then why do it?’ Reena could never understand why battle could be considered the solution to so many tribes’ problems. Koss could hardly keep up with her incessant questions. He was one of only a handful of people who were not surprised at all by her intelligence and determination.

‘You are your Mother’s daughter,’ he would say often, whilst looking away into the distance so as not to show any emotion. He would always stroke the scar on his left cheek when there was any mention of Reena’s Mother, knowing that the permanent reminder of her death would never ease his pain.



Shortly after Reena was born, Koss had taken his wife and newborn baby to the shores of Lake Mara to look for a large swan-type bird that was local to that area.

The intention was to get Reena a large feather, which would then be dyed red and used in the ceremony to