

Book Two of *The Arcadian Chronicles*

## **Mantivore Prey**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

Typical. Here I was, in the middle of an emergency and Mai Brarian nowhere to be seen. Humidity hung like a heavy coat in the Waiting Area, making it hard to breathe the soupy air. Vegetation crawling up the walls quested into the room on snaking tendrils that weaved in my wave. While I paced the room, angrily slapping the greenery away from my face.

That was when I heard them. Cupert Peaceman's accordion brayed like a sick donkey; his poor timing pinpointed by bangs and tinkles from a collection of other instruments better employed as bird-scarers. Cursing, I flailed through the plants towards the door. Because I suddenly remembered where Mai Brarian was. Where the rest of the village was. Where I should have been – if this crisis over the failing chiller units hadn't driven it from my memory.

*There was a time when it wouldn't have slipped my mind...*

Standing behind the door, listening to the din getting steadily louder, my hands shook and I panted with more than the effort of breathing Mai's plant fug. Once I opened the door, I was headed for a row of galactic proportions. And I plain wasn't up to it.

*Maybe if I explained that I really **did** forget that today was Mai's Node Thanksgiving procession...*

*Oh yes? And where – exactly – would that leave me? “I think plant offerings to the Node is cripp-witted slurry. And though I've said so, at every possible occasion – sorry Mai - this time I didn't **mean** to be here waiting for you with an urgent request...”*

Nah. I wasn't rolling onto my back with my paws in the air for anyone. Especially Mai Brarian. It would be snowing in the noonblast before she – or anyone else - had me pleading for a micron of slack. I pushed the door button <Open> and walked onto the veranda, gasping as the desert air instantly dried the sweat pouring off me. Their reaction would have been funny at any other time. The approaching

procession, straggling across the village square with 'Mother Mai' at its head, stuttered to a halt - the accordion trailing away in a discordant wheeze. Everyone, dressed in their market-day best and sprigged with flowers, surged forward and clumped around the entrance to Mai's yard, gaping at me through the dust pall as if I'd just emerged from *Distant Thought*.

Sticky with dried sweat and tousle-haired from crawling around the chiller units, I must have looked like something the cat sicked up.

Mai stormed up the flower-lined path towards me. Raw hatred twisted across her face for just a nanosec, before she smoothed her expression. And that blast of honest emotion heartened me. *Because if it's down to just us, Mai – you don't stand a chance.*

"What are you doing here, Felina Keeper?" Her anger-shrilled voice further steadied me.

I locked looks with her, "Waiting for you to finish with your plant waving and get back to your job. This is urgent."

"It always urgent with you, Felina. What is it this time? Run out of chocolate and brandy, have you?" Kaila Player's normally pale face was flushed as she pushed forward, putting her arm around Mai's shoulders.

Overloud laughter bellowed from some close enough to hear as they continued to funnel through Mai's front gate, while the rest of procession clustered along the plasmesh fencing to catch what was going on. Judging by the number of unfamiliar faces in the crowd, it wouldn't long before Mai's monthly pantomime would have visitors to Cnicus outnumbering the villagers.

I ignored Kaila, keeping my attention on Mai. "As Byron warned when you didn't get his last order through, the chiller units are failing in Cool Rooms One and Two." I shrugged, "Depends on whether you want to save the cheeses, pâtés and hams stored there ready for next week's market."

Scattered moans and curses erupted from amongst the flowery crowd and those who'd spent time and hard-earned swaps on making the produce sold at Reseda Market every month, pushed to the front of the crowd.

"What should we do?" Rajen Dairy asked, while the rest looked at me like lost sheep.

*Yeah... you all snigger about my eating and my size – but the minute anything goes wrong, you flock to my door worrying at me to fix it.*

"I've managed to empty Cool Room Five. It's too hot to move anything now..." I gestured at the sunbleached sky, "...but if we use Kraide's refrigerated carrier tonight, we should get the produce moved. The chiller units are still running – just. So for now, I guess we hold our thumbs and hope that today isn't the day they finally stop."

"But Room Five is half the size of Rooms One and Two. How are we going to fit it all in?" Ajene Stitcher's wail scraped across my stretched nerves.

"You're right Ajene – as always. Room Five is smaller – which is probably why the unit in there still works. We'll have to stack everything higher – maybe make some hard decisions about keeping back some of the produce for village use." I tapped my foot, "I never said it was a good solution. Just the only one on offer."

With weary indifference, I watched the resultant head-scratching and arguments. I'd been battling with this crisis since I'd heard the <Malfunction Alarm> chirruping before first light this morning. It seemed a lifetime ago.

A skirling din suddenly started from the Nodery.

Everyone swivelled back to Mai, who stood wide-eyed and blinking, in typical Cnicus fashion.

“Is the Node thanking you for your flowery offerings?” I suggested.

“Hoe it flat, Felina Keeper,” she hissed, running up the front steps to the veranda and sweeping past me into the Nodery in a cloud of scent that contrasted with my own acrid sweatiness.

The noise from inside the Nodery abruptly stopped and a male voice started bellowing.

My jaw dropped. *I didn't know the Node could shout!*

Neither – judging by the ashen colour of her face as she reappeared – did Mai. Her mouth moved as she gestured at room. But we didn't hear her. We couldn't. The voice blaring from the Nodery was ear-holing in volume.

“ALL CITIZENS OF CNICUS SHOULD MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE MEETING HOUSE FOR AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT IN TWENTY SIX MINUTES AND SEVEN SECONDS... ALL CITIZENS-”

I made my way out of Mai's crammed front yard when shock-stunned villagers around me finally started moving. Only to hear the same message blasted from a <Bullit Drone> circling Cnicus, raising choking dust clouds and panicking the animals. It wasn't doing a bad job at panicking the humans, either. When was the last time we had this type of announcement from The Council?

My stomach churned. I remembered only too clearly. Twenty-two years ago, The Council proclaimed that God worship was now illegal and that all clergy were deNamed. After that decree, the planet was engulfed in the Turbulence; our village lost a decent schoolteacher, village historian and all spiritual direction. While a Family was plunged into poverty and disgrace.

I joined the queue of frightened villagers filing into the Meeting House, twitched and angry. *What is the roaching Council going to take from us, this time?*