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First published in Analog, July 2000

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## I

### Quis Web

Jeremiah's kidnappers let him watch the delegation that came to negotiate on his behalf. The wall in front of him was one-way glassplex; he could see the people in the room beyond, but to them the wall appeared opaque.

He didn't recognize the man speaking, but the fellow wore the uniform of the Foreign Affairs Corps for the Allied Worlds of Earth. Jeremiah knew the other two people in the delegation: Deborah Svenson, Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, and Professor Jack Brenn, Jeremiah's thesis advisor in the anthropology department.

One of Jeremiah's kidnappers also stood in the room: Chankah Dahl. As Manager of Dahl, she governed one of the largest city-states in the human settlement on the planet Coba. A tall woman with gray hair, she ranked high in the power hierarchy of the Twelve Estates.

The voice of the Foreign Affairs officer came over an audiocom set high in the wall. "You must understand, Manager Dahl," he continued. "Jeremiah Coltman is a citizen of the Allied Worlds. Your decision to send him to another Estate against his will is considered abduction by our people."

Manager Dahl remained unperturbed. "You are well aware that before Jeremiah came here, he signed an agreement to abide by our laws." She looked around at them. "Your government has no jurisdiction

here. He is ours now.”

Jack Brenn stiffened. A large man with broad shoulders and a shock of black hair, his intensity almost crackled in the room. “You have no right to hijack him this way! He signed that agreement with the understanding that it meant you could *deport* him if you didn't like him.”

“But we do like him,” Chankah said mildly. “We have bestowed our highest honor on him.”

Dean Svenson spoke. “Now that Jeremiah's fieldwork is complete, he wishes to return home. Manager Dahl, he has his school, work, relatives.” Quietly she said, “His life.”

The Manager said, simply, “He is Calani. Calani do not leave Coba.”

Jeremiah touched the engraved band that circled his biceps. He had one on each arm. Made from solid gold, they symbolized his position. Calani. Dice player.

He really, really didn't want the honor.

“I will relay your regards to him,” Chankah finished.

Jeremiah recognized her tone. She was dismissing the delegation. He hit his fist on the glassplex. “I'm here!” he shouted. He knew it wouldn't carry through the soundproofed wall, but he had to try. “Don't go!”

Only his silent reflection answered. He regarded it, seeing a man more of Coba than of Earth. Three years ago, when he arrived in Dahl, he had been soft, out of shape, plump. Now lean muscles replaced the flab, built by his job on the construction crew where he had worked until ten days ago. He would never be tall or husky, but he enjoyed a fitness now he had never known before. He loved working in the crisp air of the spectacular Teotec Mountains. During the day he labored with his muscles and at night he labored with his mind, writing his dissertation. His only “hardships” were the lack of computers and the relatively low level of technology here, where the culture had backslid. He had otherwise thoroughly enjoyed his life.

Until now.

Instead of comfortable work clothes, today he wore garb appropriate for a Calani: rich suede trousers, a suede vest, and a white shirt embroidered at the cuffs with threads made from gold. His armbands went over the shirt sleeves and heavy gold guards circled his wrists. His hair spilled over his ears and down his neck in tousled brown curls.

Behind him, the lock mechanism on the door clicked. He turned to see a woman enter with an octet of guards. She riveted attention. At six-foot-two, she stood six inches taller than him. Her face showed the classic beauty of Coba's highborn. She was almost twenty years his senior, just past forty, but she had the build and vibrant health of an athlete half her age. Her suede trousers clung to her long, muscular legs. A trace of silver dusted the tendrils of hair that curled at her temples, and a heavy auburn braid fell down her back to her waist. Her eyes, large and gray, had a luminous quality. Her simple clothes had no adornment and needed none: her aura of authority drew notice far more than any jewelry or bright colors.

Jeremiah knew little more about her than her name. Khal Viasa. As Manager of Viasa, she governed a small but wealthy city-state high in the mountains. During his years here, he had seen her only at a distance when she visited Dahl. He hadn't thought much about it, though he had always noticed her

striking appearance. No one would ever describe Khal Viasa as “pretty.” Elegant perhaps, mesmerizing, stunning, regal. It had never occurred to him that so powerful a ruler would notice a simple laborer. Nor had he expected his reputation as a good Quis player to carry beyond Dahl.

Ten days ago Manager Dahl told him the news; Manager Viasa had bought his Calani contract—a contract he hadn't even known he owned. They seemed to find this a perfectly reasonable transaction, despite his incredulous protests.

*Be careful what you wish for.* If ever a situation had earned that warning, this was it. He had wanted a chance to observe the Calanya, the elite group of dice players that lived on a Manager's Estate. He considered his inability to study that cloistered institution a weak point in his dissertation. Calani played the strategy game of Quis. They studied for years and had to pass rigorous exams before they could apply for positions within the Calanya of the Twelve Estates. Well, he hadn't applied for anything. If he had known his talent would lead him into this situation, he would never have let anyone find out how well he took to the game.

Manager Viasa came over to him, moving with a natural grace. She spoke in the Teotecan language. “My greetings.”

“They're leaving.” Jeremiah motioned to the room beyond the glass. “Without me.”

She put her hands on his shoulders, making him acutely aware of both her greater height and her sensuality. “Surely you know better than to speak in front of your escort. Manager Dahl told me that you spent the last tenday learning the ways of the Calanya.”

Learning? Is that what they called it? He had spent the last ten days in a guarded suite, albeit one far more luxurious than the apartment where he had lived before. Yes, Manager Dahl had given him the Oath: never again read, write, or speak to anyone outside the Calanya. He couldn't live that way. Scholarship was his life. When he broke the Oath, however, they put him in solitary, which he hated. So for now he remained silent.

His thoughts must have shown on his face. Khal's voice gentled. “Jeremiah, I realize you are unhappy with this. I am sorry it is hard for you. I hope you will feel better when we reach Viasa. We leave tonight.”

That only made it worse. In Viasa, his chances of escape went to nil.

\* \* \* \*

Starlight silvered the towers of Viasa as the windrider descended in the night. The Estate rose out of the darkness like an ancient castle. The old fortress now served as the headquarters and home of Manager Viasa and her staff. A wall surrounded the Estate and city. Sharply slanted roofs came into view, their stark beauty accented by lights within arched windows. Mist wreathed Viasa, turning the lights a hazy gold and curling around shadowed arches and spires. Beyond the city, jagged mountains stepped up into the sky.

Viasa stood near Grayrock Falls, high in the Teotec Mountains. Jeremiah knew that even if he did somehow escape his guards, no feasible way existed to leave here except by air. He had never flown a rider, and the winds that ripped through these upper ranges were inimical to all but the most seasoned pilots. Even with equipment, supplies, and luck he doubted he could survive the months-long hike out of the mountains and across the desert to the starport.

He wondered if the delegation knew he had left Dahl. Would they go home without him? The Allied authorities had warned him that if he insisted on coming to Coba, he would lose their protection. The human settlements that had spread across the stars were splintered into three political entities. The Allied Worlds of Earth existed in the shadow of two giants, the Skolian Imperialate and the Trader empire. The Skolians claimed Coba. Earth had no wish to strain its precarious relations with the powerful, warlike Skolians, particularly not for a graduate student who, in the greater scheme of things, had little consequence.

\* \* \* \*

The wings of the windrider spread in metal pinions. Painted to resemble an althawk, the craft rode the gales like a giant bird. It soared over the city rooftops and landed on an airfield lit by misty lights.

Jeremiah looked around the cabin. It seated ten: his guards, Khal Viasa, and himself. The pilot and co-pilot sat up front. As he undid his safety harness, his guards rose to their feet. All eight women were taller than him, as were most Cobans, both male and female. These wore dusky purple uniforms with the Viasa symbol on their shoulders, a stylized image of Grayrock Falls. Stunners hung on their belts, guns that fired needles with a fast-acting sedative.

The captain opened the hatch. Accompanied by six guards, Jeremiah jumped down onto the tarmac. As he pulled his fur-lined hood tighter against the tearing gales, Khal stepped down with the other guards. Her hood framed her face, making her large eyes even more intense. She smiled slightly at him, as reserved as always, but also with discreet surprise, as if she too found it astonishing that he was her Calani.

The icy wind at Viasa made even the gales at Dahl seem like puffs of breeze. Leaning into the rushing air, they ran across the tarmac to the Estate and entered the fortress through a graceful quartz arch in its stone wall. Relief washed over him as they reached the protection of a vaulted hall.

Several Estate aides waited for them. As they bowed to Manager Viasa, they darted glances to where Jeremiah stood with his escort. He seemed to intrigue them just as much as his rare glimpses of a Calani in Dahl had fascinated him.

A dark-haired woman spoke. "Welcome back, Manager Viasa."

"I came as soon as I received your message," Khal said. "What is the situation at the dam now?"

Her aide looked worn out, with dark circles under her eyes. "The electrical plant still isn't functioning. The beacon that guides windriders in the mountains has already failed. If this continues much longer, neither Viasa nor Tehnsa will have power."

Jeremiah tensed. No wonder Khal had wanted to return so soon. The Viasa-Tehnsa Dam harnessed energy from the Grayrock Falls. In this remote mountain region, it provided the only continuous source of power for Viasa, and also for Tehnsa, its dependent city-state.

Khal came over to him. She stood a fraction closer than he expected, nothing that would have been unusual in Cambridge on Earth, but a bit off-kilter here, given the famous reserve of the Viasa people. She spoke in her husky contralto. "I'm sorry, Jeremiah. It seems Viasa demands my attention. Your escort will show you to your rooms."

He nodded, relieved. Tired and disheartened, he needed to withdraw into privacy.

Khal spoke to the captain of his escort. "Take him into his suite by the private door. The others can wait until later to meet him." She smiled at Jeremiah—and it changed her entire face. Instead of classic reserved perfection, she suddenly became warm and vibrant. "The other Calani are curious about you. None have ever even seen an offworlder, let alone met one."

He just nodded again, glad he didn't have to think of a response. She brushed his arm in an unexpected touch of farewell. Then his guards escorted him out of the hall. They followed marble corridors with high, arched ceilings. At first he thought the bronze claws on the walls held torches; then he realized they were electric lights. The lamps resembled flame, adding to the ancient atmosphere, a reminder of Viasa's age and conservative nature.

The next wing they entered, however, had genuine torches in the claws. They stopped at a wall engraved with arabesque designs. When the captain pressed a series of ridges in the design, clinks came from within the wall. She leaned against the stone and a door swung inward. Moving to the side, she bowed to Jeremiah. He looked back at her, puzzled. Then he realized she was waiting for him to enter.

He walked into a suite of stunning luxury. The darkwood furniture gleamed with red highlights. Pale green cushions lay on divans and in piles on a plush gold rug. The walls were painted dark amber near the floor, then shaded upward through lighter golds and into ivory near the ceiling. Held by slender gold chains, lamps hung from the ceiling, spheres of delicate frosted glass hand-painted with mountain scenes. Blown glass vases graced the tables, each with a blue-green stalk topped by a spray of gold spheres the size of marbles, but airy and hollow.

The bathroom alone was as big as his old apartment in Dahl. A pool filled most of it, fed by fountains and tiled in green, with frothy jeweled inlays. The bedroom had a canopied bed made up in blue and green velvet. Copper braziers kept the room warm. In the window seat, starlight streamed through tall panels made from unbreakable glassplex. Looking through the windows, he realized the outside wall was a sheer cliff face that plunged far down into the mountains.

When they returned to the living room, the captain indicated a horseshoe arch set across from the private door. Gold mosaics bordered the arch and ivory drapes hung within it. "That leads to the main common room for all the suites," she said. Then she bowed to him. "We will leave you to rest. If you need anything, we will be Outside."

He nodded, knowing full well the real reason they were posted around his suite. Khal meant to ensure he stayed put.

When Jeremiah was alone, he sunk onto a divan, too tired even to go to bed. After awhile, a tap came at the archway to the common room. He wanted to ignore it, but the same inexhaustible curiosity that had spurred him to become an anthropologist got the better of him now.

"Come in," he said.

The hangings shifted to reveal a tall man with a husky build and broad shoulders. He looked about forty, with the classic features of the Coban highborn. Gray dusted his black curls. He stood with natural confidence, as if he took his high status for granted. His clothes resembled Jeremiah's, but darker in color. Three bands circled each of his arms, rather than one. Jeremiah wondered why he rated more, then felt irked at himself for caring.

“My greetings,” the man said. “I am Kev.” He took in Jeremiah's slouched posture. “I can return another time, if you prefer.”

Although Jeremiah didn't feel like company, he had no wish to alienate the other dice players. He would be living with them for some time, maybe even the rest of his life, a possibility he was doing his best to forget.

He sat up straighter. “Come in. Please.” He indicated an armchair set across a table from him. “Be comfortable.”

Kev settled into the chair and stretched his long legs across the carpet. “Being Outside is tiring. But you need not worry. You will not have to go there often.”

“Outside?”

Kev gestured around them. “The Calanya, the place where we live, is Inside. All else is Outside.”

Jeremiah stared at him. “We never leave these suites?”

“We have this wing of the Estate. And the parks. They cover twenty square kilometers.” Kev looked apologetic. “Most Calanya have more land. These mountains limit Viasa's space. Still, it is enough, I think, for fourteen people.”

“Fourteen Calani live here?”

“Counting yourself.”

Jeremiah rubbed his eyes. “Don't remind me.”

Kev considered him. “The rumors are true, then? You received your Oath against your will.”

“Yes.”

“It is hard to imagine. Many people would give much to be where you are now.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “I had no idea Manager Viasa wanted my contract.”

“Normally the Calani decides what offer to accept,” Kev acknowledged. “When Khal initiated the negotiations for your contract, news of your Quis talent spread. Several Estates entered the bidding despite your lack of formal study.”

Jeremiah stared at him. *Other* Managers had also bid for this clandestine dice contract of his? “How do you know?”

Kev's expression turned inscrutable. “Khal and I talk.”

Khal. Kev spoke as if it were natural to call one of Coba's most powerful leaders by her first name. Calani were among the elite who might address a Manager in such a manner. Jeremiah couldn't imagine doing so, no more than he had ever felt comfortable using “Jack” for Professor Brenn, even after Brenn insisted. Maybe the ease came with experience.

“How long have you been a Calani?” Jeremiah asked.

Arrogance touched Kev's voice. “Twenty-three years. I took the Oath at sixteen.”

That boggled Jeremiah. Kev must have spent most of his life in seclusion, playing dice. Then a thought came to him: *Is it really so different from the way I've studied all my life?* He might as well have been in seclusion given how rarely he ventured out of the library or classroom.

Yes, he thought. *It's different.* He had chosen that life, rather than having it chosen for him.

\* \* \* \*

Jeremiah slept through the morning, something he rarely did on Coba, given its thirty-two-hour days. He didn't feel like getting out of bed. He spent the afternoon in his robe, sitting in the window seat of his bedroom, staring out at the chasm of air and the drifting clouds below.

Of course he tried to leave. He heaved open his private door and found guards Outside, all armed. When the captain asked if they could do anything for him, he shook his head and closed the door. Then he returned to the window seat and watched the sky.

In the evening, he roused himself enough to bathe in his swimming pool with its fountains. He shaved using a pearl-handled razor he discovered laid out with a towel on a polished stone bench by the pool. Back in his bedroom, he changed into clothes he found in the wardrobe, garb similar to what he had worn yesterday. Then he sat by the window again.

Kev came to ask if he wanted to join the other Calani for dinner in the common room, or would he like his meal here. Jeremiah shook his head to both suggestions.

Finally night settled over the cliffs. He was still sitting by the window when the guards came for him.

\* \* \* \*

Blue and green mosaics tiled the halls, with gold accents that gleamed in the torchlight. After following a maze of corridors, the guards took him up a tower, climbing a spiral staircase of black marble. No one explained why or spoke to him.

At the top, they came to a horseshoe arch. The suite beyond was even more refined than his own. Soft light diffused from panels in the ceiling. Parchments on the walls glimmered with paintings of birds and branches. Dark urns as tall as Jeremiah stood in the corners, enameled with clusters of gold marble-flowers.

His escort showed him into a room with blue-shaded walls and a pale blue rug. It had no furnishings, only a voluptuous pile of green, blue, and gold pillows heaped in one corner. The captain bowed to him and then the guards withdrew. A moment later Jeremiah heard the door close, followed by the click of the lock mechanism.

He rubbed his chin, baffled. What did they expect him to do here? For a while he paced the rooms. When he grew tired of looking for a way out, he lay among the pillows, letting their softness envelop him. With no other outlet, he sought the freedom of sleep.

Sleep, however, evaded him. Instead, tears slid down his face. Damn. He hated to cry. The tears came

anyway, for the loss of his freedom and the people he loved. After a while he did manage to drowse, but he never fully slept.

“Jeremiah?”

He opened his eyes. Khal Viasa was standing above him, dressed in a clinging robe of red velvet. She had unbraided her hair, and it fell in glorious auburn waves to her waist. He stared at her, bewildered, aware of her long, lean curves under the robe.

She knelt next to him among the pillows. “Your guards told me you haven't eaten all day.”

“I wasn't hungry.” He rubbed his palm across his cheek, trying to erase the signs of his tears.

“Ai, Jeremiah,” she murmured. “I am so sorry you are unhappy.”

Her compassion caught him off guard. He had expected her to be as cold as everyone else he had met from Viasa. Maybe under that infamous reserve, they were human after all. “I don't understand what you want from me.”

“To eat. You will become sick if you refuse food.”

He wanted to say no. His diet was tricky, though. He had none of the immunities that protected Cobans against the poisons and bacteria here. It limited the foods he could eat, and his water had to be treated. One reason he had lost weight so fast when he first came to Coba was because he had been sick so much, until he and his doctor worked out a diet he could tolerate. If he became careless now, he risked upsetting the chemical balance his body needed to maintain.

After a pause, he said, “All right.”

Khal rose to her feet and went to an audiocom in the wall. When she touched its fingertip panel, a woman's voice floated into the air. “Seva here.”

“Seva, this is Manager Viasa. Have the instructions for what Jeremiah can eat and drink been given to the kitchens?”

“Yes, ma'am. Last night, right after you landed.”

“Good. Have dinner brought up for him and me. We missed the evening meal.”

“Right away, ma'am.”

Jeremiah wondered why she hadn't eaten. She looked exhausted. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She came back and settled next to him in the pillows. “I am fine. But it is kind of you to ask.”

“Is it the Viasa-Tehnsa dam?”

Khal sighed. “It took all day to repair the electrical plant. The beacon still doesn't work. Then I had to explain to Manager Tehnsa why it all failed.” She gave him a look of apology. “But I shouldn't bore you with mundane Estate details.”



“It’s all right.” He preferred mundane details to thinking about his situation.

The audiocom buzzed. Then a girl said, “Your meal is here, Manager Viasa.”

“Ah. Good.” Khal rose gracefully to her feet and left the room. She returned with two junior aides. The boy carried a gold platter with an ornate cover, and the girl had a blue lacquered stand trimmed with gold and pearl inlays. They bowed to Jeremiah, set up the stand with the platter, and then withdrew from the room. A moment later the door closed and locked.

Jeremiah blinked. “That was fast.”

Khal smiled. When she lifted the cover off the platter, an aroma of spices filled the room. It made his mouth water. Maybe he was hungry after all.

Dinner was set out on the platter. Khal filled two gold-rimmed crystal goblets with red wine and gave him one. Then she took a plate of spiced meatballs and settled next to him among the pillows. Using a small gold fork, she speared a spice ball and offered it to him.

Jeremiah flushed. He would never have expected an Estate Manager to feed him. Self-conscious, he ate the spice ball. It tasted even better than it smelled, and he suddenly realized he was famished.

She gave him another, then speared one for herself. They alternated eating spice balls with drinking wine, Khal feeding them both until they finished the plate.

He took a last swallow of wine. “That was good.”

“I am glad you liked it.” She finished her drink, then took his empty goblet and set it with hers on the rug.

Jeremiah lay back in the pillows, relaxed now. Tipsy, in fact. Khal leaned on her elbow next to him, an intimacy that made him even more aware of her presence. The collar of her robe slipped down her shoulder, revealing smooth skin. He didn’t think she noticed, but that only made the effect more erotic. She nudged him onto his back and began to unlace the thongs that held his shirt closed.

Jeremiah caught her hand, still sober enough to read the implications under her seduction. “What are you doing?”

Her eyes were glossy from wine. She disengaged her hand from his and tweaked open his shirt. Then she slid her palm across his chest. “You are very beautiful, Jeremiah.”

*Beautiful?* Right. What was going on, with a private den, an intimate feeding, and now this? On Earth, women had never noticed him. It hadn’t surprised him, given how he saw himself: a fat, short, boring nerd. His parents claimed his negative self-image was undeserved, that it came from taunts he had taken as a boy, when in truth he was “a charming, intelligent young man.” Well, of course they said that. They were his parents. They would think he was charming if he fell on his face in the mud.

It was true, though, that in Dahl his shyness had become an asset. Coban women valued the trait in men. But he had never risked having a girlfriend there. The Twelve Estates operated on a double standard that could have come from the Dark Ages, except here it applied to men. A woman could do as she pleased, but a man was expected to behave with decorum. Had he taken a lover, Manager Dahl would probably have asked him to leave. In a place as conservative as Viasa, he could have been deported.

In some ways, it had been fun. Women in Dahl considered him a challenge, an exotic treat they were convinced wanted his honor compromised. After all, he came from offworld. Surely if a single young man traveled so freely, without a chaperone, he must be free in other ways too. But even the most aggressive had never pushed this hard. The implied insult in Khal's behavior stunned him. It also hurt, given his attraction to her, but he didn't want her to know.

She touched his cheek. "Your emotions flash across your face like a beacon. Why are you upset?"

He spoke coolly. "It's obvious why you had me brought here."

"I should hope so." She smiled. "This is the Akasi suite."

Akasi? Oh, Lord. *Oh, Lord.*

She was watching his face. "You didn't realize?"

"No." He flushed. "I hardly *know* you."

Khal looked at a loss for words. "Chankah Dahl led me to believe that you knew of my proposal."

He thought back. Yes, the Dahl Manager had said something about an Akasi during his solitary confinement. He had been so angry at the time, he had refused to listen. "I ... missed it."

"It is a big thing to miss."

No kidding. Akasi Calani. How could he be married to this stranger? "When did we, uh, have the ceremony?"

"We were wed as soon as you signed the Calanya contract."

"I didn't sign anything. Manager Dahl wrote my name."

"Well, yes, it did work out that way," Khal admitted. She brushed her knuckles over his cheek. "I won't hurt you, sweet Jeremiah." Then she went back to unlacing his shirt.

Flustered, he caught her hand. "Now wait a minute, Manager Viasa."

"Khal," she murmured.

He reddened. "Um, okay. Khal."

"It is all right," she soothed. "Try to relax." She slipped her hand free, then finished undoing the buttons that closed the outer seams of his sleeves. As she tugged his shirt away from his body, her robe slipped more, revealing tantalizing hints of skin.

This all felt surreal, like a dream. Real or not, though, it was a marked improvement over the last few days. With a sigh, he let go of his resistance and put his arms around her waist. Drawing her close, he inhaled her scent, a fragrant blend of spices and incense.

Khal reached down to the outer seams of his trousers, which were held closed by flaps. As she undid the flaps, she traced her fingertips over his skin. He finally understood why men's trousers here had such

an odd design. A woman who knew what she was doing could make taking them off intensely erotic.

Pushing up on her elbow, Khal gazed at him. "You've such big eyes." She rolled a lock of his hair between her fingers. "Our poets write soliloquies about the wind god Khozaar. They say his face has a beauty no mortal man can match. But they never saw yours, Jeremiah. You shame even the wind."

Good Lord. She was sweet-talking him. Before he could think of an appropriate response, if one even existed to such outrageous statements, she added, "I can't believe the women on your Earth let you come here alone."

"Oh, well. You know. I had them all dazzled." He had to laugh. "They never even knew I *existed*."

"You are modest. I like that." She brushed her lips across his cheek.

He pulled her closer, pressing his cheek against hers in a gesture his one and only girlfriend on Earth had called "too tender," as if that somehow made it wrong. Khal seemed to like it, though, which pleased him.

Had her clothes been made with the same complicated flaps and fastenings as his, he doubted he could have figured them out in his inebriated state. But it was simple to pull the braided cord of her robe and slip the velvet off her body. She wore a silk shift underneath that rippled over her toned curves. He watched with appreciation when she sat up and pulled the shift over her head, her breasts lifting as she raised her arms. The silk trailed over her nipples. He wondered if all Coban women were so well-formed, or if she took unusually good care of herself.

She settled alongside him and touched her lips to his, but she resisted when he tried to pull her into a kiss. He hesitated, unsure if Cobans had the custom. He had never seen two Cobans kiss, and his questions had always been met with embarrassed silence or smirks. If they did kiss here, they considered it far more private than in the Wyoming culture on Earth that had produced him.

Uncertain what Khal wanted, he stopped trying to push. It seemed the right response; she relaxed and brushed her mouth over his again, feather light. She slid down and touched her lips to his chest, her caress maddening in its "almost there" quality, as if she would stop teasing any moment and truly kiss him. He tried to reach for her, but she nudged him back in the pillows. Then she tickled his belly button with her tongue. Jeremiah laughed and stroked her hair, staring at the gold ceiling.

When she went lower still, he couldn't take any more. Grasping her arms, he tugged her back up and rolled her over until he lay on top of her. She made a deep-throated sound, a blend of surprise, protest, and pleasure. Caressing her breasts, he tried to kiss her again. This time she turned her head.

"Come on, Khal," he said against her ear.

She pressed her hands against his shoulders, pushing him over onto his back again. Disconcerted, he realized that with her muscled body and greater height, she was stronger than him. She didn't want to fight, though. When he relaxed, she touched him all over with both her mouth and hands, taking her time, until he groaned. When he tried to return her caresses, she always nudged him back into the pillows.

Finally he grasped her shoulders and dragged her up on top of him. "Quit teasing me," he said in a husky voice. "You're making me crazy."

Her eyes had glazed with desire. "I always wondered, when I saw you in Dahl, what passions lay under

that ice prince exterior of yours. Rumor said no woman could melt the ice, but I knew they were wrong.”

The women in Dahl had talked about him? Then again, what did it matter now? He tried to kiss her again—and this time she responded, deep and full. As he stroked her, she moved her hands on him. Then she lifted her hips and slid down, filling herself with him. They made love buried in the pillows, slow and steady. When he finally climaxed, she let herself go as well.

Afterward they lay quiet, side by side, their breath slowing to normal. Eventually Khal pushed up on her elbow. When he smiled, she traced her finger over his lips. Then she reached for her robe.

He caught her around the waist. “Where are you going?”

“I ... have, ah, Estate business.”

His drowsy contentment began to fade. The histories he had read of the Twelve Estates treated love like a fine wine to savor. The idea of a Manager leaving her Akasi on their wedding night would have appalled the poets. Of course, those were all romanticized folktales, but even so, he found it hard to believe Khal's behavior was normal.

He drew her down next to him. “Surely it can't be so important that you have to go now.”

At first she lay stiff in his arms. After several moments, though, she relaxed. “Perhaps not.”

“Khal, what's wrong?”

It was a moment before she answered. Finally she said, “You are a wonderful lover. But...” She touched the gold guard on his wrist. “It is unusual for an Akasi on his wedding night to show your, ah—expertise.”

Oh, Lord. She was upset because he wasn't a virgin. He shouldn't have been surprised. Even so, it threw him. “You knew I wasn't Coban.”

Disappointment washed over her face. “I had hoped you would tell me that I erred. Your behavior in Dahl was said to be above reproach.”

After everything else that had happened in the past few days, he didn't think he could face a rejection now. He was tempted to tell her what she wanted to hear. But to hide the truth would be a tacit agreement that he had done something wrong. He had never dated much, but the one woman who had loved him had meant a great deal to him, despite everything, and he didn't intend to diminish that by lying.

“I was a guest at Dahl,” he said. “I respected the customs of my hosts. But my life was formed by a different culture. I'm not ashamed of that.”

“In this culture of yours—were you—” She spoke with difficulty. “Free with yourself?”

He thought of all the times he had sat around with his friend Wayland, a grad student in computer science, the two of them grumbling about their lack of a love life. Dryly he said, “No. Not at all.”

“You bring such skill to your lovemaking.” A hint of mischief touched her smile. “It must be natural talent.”

Or loneliness, he thought. He understood the question behind her compliment, though. “I was engaged

years ago.”

“Engaged?”

“It’s an English word. It means spoken for. I suppose you could say betrothed, though that’s more formal.”

She tensed. “A woman waits for you on Earth?”

“No.” Even after so long it hurt to remember. Miranda had ended the engagement months before he left for Coba. She had no interest in following him to exotic places, and he had never fit in with the influential circles she traveled. What had hurt most was knowing she believed he wasn’t good enough for her crowd. He wondered what she would think when she learned that instead of her, he had married one of the most powerful women on an entire world. Let her chew on that.

Khal was watching him again. “This woman who stole your virtue—she also broke your heart.”

He wished his face didn’t show his emotions so clearly. “Something like that.”

Gently she said, “Then let us make an agreement.”

“An agreement?”

“I will try to accept your past.”

“And in return?”

“You will try to accept being my Calani.”

He exhaled. “I can’t.”

“Try, Jeremiah. I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

After a moment he said, “I’ll see.” He could never stop trying to return home. But while he was here, he could try to make the best of this. It was better than staring out the window all day without eating.

That night he slept among silk pillows in the arms of his wife—a world leader, kidnapper, and enigma.

\* \* \* \*

The main common room in the Calanya was large and airy, with many arched windows that let in streaming sunlight. The furniture and floor were polished snowfir wood. The walls started as a rich gold near the bottom, blended into lighter hues higher up, and turned white at the top, with a ceiling as blue as Coba’s sky, a deeper shade than on Earth.

Several men sat at a table playing Quis. Kev avoided them and led Jeremiah to an alcove. It had no benches, but the plush rug provided plenty of comfort. When Jeremiah sat among a scatter of cushions, his toes sunk in the pile.

Kev sat across from him and untied the dice pouch on his belt. “We will start with a simple round.”

“All right.” Jeremiah couldn't figure out Kev. The man didn't appear to enjoy his company at all, yet he had offered to introduce Jeremiah to the other Calani. Now he wanted to play Quis instead.

*So play Quis*, he thought. Until he understood the dynamics of the Calanya, it seemed best to follow Kev's lead.

He untied his own pouch and poured out a colorful set of balls, cubes, rods, cones, bars, polyhedrons, disks, and other shapes. The older pieces were glass or painted wood. In contrast, the Calanya dice Khal had given him were all gems or precious metals, a full set and more, including unusual shapes he had never seen Outside. He still kept the older dice, though. He had grown attached to them.

“What do we bet with?” he asked. As far as he had seen, Calani had no money.

Kev spoke coolly. “We have no need of bets. It is a device created by Outsiders to hold their attention.”

A boy of about fourteen came into the alcove and dropped onto the carpet by Kev. He spoke to Jeremiah in the rich cadences of the Viasa highborn. “Why would you want to bet?”

Kev turned to him. “One should not interrupt a teaching session, Hevtar.” When the boy flushed, looking for all the world like a skittish colt, Kev smiled. “Perhaps you might join us?”

Hevtar's embarrassment vanished. “I would like that.”

Kev glanced at Jeremiah. “My son.”

Jeremiah nodded to the boy. Hevtar resembled his father, with the same dark hair and even features, though his eyes were gray instead of black. Apparently he also shared Kev's talent for Quis. Jeremiah hadn't realized a father and son might end up in a Calanya together.

He wished he could write about the Calanya. After giving him their vow of illiteracy, the Cobans had taken all his notes and the final draft of his dissertation. When he realized they never meant to return any of it, he had gone into one of the few rages he had ever experienced in his life. To have labored for so long, with such love for his work, and then have it taken away just when he finished—it had devastated him.

Kev was watching his face. “If you object to Hevtar joining our session, he can observe.”

“I don't mind at all.” Jeremiah nodded to Hevtar. “Join us, please.”

Hevtar took out his dice, then pushed his Calanya bands higher up on his biceps. He wore one on each arm. His were thinner than Jeremiah's, with less engraving. Kev wore both types, one like Jeremiah's on each arm and two of the simpler style. Jeremiah wanted to ask them about it, but something stopped him. Hevtar gave him an odd sense, as if he simmered with distrust.

Kev placed a ruby ball on the carpet. “Let us make a simple start.” He tapped the die. “Viasa.”

Hevtar set a darkwood arch beside the ball. “Dahl.”

Jeremiah had never played Quis this way. “We name our pieces?”

Hevtar answered with disdain. “Of course not.”

Kev glanced at his son with a hint of rebuke. To Jeremiah, he said, "In a sense you probably already have." He indicated Jeremiah's dice. "How long have you had these?"

"Some for years." He picked up a wooden rod. "Manager Dahl gave me a set when I arrived in Dahl." He touched a sapphire ring. "Some are gifts from the crew I worked on, presents to ... congratulate me." It had been hard to deal with the admiration and joy his friends expressed for his "good fortune," when for him it was a disaster.

"They must have liked you very much," Kev said. An undertone pulled at his voice, as if he resisted believing his own words. "Tell me about your dice. Do you associate them with people, places, objects? Thoughts? Concepts?"

"In a way." Jeremiah's mind had always given color, texture, even personality traits to everything from simple mental images to abstract math concepts. With Quis, his associations became so vivid, the dice almost seemed alive.

Kev indicated the playing area. "Let yours interact with ours."

Jeremiah set a silver octagon by Kev's ruby. "Manager Dahl."

An amused voice sounded behind them. "Is this basic Quis?" A man with gray hair stepped past Jeremiah and knelt on the rug. He balanced an opal disk on Hevtar's arch so it shadowed the other dice. "Minister Karn."

A sandy-haired man a few years older than Jeremiah sat next to Hevtar. He placed a black sphere outside the opal's shadow. "Manager Varz."

Jeremiah wondered if they always barged into a game this way. Then it occurred to him that this might be what Kev had meant by introducing him to the others. With Quis.

The older man was elegantly thin, with the tall stature common among Cobans. Meeting Jeremiah's curious gaze, he said, "I am Savan." Although he too had the Viasa reserve, he gave off none of the dislike the boy Hevtar emanated.

The younger man smiled. "I am Niev." He actually looked friendly. "Welcome to Viasa, Jeremiah."

"Thanks," Jeremiah said.

"So." Savan surveyed the dice. "Shall we continue?"

Kev snorted. "Only one outcome exists." He dropped an obsidian block on the structure and it collapsed. "Varz."

It was an odd "move," but Jeremiah understood what Kev meant. Karn and Varz, the two most powerful Estates, had gone to war ten years ago. To say it had disrupted the Twelve Estates was an understatement.

Intrigued, he considered the dice. Could they tell history with the game? He set a bridge into the toppled structure so it linked the Karn and Varz cubes. Then he said, "The Karn and Varz negotiations after the war."

Savan nodded to him. Then they all resumed play. They soon stopped describing their dice, as the interactions among the pieces became more complex. Jeremiah had never played such Quis. They weren't trying to beat one another with competing structures. Instead, they all worked on the same pattern, using it to describe the war.

He already knew most of the history. However, the Viasa dice players had a different view of the war's most famous casualty, a Calani named Sevtar. Jeremiah knew Sevtar had died in the final battle, when Varz attacked Karn, but he had never realized the war *began* over Sevtar. Karn and Varz went to battle for a Calani—and both ended up losing him.

As the Quis session ended, Jeremiah sat back, enjoying a satisfaction similar to what he felt after he read a well-written history for his research.

Savan gave him a look of approval. “You learn fast.”

“Thanks.” Jeremiah indicated the structures sprawled across the floor. “Can you describe all history this way?”

“Not only history,” Savan said. “We project futures, model political strategies, and design trends.”

Jeremiah rubbed his chin. “You all seem to know everything that happens among the Twelve Estates. How? You never leave the Calanya and you receive no Outside input.”

“I used to think they knew everything too,” Hevtar confided, warming to Jeremiah. “But they don't, really. Even father, with three levels, can't know everything.”

“Three Levels?” Jeremiah glanced at Kev. “That means how many places you've lived, doesn't it?”

“Not exactly,” Kev said. “It refers to the Estates where a dice player has been in the Calanya.” He touched the top band on his arm. “I did my First Level at Ahkah.” His fingers brushed the second band. “Then Varz for a few years.” His touch lingered on the third band, the most elaborate. “Then I came here.”

Jeremiah could see the advantage of having higher Levels in a Calanya. When a dice player switched to a new Estate, he would bring knowledge with him that no one else knew except his former Calanya and Manager. It gave the new Manager political advantage over the previous. He had no doubt the price of higher Level contracts went up exponentially. The Oath also began to make sense, at least the part about no communication with Outsiders. It provided a way to secure the knowledge contained within the Calanya.

“You advise Manager Viasa, don't you?” he said.

Savan nodded. “Advise. Shape power.”

“But the Oath makes you rely on second-hand knowledge gleaned from higher Levels,” Jeremiah pointed out. “Doesn't that weaken your effectiveness?”

Savan shook his head. “Quite the contrary. It is our greatest strength.”

“We are almost a closed system,” Kev said. “The Outside touches our Quis only through Khal. Any



other input—speech, reading, writing—contaminates our work. The only way to affect a Calanya is through its Manager. She must be supreme at Quis, to counter Outside players—such as other Managers—who seek to influence or infiltrate her Calanya.”

New ideas were forming for Jeremiah. “Would you all play another session with me? I want to try something.”

Niev grinned. “Certainly.” The others nodded with approval. Apparently an urge to play Quis and learn from more senior Calani was more acceptable to them than Jeremiah staying by himself all day. He wasn't sure yet how he felt about living in an arrangement as communal as a Calanya, but so far it was tolerable. His suite allowed him a retreat when he needed privacy.

Jeremiah set a silver disk with gold spirals in the playing area. As the session evolved, he wove his concepts into his moves, at first puzzling the Calani, then intriguing them. He shaped an idea: the twelve Calanya on Coba were like secured, primary nodes in a culture-spanning network analogous to a computer net. The players Outside acted as nodes and links in an ever-evolving web shaped by the Managers and Calanya.

Everyone in the Twelve Estates played Quis, from the day they were old enough to hold the dice until age left them too frail to lift the pieces. Quis conveyed news, data, stories, gossip, trends, and more. Outsiders learned new moves and passed them along in their own game, influencing their opponents. So information spread, not through electronic, optical, or quantum machines, but in the malleable, subjective experience of Quis.

The other Calani picked up his intent with a skill far greater than anything he had known Outside. He had thought himself good at Quis, parlaying his knack for the gambling version into a notorious reputation. Now he felt like a novice. Even Hevtar surpassed his skill. Instead of playing against one another, though, they all worked together, reshaping Jeremiah's ideas, challenging his moves. So he absorbed meaning from the patterns.

He had known Calani were elite dice geniuses who gave a Manager prestige based on their reputation. However, he hadn't realized they took such an active role in shaping their culture. With her Quis, Khal input information into the Calanya: with their Quis, the Calani studied problems and designed strategies. They output their results to Khal and she analyzed their work. She then played with selected aides, who played with others, and so on, until Viasa's input into the general Outside web spread like ripples in water. The better a Manager played Quis and the stronger her Calanya, the greater her influence.

Quis was power.

Exhilaration swept over Jeremiah, the rush he always experienced with an exciting discovery. Lord, he wished he could write an article on this. He saw just how to open the paper, develop the ideas, and argue his conclusions.

Then his excitement faded. Fine. So it would make a great paper, maybe win him grants. Unless his situation changed, he would never have a chance to do anything with this new knowledge.

His concentration on the session began to slip. Savan finally paused in the process of placing a die. Hevtar yawned and several other Calani shifted position, rubbing their eyes or looking around.

“Perhaps we should take a break,” Savan said.

Agreement rippled around the players. As people stretched and rubbed kinked muscles, Kev regarded Jeremiah. With difficulty, he said, "I see now why so many Managers bid for your contract."

To Jeremiah's surprise, the others made quiet sounds of agreement. Savan said, "An intriguing idea of your people, to play Quis with machines."

Jeremiah smiled at the comparison. He supposed, from the Coban view, computer webs were a poor imitation of Quis, dead rather than alive.

"I'll bet you could come up with great games on these computers of yours," Hevtar said.

Jeremiah laughed. "You can indeed." More ideas for articles came to him: a comparison of top level gamers on Earth with Quis players like Hevtar; an analysis of Quis as a means of redirecting aggression from warfare to strategy games; a study of the sensual link between Quis and Coban male-female dynamics.

It all would make a veritable gold mine of scholarship—except the same institution that so excited his interest also made it impossible for him to pursue his work.

## II

### An Oath Unasked

Jeremiah glanced out his bedroom window at a crisp, clear morning. Pulling on a sweater, he went into the common room. Across the way, Hevtar was coming out of his own suite, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

The boy blinked at him. "You're going again?"

"Every morning," Jeremiah said.

A group of Calani was eating breakfast at a table. Niev looked up. "I went with him yesterday," he told Hevtar. "It was terrible. Truly terrible. I thought I would die." Then he flashed Jeremiah a conspiratorial grin.

Jeremiah smiled, glad for Niev's friendly nature. In the fifteen days since he had come to Viasa, only Niev had shown any warmth. The other Calani maintained their reserve. When they played Quis, though, he became one of them. He enjoyed Calanya Quis almost as much as his research.

Hevtar held himself even more aloof than the other Calani. Jeremiah liked him, though. The youth reminded him of himself at fourteen, fascinated with his studies to the exclusion of all else. He didn't think he had ever been skittish or moody like Hevtar, though; he tended more toward what his friend Wayland described as "amiable stoicism with your head lost in the clouds." That stoicism hadn't come easy; as a child he had ached with the ridicule he endured in school because of his awkward appearance, high grades, ineptness in sports, and lack of a fighting instinct.

In contrast, Hevtar had a fresh innocence untouched by the Outside. He had spent his youth as a prodigy sheltered from the world. Then at fourteen he entered the Calanya. Jeremiah wouldn't have traded his youth for Hevtar's, though. It was true the boy had never had to deal with the spirit-crushing experience of constant derision, even physical violence from his peers. Hevtar had lived with great honor since birth. Although it might give him a happier life, it also left him less socially mature. Jeremiah doubted

the high-strung, handsome genius could survive Outside, whereas Jeremiah had always known he could make it on his own.

Hevtar started to smile at him, then stopped. It wasn't the first time he had resisted an impulse to friendship. Now he turned away and joined the group at the breakfast table as if no one else were in the room.

Jeremiah stood for a moment, stung by the rebuff. Then he took hold of himself and went to the double doors of the common room. Opening the ornate portals, he found his escort at a round table Outside, playing Quis.

The captain blinked at him, then looked at the others with bewilderment. "He wants to do it again."

"Jeremiah, you should relax," another guard urged. "Have breakfast. Enjoy yourself."

With a half smile, he leaned against the doorframe and waited. Being an Akasi had its advantages. Khal gave him anything he wanted. Anything, that was, except his freedom.

"Manager Viasa says he can go when he pleases," the captain said. Her expression suggested Manager Viasa had lost a few Quis dice from her brain. She nodded to the guard who had tried to dissuade him. "You go, Aza. It makes me tired just watching him."

Aza sighed, rising to her feet. She went with Jeremiah back Inside and through a maze of halls that let them out into the parks. Then she paused, squinting as if she hoped he had changed his mind.

He grinned at her. Then he set off for his morning run.

The mountain air exhilarated him. The parks were ideal for running. They started out as well-tended gardens, then tangled into untamed forests that hid chill sapphire lakes. The ever-present wind rippled the forest in waves, ethereal in its wild beauty.

Although linguists translated the Teotecan word for these trees as *snowfir*, they hardly looked like firs to Jeremiah. At this high altitude they grew only about twenty feet tall. Their trunks consisted of slender white stalks that spiraled around each other. Clusters of white or pale green fruits bobbed around them, attached to the trunk every few inches, like snowy billiard balls but delicate and hollow. The pale green needles on the trunks could jab a person like bee stings and left punctures that took days to heal.

The path he followed wound through the edges of the forest. He had started running three years ago because his poor showing on the Dahl construction crew had embarrassed him. Overweight and out-of-shape, he had struggled through his shifts. Now he enjoyed running for its own sake. He would have liked a partner, but he had yet to convince anyone on Coba that it provided a sane form of exercise.

Had his stay in Viasa been voluntary, he would have thrived. Calanya Quis not only fascinated him as a research subject, it was fun to play. The Calani took it far beyond what he had learned Outside. Savan's game incorporated the wisdom of an expert who had spent decades mastering the dice. Niev's style reflected his good-natured outlook on life. Hevtar played with a naivete that stumbled at times and soared at others.

None of them, however, could match Kev's formidable gift. During one session the Third Level gave every detail about the failure of a beacon that warned riders in the mountains. It was powered by the Viasa-Tehnsa dam. Yet Jeremiah knew Kev and Khal had discussed it only with dice, never words. And

Kev's Quis brilliance only began in his ability to process huge amounts of information. With style and flair, he manipulated abstract portrayals of the political fluxes among the Twelve Estates, molding the very flow of power on Coba, for Viasa and for Khal.

Jeremiah often found Khal in his thoughts. He had never known anyone like her. He couldn't imagine a woman of her status on Earth paying him any attention. Even if she had, he would have been too flustered to respond. Khal, however, liked his reticence. It was, after all, a Viasa trait, and expected to some extent for men throughout the Twelve Estates.

A massive wall enclosed the parks, with sculpted holes and ridges that let it act as a windbreak. As he ran along the wall, he left Aza behind. She was walking on top of it, watching him, her gun at her hip, the wind whipping her tawny hair around her shoulders. She made an impressive figure, towering and muscled, lean under her violet uniform. He wondered if Coban women had always been this big, or if they had bred for those traits over the generations.

Jeremiah grinned. *You can't solve everything with brawn*, he thought to Aza. Then he grabbed a handhold on the windbreak and started to climb.

"Hey!" Aza yelled.

Looking up, he saw her striding in his direction. As he neared the top of the wall, high above the ground, the wind picked up, ripping at his hair. Aza was running now. He smiled, wondering if she thought he would climb down the other side and vanish into the mountains. Maybe he should.

He changed his mind when he reached the top.

Even knowing the south and north sides of Viasa ended in cliffs, he wasn't prepared for the reality. The builders had cut this windbreak out of the mountain. On the other side, the cliff plunged down in a vertical wall until it vanished into clouds. Far below that, mountains carpeted with mist rolled out to the horizon. He stood braced against the wind, an intense blue sky arching around him, vibrant and dark, as if he were on the pinnacle of the world.

Aza came to a huffing stop next to him. "Are you *crazy*!" she shouted, her voice almost lost in the wind.

Jeremiah grinned.

"If anything happens to you," she puffed, "Manager Viasa will throw me into prison and melt down the key."

With a laugh, he let himself down the inner side of the wall and started back to the parks. Aza followed, grumbling. As they descended into quieter air, her mutters resolved into words. "Crazy. Runs in circles and tries to fly. What ever happened to normal Calani?"

"I never claimed I was normal," he pointed out.

She froze, then looked down, her face red. "Heh, you! Are you going to talk and get me into trouble?"

"How will you get into trouble?" He jumped down onto a lawn of tiny snow-sphere clusters. "No one is here to see."

She jumped down next to him and peered through the snowfirs at the distant Estate. "So. Maybe not."

Turning back, she regarded him as if he were forbidden fruit. "I have to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"It's about the Skolian Imperialate."

"I'm no expert on Skolians."

She lowered her voice. "Is it true a man commands their military?"

"Well, yes, it is."

"No! You make fun of me."

Jeremiah laughed. "It's true."

She glowered at him. "Pah."

"Where did you hear about it?"

"A whole slew of you Earth people came around here last year," she explained. "They installed the computers Manager Viasa bought from them. One of the men told me." She grinned. "Nice-looking fellow. Like you."

"I didn't know Khal bought an Allied computer system."

Aza shrugged. "They've had it a while. No one here really knows how to use it, though." She leaned closer. "So it's true? Emperor Valdoria is *aman*?"

Mischief tugged at him. "You bet. He's bigger than you, tougher than a clawcat, and meaner than a cheated dice player."

"Oh, blow."

"It's true. His title is Emperor Skolia, though. Valdoria is his family name."

Aza scowled. "Valdoria-pootoria. Put all you offworld men in a Calanya and you wouldn't cause so much trouble." She pondered the thought. "Of course, none of you can play Quis worth spit."

"Spit, pah. I could Quis you out of your home, job, and every gold thread you own."

"A fledgling Calani and already he's conceited." She put her hands on her hips. "You think I can't play Quis better than an offworlder? I can prove you're wrong."

"I'm not supposed to play Quis with you."

"So now he's a perfect Calani."

"I don't have money to bet."

"You don't need it." She gave him an appraising look, her gaze traveling up his body with obvious

suggestion. "I know something I'd rather win from you anyway."

Jeremiah's smile vanished. Suggesting a man go to bed with a Quis opponent to pay off his debts amounted to calling him a prostitute. It floored him that she would imply such to the husband of an Estate Manager.

His reaction must have shown on his face. She frowned. "Don't act so traumatized. You're the one who broke your Oath. What did you expect me to think?"

"You thought wrong."

"Rumor says you weren't a husband by choice." Aza leaned against the windbreak. "You're a healthy young fellow. Who could blame a body for thinking you'd want a change from a woman seventeen years your senior?"

Jeremiah crossed his arms. The age difference made little difference to him. Khal's formidable reserve bothered him far more. Even after fifteen days he had no idea if she felt anything for him beyond physical desire.

"So paradise has problems, heh?" Aza made a sympathetic noise. "You can talk to me. I'm not just your guard, you know. I can be your friend too."

Friend? After she practically called him an adulterer?

A defensive note crept into her voice. "I know I'm not high-level like you. But I'm no airbug either. Why, I personally saved Viasa from collapse."

"From collapse?" He raised his eyebrows. "So how come I never heard about it?"

"Well," she amended. "Maybe not *full* collapse. But Viasa and Bahvla don't get along."

"You mean Bahvla Estate?"

"That's right. Manager Bahvla sent an agent here to spy on the Calanya." She looked smug. "I caught that scuttle-slug. Stomped her out. Put her in the Med House."

Dryly he said, "Remind me not to spy on the Calanya."

"How can you spy on what you are? Besides, no one hurts Calani. If I harmed one gorgeous hair on your gorgeous self, Manager Viasa would cork me in a bottle and throw it over the cliff." She grimaced. "That would be as bad as the time she sent me to help out at Tehnsa Estate."

"What's wrong with Tehnsa?"

"Everything." Aza waved her hand. "Without Viasa to help her, Manager Tehnsa would self-destruct."

He gave her a wicked look. "If Khal finds out you talked to me, she'll send you to Tehnsa."

She looked alarmed. "I'd rather fall off the cliff."

"I hope not." Jeremiah felt his legs growing cold. "Aza, I have to finish my run."

She shook her head. “Crazy offworlder.”

He laughed, then took off again.

\* \* \* \*

On a morning when frost traced patterns on the window, an octet of guards showed up at Jeremiah's suite. He recognized none of them. As they escorted him through unfamiliar halls, he grew uneasy. Had something happened to Khal? Last night his escort had never taken him to her suite. Although he didn't see her every night, they spent most together, and if work kept her away she sent a message.

They left him alone in an office paneled with darkwood. Armchairs stood on bronze rugs, and a desk across the room sat by a floor-to-ceiling window. Bookshelves lined the walls. A globe of Coba spun lazily on a stand, its huge polar ice caps glinting.

The door opened behind him. He turned as Khal entered the room. It was odd to see her wearing dark trousers and a shirt, with her braid hanging down her back. At night, she unwound her hair and relaxed in a robe.

She closed the door and came over to him. Standing with her this way made him even more aware of her height. She also looked tired, as if she hadn't slept.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

She wasted no time with formalities. “I realize the damage you caused my Estate resulted from ignorance. But understand me, Jeremiah—the sentence for a native Calani who committed such a crime would be prison.”

He stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Your Oath. And Aza.”

So. Someone had found out he had been talking to his guard these past few days, during his runs. “I'm sorry you're upset. But I never took the Oath of my free will. Besides, Aza and I only shared a few friendly exchanges.”

Her voice turned to ice. “Friendly?”

He suddenly realized at least part of the reason for her anger. Apparently Aza wasn't the only one who had misread his desire to speak. “We only talked.”

She pushed back disarrayed tendrils that had escaped her braid and curled around her face. “Is this truth?”

“Of course it is. Don't you know me well enough to see that?”

The relief that broke through her reserve and washed over her face answered him more than would have any words. In a more natural voice she said, “Kev and Savan suspected the two of you were talking several days ago. But they hesitated to speak. Such an accusation is a serious matter.” She shook her head. “I had good reason to trust Aza. A few years ago she uncovered a Bahvla plot to infiltrate my

Calanya. Now it appears Bahvla arranged the episode so Aza could gain my trust.”

He didn't want to believe Aza had used him. Although he found her abrasive, he had thought she might help him escape. And she enjoyed talking to him. Surrounded by the reserved Viasa Calani, with his even more reticent wife for company in the evening, he missed simple conversation.

Finally he said, “This Calanya Oath is loneliness.”

She watched his face. “I had thought ... you seemed happy.”

“At times I am.” As much as he wanted to reach for her, to tell her how much he valued their nights together, he held back, wary of her cool nature. “But the seclusion, the constraints—it will never be natural to me.”

She exhaled, stirring a lock of hair that curled around her cheek. “Jeremiah, I understand. But if you can't keep the Oath, you can't live in the Calanya or play Quis with the others. You would have to stay in a solitary suite. Input of any kind alters the patterns you build. As a Calani, you are a master of the dice. Everything that affects you goes into your Quis and from there into Viasa.”

He shook his head. “I just don't see how my talking to Aza could cause a problem.”

“Which is why she homed in on you.” Khal touched his arm. Then her reserve slid back into place and she withdrew her hand, putting the invisible wall between them that always came up, except when they made love.

“Aza would never have dared speak to a native Calani,” Khal said. “She went after the one person vulnerable to her. She purposely misled you, as with her lie about our inability to use the new computers. That all went from your dice into the Calanya Quis, then into mine, and from there into the public net. Her patterns were subtle, but repetition on the Outside magnified them. It made Viasa look incompetent.” She paused. “Aza also encouraged you to give her information, such as your knowledge about Skolians. She took all that to Bahvla, giving Bahvla advantage over Viasa.”

He just shook his head, feeling as if he had taken a punch in the stomach.

Khal spoke in a subdued voice. “I feared you had chosen to sabotage Viasa, to strike at me.”

The surprised him. “Why? It wouldn't have convinced you to let me go.”

“No. But it would have given you revenge.”

That she would even wonder if he might act out of malice bothered him. He lived by a simple principle: don't hurt people. It didn't work all the time, nor were his decisions always clear-cut, but he stuck to it as best he could. “I would never harm my own wife that way. Or Viasa. The people here never did anything to me. Hurting them would only make me like myself less.”

Some of her tension eased. “If only all of us were as even-natured.”

Bitterly he said, “Sometimes I wish I wasn't.”

“Eventually you will adapt to our ways.”



“How?” He heard the betraying loneliness in his voice. “How can anyone adapt to the isolation? Look at Hevtar. I’m the Calani nearest to his age, and I’m ten years older. What kind of life is that for a fourteen-year-old boy?”

Khal tensed. “Hevtar is unhappy? You have seen this?”

“Well, no.” Her dismay startled him. “He seems very content.” Dryly Jeremiah added, “As long as he doesn’t have to see me.”

Khal sighed. “Don’t judge him harshly. He has loyalty to his father. He will overcome his resentment toward you.”

Jeremiah couldn’t imagine why Hevtar would see him as a threat to his father. No one could touch Kev at Quis, least of all him. “When I see Kev and Hevtar together, it reminds me of how much I miss my own family.”

Her face took on an odd expression, as if he were forcing her to confront a decision she wanted to avoid.

“What is it?” he asked.

She pushed back her hair. Then she went to her desk and touched a panel. When a drawer slid open, she removed a silver disk. “This came in at the starport eight days ago. Dahl serves as our contact, so a robot drone delivered it there. Manager Dahl sent it to me.”

His pulse leapt. Without thinking through her probable reaction, he strode to the desk and reached for the disk.

Khal drew back her arm. “Your Oath.”

His need to hear the disk swept over him. Who sent it? His family? Maybe he could wrest it away from her. She had height and muscles to her advantage, but he was faster.

*Slow down*, he told himself. Even if he managed to take the disk, it wouldn’t be long before his guards showed up and knocked him out. Then what did he have? He preferred an option that neither antagonized nor injured Khal.

“If you weren’t going to play it,” he said, “why show it to me?”

She hesitated. “It is difficult to know what to do.”

“My hearing it won’t change my Quis. My wish to go home is already in every game I play.”

To his surprise, she didn’t deny his words. “I know. I try to mute it, but I can only do so much. The people of the Twelve Estates know how you feel.”

“Doesn’t that weaken your Estate?”

“It does make Viasa look—barbaric,” she admitted. She spread her hands. “We live in a modern age, with legal and social restraints on how we court our men. Even Managers must operate within certain social bounds. I knew I would receive censure for giving you no choice. And I have. I wanted you

enough to go through with it despite that.” Obviously self-conscious, she said, “But I’ve also found—well, I think many of our women would secretly like to return to the days when a warrior could carry off a husband for herself. They see me as an ancient warrior queen and you as the captured prince. That seems to have enhanced my image. People find it rather, well—mythical.”

He stared at her, floored by such strange statements, especially applied to him, Jeremiah Coltman, geek of the anthropology department. Although he had lost his chubby build, he otherwise had a view of himself far different from how the Cobans saw him. Or not different, but rather, the same qualities that had made him unsuccessful with women on Earth had the opposite effect here. Unfortunately, there was such a thing as too much “success.”

“Your world is a lot different than mine,” he said.

“I imagine so.”

“But Khal, given all that, you must see that my hearing the message won’t change my Quis.”

She paused. “It is hard to judge the effect before the cause.”

Softly he said, “Play it.”

Khal regarded him. Then she clicked the disk into a computer port on her desk.

His father’s voice floated into the still air. “Hello, Jeremiah. If this finds its way to you, I want you to know we are doing everything possible to free you. Your mother and I are also working with the authorities to obtain travel clearance for Coba. We won’t give up.” Then his mother spoke, her voice strained. “All our thoughts are with you. Your brother and sister send their best. We love you, Jeremiah. We *will* see you again, I’m sure. Love always, Mom and Dad.”

The disk hummed into silence.

His hands clenched the desk. He saw through their optimism. Visiting Coba shouldn’t take that much red tape—unless the authorities feared they would cause trouble. Even if his parents did make it here, the Cobans would never let them near him. He might never see his family again.

“I am sorry,” Khal said. “I shouldn’t have told you.”

He fought back the tears that threatened his eyes. “You would understand how they felt if you had children.”

She froze. “What makes you think I have no children?”

“How could you? We’ve only been married a few tendays.” Belatedly he realized he might have just made a terrible gaffe. She could have been married before. What if she had lost a husband? Or she might have illegitimate children. That seemed unlikely, though, given her conservative nature.

“How could you think I had no husband?” Khal asked.

“You never mentioned one.”

She leaned against the desk. “Ah, no.”

Jeremiah tensed. “What does that mean?”

“How could you not know?”

“Know*what*? ”

“I had another Akasi. We stopped years ago.”

“Stopped?” What did that mean? “Where is he?”

“In the Calanya.”

“Still?”

She tilted her head. “He and I are no longer Manager and Akasi. I wouldn't be here with you otherwise. But the Oath is for life. I swore him support and protection. Our estrangement doesn't negate my responsibility.”

Dryly Jeremiah said, “We call it alimony.”

“He told me that he visited you on your first night here.”

“*Kev*?”

“Yes.” She pushed her hand through her hair. “Kev.”

“He didn't say a word.”

“You must have seen his Viasa armbands. They are like yours.”

“I didn't understand.” He did now, though. No wonder Kev wished he would fall off a cliff. And*Hevtar*. How could he have missed it? Yes, the boy had many of Kev's traits. But his resemblance to Khal was also unmistakable.

Khal spoke softly. “I regret that you had to find out in this way. I assumed you knew. You have learned so much about us that I sometimes forget you don't know our culture as well as we do ourselves.”

He walked to the window and gazed out at the sky. “I need to think about all this.”

“Would you prefer to return to your suite?”

Relieved, he nodded.

He spent the rest of the day in his window seat, thinking about Kev and Hevtar. He wished human relationships were as easy to understand as Quis.

\* \* \* \*

Hevtar walked into the common room. “It's her!” He came to the table where Jeremiah and several other Calani were playing Quis. “I saw her windrider from my window.”

“Pah.” Savan looked up from his dice and glared at the boy. “Calm down. I can't concentrate.”

“*I am* calm,” Hevtar said.

Niev smiled at Hevtar. “Quite an occasion when Her comes to visit. Whoever Her is.”

“Manager Tehnsa,” Hevtar said.

Jeremiah was relieved for an excuse to leave the game. Since his talk with Khal yesterday, he hadn't felt much like playing Quis. “The infamous Manager Tehnsa? This I have to see.”

“You better hurry,” Hevtar said. “Her rider already landed.”

It surprised Jeremiah that Hevtar didn't rebuff him. Curious about what could convince the youth to forget his resentment, he followed the boy into his suite. Hevtar took him to a window that overlooked the airfield. Gazing down and out, Jeremiah saw Khal walking across the distant tarmac with a group of people.

“Which one is Manager Tehnsa?” he asked.

“The woman with the black hair,” Hevtar said.

Jeremiah studied the graceful figure. “Woman” wasn't really the right word. Manager Tehnsa couldn't be more than sixteen. A waterfall of black hair fell down her willowy back, glossy in the sunlight. “She's beautiful.”

“Yes,” Hevtar agreed, with great emphasis. In a shy voice, he added, “She's nice too.”

Jeremiah smiled, wondering if Khal knew how her son felt about the Tehnsa Manager. It seemed an apt pairing, the son of one Manager with another Manager.

Hevtar suddenly seemed to realize who he had invited into his room. He stopped smiling. “I didn't mean to disrupt your Quis game.”

“You didn't. I wanted to quit.”

“Oh.” The boy looked out at the airfield.

“Hevtar.” Jeremiah hesitated. “I wanted to say...”

Hevtar looked at him. “Yes?”

“I'm sorry if I've caused you any difficulty by being here.”

Hevtar shifted his feet. “It isn't really my business.”

Jeremiah searched for words. How did one discuss these things? “I didn't realize before. About your parents. I hope I didn't seem insensitive.”

“I just can't...” Hevtar glanced toward the common room. “I have a Quis session.”

“Of course.” Jeremiah let it go. When he was fourteen, he doubted he would have wanted to discuss such a convoluted situation either.

They started out of the suite. Just before they entered the common room, though, Hevtar paused and gave him a shy smile. “Some time, would you like to come over and listen to Niev and me practice? He plays the lyder. I sing.”

“Thank you,” Jeremiah said. “I’d like that.”

In the common room, after Hevtar went to his Quis game, Jeremiah headed to his suite. Before he reached it, though, he ran into Kev coming out of another common room. They both stopped, awkward with their almost-collision. Jeremiah wished he could teleport somewhere. Anywhere.

After a pause, Kev said, “Do you have a moment?”

Jeremiah shifted his feet. “Sure.”

So for the first time, he went to Kev's suite. It had a living room far more luxurious than anything else he had seen, even in the Calanya. The fixtures, trim, and braziers were gold. Standing lamps had silk shades with gold ribbing. The rugs, divans, windows, tables, and walls gleamed with the understated elegance of immense wealth. Apparently Khal's “alimony” came high. Jeremiah tried not to be irked, but he didn't succeed.

“Would you care for some liqueur?” Kev asked.

“Thank you, but no.” He wondered why Kev asked. Out of hospitality? Or some other motive? He had no idea if Kev knew he couldn't drink Coban liqueurs, only certain wines, teas, and boiled water.

*Stop it*, he told himself. If he tried to analyze every word Kev spoke, he would go nuts.

The Third Level motioned him to an armchair. As Jeremiah sat down, Kev settled into a chair across the table. He spoke quietly. “Khal told me what happened.”

Jeremiah shifted his weight. “I shouldn't have been so dense.”

“I owe you an apology. I have been ... less than courteous.”

“It's all right.” Jeremiah didn't know what else to say.

So they sat, trying not to look at each other. Then Kev went to stand at a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the airfield. “They're moving Manager Tehnsa's rider to a hangar. She must be staying for a visit.”

Relieved to change the subject, Jeremiah joined him. A crew was wheeling the rider across the blacktop. The craft looked like a giant bird with a bright red head, green plumage edged in black, talons black as lava, and gold eyes. “It's hard to believe Manager Tehnsa is as inept at Managing as everyone says.”

“She isn't.” Kev continued to watch the crew. “Caryi had an entire Estate rolled into her lap when she was only thirteen, after her predecessor died in a rock fall. Since then she has been trying to cope. Khal helps. Tehnsa is also hampered because its Calanya is small, only six Firsts and no higher Levels.”

Jeremiah glanced at Kev's three arm bands, wondering if he had ever considered leaving Viasa. It would solve the problem of having to see his ex-wife and her new husband every day. "How would she go about getting a higher Level?"

Kev looked at him. "The Estate that wants him makes an offer. If he is interested, the Managers negotiate. Counter-offers are made. Other Estates may enter the bidding. The higher the Level, the steeper the price of his contract. The practical limit for most Estates is Third Level."

So. Maybe no one could afford Kev's contract. "Why trade at all?" He thought of Aza. "If one of us went to Bahvla, wouldn't that give Bahvla power over Viasa?"

Kev snorted. "Khal would never trade with Bahvla."

"But she does with other Estates."

"Not often. High-Level trades are rare." Kev brushed his Viasa band in a gesture he often used, yet didn't seem to notice on a conscious level. "Savan came here from Tehnsa two years ago. When he left Tehnsa, Caryi lost her best Quis player. But the settlement that Viasa paid for his contract allowed Caryi to clear many of her Estate's debts."

Jeremiah could see why a player with Savan's talent would want a position at a more powerful Estate. But going from Tehnsa to Viasa was like switching from a small to a large room in the same house. Kev had come from Varz, a powerhouse Estate having only a tenuous alliance with Viasa.

Another thought came to him. "You must have been at Varz during the war."

Kev nodded. "I knew the Calani Sevtar for a short time."

"It's hard to imagine a war fought over one man."

Kev smiled slightly. "Not if you knew Sevtar. He was bigger than life, Jeremiah, huge, powerful, strong, wild, gentle when he wanted to be, affectionate. He looked like a god and he played Quis better than anyone alive. In many ways, he was the antithesis of the Coban male, yet in others he offered everything a woman could want. It all added to his mystique."

"It certainly seems to have affected Karn and Varz." Jeremiah paused. "I don't really understand Coban women."

Kev gave a dry laugh. "I quit trying long ago."

Jeremiah smiled. Then he spoke with care. "Negotiations for your trade with Viasa must have been going on then."

Kev looked out the window. The airfield was clear now. "Fourteen years ago, Manager Varz wanted to enlist Viasa as an ally. So she honored Viasa with Quis. She chose me to play dice with Khal." It was a moment before he continued. "Khal and I discovered we suited. She negotiated with Manager Varz. The settlement put Viasa into debt for years."

Jeremiah didn't want to know this, that Khal had indebted her entire Estate for another man. "Doesn't it bother you that they buy us that way?"

“No.”

“Never?”

“The Calanya is the only life I have ever wanted.”

“Don't you want to go Outside? Climb a mountain? See the world?”

Kev turned to him. “No.”

“Oh.” Jeremiah didn't know what to say to that.

“You would have liked Sevtar.” Kev smiled. “He also had this habit, running circles in the Calanya parks. He was an offworlder, too. A Skolian.”

Jeremiah stared at him. “You're joking.”

“Not at all. His ship crashed here almost thirty years ago. Now the Managers are afraid.”

“Afraid? Why?”

“He came from a powerful Skolian family.” Kev regarded him. “One that could cause Coba great harm if they knew what happened here. The Managers changed his name and identity. The name Sevtar is Coban, our god of the dawn. None of us knew Sevtar's real name. We don't make his story a secret, because its discovery would draw even more attention. However, we say very little about him to offworlders.”

Jeremiah just looked at him, his unspoken words hanging between them like an intruder: *You told me* . The Viasa Calani had already accepted what Jeremiah continued to deny, that he would never leave Coba.

### III

#### Mountain Passage

The year on Coba lasted a few months longer than on Earth. It eased from winter into spring, warmed into summer, and frosted into autumn. Viasa sat so high in the mountains that when winter returned, its storms often massed below the Estate, leaving Viasa in sunshine, subzero temperatures, and ice.

Today light poured through the windows of the morning room in Khal's suite. She sat across the breakfast table from Jeremiah, lost in silence while they ate. The blue silk of her robe glowed against her golden skin, and her hair fell over her body in red-gold waves. It wasn't only her striking appearance that attracted him now, but also qualities that made her unique: the slight curve of her lips that hinted at her hidden streak of mischief, the way she looked up from her work in welcome when his escort brought him to play Quis during the day, the sultry invitation in her gaze at night. He knew he had fallen in love with her. But she remained a cipher. She never spoke of her feelings, and her face rarely revealed her moods.

“You're quiet today,” he said.

She looked up, focusing on him. "My apologies. I must make poor company this morning."

"Is something wrong?"

She sighed. "One might say so." After considering him, she touched an audiocom set into the table.

The voice of her aide floated into the air. "Seva here."

"This is Manager Viasa. Please have the Allied files in my office sent up here."

"Right away, ma'am."

Allied files? Jeremiah gave her a questioning look, but she said nothing. From past experience, he knew that trying to draw her out would do no good. So they continued to eat.

After a while a girl tapped at the open door arch. "An aide is here to see you, Manager Viasa."

"Show her in," Khal said.

A woman with yellow hair entered, carrying a box about six inches on a side. When Jeremiah saw the comp disks in it, his pulse jumped. He would recognize those anywhere. They held all his notes from his years of fieldwork in Dahl.

Khal waited until the aide left. Then she regarded Jeremiah. "Yes. They are yours."

"What about my dissertation?" He didn't see the labels for those disks. "Was it destroyed?"

"Winds, no," Khal said. "We would never do such a thing. We know the dedication you put into your work."

"Where is it?" He knew he shouldn't let it wrench him this way. It didn't look as if he would be going home any time soon. He had found no way to escape Viasa or convince Khal to let him go. If the Allied authorities had made progress in negotiating his release, he knew nothing of it. He had begun to wonder if they had given up. With Coba under Skolian protection, Earth preferred to avoid any fuss that might attract military attention from the bellicose Skolians. Yet no matter how he ended up, he cared what had happened to his work.

"When the Council of Managers agreed to let you live in Dahl," Khal said, "we all understood why. Minister Karn knew you intended to write about us."

Anger edged his voice. "Maybe it didn't matter because she never intended to let me leave."

"We are not so devious, Jeremiah. Minister Karn would not lie to you." Khal touched the box. "Because of this, we owed you a debt. I paid it as best I knew how. I sent your study to your mentor on Earth."

Jeremiah stared at her. "You mean Professor Brenn? You sent him my thesis?"

Khal took a disk out of the box. A holo of the Harvard seal gleamed on its shimmering surface. "A windrider delivered this while you were still asleep."

He swallowed. "Khal, play it."



“Are you sure? It won't change anything.”

“Yes.” His pulse raced. *What had Brenn thought?* “I'm sure.”

As she clicked the disk into a slot on the table, Jeremiah tensed. What if Brenn didn't like the work? What if he thought it incomplete or of poor quality? Even if Jeremiah could have presented his thesis to his doctoral committee, they might have found it wanting. Maybe Khal was right. Brenn's response might only dishearten him.

But he had to know.

Brenn's voice rose into the air. “Jeremiah, hello. If you are listening to this, you probably know the Cobans sent me your work.” He paused. “To say their action surprised us would be an understatement. In any case, I submitted it to your examination committee.”

Jeremiah blinked. Why bother giving it to the examiners when he wasn't there for them to examine him?

Brenn spoke as if anticipating his reaction. “A thesis without an author to defend it is unusual. However, after reading your work and considering your circumstances, the committee decided to accept the dissertation without your oral exam. In cases such as yours, the oral is only a formality anyway.” He paused. “Your committee, the department, and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences concurred. You were granted your doctorate during the last graduation.”

They gave him a Ph.D. *without* his final defense? How? He certainly hadn't considered the oral a formality. He had feared he wouldn't pass.

Brenn continued. “Your work has provoked more talk around here than I've seen in years.” He cleared his throat. “You raised quite a stir with the section on the evolution of the Calanya from a harem of the Managers' husbands into a group of elite dice players who aren't married to the Manager. Your arguments that polygamy for either sex destabilizes a society has debates going. Dean Baker claims it's hooey, Melissa Alli thinks you're brilliant, and Wayland is somehow running computer simulations on it, lord only knows how.” Awkwardly he added, “But perhaps you have had more chance to test your hypotheses about the Calanya than you would have preferred.”

No kidding, Jeremiah thought.

“You might like to know,” Brenn continued. “You were awarded the Feldman Fellowship in Anthropology. I also submitted your dissertation to the Academy of Planetary Studies.” He paused. “Jeremiah, you won the Goldstone Prize.”

“*What?*” Jeremiah's hand tightened on the stem of the crystal goblet that held his water.

“I think this was the first time a Goldstone winner couldn't attend the ceremony,” Brenn said. “Your award monies will be held for you until—well, until you can claim them.”

After a pause, Brenn said, “Your family sends their love. We are all proud of you.”

Then the disk went silent.

The stem of Jeremiah's goblet suddenly snapped. He stared at the line of red that welled from the cut on

his hand. Then he dropped the glass, and it shattered across the mosaic tiles on the floor.

“Jeremiah?” Khal started to reach toward him.

“No!” He pushed back his chair with a jerk, then rose to his feet and strode away from the table. Beyond the horseshoe arch, he entered a lofty corridor. Darkwood paneled one wall but the other was glassplex. It looked out into pure sky.

Far below, the Teotec Mountains rolled away, wreathed in the mists and carpeted by richly growing snowfirs, the Forest of the Clouds. Lake-of-Shadows made a dark blue glimmer in the north and Lake-of-Tears glistened silver-blue in the south. Far to the east, the snow-covered tip of Mount Shadows Peak lifted into the sky. The panoramic view mocked him, a reminder that he lived in a gilded prison, forbidden the freedom promised by that spectacular landscape.

The hall ended in a round chamber with its back wall and floor carved from the cliff itself. The other walls were glassplex that polarized to mute the Sun's glare. The chamber wedged into the cliff like a bubble on that great, sheer expanse of rock.

A bench jutted out from the back wall. Jeremiah dropped onto it, rested his elbows on his knees, and put his head in his hands.

Boots sounded in the entrance. He looked up to see the captain of his Calanya escort. Then Khal appeared behind her.

“You may wait in the morning room,” she told the guard.

After the captain left, Khal sat on the bench near Jeremiah. She spoke with care. “These honors you received—they mean much, yes?”

“What does it matter?” He stared into the sky that arched around the chamber. “I'll never be able to accept them.”

“It might help to talk.”

That was a switch. Usually he was the one who wanted her to open up. Now she sat quietly, neither pushing nor withdrawing into her reserve.

After a while, he spoke. “The doctorate is what I was working on all those years in Dahl. They don't normally grant it without final processes I couldn't do here. But they gave it to me anyway.” He swallowed. “The fellowship is a research grant awarded each year for work that led to a doctorate in anthropology.”

“Given to only one person? Out of everyone?”

“Yes. But it's no big deal.”

“No?” She regarded him. “I think this doctorate of yours and this prestigious Feldman Fellowship are far greater honors than you admit.”

It had never occurred to Jeremiah that he would win the Feldman. Although he did well in research, the fellowship usually went to someone who also had a top record in academic courses. His grades were

nothing to boast about. Research was what he loved, usually to the detriment of his classes.

What dazed him, though, was the Goldstone. He had no idea what possessed the Academy to give it to him. It always went to a seasoned faculty member in a major academic department. For a graduate student to win for a doctoral dissertation was unheard of. It assured him of a good shot at any academic job he wanted. He stood on the verge of realizing his dreams—and Coba had stolen them.

Khal was watching him. “This Goldstone, what does it mean?”

Jeremiah swallowed. “It means that people I don't deserve to call my colleagues think my work is the best done in our field this last year.” He turned to her. “Don't you see? This is all I've ever wanted. You've taken my dreams.”

Quietly she said, “It was a mistake to play the disk.”

“Let me go, Khal. Let me go home.”

“Even if I could take away the Calanya Oath, which I can't, we could never let you leave now. You know too much.”

“You don't want me to write about the Inside.”

“In part. It is private to us.” She paused. “But your knowledge of Sevtar is more serious. His family wields immense power among the Skolians. If they ever learned what happened to him here, they would seek vengeance.”

He shook his head. “I'll never mention him.”

“I have no right to risk the safety of my people.”

Jeremiah rose to his feet and crossed to the curving wall. A misty cloud drifted by below the chamber. “I don't deserve the Goldstone anyway. My work was incomplete.”

Khal came to stand behind him, sliding her arms around his waist. He saw her reflected in the glass, looking out over his head at the breathtaking view.

She spoke quietly. “I know you, Jeremiah. You would never rest until you created perfection. Even then you would be dissatisfied. I read this work of yours before I sent it to Earth. You deserve every honor they gave you.”

He blinked. “You read my thesis?”

“Yes. It took some time. My English is terrible.” She tilted her head. “It is strange to see the Twelve Estates through the eyes of an offworlder. But your love of Coba came through in all you wrote.”

It meant a great deal to him to know she had liked his work. Even so, he couldn't tell her what she wanted to hear, that his love of her world would make up for the loss of his own. So they stood in silence, watching the sky.

After a while she said, “I attend the Council of Managers at Karn Estate soon. I have been thinking that, if you like, I will bring you with me.”

He knew she never traveled with Calani. This was her way of trying to ease his unhappiness. “Yes. I would like that.”

Some of the tension in her embrace eased. She drew him around so they faced each other, her arms still around his waist. “Before we leave for Council, Manager Tehnsa is coming here to visit. I would like you to play Quis with her.”

That surprised him. Although Khal often had her Calani sit at Quis with Caryi, she usually chose experienced players. “Are you sure you want me to do it? Not Kev or Savan?”

Khal nodded. “I hope an infusion of new ideas will strengthen her game. You see things in a different way.”

“How about Hevtar?”

“Hevtar?” She gave him a puzzled smile. “He’s a child.”

“Not really.” Jeremiah thought back to their sessions. “He has a fresh outlook and he understands Tehnsa.”

“He does have a remarkable style, doesn’t he?” A mother’s pride warmed her voice.

“He does. And something else, Khal.”

“Yes?”

“Caryi needs a higher Level Calani. And an Akasi. Hevtar might consider it.” Given what Jeremiah had seen, Hevtar would consider it paradise.

Khal dropped her arms. “Hevtar go to another Estate? As Akasi? Of course not. He is far too young.”

“Aren’t most highborn boys here betrothed by fifteen?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted. “In more conservative Estates.”

Dryly he said, “Viasa is hardly a hotbed of radicalism.”

She smiled slightly. “No, I suppose not.”

“You have to let him grow up.”

She considered him, then walked over to gaze out at the sky. “I would miss him. So would his father.”

Jeremiah understood. The deep, abiding love Kev and Khal felt for their son showed in their every word and action toward him. For all that Khal resisted the idea of a betrothal, though, he suspected she realized the match made good sense. Caryi and Hevtar were young by most standards, but the conservative upper echelons of Coban society encouraged early marriages among the highborn, to produce heirs. Tehnsa needed a Second Level, one with a fresh outlook, and Hevtar needed someone like Caryi who understood his moody, stratospheric intellect. The pairing would let him stay near Viasa, yet at the same time give him independence. He and Caryi would also have Viasa to guide them in

governing Tehnsa.

Jeremiah paused. “Khal—?”

She turned to face him. “Yes?”

“What happened? With Kev and you?”

“We ... had a disagreement.”

He waited. “Yes?”

It was several moments before she spoke. But this time she did answer. “He wanted more children. I didn’t.”

“Hevtar is a wonderful young man.”

“Yes. He is.” With difficulty she said, “I have always thought it important that I give my child my best personal attention. But I am also a Manager. I didn’t feel I could do both with more than one child.” She paused. “My refusal caused rancor. Kev stopped caring for ... for Viasa.”

*No, Jeremiah thought. He didn't stop caring for you.* “He never left Viasa.”

“I offered. Other Estates expressed interest, despite the immense cost of his contract. He didn’t want to go. Why should he? Viasa is a good Estate.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “The Calanya trade—that’s the only equivalent of divorce that exists for an Akasi.”

“I don’t understand this word ‘divorce.’”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

A long standing heartache showed behind her reserve. “I would never have brought you here if Kev and I still lived as Akasi and Manager.”

“He’s still your husband.”

“You know my people no longer practice polygamy. You wrote this yourself in your study of us.”

“But for Managers it’s still legal. No matter how you evade the description, you have both Kev and me.” He made himself say the truth he had avoided. “Kev will always come first for you.”

“Jeremiah, no.” She started toward him, but stopped when he put up his hands as if to hold her off. “Surely you know what you mean to me.”

“How can I know? You never say.” Pain edged his voice. “Oh, I know, you’re proud of your young trophy husband. But I’m not *aprize*. What happens when you tire of your ‘exotic prince’? When the novelty wears off and you want a man who understands and values your way of life?”

“You’re wrong if you think you mean only that to—to Viasa.”

He gave a laugh with more pain than humor in it. “You can't even say ‘*tome*. ”

She spread her hands, her body silhouetted against the sky. “Perhaps you want more from me than I know how to give.”

Softly he said, “That works both ways, Khal.”

\* \* \* \*

A loud buzzing jarred Jeremiah awake. He opened his eyes into the darkness of his suite. Fumbling on the nightstand by the bed, he switched on the audiocom.

“What?” he mumbled.

“Jeremiah?” Khal's tense voice came out of the audiocom.

Her urgency pulled him awake. “What's wrong?”

“Can you read starship trajectory scans?”

Puzzled, he said, “I took some astronomy in college. We covered the basics. But that was years ago.”

“That's more than any of us have.” She took a breath. “We need you in the observatory tower. Hurry. Please.”

He sat up, reaching for his robe. “What happened?”

“A starship.” Strain crackled in her voice. “It's out of control and headed for Viasa.”

\* \* \* \*

Jeremiah ran through the Estate, surrounded by his escort. When they reached the observatory tower, he raced up the spiral stairs two at a time. They strode into the observatory, a domed room with a telescope run by antique gears. In sharp contrast, the gleaming consoles in the center of the room belonged to the modern computer network Viasa had been incorporating over the past year.

Khal stood at the central console, still in her day clothes, with a cluster of aides. They looked as if they had worked straight through the night. Kev was leaning over the console, studying its screens, his hair and clothes tousled as if he too had just run here from the Calanya. It didn't surprise Jeremiah to see him; Kev's mathematical gifts went hand in hand with his Quis expertise. Holographic icons glowed above one screen and data spilled across another. A third projected a holographic trajectory map for a ship already within Coba's atmosphere.

As Jeremiah came up to them, Khal indicated the trajectory holo. “Can you interpret the map? We've never had reason to work with this aspect of the system.”

Jeremiah hesitated, aware of the Outsiders present.

Khal spoke quietly. “Break the Oath. Lives depend on what you know.”

He nodded, then concentrated on the map. Kev moved aside, giving him a better view.

“You're right,” Jeremiah said. “The ship is headed for Viasa. I don't think it is out of control, though.” He looked over the console. “Will this respond to my voice?”

“Tell it your name.” Khal spoke into a comm on the console. “Saje, give access to the next voice identifier.” Then she nodded to Jeremiah.

He spoke in the comm. “Jeremiah Coltman.”

Saje, the computer, answered. “Access granted.”

“Give me what you have on the incoming ship,” Jeremiah said. “Use graphics as much as you can.” He had always been better at interpreting images than numerical data.

Holos of graphs and blurred space vessels appeared above several screens. Statistics flowed across others. The longer he studied the jumble of data, the more it baffled him. It was like poorly translated text, but in images instead of words. Saje couldn't even ID the type of craft coming in, let alone give details. It could be anything from a windrider to a military dreadnought.

Suddenly it hit him. “Saje, you use Allied standards, don't you?”

“That is correct,” Saje said.

“Can you give me the analysis using Skolian protocols?”

“Working.” The holos reformed—and this time they made sense.

“It's a Skolian ship,” Jeremiah said. “Civilian, I think.” He glanced at Khal. “It looks like a scout.”

Relief washed across her face. She must have feared the same thing he hoped for, that the ship had come for him. If it were Skolian, though, that wouldn't be the case. More likely it was off-course for the starport.

“Will it miss Viasa?” she asked.

“I'm not sure.” He studied the displays. The data was scrolling in Skolian glyphs now, which he couldn't read, but he understood the holos. Sweat beaded on his temples despite the cool air. “If it doesn't alter course, it will hit the city.”

Khal exhaled. “Can we contact it?”

“I think so.” He looked around. “Is your audiocom hooked into the computer's long-range signaler?”

“I don't know. What does that mean?”

“The signaler can contact the ship,” he said. “When the techs set up your system, they should have linked your audiocom into the signaler or else installed a long range comm. Did they discuss it with you?”

“Not really. We had no need for it. This computer system does Estate management, not starship landing.” She regarded him. “Can you set it up?”

“I don't know how. But the computer might.” He leaned over the console. “Saje, can you talk to the incoming ship?”

“At the moment, no,” it answered. “However, you are right that I may be able to link the audiocom into my signaler. I need details on the audiocom technology.”

Khal spoke. “Look in the files on the Estate electrical systems under ‘intranet connections.’”

“Working,” Saje said.

Jeremiah studied the holos rotating above the console. “The ship has slowed some, but it's still coming in too fast. If it hits Viasa, it could cause a lot of damage.”

“We're already evacuating, into the east canyon.” Khal turned to Kev. “You better go too. My aides can take you.”

He shook his head. “I'm staying.”

She stiffened, her dismay at hearing his voice obvious. “You must go with them, Kev. You might be hurt if you stay.”

“I'm not going to leave you,” he told her.

“You mustn't endanger yourself.” She lifted her arm and he started to move, as if to take her hand. Then they stopped, obviously aware of the people watching them. Khal lowered her arm and Kev took a breath.

Jeremiah stood at the console, awkward and self-conscious. He felt like an interloper. Seeing Khal and Kev together, so alike in background, outlook, and power within their separate spheres of accomplishment, he knew they were the two halves of Viasa. They shared a closeness he would never have with Khal, not if he spent his entire life here and Kev left tomorrow.

Static suddenly erupted from the comm, accompanied by a man speaking Skolian Flag. “—read me? I repeat, I'm receiving your signal. Please respond.”

For an instant Jeremiah's mind blanked. Although he understood some Skolian Flag, he spoke almost none, and for the past four years he had heard only Teotecan.

Then bits of his meager Skolian vocabulary came back. He leaned over the comm. “Know English you? Spanish? French?”

The pilot switched into heavily accented Spanish. “This is Dalstern GH3, scout class II. Viasa, I need holomaps. These mountains are much trouble. The wind make problem also.”

“Can you link your computers to our system here?” Jeremiah asked in Spanish. “We will help guide you down.”

“I try.” He paused. “Do you receive?”

Saje spoke in Teotecan. “His system uses ISC standard ninety-two. I can only process some of its



input.”

Khal looked at Jeremiah. “What does that mean?”

He raked his hand through his curls. “Your system was never set up for this. It does have a lot of what we need, but most of it uses Allied standards. Saje is having trouble with the form of the incoming data.”

“Can you tell it the right form?” she asked.

He spread his hands. “It's like trying to translate one language to another, on the spur of the moment, when I don't speak one that well and can't say anything in the other.”

“What about the pilot's computers?”

Jeremiah spoke into comm. “Dalstern, can you send your data in an Allied protocol?”

“Which one?” the pilot asked.

“Saje, help him figure it out.”

“Working,” Saje said.

The pilot paused. “Viasa, your data is incomplete.”

“What's missing?” Jeremiah asked.

The pilot listed acronyms, none of which Jeremiah knew. When he paused, Jeremiah said, “Saje, do you understand that?”

“Enough to know I'm missing some important files.”

“Viasa,” the pilot said, “we are maybe close to what we need. Can you send the equations that transform the coordinate system in your primary nav module to the system we use?”

Jeremiah hesitated. “Can you do that, Saje?”

“It requires software I don't have.”

“It can't be that hard to figure out.

“Whether it is hard or easy is irrelevant,” Saje said. “I don't know what transform to apply. If I use the wrong one, it could do more harm than good.”

“Can't you run comparisons with the Dalstern?”

“We are trying. But we have incompatibilities. It hampers the procedure.”

Khal regarded Jeremiah, her face pale. “Can you tell it the right transform?”

He shook his head. “I'm no astronavigator.”

“You said you studied it in school.”

“I hardly even remember the Allied protocols, let alone Skolian. And I've never been that great at math.”

Kev spoke. “Use Quis.”

Jeremiah jerked, as startled as everyone else. It was one thing for an offworld First Level to break his Oath; another to hear one of the leading Calani among the Twelve Estates do it, not once, but several times.

“You know more than you think,” Kev told him. “You wouldn't do so well at Quis otherwise. Use the dice. Use the patterns in your mind.”

Jeremiah had no idea if it would work, but he had nothing better to offer. Taking a breath, he tried to calm his mind into the meditative state that often came when he played Quis. He let the few formulas he remembered rise in his mind.

*Make them dice*, he thought.

He sat at the console and rolled out his dice on a flat screen. In the Calanya, they used Quis to study political, cultural, historical, and social relationships; now he used it to do mathematics. He chose different pieces for different symbols, then “wrote” equations by making Quis structures.

The comm crackled with the pilot's voice. “Viasa, where is beacon to guide aircraft in these mountains?”

Jerked out of his concentration, Jeremiah knocked over a structure. Dice flew across the console.

“Ah, no.” Trying to relax, he gathered up the pieces and started again.

Khal spoke to the pilot in broken Spanish. “Say again?”

“The warning beacon,” he said. “Where is it?”

“Broken,” Khal told him. She glanced at Jeremiah, her question obvious: *How does he know we have a beacon?*

“It's probably in a Skolian file on Coba,” Jeremiah said. “Or his scanners might have found something.” When she indicated the comm, he spoke into it. “Dalstern, we have holomaps for you, but we have a mismatch in protocols. We are working on it. Please stand by.”

“Understood,” the pilot said.

Concentrating on his dice, Jeremiah incorporated the rules of mathematics into the rules of Quis. He was trying to derive equations with Quis. He discovered the math was easier when he thought in terms of dice structures.

Suddenly a concept snapped into place. Yes! He saw how the Skolian and Allied methods for describing spatial and temporal behavior related.

As Jeremiah gave his results to Saje, he glanced at the evolving holomap that showed the ship's progress. He could only imagine what it must be like to hurtle through the jagged Teotecs with neither

maps nor a beacon. The ship obviously had sensing equipment or it wouldn't have made it this far. But it was designed for space rather than planetary maneuvers, and the savage winds in the upper Teotecs would tear a less sturdy craft apart. The ship had slowed more, but it was still coming in too fast.

“Viasa, I need maps,” the pilot said.

“I'm sending what I have.” Jeremiah prayed he had derived the right transform; otherwise, he could be sending the pilot to his death.

“Received,” the pilot said.

Khal spoke. “Jeremiah, what can we do to help?”

“Guidance.” He studied the holomap. “He's about one span north and two spans above Grayrock Falls. What's the clearest passage through there?”

“He must avoid the Heska Cliffs,” Khal said. “He should go higher, one span, and to the east one third.”

Jeremiah told Saje. Then he asked, “Dalstern, did that come through?”

“Part of it,” the pilot answered. “I pull up.”

Watching the holomap, Jeremiah spoke to Khal. “He's up about half a span. Will he make it over the cliffs?”

“He must go higher,” she said. “If he can't, he should go east two spans. A small pass is there.”

Jeremiah input the data and watched the holomap change. “That looks good—ah,*no!*”

The map fragmented. In that same instant, the pilot said, “Viasa, we have problem.”

“We too,” Jeremiah said. “Saje, what happened?”

“You only gave me a partial transform,” Saje said.

Jeremiah swore under his breath. What had he missed? Struggling to focus his mind, he turned back to his dice. But his mind kept coming up with images of the ship hurtling toward them, breaking his concentration.

“Viasa, I need set-down coordinates,” the pilot said.

“We're working on it.” Jeremiah glanced at Khal. “Where should he land?”

“West of Viasa. Away from the evacuation.”

Jeremiah stared at her. “The west is sheer cliff face.” He was painfully aware of time passing. If he couldn't solve the transform problem, the pilot would have little control over where he landed—or crashed.

Kev spoke. “The Calanya parks. That will take him away from the city without sending him over the cliffs.”

As soon as he saw Khal's dismay, he understood: to let a ship destroy the Calanya would violate her sense of decency at a level so basic it was part of her. He could almost feel her weighing the pilot's death against that destruction.

Then she blew out a gust of air. To an aide, she said, "Double-check that the Calanya has been evacuated." As the aide took off, Khal turned to Jeremiah. "Send him to the parks."

"It's a small area for a ship without a map," Jeremiah warned. "If he misses, he could hit the Estate."

"We must protect the evacuees," Khal said. "The Estate can be rebuilt. People cannot."

Khal's aide came striding back to them. "The Calanya is empty. The only person still there is a guard captain."

"Good." Khal motioned to her aides. "All of you, go with the evacuation. Let them know the situation and make sure they take cover in the lower end of the canyon. Even if the ship hits on that side of Viasa, it probably can't penetrate so narrow an area."

Intent on his dice, Jeremiah barely heard the aides leave. As he lifted a platinum cube, Kev said, "Wait." He reached forward and moved several pieces. "Try this instead."

Jeremiah nodded, a new pattern evolving in his mind based on Kev's moves. He continued to play. Every second that passed felt like the warning tick on an antique clock. The Observatory stood in the path of the incoming ship. If the vessel hit it, the impact could sheer off the dome and destroy everything within—including them.

He tried to think faster, but it only made his Quis frantic. Kev made another move, then changed his mind and tried a different one. Jeremiah picked up his intent and rearranged several structures. He still couldn't find the missing part—couldn't make it—

"Viasa, I have no more time," the pilot said. "I guess coordinates."

Suddenly Jeremiah saw the pattern, beautiful and elegant. "Dalstern, I have it!" He gave Saje the new equations as fast as he could trace a light stylus across the screen.

"Received." Relief washed the pilot's voice. "Suggest you get out of there. Over and out."

"Over and out," Jeremiah said, jumping to his feet.

With Khal and Kev, he raced across the observatory. They sped down the stairs and out into emptied halls. Then they ran out into the starlit Calanya parks. Wind pummeled them with fists of air, and thunder roared above the keening wind.

No, not thunder. A starship engine.

Jeremiah picked up his pace, then realized he had left Khal and Kev behind. As he whirled around, Khal stopped, staring at the sky. "*No!*" she shouted.

The ship hurtled out between two peaks high above Viasa, making a giant shadow in the sky. It wasn't big for a starship, but compared to the Estate it loomed huge. Its engines roared in the wind.

Khal took off with Kev at her side, her hand reaching out to Jeremiah as if she sought to protect both him and Kev against these forces so far beyond her control. As they raced for the Estate, the ship skimmed over the city, dropping at an alarming rate. It snapped the spire off a tower.

They slowed then, knowing they had no chance of making it to the canyon in time. Either the ship would miss them or it wouldn't. As they stared upward, they backed toward the Estate, more by instinct than because it would do any good.

The ship grazed a roof, smashing its crenellations. Then it cleared the Estate, dropping fast. It rammed down into the Calanya parks, still skimming forward. In a scream of high-pressure composite on bedrock, it tore up ground cover and blasted trees as it shot across the parks.

With an explosive crash, the ship slammed into the windbreak—and the gigantic wall shattered like glass. Crumpled but intact, the craft came to a shuddering stop, jutting over the cliff. In a nightmare of slow motion, it began to tip over the edge.

Without pausing to think, Jeremiah ran for the ship, pushed from behind by the wind as he dodged scorched areas of the parks. By the time he reached the craft, he had far outdistanced Khal and Kev. He pounded his fists against the unyielding hull. “You have to get out!” he shouted.

A hand closed around his arm and someone swung him around. Even before he looked up—and up—he knew it couldn't be Khal or Kev. Neither had such towering height. In the starlight, he couldn't see much more of the man than his massive size.

The Skolian released his arm and spoke in Spanish. “I've come for a man called Jeremiah Coltman.”

Jeremiah took a breath. “I'm Coltman.”

The Skolian took his chin and turned his face into the starlight, one way, then the other. Then he let go and pulled up Jeremiah's arm to look at his armbands. “So. You are. We must hurry.” Before Jeremiah could respond, the man grasped his arm and took off, pulling Jeremiah with him.

As they reached the airlock, Jeremiah balked. What did the Skolians want with him? If he went with this pilot, he could find himself in a worse situation than if he stayed here.

A voice came through the wind. “Jeremiah,” Khal called. “Wait!”

The Skolian spun around, his hand falling to his hip. With a lurch of dismay, Jeremiah saw that the man wore a Jumbler, a military sidearm that could destroy Khal as fast as antimatter annihilated matter. Khal and Kev stood a short distance away, Kev staring as if he were seeing a supernatural being.

As the Skolian drew his weapon, Jeremiah caught his arm, praying he didn't activate automatic reflexes that made the man shoot him instead. “Please. Don't hurt them.”

Khal came closer. “Don't go, Jeremiah.”

He swallowed, suddenly knowing he was going to trust this stranger. It might be his only chance to return home.

His voice caught. “I have to.” After seeing Khal and Kev together tonight, he could no longer deny what

he had always known at a subconscious level. They completed each other. When Hevtar left home to wed Caryi, they would probably turn to each other to fill the void. Jeremiah couldn't bear to live with Khal knowing another man would always claim her heart.

She came to him. "Don't go. Viasa has come to care—" She took a breath. "I have come to care. For you."

Her look was aching familiar, the one that caressed him after they made love, that held promises of affection she never spoke aloud, always leaving him in doubt. Now she added the words he had needed to hear, and even on the brink of escape he wanted to take her into his arms and promise he would stay.

He struggled with his words, aware of the Skolian stranger listening to them. "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. But I can't be what I'm not. And I could never share you. It would kill me." He swallowed. "Oh God, Khal, don't let pride keep you apart from the man you really love. Whatever you and Kev said to each other all those years ago ... let it mend."

"Jeremiah," she murmured. The silver track of a tear slid down her face, catching starlight.

The pilot spoke with unexpected gentleness. "We must go."

Softly Khal said, "Good-bye, beautiful scholar."

Jeremiah wiped a tear off his face. "Good-bye, Khal."

The Skolian was already opening the airlock. As he paused to let Jeremiah enter, he looked back at Kev. "Don't tell anyone," he said in Teotecan. "You know why."

Then he closed the hatch, cutting them off from Viasa.

\* \* \* \*

Jeremiah sat in the co-pilot's seat while the Skolian took them away from Coba. On the holoscreen, he watched Coba recede until she became a jeweled orb, a beautiful Quis die among stars and stardust. Another tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped it away, not wanting the stranger to see.

The pilot remained intent on his controls, more so than the ship probably required. His concentration gave Jeremiah a portion of privacy.

After a time, when Jeremiah had recovered some, he looked more closely at his rescuer. The man's skin, hair, and eyes had a gold cast. His skin flexed like tissue, but looked metallic. He had no doubt the man's alterations improved him over a normal human. He appeared hale and fit, with a powerful physique. Jeremiah was no judge of appearance in men, but even he could see this Skolian had remarkable good looks. Gray streaked his hair. He appeared about forty, but his facial expressions had a maturity that came from many more years of life, which suggested he enjoyed the benefits of delayed aging. Taken with the engineering on his body, it made Jeremiah suspect he came from a wealthy, powerful segment of the Skolian population.

The Jumbler gun at his hip was military issue. He also wore heavy military gauntlets embedded with conduits, picotech controls, comm meshes, and a wide gold strip around each wrist. Although the gauntlets looked solid, they flexed with his movements like a second skin.

The man glanced at him. In Spanish, he asked, “Are you all right?”

Jeremiah nodded. “Yes. Thank you for your trouble.”

The man shrugged. “It is not so much trouble.”

“You could have been killed.”

“I have seen worse.” He paused. “I expect to have the beacon, though. It help that you know that transform.”

Jeremiah thought of his half-panicked Quis. “I was guessing. Playing dice with your life.”

“Such a problem take more than guesses.”

“I was lucky.”

The man's face gentled. “You are not what I expect.”

“I'm not?”

“The genius who make history when he win this famous prize at twenty-four? I expect you to have a large opinion of yourself. But it seems not that way.”

“I didn't deserve the Goldstone. Besides, that is hardly reason for the Skolian military to rescue me.”

“They didn't. They know nothing about this.” The man paused. “I take you to a civilian port. From there, we find you passage to Earth.”

It made no sense. Why would this Skolian help him? Was he a wealthy eccentric? Then how did he have a Jumbler? Jeremiah considered him. “At Viasa, you used some Teotecan. You even knew how to read my name from the Calanya bands. How?”

The man answered in perfect Teotecan, his accent heavy but easy to understand. “It doesn't seem to bother you to speak.”

“Well, no.” Jeremiah blinked, startled by his fluency. “Should it?”

The man spoke quietly. “It was years before I could carry on a normal conversation with an Outsider.”

An awareness that had been tugging at Jeremiah's mind suddenly became clear. The gold bands in the man's gauntlets weren't high-tech equipment.

They were Calanya guards.

Jeremiah stared at him. “You were a *Calani*? ”

The man reached into his pocket and took out an armband. “I thought this might answer your questions.”

Jeremiah took the band. He recognized both the insignia of Karn Estate and the Akasi symbol. The man who wore this had been Akasi to the ruler of a world. The name said *Sevtar Karn*.

“You're him.” Jeremiah looked up. “Sevtar. The one they went to war over.”

“Actually, my name is Kelric. They called me Sevtar.”

“But you're *dead*. ”

Kelric smiled. “I guess no one told me.”

Jeremiah flushed. “They think you burned to death.”

“I escaped during the fires. In all the chaos, I managed to take a windrider and fly to the port.”

“Why do you let them think you died?” Jeremiah paused. “Did you hate Coba so much?”

Kelric considered. “At times. But it became a home I valued. Eventually, one I loved.” He extended his hand for the armband. When Jeremiah gave it to him, he ran his thumb over the Karn symbol. Then he put the band in his pocket. “Several of my Oaths were like yours. Forced. But I gave the Oath freely to Ixpar Karn, Minister of the Twelve Estates. When I swore loyalty to her, I meant it.” He regarded Jeremiah. “I will protect Ixpar, her people, and her world as long as it is within my power to do so.”

A chill ran up Jeremiah's spine. He hoped this man never saw him as an enemy. “Why come for me?”

Kelric spoke dryly. “It was obvious no one else was going to do it. Your people and mine, they've been playing this dance of politics for years. You got chewed up in it.” He touched the wrist guard in his gauntlet. “I spent eighteen years as a Calani. Everything in me went into the Quis. I was a Jagernaut. A starfighter pilot. It so affected the dice web that the Cobans went to war. I had no intention of leaving you in the Calanya, another cultural bomb ready to go off.”

Jeremiah remembered how his few talks with Aza had harmed Viasa. He could barely even imagine the havoc a Jagernaut in the Calanya could create.

Then he thought of Kev's expression when he had seen Kelric. “You knew Kev.”

Kelric nodded. “At Varz. Kevtar Jev Ahkah Varz. He called himself Jev then, because people mixed up our names.”

It sobered Jeremiah to realize he had never even known Kev's full name. “Why did you tell him not to say anything?”

Kelric regarded him. “I don't want my family seeking vengeance against Coba for what happened to me. They think I was a POW all those years. I intend for it to stay that way.”

“Who is your family?”

“Valdoria.”

Jeremiah swallowed. Even he knew of the Valdoria name. *Powerful* was an understatement.

“Maybe someday I can return to Ixpar on my own terms,” Kelric said. “But it isn't possible now. I don't want her dragged into Skolian politics unless I'm secure enough in my own position to make sure neither



she nor Coba comes to harm.” Wryly he added, “And believe me, if Ixpar knew I was alive, she would become involved.”

Jeremiah thought of Khal. “Coban women are—” He searched for the right word. “Well, they certainly aren’t tentative.”

Kelric laughed. “No, they aren’t.”

“I thought I would never see home again.”

“Your rescue has a price.” Flint showed in his gaze. “If you renege, you will bear the wrath of my family. And myself.”

He could guess what Kelric required. “I’ll never reveal you were on Coba.”

“Good.”

“But how do I explain my escape?”

“It’s remarkable,” Kelric commented, with a slight smile. “You managed to fly a windrider to the port on your own.” He paused. “I’ve entered the necessary records and had the port send a message about it from you to Manager Viasa.”

“So she will tell the same story?”

“Yes.”

Jeremiah knew Khal would welcome the chance to explain his escape without implicating Coba in Kelric’s captivity. Softly he said, “I’ll miss her.”

“Coban women do have that effect,” Kelric admitted. The hint of a smile showed on his face. “Gods only know why. They are surely exasperating.”

Jeremiah smiled. “Yes,” he said, also agreeing with the unstated love beneath the words.

“There is a favor I would ask of you,” Kelric said.

Jeremiah wondered what he could possibly give such a powerful man. “A favor?”

Kelric unfolded a tray from his seat arm, extending it to Jeremiah’s seat. Then he reached into his pocket—and took out a dice pouch. “I should like to play Calanya Quis again.”

“I would like that.”

So they rolled out their dice.

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First published in *Analog*, July 2000