

Special 10th Anniversary Release

Mentor's Lair

Book Two of the Zaddack Tales

Also by Karen Daniels

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Mentor's Lair

book two of the Zaddack Tales

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Mentor's Lair

a novel

Karen Daniels

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10th Anniversary Special Mentor's Lair Release

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*This 10th Anniversary Release of Mentor's Lair
is dedicated to my tribe*

Thank You
to everyone in my life, dead and alive, who truly counts

One

The fiery ball violated the interstellar darkness. The Bioguard turned toward the human female at his side. The comet was reflected as wedges of fractured brightness in his bulbous eyes.

“We are doomed.” The Bioguard’s manner remained calm.

“What is that thing?” Serall asked, twisting back to the port. She was transfixed by the glowing streaks, which nearly obscured the stretch of milky white stars that punctuated the dark. “I’ve never seen...”

“Hold.” Minack’s word bit into Serall’s words. “I must check my star maps to be sure.” The Bioguard marched over to the blinking control panel, scowled, and scratched his hairy neck. Then in one quick motion he pulled out several old paper charts. Flipping through the rolls he found the dog-eared one of choice. He unscrolled the complex drawing and compared the markings against the active star sensor.

“As I feared, this comet is uncharted.” His eyes flipped from one source to the other. Finally he straightened with a grunt and moved back over to the port. He spoke with certainty. “This is the beginning of the end.”

“What?” Serall glanced at the Bioguard who came to her shoulder height. “What’re you talking about?”

“Comets are a thing of space that travel in endless loops—unless they disintegrate. I had hoped this was one that had been seen before when the tail had a different configuration but there are none marked anywhere near here.” Something resembling a chuckle died in his throat. “As I breathe—no other sight could be worse than this.”

“Why? What does that thing have to do with us?” To Serall’s landborn eyes the comet was like a sun which had been pushed from its rightful path. Now the descending fist of fire carved a luminous course, seeming to reach even closer to their tiny space vessel. She stared at the apparition, sucking in her breath. In places she could see right through the yellowish tails to the stars beyond, as if everything on the other side was normal.

“See—behind?” He tapped a dark fingernail on the port covering. “The twin trails?”

“Of course. How could I miss them?” Frustration edged her voice. “I don’t need you to point out the obvious. I’m asking you what that has to do with us.” Serall couldn’t pull her eyes away from the sight that was so unlike anything she had ever seen in the skies of Riatha.

“If you will show some patience, human, that is what I am explaining. That is a comet. Normally I would be pleased since they contain much frozen water—a good source of liquid.”

“Normally?”

“Yes. But this has twin tails.”

“So you said in case my eyes missed. So what? Does that mean it doesn’t have any water?”

“These frozen balls can have any number of tails, in front or behind depending on whether they are nearing or passing a sun. You see it is a sun’s heat that causes...” he dismissed the rest of the sentence with a flick of his hand. “We Bioguards are a space faring race who have only one prophecy concerning comets. ‘When you see a tailed one, mine the water; no need to run.’” His extreme arm muscularity rippled as he gestured. “That applies to all comets except this particular tail configuration alone.” His lips moved little as he continued to speak. “‘But beware! If twin tails come to be, then no place is safe to flee. The darkness comes.’ So you see, we are doomed.” Minack repeated his previous condemnation.

“No, I don’t see. What darkness?”

“When the twin-tailed star is seen, life as we know it will soon come to an end—at least soon in the cosmic sense.”

“You mean we’re in danger of that crashing into our ship? Can’t we just stay away from it?”

“No. Our own deaths would be a small thing. I am talking about the ultimate blackness, a time when the light of life will no longer shine anywhere.” Minack’s deep eye ridges furrowed; then he reiterated. “All life shall perish.”

“And you believe this’ll come to pass because now we’ve seen this twin-tailed star?”

“Yes.” He left the port and busied himself rerolling the chart. “We even have evidence, you and I. This comet existed

before we saw it and bad things have already happened. My team was killed. Your home planet Riatha was blown up when the crysolium exploded. Now I would say those were just the beginning. These twin tails warn us of something already begun, something that can not be stopped.”

“How do I know you’re not making this up?” She turned to him. “You have reason enough to hate me—as you said, your team is now dead.”

“You killed them.”

“I had no choice. You know rather well that for me it was either kill or be killed. So now how do I know you’re not just saying all this to frighten me? Make me doubt myself?”

“Because Bioguards only say what is so.”

“Even to me? Your kind has been exterminating humans for generations. We are enemies.”

“I speak only truth.”

“And I know this because?”

“I say it is so.” His protruding lips tightened.

“I see. Even so, a prophecy is just words unless you allow your mind to interpret events so that they fit. I mean, what about the dark skies prophecy of Riatha? It’s true the events leading up to the destruction of Riatha supported that prophecy—but what about the rest of it? ‘...Once more a zaddack will be sent forth, One Who Knows, to lead the deserving children of Riatha to the land of the blue sky, so that the circle of balance can once again be restored, making right what was made wrong in the time of dark skies.’ We have the zaddack on board. If that prophecy is true then things should get better now. Which prophecy is true?”

“My people are born of logic.” He slid the well-used chart into its slot. “We are not given to fantasy.” The Bioguard went back to his calculations. “This is the only foretelling my people have. I believe it to be true.”

“Where did the prophecy come from?”

“The beginning of time.”

“That’s ridiculous.” A chill ran up Serall’s spine.

“I am just repeating what was told to me, what I would teach my little ones if I had any.” Minack’s black nailed fingers curled on the hard edge of the control panel. “Well, nothing can be done anyway. What we have seen we have seen. And even if

this twin-tailed star were in a different quadrant, away from our eyes, it would still be out there condemning us all.”

Serall stared at the myriad clusters of glittering stars, which now paled next to the shimmering blazes of the comet. When they had been forced to take to this ship a few weeks earlier she'd thought that their path to old Earth would be simple after the hardships she'd suffered. Now it appeared Allthatis was extending a flaming hand right toward their ship. Serall blinked against the encroaching luminescence. She wondered if, indeed, Ati's fist would strike.

Two

Terru trotted quickly down the corridor, eyes narrowed and nose held high as he inhaled the scents aboard the ship. Already he longed for the smell of the breeze blowing through the leaves of barkless Riathan trees. And he missed the volatile aromas that sprang from the ground outdoors, earthy smells which were fragrant to his sensitive nostrils. His feet itched to run, as they were born to do, across the unrestricted openness of land, with the sand crunching beneath his paws and sunlight warming his fur.

Terru descended further into the ship via the spiraling halls. Near the bottom he leaped down the four steps that led alongside the containment chamber, which held the lump of crysolium. The zaddack sat down on his haunches just outside the circular room, sensing the mindsparks that pulsed within the ore lying just behind the heavy entrance. The efflux of energy from the c-ore which moved out of the ship propelling it forward was loud to his sensitive hearing, like an over full river. His double lobed ears twitched and automatically lay back on his head to dampen the sound that no two-legged could hear.

Terru came here to ease the painful isolation which ruled his heart, for within the energy which rumbled and shifted inside the piece of crysolium, lay the mindsparks of more than just Minack's compatriots, the dead Bioguards. When Riatha had exploded an energy wave had swept over the tiny ship. Terru had felt life sparks move through the vessel; life force energy that had been released from the crysolium caches on the planet. Some of the mindsparks had been drawn to the piece of crysolium aboard ship and in moving too close they had been pulled into the crystalline matrix. Here they would remain trapped until being expelled as propellant into the vastness of space.

Terru sat outside the containment chamber. His bluish inner eye covering slid half way across his eyes as he listened intently with his mind, accessing that part of his brain from which he was able to Bond with another and hear their thoughts. He projected his essence outward, toward the sparks of energy in the

ore. Some days he could locate a certain color with a special quality that felt familiar...like the bold gray with luminescent streaks of Runak's mindspark... Terru couldn't exchange thoughts with the intangible essence of his dead friend, but the sensation of touching a part of the oreseeker, if only for a moment, made the zaddack feel whole again, temporarily easing his loneliness.

Today, as Terru's mindspark curled in and around the life force of those trapped within the crysolium, he bumped into unidentifiable patterns and personalities. He felt no fear, aware that as a zaddack he could cast his mind forth into c-ore and draw it safely out again. Terru's orange essence briefly touched a deep purple thought...a green string of pain...the puffy yellowness of someone's emotion...and the unmistakable dark blue-black of a Bioguard. He recast his energy quickly in search of Runak.

At last a spot of gray filled with streaks of white luminescence tumbled close to Terru's probing mindspark and he pressed his thoughts tightly against the familiarity of the oreseeker's essence. Warmth filled the zaddack's heart as he allowed himself to bask in Runak's energy and he remembered the dark tunnels and quiet caverns they had once shared.

Today the energy emitted something new. Terru's eyes closed as the contact eased the tension in his sinewy body. Unconsciously his ear shifted as if Runak were scratching just at the base where it always itched most.

Terru lay down, resting his head on his paws, enjoying the easing of his loneliness. His orange gold energy shimmered at the edge of Runak's gray. The zaddack shifted his mind subtly trying to find what was different this time and was struck with the full force of an alien energy. There was something, or someone, attached to Runak's mindspark. This strange energy whispered to Terru of a greatness beyond imagination. The alien spark was somehow familiar and at the same time beyond anything Terru knew. This thing, this being, was trying to contact him. It knew he was there. A message leaped into Terru's mind as if it had been lying in wait for him.

There were no words, no clear thoughts, only a sense of color and a barely controlled reservoir of strength. The message came; an intangible softening of cold blue, a spike of orange

tinged red brightness, then circles. It repeated, a softening, a spike, circles. Terru struggled to understand and absorb meaning from the movements of color. But his highly intelligent mind, which had evolved long before two-leggeds walked, could not grasp the exotic nature of the message.

His top lip twitched, retracting back to expose his sharp upper teeth. He breathed, the brindled markings on his sides moving in and out with slow precision. His head tilted.

Softening blue, spiking orange red. A sensation of circles.

Still, Terru couldn't translate the pure mindspark message into a form which held meaning. His paws twitched as if he were dreaming of running and a small whine rose from his throat.

Clarity did not come.

The grayness filled with bright swaths of glowing whiteness and the pattern shifted slowly, forming into myriad interlaced circles.

Terru's orange ball of energy expanded and he became less aware of his body. He jerked as if startled from sleep. Contact with Runak's mindspark and the attached alien energy broke; Terru lost the closeness. The departing energies were buried in a wave of others.

Terru's consciousness came back to his body. His eyes opened slowly, the nictitating membrane easing back from sight. He shook his head and his ears flopped but he couldn't shake the feeling he had missed something important.

He rose and stretched, arching his back and splaying his front paws. His sense of isolation had eased but now he carried a new feeling. He sat for some moments absorbing the experience, his mind straining for a frame of reference.

Somewhere in the Runak-alien energy message lay information Terru needed to understand. But his mind could not come full circle and bring the knowledge of before to his thoughts of now. Frustration cut in, an edge of darkness in his mind.

Terru yawned and rubbed against the door of the containment chamber, lingering a moment longer with what was left of his dead friend. Then he circled back and moved slowly up the stairs, his mind turning the strange encounter over and over, like a stone being worried in a stream.

His guts churned with urgency and he decided to seek out

the one person on board who had known Runak: Serall. Perhaps she, with her two-legged perception, could help him understand what message lay beneath the pattern.

Terru trotted quickly up through the ship's levels, trusting his keen sense of smell to lead him to the female human. All the two-leggeds exuded a similar musk but each lent a distinctive sensation to his nostrils and tongue.

Serall smelled warm, like the suns, and the air around her tasted like dirt after rain. The ship's air system confused trails at times but he licked the air and inhaled. She had recently passed this way so it was easy to follow her lingering scent trail toward the control room. Terru ignored the stronger less pleasant scent of long fallen fruit, the smell of the hairy Bioguard. No amount of recirculated air seemed to remove the odor, which hung heavy.

Even before the zaddack rounded the final corner he heard the interaction of two voices, human and Bioguard; tension apparent in their tones. She who smelled of suns was talking in a hard fast voice. The zaddack lingered at the entrance before entering.

"Double darkness!" Serall spun on her heel and confronted Minack with a glare. "I told you—we need to go to old Earth. Twin-tailed star or not!" She glanced at the comet which now appeared nearly twice as large as only two days before. "A couple of days ago you told me of some fatal foretelling and now you're telling me you don't know where we are?"

The squat Bioguard turned from her harsh words and said nothing. He paced to the control panel of the ship. The hunch between his shoulder blades made his feelings about her emotional outburst clear.

Serall's words rushed on. "And why did you say anything of your prophecy to the others onboard? The effect on everyone since you shared that little foretelling..."

"I tell you this. First, remember that is not a star. That..." Minack stopped talking when Terru walked into the room.

The zaddack noted that the female human clenched her fists and was leaning perceptibly forward. The Bioguard kept shifting his eyes from side to side in a manner that told Terru Minack held more discomfort than he was vocalizing. Both two-leggeds stared at the zaddack.

Terru moved smoothly over to Serall and nudged his nose into her leg. Once he had her undivided attention he took some of his mindspark and hurled it forth toward her mind, forming an image of Runak, the now dead oreseeker they had both loved. Terru had to push hard with the thought, past Serall's wall of pain that had formed upon the death of Kafa; the zaddack the human had once been Bonded to.

The two-legged female's eyes widened, then narrowed. She looked quickly over at Minack who was staring. Then the Bioguard turned away, back to the star map on the control panel. Serall squatted and placed her hand on Terru's back. Her eyes watered.

The zaddack's golden eyes looked into the human's green ones. He allowed himself to remember the context of the Runak-alien message; then he relayed the pattern to the human: softening blue, spiking orange red, a shift into interlaced circles.

She shook her head. He repeated the images over and over.

This female who smelled of suns and fresh wet dirt held many colors in her mind, though in her current state they were edged with the dark shadow of sorrow. The reds, blues, and greens were convoluted and stretched around each other, fluxing as she struggled to understand the message the zaddack sent into her mind.

Terru sensed her effort and questions. He reinforced the patterned message and added a mental image of the oreseeker; phosphorescent eyes, pale hairless skin, slender limbs, the ever present hooded cloak resting on his shoulders. The effect of the image on Serall was instantaneous. She gasped and her hand flew to the pendant at her neck. She clutched the medallion as the reds in her mind brightened and the zaddack knew she saw Runak's image as clearly as if the oreseeker had been standing there.

But still she did not understand the message of softening blue and spiking orange red any more than Terru. He knew this as he continued to search the colors of her mindspark for answers. Serall's mind was not going to reveal the meaning of the pattern; she did not have the information he desired. He broke their mind connection and left.

End sample

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Excerpt

Mindspark, Book Three of the Zaddack Tales

Prologue

Before the beginning of time as we know it, there was a cosmic seed of both Light and Dark. This helix heated slowly over time until the energy reached a critical level; there was a titanic explosion and Dark was hurled from Light.

Time passed and the hotness cooled. A star was born, then many, until the firmament contained countless points of brightness. Planets were forged from fiery births and as the cosmic clock ticked on, some worlds became temperate with livable climates. Life began.

But the Dark, alone and contracted into its own linked dimensions, hungered mindlessly, yearning to return to the point of origin, to rejoin Light.

Millennia of millennia passed and creation's Dark began to undulate. Finally it spilled forth, abandoning its void from beyond beyond. The Dark surged through space, in and out of dimensions, searching to reconnect with Light. Unstoppable, this ultimate Dark migrated, swallowing planets and stars, and all life that dared to stand in its path.

The chill in the early morning air was arctic. Terru snorted, sending up plumes of thick white vapor. Cold cut through his furry coat and wrapped around his bones with an ache that burned. The zaddack shivered. Not a skin shiver, but a deep

muscle spasm as his body struggled to warm itself.

Automatically he pulled his head closer until it appeared to emerge from between the humps of his shoulder blades. The membrane designed to keep sand grit out of his eyes closed against the torrid cold but still his eyes watered. His breathing was labored, a struggle to bring in such iciness and warm it for his body's use. His usually proud tail was limp and the scruff of his neck puffed against his chest.

The edge of Darkness was upon them.

A falling star dropped in arcing descent, splatting in the sand with sprays of fire. The sparks, forged from the dust of creation, stuck to the zaddack's fur and the energy filled him with foresight. Even as his body froze his feet burned, melting beneath him.

Death was stalking the universe and anything containing mindspark, the energy of life, was prey. As the sky fell around him Terru woke with a jerk.

Ryn, the female zaddack, growled, startled by Terru's movement. She butted her head against her mate, stretched, splaying her paws before settling in again against the warmth of his belly.

Terru's golden eyes glittered in the darkness of normal night. He remained awake as a false dawn tickled the horizon. He squinted and looked up to watch for falling stars.

Chapter One

Jaspen's hood fell low over his face, trapping the luminescence that shone from his eyes. He moved through the ship's corridors while the other two-leggeds slept, his soft-booted steps silent. When he neared the viewing port he paused and pushed the hood from his forehead. To his vulnerable eyes the distant stars shone with a painful radiance; yet, he was grateful, for it meant that the fatal Darkness was still far away. He averted his gaze from the endless pattern of space and an afterimage of searing spots danced across his vision.

The oreseeker pulled his hood forward and stood in silence. He closed his eyes and sent his senses outward,

spindles of his essence reaching from the core of his mindspark out into the universe. He touched deep emotional pain and a raw stab of anger but knew these to be clinging energy from his own self. He sucked in a deep breath and continued his search. The effort made his bones ache. He could sense the Dark thing out there; moving, growing, disappearing and reappearing, stretching ever nearer; still he could not touch it.

Jaspen opened his eyes and sighed, a release from deep within his belly. He turned from the viewing port and moved on. Though his body had aged little, he had walked past this port almost daily for the last fifty-four years. And for the last eleven his heart had been trapped, bound in a prison of pain. The glow from his eyes illuminated the ship's slick gray walls; a sheen as familiar and detestable to him as his loneliness.

He walked down the steps leading to the zaddacks' lair just outside the crysolium chamber. Jaspen's footsteps alerted the male zaddack, Terru, who raised his head and blinked sleep-filled golden eyes from where he lay snuggled against his mate. The two zaddacks were twined around each other and the comforting sound of the female's quiet snoring went on uninterrupted.

Jaspen traveled smoothly along the flooring, his hooded-cloak billowing at his heels. He kneeled and reached a pale-skinned hand to gently stroke the bristled-fur on top of Terru's head. The male zaddack yawned. In the luminescence from Jaspen's eyes the zaddack's jagged teeth glimmered, like bone-forged knives in moonlight. Terru's fur felt familiar against the oreseeker's fingers, though Jaspen knew if there had been others around Terru would not have submitted to this touch; it was not the zaddack way. But every twenty-seven hours when the lights went off to simulate night, Jaspen roamed freely, coming here, and always paying homage to the zaddacks. And they allowed it for the time of night belonged to

Jaspen.

Ryn slept on as the oreseeker fondled Terru's rough fur. The warmth from the zaddacks rose to greet Jaspen like heat from fire in a chilly cave. He smiled at how well the zaddacks fit together, the female's delicate paws and Terru's larger versions; the shadowed outlines of brindled markings on their furred-skin blending together. Jaspen sighed, a sound full of yearning to belong to another, as these two did to each other. Unable to resist, Jaspen eased his body down to lay next to the zaddacks. He shut his glowing eyes and listened to the slow rhythmic breathing of Ryn, feeling the twitch of her paws as she dreamt of some far off thing. He could sense her essence as a rich jumble of color inside his head.

Terru exhaled deeply, a sound of contentment, which made Jaspen's heart contract. The male zaddack lowered his head and rested his muzzle on Jaspen's shoulder. The oreseeker timed his breathing with Terru's and he imagined what it was like to travel on four paws instead of two feet. While Jaspen lay there, he belonged.

Jaspen had no idea how much later it was when he woke. The ship remained dark and the zaddacks still slept. Reluctantly he pulled away from the shimmering warmth. Terru opened one eye, blinked, then closed it again.

Jaspen stood and the chill of the outer crysolium chamber penetrated his cloak. He pulled the garment tighter and moved to the inner wall. He entered his code, pressed the opening mechanism, and pushed the solid weight of the door open. After moving into the crysolium chamber he shut the door. A familiar sense enveloped him. There was no one else here, but he was not alone.

A lump of crysolium sat in the center of the circular chamber; a large piece of ore by some standards in the

universe—small by others. Jaspen shoved back his hood and the light from his eyes sprang forward in the darkness. With his unique vision he could see that the c-ore pulsed with life; mentor's mindspark lay within.

Jaspen moved close to the ore and dared to touch it. Then he stepped back a pace and sat down while pulling a medallion from the pocket of his cloak. Shaped with two concentric circles, the pendant called Spiriteye generated warmth in his palm as the metal responded to the close proximity of mentor's life force within the crysolium.

The oreseeker raised the Spiriteye to his eyes and peered through the center; the space between the circles misted. Jaspen looked beyond the medallion to the structure of the ore where lacy strings of pulsating energy danced. He greeted mentor, the noble spirit whose bodily death had given them fuel, therefore life to those on this spaceship.

Mentor's mindspark powered the ship. The creature's life force had been spewing into the void of space for decades now as they headed toward old Earth. Fragments of the creature's spark were lost forever in the interstellar darkness outside the ship. But mentor had not been an ordinary being; it had been a singular species, able to create life amidst the icy world on which it had lived. So, when Jaspen watched the threads of mindspark that still remained within the ore he could easily sense mentor's strength.

One of the energy threads swayed, curving back in on itself in response to the oreseeker's mental hello. Jaspen watched through the Spiriteye and saw a red filament reach toward him; the energy shot out and touched the medallion. The circular metalloid flared as if it had caught on fire, but the brightness of spirit did not bother Jaspen's sensitive eyes.

He grinned as the string of energy wriggled through the pendant and cavorted around his head like a rainbow lightning storm at night. The sense of mentor was so strong

it was as if the large white-furred creature actually stood within the chamber.

Oreseeker, you honor me with your presence. Mentor's words were not spoken but projected into Jaspen's mind making it feel like a conversation that had already taken place. *You are restless.*

"I'm anxious to be off this ship." Jaspen answered from the core of his mind.

The mentor's musical laugh echoed in Jaspen's head. *If you understood the essence of time you would have no restlessness. Everything you perceive as yet to happen has already occurred. Everything that is past has not yet happened.*

Jaspen was used to receiving such thoughts from mentor but even after years of conversations he felt no wiser for it. He tried to stretch his thinking in order to fully encompass what mentor told him, but often the ideas only jumbled in his mind to later haunt him with confusion.

You have the aura of zaddack about you. Mentor paused, waiting for his response.

"I rested with the zaddacks before coming here."

That is good, mentor's thoughts flowed smoothly. *Jaspen, when you are on old Earth, I will no longer be with you.* The words were crystal clear.

"Where will you be?" A kernel of despair hardened in the pit of Jaspen's stomach. "Are you more depleted than you appear to me?"

It's true that much of me has already gone to the void between the stars. Each time we have landed, left planets, or changed course, more of me has gone. Mentor thought laughed again, a sound of goodness. *I have done what I can; now I wish you to set me free. After the ship has landed on Earth, use your ability to pull what remains of my mindspark from this crysolium. I do not wish to remain.*

"We could just have Minack heat the chamber and purge your energy out through the fuel spouts."

No. Mentor's mental tone was emphatic. Purging is crude and alters the pure form of mindspark, scattering it. I wish to have intact what remains of me. Do not condemn me to entrapment within this structure, a fate between life and death.

"I'll do whatever you ask," Jaspen's bright eyes dimmed, "but," he stopped thinking for a moment in order to let his selfishness go. Then he thought simply, "what you ask of me is difficult. Only once have I tried to manipulate energy within crysolium and that time I had Serall's help."

The task will be simple because there is only me in here—no energy from others to untangle. And you have the Spiriteye pendant. Believe what I say. You will find this task doable.

Jaspen frowned, his mind full of sorrow. "When I set your energy free, I will truly be alone."

Someday, if you allow it, your heart will not ache as it does now. Remember that the way of the universe is the way of the universe. There is a time to feel, a time to act, and a time to understand. When there is nothing to be done about something it is best to accept. Like this great Dark—a Shadow of creation which now eats this universe.

"Are you saying there's nothing we can do about the Darkness?" Jaspen hunkered down tighter into his cloak.

Oreseeker, you most of all should understand that within the dark lies the light. One can not be without the other.

"I know the beauty, the splendid secrets of the shadows. But this Dark thing from the edge of the unknown will destroy us all. It is not ordinary darkness."

I can envision the moment at the beginning of time when the light of creation cast the coils of darkness away—shunning the Dark. Yet I myself do not know its true nature. Mentor's thoughts paused and there was a deep churning sensation. This Dark is beyond the scope of what I am and what I understand. I only know that it is coming.

“When I release your energy, where will your mindspark go?” Jaspen held his breath as the question slipped into his thoughts.

The silence within the crysolium chamber echoed dramatically inside Jaspen’s skull. He feared his question was somehow inappropriate and that he had driven mentor’s thoughts from his mind. Yet, he could still see the pulsating rhythm within the ore, like a powerful creature in hiding.

Everything is perception. Mentor’s thoughts curled quietly around Jaspen’s brain, like hands holding a baby. As mentor went on Jaspen thought he heard the far off sound of trickling water and the song of wind in the trees.

When I think-speak with you it feels to me as if you, with your mindspark still contained within the physical self, are less whole than me—for even with your special eyes you can not see the truth of what surrounds you.

“What truth?”

The truth of who and what you are. We are all uniquely who we are, but we, all species, all life, is the same.

“How can something be different and the same?”

Without physical separation all is the same.

“If that’s true, why should we fight to stay alive? Why do we fear death?”

Because the steps you take while within your body determine the path you will walk in death. Something inside you knows that. The lust for a physical life is powerful.

Jaspen’s eyes watered and he blinked, closing off their light for an instant. “Mentor, I long to join you. I’m tired of who I am. There are no others like myself.”

You still miss the human female Serall.

Jaspen knew he could not cloud the truth from mentor. “Even though she belonged to another man I always loved her. After a time I could hide the depth of my feelings so she did not know, but inside myself I always

hoped that someday..." Jaspén shook his head.

In life you hoped one day she might be yours—that she would see the strength of your love for her and be drawn to it like an oreseeker to darkness. I see that with her death you still hoped she might come to you—that you, with your eyes, would be able to see her mindspark as you see me within the crysolium now. Finally then, with her physical death, you would have a part of her no one else did.

Jaspén hung his head, embarrassed by the truth.

The energy around you is weighted with sorrow. You associate your change from human into oreseeker with Serall. You have not wanted me to touch that pain before.

"I'm afraid." Jaspén realized he was no longer holding the medallion yet the mentor's word thoughts were undiminished in clarity.

That if you let your feelings out...

"That if I let them out I'll drown under the weight. Then what is barely tolerable now will be unendurable." The thoughts tumbled forth from his mind and he felt the reality of them. His cloak was suddenly too thin. He shivered. "Why couldn't I remain human? Why did I have to change?" The last thought was echoed with his voice. "Why?"

I wish I could offer you comfort but the pain is your own. It is for you to find a way to peace.

Jaspén spoke out loud. "When Serall died, did you feel her mindspark?" He was ashamed of the hunger in his words.

There was a long silence before mentor thought spoke again. *No.*

The crysolium chamber was still and dark save for the ghostly embers of the oreseeker's eyes.

"Do you think Jeriah and Serall are together in death?" Jaspén's thought was ringed with pain.

Their bond of love was not one which transcends

bodily death.

“She is alone, then.” Jaspen’s eyes glittered and his chest loosened. He felt a stab akin to pleasure and hated himself for it.

Mentor’s mental tone was tinged with curiosity.
This gives you good feelings?

“I’m ashamed, but it does. I suppose I’ve been thinking that if they were to spend eternity together she would never... she would not...”

Remember you.

“Yes.” Jaspen’s whispered word hung in the darkness of the chamber.

It may come to be that your love for Serall will be your undoing. You have much energy tied up into what wasn’t and what can never be.

“I know.” Jaspen rocked onto his heels to comfort himself. “I know it’s senseless but I can’t let go of her. It’s as if she’s burned permanently into the network of my mind and everything I think goes through that reflection of her. I hope that in death I find release from this torture.”

Be careful, Jaspen, what you desire.

“What could be worse than loving her as I still do? Or more difficult than watching her spend her life with another and to see her produce children that are not mine?” Jaspen pressed his forehead against his fists as if to drive out the thoughts. “What could be more devastating than not having my love returned? What?” The oreseeker spoke out loud again as if that would help the mentor truly understand his torment.

Her loving you.

“What?” Jaspen sat back in surprise, his wide eyes lighting the rocky surface of the crysolium. The pale light created shadows between the miniature peaks of the ore as if his eyes were moons and the lump of crysolium a planet.

Sometimes actually receiving love is worse than unfulfilled longing for that love. Mentor’s words hung

between their minds.

“Never! I...” Jaspén paused, closed his eyes and quieted his mind before going on. “Mentor, my respect for you is unlimited but you must believe me when I say that nothing on any planet I’ve seen is worse than the desolation within my own body.”

There are consequences to all actions and the path you have not walked may be far worse than the one you are on.

There was a long mental silence. The chill of the chamber seeped between Jaspén’s cloak and skin. He rose and when he moved away the exterior of the c-ore darkened though the interior remained filled with fire. He paced the tiny room to warm himself. Thoughts roiled his mind. Desolation and anger at mentor’s words coursed through his veins as he moved back and forth across the chamber. He stopped and turned to face the life that infused the ore.

“I know what you say must be true or you wouldn’t say it. But I can’t change the way I feel and if somehow I could, and did, I would no longer know who I am. I’ve lived with these emotions for so long they define me.” Jaspén took a deep breath. “My world revolves around Serall even though it’s all in my own mind.”

Sobeyit. The archaic phrase from Riatha sounded odd coming from mentor. *I didn’t mean to upset you or tell you how to feel. But your pain envelops me when we mind-speak and I can’t help but want to ease the strength of it.* Mentor’s thoughts were warm and caressing. *You have much to face in the future. Do what you can do for that is all there is. And there are Serall’s children, Kala and Noa, for you to watch over and love. That task has now fallen to you and the Bioguard Minack. They, and the other children, need you to be there for them.*

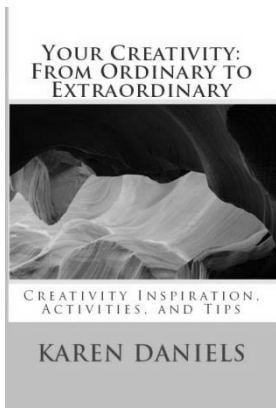
“I know.” Jaspén cocked his head and grimaced. “Though they were not fathered by me, I will always be there for them.” In thinking of Serall’s children Jaspén once

more became aware of the ship surrounding them. He tilted his head, then gave a slight nod. "I must go now. Minack will bring back the ship lights soon."

So you must. Be well, oreseeker.

"And you, mentor." Jaspen gave the crysolium a final lingering look before hefting the door open. The outer room was warm in contrast to the ore chamber. His soft boots slid across the floor. As he passed the zaddacks, Ryn's eyes blinked open, golden slits in the darkness. Jaspen bowed, then headed back up through the ship.

end excerpt



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