

## PRISM

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IMAGINE being a student not for ten orbits of a sun, or thirty, but over two hundred such journeys. Granted, I spent the first few decades doing what any newborn Lanivarian would do: eating, metabolizing, differentiating, growing, eating, metabolizing, differentiating, growing ... I remember it as a time of restlessness, of an awareness I was more, but unable to express this other than to whimper and chew.

The day did arrive when I opened my mouth and something intelligible came out. I distinctly remember this something— web-beings being possessed of perfect memory—as a clear and succinct request for more jamble grapes. My birth-mother, Ansky, remembers it as an adorably incoherent babble that nonetheless signaled I was ready for the next phase of my existence. So she took me to Ersh, the Senior Assimilator and Eldest of our Web, who promptly grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and tossed me off her mountain.

While horrifying to any real Lanivarian mother—and likely to any intelligent species with parental care—this was Ersh being efficient. I was thus encouraged to cycle into my web-self for the first time. It was that, or be shattered on a rock seven hundred and thirteen meters below. Instinct, as Ersh rather blithely assumed, won, and I landed on the surface of Picco's Moon as a small, intensely blue, blob of web-mass. A somewhat flattened blob, but unharmed.

Unharmed, but I recalled being overwhelmed with

foreign sensations as my universe widened along every imaginable axis. I floundered to make some sense of it all, until, suddenly, everything became *right*. I knew without being told this was my true self, that there was nothing unusual in losing touch, sound, sight, and smell while feeling the spin of stars and atoms, hearing harmony in the competing gravities of Picco and her Moon, seeing the structure of matter, and being perfectly able to distinguish what was appetizing from what was not.

*Appetite.* I formed a mouth, small and with only one sharp edge, then began scanning my new universe for something to bite. *There!*

Not knowing what it was, I ripped a mouthful from the edible mass so conveniently close.

*Ersh-taste!*

Ideas, not just nutrients, flooded my consciousness, new and nauseatingly complex. *Ersh-memory.* Even as I hastily oozed myself into the nearest dark and safe-looking crevice, I gained a word for what was happening to me. *Assimilation.* This was how web-beings exchanged information—by exchanging the memories stored within their flesh. *Our flesh.*

Exchange? I was mulling that over when a sharp, unexpected pain let me know I'd paid my price for the knowledge.

My studies had officially begun.

What followed were times of wonder and the expansion of my horizons . . . Okay, what really followed were centuries of always being the last to assimilate anything and being convinced this was a plot to keep me stuck with one of my Elders at all times. In retrospect, it

was probably more difficult for them. The ancient, wise beings who formed the Web of Ersh had made plans for their lives and research stretching over millennia and, as they routinely assured me, I hadn't been so much as imagined in any of them.

Maybe in Ansky's. Ansky's outstanding enthusiasm about interacting with the locals meant I wasn't her first offspring—just the first, and only, to taste of web-mass. The rest grew up clutched to what I fondly imagined were the loving teats, bosoms, or corresponding body parts of their respective species.

I was tossed off a mountain to prove I belonged here, with Ersh and whomever else of my Web happened to be in attendance. While they could have cycled into more nurturing species—the ability to manipulate our mass into that of other intelligent species being a key survival trait of my kind—I'm quite sure it didn't occur to any of them. I was not only Ansky's first, I was a first for the Web as well, having been born rather than split from Ersh's own flesh. This was a distinction that made at least some of my web-kin very uneasy. Mind you, they'd been virtually untouched by change since the Human species discovered feet, so my arrival came as something of a shock. Ansky was firmly reminded to be more careful in the future. Her Web, Ersh pronounced sternly, was large enough.

We were six: Ersh, Ansky, Lesy, Mixs, Skalet, and me, Esen-alit-Quar—Esen for short, Es in a hurry. Six who shared flesh and memories. Six given a goal and purpose in life by Ersh: to be a living repository of the biology and culture of all other, tragically short-lived intelligent

species. It was an endless, grueling task that took years of living in secret on each world, ingesting and assimilating the biology of each ephemeral form, learning languages, arts, histories, beliefs, and sciences, all while traveling the limits of known space.

Not that I was ever allowed to go.

Ersh had dictated I was to stay on Piece's Moon until I was ready. *Ready?* I understood waiting until my body grew into its full web-size. After all, mass had to be considered when cycling into another form. It was wasteful, if entertaining, to gorge myself simply to cycle into something larger, then have to shed the excess as water anyway upon returning to web-form. Then there was the issue of learning to hold another form. The others presumed my staying Lanivarian from birth till impact meant I'd be able to distort my web-mass into any other I'd assimilated. They were wrong. While I could immediately return to my birth-form for a moment or two, after all this time, I still couldn't hold other forms for any duration. I might have done so faster, had Ersh chosen to teach me what I needed to know—and the others refrained from terrifying hints I might explode if not careful—but Ersh had definite ideas of what and how I was to learn.

Which was the real reason I still wasn't "ready" after two hundred years. Ersh had insisted I be taught—by the others, as well as herself. Since this teaching could not be done by assimilation alone, and she found fault with almost everything I did learn— not surprising, considering I had four teachers who'd never taught before—"ready" seemed unlikely to occur within even a

web-being's almost endless lifespan. I was stuck on Ersh's rock, safe and utterly bored.

It would have been nice if it had stayed that way.

*"ESEN!"*

My present ears were tall enough to extend past the top of the boulder sheltering the rest of me. I swiveled them slightly to capture more nuance from the echoes ricocheting after that latest bellow from the window. It was important to gauge when Ersh was about to pass exasperation and head for all-out fury, if I wanted to avoid something thoroughly unpleasant in the way of consequences. The Eldest did occasionally give up before losing her temper. *Twice, maybe.*

"Are you going to answer, 'tween, or should I?" a velvet-coated voice from behind inquired, driving my ears flat against my skull.

*Skalet?* I didn't bother twisting my long snout around to glare at her, too busy quelling this body's instinct to run from threats. I wasn't in any danger, except from heart palpitations at Skalet's bizarre sense of humor. She'd approached from downwind, naturally, having firsthand knowledge of my current form's sense of smell. Providing such unpleasant surprises was simply this web-kin's favorite game at my expense and quite the feat this time, considering she was supposed to be half the quadrant away.

However, Skalet was probably preparing to expose my hiding place to Ersh—her other favorite pastime. "I was just getting up," I told her, attempting to make this more casual than sullen. Skalet had no patience for what she

called my "ephemeral moods."

When I finally looked at her, it was to affirm the voice matched the form I'd expected. I may have been the only "born" web-being, but that didn't mean the others were identical. Far from it. Even in web-form, they were distinct individuals, sending tastes as unique as themselves into the air, though this was usually only when they were sharing memories with one another. Revealing web-form to aliens was strictly forbidden, precaution as well as protection.

So normally, they chose another form, picked, my Elders informed me, for its appropriateness as camouflage and its convenience when using non-Web technology. I was reasonably sure their choices had more to do with personal preference, since if it was convenience alone, they'd all be Dodecian and have arms to spare—with a brain able to control all of them at once. Not that I'd been Dodecian any longer than it took to realize successful co-ordination required a certain level of maturity as well as a room without fragile objects.

Skalet managed to cause me enough grief with her present brain. She stood too close for comfort, straight and tall on two legs, dressed in a chrome-on-black uniform she likely considered subtle but which reflected glints of Piece's orange-stained light with each disapproving breath. *Kraal*. I replayed a portion of memory. Human subspecies. Not biologically distinct, though heading in that direction. Culturally so, definitely, with a closed society built around an elaborate internal hierarchy of family, clan, and tribe allegiance. New from her last trip was a tattoo from throat to behind her left ear

marking a particular affiliation; she'd made sure to braid her thick hair to expose every line. I didn't bother reading it.

My obedient rise to my hindlegs produced the expected and ominous silence from the window and lit a triumphant gleam in Skalet's Human eyes. "What did you do this time, Youngest?" she asked as we walked together up the slope to Ersh's cliffside home. As we did, I could see Skalet's personal shuttle sitting on the landing pad. Shuttles to and from the shipcity on the other side of Picco's Moon were the only rapid means of travel across the tortured landscape. The native intelligent species, Tumblers, preferred to migrate slowly along the jagged valley floors, stopping for conversations that could last months. They had a time sense on a par with Ersh's, which I'd long ago decided was why she was usually a Tumbler herself. *Another difference between us.*

"Nothing," I said, quite truthfully. I was supposed to have finished repotting the duras seedlings in Ersh's greenhouse this morning, making that "nothing" undoubtedly the cause of the bellowing. I hated plants. They stank when healthy and reeked when ill. And dirt. I hated dirt, too. Dry sand I quite liked. But no, plants insisted on wet dirt that stuck to my paws and got in my sensitive nose. It hadn't taken more than the thought of coming outside to catch the monthly Eclipse, an event I always missed because of some task or other Ersh invented, to make me abandon the trays.

"Ah," Skalet replied, as if my answer was more than sufficient. "Neither did I," she said more quietly, her steps slowing as if in thought. "Are the others here yet?"

"What others?" I asked. "I didn't know you were coming until now. Are the rest on the way?" My tail gave a treacherous sideways drift before I could stop it, tail-wagging being among those childish things I was supposed to be long past. Lesy tended to bring presents. To be honest, any of the web-kin did, in the form of knowledge to be shared—even Skalet, though hers often tasted more of conflict and politics than wonder. Ersh sorted it all for me first, of course, as Senior Assimilator, but I could always tell the source.

"That's for Ersh to tell us," Skalet said brusquely, our steps having reached the point of our approach everyone knew marked where Ersh's sensitive Tumbler hearing must be taken into account.

*Ersh had told us, all right.* I gingerly pushed the seedling into the revoltingly damp dirt with one extended toe. My Lanivarian hands were adept at such fine maneuvers, if a misery to clean afterward. My ears were cocked back, toward the kitchen, straining to catch the mutterings of an argument which had lasted longer than I'd thought possible.

No one countered Ersh's wishes. *Except me.* But that was something my web-kin had come to expect. They all knew I'd give in, come home, do the job, and grovel appropriately. It was unthinkable to imagine otherwise, even for me at my most rebellious. Ersh was the center of our Web. Her word was Law.

Until today, when she'd stated her latest wish and Skalet had tried to refuse.

Another seedling went in, stubbornly crooked until I

pressed the dirt to one side firmly with my thumb; I couldn't help humming happily to myself. Although it delayed supper and spoke volumes about my immaturity, the novelty of someone else taking the brunt of Ersh's ire was extraordinarily pleasant—not to mention I was on Skalet's side.

I most definitely didn't want her staying with me while Ersh left home for the first time in my memory.

That this arrangement was designed to punish both of us with Ersh's famed economy of effort was not lost on me, but what Skalet could have done to deserve it I didn't know. Nor wanted to.

*Ersh should have told me.*

"I've had enough of you."

My stylo halted its dive at the star chart and I peered up hopefully. "We're done for the day?" I asked.

A violent wave and: "Ssssh."

Skalet was using the com system. Again. As she had most of the morning since Ersh departed—in Skalet's own shuttle, something she'd known better than to protest.

I sighed and reapplied myself to the present lesson. Another three-dimensional strategy calculation, probably containing some unlikely ambush. Ersh must have removed more than usual from Skalet's latest memories of the Kraal before sharing them with me, for this made less sense to me than the last lesson.

*Regardless, it would be my fault,* I sighed once more, but to myself. Skalet was brilliant and, as a Kraal, had earned considerable acclaim within her chosen species as a strategist. Not an accomplishment she flaunted, given Ersh's obsession with keeping our natures and activities

hidden, but there were no secrets in the Web. Well, technically there were any number of secrets held within Ersh's teardrop blue web-mass—most being kept from me—but none of us had that ability. And, when it suited her, or more truthfully, when Ersh was within earshot, Skalet could be a patient and interesting teacher. Otherwise, as now, she was maddeningly obscure yet somehow convinced I deliberately avoided what she saw as the clear, simple path to the right answer in order to waste her time.

*Hardly.* I was every bit as anxious to have this lesson done and be outside where I could observe the Eclipse. I wrinkled my snout at the problem before me, wondering if accidentally drooling on the plas sheet might somehow ruin it.

Skalet continued talking urgently into the com. "Listen, Uriel. Just bring it down here instead of where we arranged. That's the only change."

Maybe it was the lesson, with its layers of move and counter-move, but I grew suddenly curious about Skalet's conversation with this mysterious "Uriel."

Of course, it's hard to be subtle with ears like mine. "Esen," Skalet said sharply, "if you can't concentrate on your work, go outside for a while."

Perversely, now that she told me to do what I'd wanted to do,

I no longer wanted to do it. I glumly suspected this irrational reversal was another of those indications I wasn't ready to assume an adult's role within the Web. I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it. Skalet had leaned back against the com unit, watching me with the

obvious intention of not saying another word in my presence. So I left.

Picco was a gas giant, her immense curve dominating a quarter of the horizon, reflecting, during her day, a vile combination of orange and purple over the landscape of her hapless Moon. During her night, Picco's silhouette occluded a chunk of the starry sky—the so-called Void. Early Tumbler civilizations had populated the Void with invisible demons. The belief continued to influence their behavior, so that modern Tumblers had a hearty dislike of moving about in the dark. As Ersh pointed out, this was a survival characteristic, given the fragile nature of an adult Tumbler's crystalline structure and the difficulty in finding any level ground on their home sphere. *Beliefs have value*, I could hear her repeating endlessly, *if not always that assumed by the believer*.

Picco's Moon did spin, luckily for those of us interested in a broader array of color, but with aggravating slowness. Once a moon week, Ersh's mountain faced away from Picco to bathe in the light of the system's star. This arrangement was called the Eclipse. Tumbler science persisted in its belief that Picco orbited her Moon and thus the shadow cast on the giant planet's surface mattered more than the arrival of true daylight. Legend said this was the time when the Void tried to drill a hole through Picco herself, only to be foiled by the magical strength of Picco's surface. Festivals and other entertainments were typically timed to climax at the end of the Eclipse as seen from the Picco-facing side of the Moon.

Other things were timed for sunlight. The sort of things I might accuse Ersh of deliberately keeping from me, except that I was afraid she'd chime agreement.

Sex wasn't the mystery. Ersh might presort the others' memories before sharing them with me, but biology didn't seem to be one of the taboos she enforced. On the contrary, we had many discussions, ranging from gruesome to merely nauseating, about the lengths to which species went in order to mix their genes. Oh, I knew all about Tumbler sex. Those individuals interested in procreation wandered about gleaning material from others of presumably attractive growth, incorporating each shard as it was received into their body matrix until they felt sufficiently endowed. There followed a rather orgasmic interlude of fragmentation, resulting in a smaller, presumably satiated adult, and a litter—literally—of tiny pre-Tumbler crystals dropped wherever that Tumbler had been roaming at the time. Somehow, during Eclipse on the sunside of Picco's Moon, those crystals were recovered by their proud parent and given the opportunity to grow.

*Somehow.* This was where Ersh grew annoyingly vague and, when pressed for details, had begun inconveniently timing my indoor tasks during the sunny side of Eclipse.

Skalet, however, didn't care what I learned, as long as she didn't have to teach me.

I bounded up the last worn stone step to the top of Ersh's mountain and paused to pant a moment. Usually I avoided the place, unless it was one of those times Ersh insisted the sharing of the Web be done here, but there really was no better view. *Just in time.* The orange rim of

Picco was disappearing behind the horizon, cut into a fanged grin by the distant range of mountains. Sunlight—real, full spectrum, right from the source light—poured over the surface, losing the struggle where Picco's reflection still ruled, but elsewhere striking the crystalline facets etched on every slope and valley in a display that explained quite clearly why this was a gem dealer's notion of paradise.

*Gem dealers.* I grinned, walking to the cliff's edge, stopping a comforting number of body lengths short. While Ersh disapproved of irony on general principle, given how often it ended in disaster for the species involved in mutual misconception, I couldn't help but take special pleasure in this particular case. The most prized gems from Picco's Moon? Tumbler excretions. Those legitimate dealers—hired by the Tumblers for waste removal and treatment around their shipcity, the only densely populated area—did their utmost to regulate off-Moon availability and so keep up the price of the beautiful stones, but there was, naturally, a thriving black market fed by those fools willing to try landing where level merely implied nonperpendicular.

To their credit, the Tumblers were dismayed by this risky traffic in defecation and regularly tried to explain, but something kept being lost in the translation of their polite phrase: "ritual leavings."

I sat on my haunches, feeling the warmth of the Sun's rays on my back, and looked for Tumblers engaged in Eclipse activities, feeling deliciously naughty—especially with Skalet to take the blame when, not if, Ersh found out.

But what I saw was a mid-sized cargo shuttle with no markings, banking low in front of Ersh's mountain, heading to our landing pad.

If this wasn't Ersh returning too soon from her mysterious trip, or web-kin with a particularly large present, Skalet was going to be in more trouble than I'd hoped.

The advantage of a shared secret was a mutual desire to keep it. I had no doubt Skalet knew I was nearby, but I also knew this time she wouldn't reveal my hiding place. Not to her guest.

A non-Web guest. Hair persisted in rising along my spine. *Alien*, Human.

And, most intriguing of all, male.

I held the genetic instructions for Human within my web-mass, along with all other species the Web had assimilated, but were I or any of my web-kin to take that form, we would be female. Cycling didn't change who we were—simply what we were. As a result, I'd never been this close to a male Human before.

*Shared memory wasn't everything*, I realized, aware this was something Ersh had despaired, loudly, I'd ever learn to appreciate.

He was as tall as Skalet, not as whipcord thin, but gracefully built. The wind picked up curly locks of black hair and tossed them in his face—surely distracting, but he didn't appear to notice. No tattoos. Perhaps not Kraal.

*Or not wanting to appear Kraal*, I thought abruptly, enjoying this live game of strategy far more than any of Skalet's simulations. Kraal didn't mix with other types of

Humans, except in formal groupings such as war or diplomacy. He could be—a spy!

*Against us?* My lips rolled back from my fangs despite common sense. With the exception of Ersh, none of us approached

Skalet's paranoia about protecting our true nature. So, this Human wasn't a threat to Ersh or our home. *Then what was he?* I tilted my ears forward as the male began to speak.

"—nice spot, S'kal-ru. We should have used this from the first—"

His voice might have been pleasant, but Skalet's smooth tenor made it sound like something from a machine. "This is not a secure location, Uriel. We have an access window sufficient to make the exchange, no more. You brought the grav-sled?" At his nod and gesture to the shuttle's side port, she snapped: "Good. Then load it up. I'll bring the plants."

*My plants?*

This time when my lips curled back in threat, I left them there. What was Skalet planning? She had to mean the duras seedlings and the adult versions in Ersh's greenhouse—these were the only plants on Picco's Moon. While a constant source of drudgery for me, they were also the only source of living mass other than the local wildlife—and Tumblers—available to us.

That source of living mass was crucial. We could fuel and maintain our bodies by eating and metabolizing in another form. But it took a sacrifice of web-mass to energy to distort our molecular structure, to cycle and hold another form. To become anything larger meant

assimilating living mass into more web-mass. To replace lost web-mass? The same. It was the fundamental hunger, the appetite we couldn't escape.

*Skalet was robbing Ersh's supply?* She must have her own source, not to mention plant life was hardly a rare commodity— anywhere but on this world. It didn't make sense.

Being without Ersh no longer seemed a holiday. I was faced with making a decision I shouldn't have had to make—whether to trust one of my own or not. I panted, knowing my emotional turmoil risked my form integrity and trying to dump excess energy as heat before I really did explode. Not as they'd teased me, but the exothermic result of changing back to web-form without control would be more than sufficient to catch the attention of the Human, in his shuttle or out.

I needed somewhere to think this through. Or explode. Either way, it couldn't be here. I crouched as low as possible, cursing the bright Eclipse sunlight, then eased back, paw by paw, ears and nose straining for any sign of Skalet, until it was safe to risk going to all fours. Then I ran.

What life there is on Picco's Moon prefers to bask deep in the valleys girdling the equator. It's hot down there, for one thing, and the lowermost walls glisten with the steamy outflow of mineral-saturated water so important to the crystalline biology of everything native. Farther up, the walls are etched with pathways, aeons old, marking the migration of species to and from the drier, cooler surface for reasons that varied from escaping predation to

a need to find the best conditions for facet cleaning. The annual plunge of the tendren herds over the rim of the Assansi Valley was, Ersh had assured me, one of the most dramatic events she'd ever seen. And she'd seen most.

I couldn't venture an opinion. Long before I joined Ersh on her Moon, the rim of the Assansi Valley had collapsed due to erosion, doubtless hurried along by thousands of impatient, diamond-sharp toes. Life here wasn't easy.

It wasn't easy for visitors either. Had I sought the depths of a valley, my Lanivarian-self wouldn't have survived an hour. As for forms that might, including Tumbler? I couldn't trust my ability to hold them.

So I avoided the Tumbler track leading to the nearest valley, the Edianti, and padded morosely around Ersh's mountain instead.

Not that I planned to go far. I might have Ersh's thorough knowledge of the place, but the Moon's geology was nothing if not active. Today's crevice was likely to become tomorrow's up-thrust, making any map based on memory alone unreliable.

I'd begun by scrambling up each rise, and slipping headlong down the inevitable slope, but calmed before doing myself any more harm than running out of breath. I'd grown up here and knew the hazards—evenly divided between those involving Ersh and those involving slicing my footpads open on fresh crystal. As for the utter unlikelihood of a Lanivarian running around on Picco's Moon? The Tumblers who climbed Ersh's mountain for conversation and trade had long ago accepted her proclivity for alien houseguests as a charming eccentricity

and, given their inability to tell carbon-based species apart, let alone individuals, paid no attention to what kind they were. Well, as long as they were tidy and didn't eat in public places—Tumblers being thoroughly offended by the concept of body cavities and ingestion providing too much evidence for comfort.

*The plants.* I had to do something. Skalet and this Uriel were Human—at least one of them likely to remain so—and what did I know about the species which could help? The flood of information on the heels of the inadvertent thought brought me to a gasping standstill. I wasn't very good at assimilating the larger chunks of information Ersh fed me.

*A lie.* I was very good at assimilating, just better at resisting. New knowledge fascinated me—that wasn't the problem. But each time I bit, chewed, and swallowed Ersh-mass, it seemed there was less of me, of Esen.

The others didn't understand. Their personalities were solid; they were *old*.

So when, as now, I needed information I'd shoved aside in my mind, the assimilation happened suddenly, as if liquid poured into my mouth faster than I could swallow, filling my stomach, rising back up my throat until I couldn't breathe. I endured the sensation, because I had to find a way to deal with this Uriel.

Ah. The turmoil subsided. I *understood* the species as I hadn't dared before. Interesting. Complex as individuals, predictable en masse, amiable yet unusually curious in their interactions with other species.

And many cultures of Humans, including Kraal, valued gems.

I 'd snuck back to the landing pad, keeping downwind in case Ska-let was looking for me. I doubted it, feeling it more likely she was content to know I'd run and was out of her way. Something in the thought raised the hair between my shoulders.

Watching the two hadn't cleared up any of the mystery. Uriel had finished piling packing crates on a grav-sled, lashing them together as though the cargo was fragile. I could smell wet dirt and bruised leaves, implying they'd been busy—and not particularly careful—putting duras plants into the shuttle. Mind you, Ersh was a little overprotective of the things. I knew from experience they survived being dropped quite nicely.

From what I'd overheard, Skalet was reassuringly adamant that the Human not enter Ersh's abode, insisting she'd move the cargo to a more secure location later. The Human, obviously not knowing Skalet as well as I, then argued he should accompany her. I'd waited for her to dismiss him, but she'd merely smiled and stroked his arm. They'd disappeared inside the shuttle for several minutes. Perhaps, I'd decided with some disgust, Skalet was following in Ansky's footsteps and experimenting with physical liaison. Ersh would not be impressed.

*But Ersh must already know,* I thought suddenly. Web-kin couldn't hide memory from her. This could be why Skalet had been left in charge of me—to punish this behavior while making it more difficult to accomplish.

*As if that had worked,* I said to myself, feeling wise beyond my years.

Their delay had given me time to put my own plan into

action. I patted the bag against my haunch, its hard bulges a combination of luck and the now-helpful sunlight. Judging from the abundance of ritual leavings sparkling around the lower slope of the mountain, Ersh had had more Tumblers visiting than I knew. I'd worried unnecessarily about having to scout closer to Edianti's unstable rim.

"Aren't there any more, S'kal-ru?" Uriel's voice sent me ducking behind my boulder again. "These will barely suffice to start twenty cultures. Mocktap won't accept that as payment for these containers—"

"These are enough. This strain of duras clones amazingly well, my friend, and grows even faster. We'll have plants for a hundred ships within months, providing both oxygen and—"

When her voice trailed away with suggestive triumph, I immediately filled in the gap. *Mass*. Ersh had modified these plants to produce the greatest possible amount of new mass in the shortest time. She'd picked duras over other species because they were hardy, thrived indoors, and, also importantly, were essentially inedible. No point sharing useful mass with other life. And, while the attraction was lost on me, Ersh confessed to finding their compact spirals of green leaves aesthetically pleasing. If Skalet was making sure her Kraal affiliates carried duras plants on their ships, it was for her own convenience as a web-being.

I was lost in admiration.

But what had convinced the Kraal? There were much easier botanicals to use as an oxygen supplement.

"The sap is even deadlier than you promised," the

Human answered as if reading my thoughts. "And, thus far, completely undetectable."

*Poison.* I wrinkled my snout as if at a bad smell. The Web revered life, especially intelligent life, but Ersh hadn't spared me the realities of that life either. Most ephemeral species engaged in self-destructive behavior, including assassination and murder. The Kraal, for instance, granted exceptional status to those who managed to remove their rivals with the utmost finesse and mystery. A game, played with lives. I could see Skalet enjoying the strategy of it, the detached observer watching generations of Kraal worry and pick at their alliances, giving the odd push to a group that caught her interest, then abandoning them in another roll of the dice.

We had less in common than I'd thought.

My plan was simple and should have worked. There hadn't been any flaws I could see. Which had been the problem, really. Failing to see what was right in front of me all the time.

The Human, Uriel, had taken my bait. He'd helped Skalet move the grav-sled a considerable distance around Ersh' mountain, to the side that was more geologically stable, though still riddled with faults and caves. There, the two of them had offloaded the sled, carrying each crate inside.

While they'd been out of sight, I'd slipped up to the sled and quickly pried open the nearest box. Packing material blossomed out at me and I'd fought to get it all back inside before they returned. But I'd had time to see what was so important: Kraal artifacts. Art. Trinkets. My

web-kin accumulated and shared memories of such things, not the real objects. What would be the point? There wasn't enough room on Picco's Moon to house a comparably comprehensive collection from any one species, let alone from thousands. Then there was the risk inherent in storing such hard-to-hide treasures.

*Treasure? Was that it?* Had Skalet somehow become enamored of private wealth? Unlikely, since as a member of the Web she could access more than she could ever spend—Ersh having appreciated the value of economics well before Queebbs could count.

There was another possibility. Ersh-memory, Skalet-flavored, floated up. A Kraal dynasty required not only a lineage, with the requisite ruthless progenitor, but the physical trappings of a House—the older and more bloodstained, the better. How long did Skalet plan to use this as her preferred public form? Human life spans were long, but that long? She was capable of such a plan, I knew. And would relish every aspect of it, including the cost.

If this bothered Ersh, something I couldn't predict, she could deal with this errant web-kin. I wanted my plants back in the greenhouse where they belonged. For that, I required the shuttle unloading to take a little longer.

Ears cocked for any sound they were returning, I began setting out my bait. Each crystal blazed in my paws, varied in color and hue, but all flawless, as if the facets had been cut with the skill of a lifetime. Biology was a wonderful thing.

One here. So. Two more there. The sunlight reflected so vividly the crystals might have been lit from within.

This Uriel couldn't help but see them. Each was worth, conservatively, the price of his shuttle. *There for the taking.*

I backed down the path leading away from the landing pad, looking over my shoulder frequently to be sure I didn't step close to the sheer cliff which made this Ersh's preferred spot for flying lessons. I really wasn't fond of heights. *There.* I rounded an outcropping, intending to leave the last few less obviously in sight before running back to the shuttle, only to find myself surrounded.

Not that the Tumblers were interested in me. I froze, lowering my paw to the ground and letting the crystals fall discretely behind, hopefully out of sight.

They were busy.

It was Eclipse, I remembered, dry mouthed, and, of course, they were busy.

If I'd thought the crystals gorgeous, their makers were beyond description. Their towering bodies took the sunlight and fractured it into streams of color, flashing with their every movement against rock, ground, and one another until I squinted in order to make out what they were doing. They were picking up crystals with their trowel-like hands and holding them up to the sunlight. I could hear a discordant chime, soft, repeated, as though they chanted to themselves.

Then a loud *Crack!*

I cried out as crystal shards peppered my snout and dodged behind the outcrop.

The Tumblers noticed me now. "Guest of Ershia," one chimed, the resonating crystals within its chest picking out a minor key of distress. "Are you harmed?"

Licking blood off my nose, I stepped out again and bowed. "I'm fine," I said, knowing there was no point explaining skin damage and blood loss to mineral beings. It would only upset them. "And you?"

One tilted forward, slowly, and gracefully tumbled closer. "In rapture, Guest of Ershia. Do you see it?" The Tumbler held up a crystal identical to those all around me, then placed it somewhere in the midst of its body. I couldn't make out exactly where in all the reflections. Then the Tumbler began to vibrate, its companions humming along, until my teeth felt loose in their sockets.

There were two possibilities. This was a group of crazed individuals, tumbling around looking for "ritual leavings" as part of a bizarre ceremony, or this was exactly what I'd hoped to find at the start of Eclipse—parental Tumblers hunting their offspring.

Which meant I'd been collecting children, not droppings. My tail slid between my legs.

However, this didn't explain the tiny fragments sticking out of my snout. Or why Ersh hadn't wanted me to see it.

Another Tumbler held up a crystal, identical, as far as my Lani-varian eyes could detect, to any of the others. The light bending through it must have meant something different to the Tumbler, however, for she gave a melancholy tone, deep and grief-stricken, then closed her hand.

I buried my face in my arms quickly enough to save my eyes, if not my shoulders and forearms, from the spray of fragments.

"Ah, you feel our sorrow, Ershia's Guest," this from another Tumbler, who graciously interpreted my yip of

pain as sympathy.

I stammered something, hopefully polite, and hurried away. The hardest thing was to resist the urge to fill my bag and arms with all the crystals I could carry, to save them from this deadly sorting by light. No wonder Ersh had tried to keep me away from Eclipse. I struggled with the urge to cycle, focusing on that danger to block the sounds of more shattering from behind. *What if the Web had so judged me? What if I'd failed that day Ersh tossed me from her mountain?*

*Different biologies. Different imperatives. Different truths. Different biologies*—I ran the liturgy through my mind over and over as I fled home.

"Just a few more minutes, S'kal-ru! I see another one!"

The triumphant announcement brought me skidding to a halt and diving for cover. Uriel! He was running down the path in my direction, pockets bulging, his face flushed with excitement.

*I hated it when a plan worked too well.*

I was out of options. The thought of going back to join the Tumblers horrified me, however natural their behavior. Cycling into that form was impossible—I needed mass, almost twice what I had, let alone what might happen if sunlight didn't travel through my crystal self in a way that enraptured the adults. I fought to stay calm, to think. Ersh had warned me a truly desperate web-being could instinctively cycle to match her surroundings—the oldest instinct. It would be the death of Esen-alit-Quar. Rock couldn't sustain thought.

"There's no time for this!" Skalet's voice might be melodious, but it had no difficulty expressing fury. I

could smell her approaching, but didn't dare look.

"This is the best one so far," I heard her companion protest. "C'mon, S'kal-ru. What's a minute or two more? We'll be rich!"

"Only a minute?" my web-kin repeated, her voice calming deceptively even as it came closer. I shivered, knowing that tone. "Do you know how many moves can be made in a game of chess, in one minute?"

The sun was setting, sending a final wash of clean, white light over the mountainside, signaling the end of Eclipse. And more.

There was a strangled sound, followed by a sequence of gradually quieter thuds, soft, as though the source moved away. Or fell.

The seedling's tender white roots had been exposed. I took a handful of moist earth and sprinkled tiny flakes of it into the pot until satisfied. Most of the plants were unharmed. All were back where they belonged. It hadn't been me. I'd stayed hidden, afraid of the Tumblers, afraid of the darkness, afraid of letting Skalet know I'd been there.

I hadn't made it back to the shuttle before Skalet, but Ersh had. Apparently, she hadn't left—sending away Skalet's shuttle in some game of her own. Had Ersh set a trap? It paid to remember who had taught Skalet tactics and treachery.

What went on between the two of them, I didn't know or want to know. It was enough that there were lights in the windows and an open door when I'd finally dared return. The Kraal shuttle and Skalet were gone.

The plants, needing my care, were not.

Ersh, as usual, was in Tumbler form, magnificent and terrifying. I shivered when she rolled herself into the greenhouse. It was probably shock. I hadn't cleaned my cuts or fed. Those things didn't seem important.

*Secrets. They were important.*

"You went out in the Eclipse."

A transgression so mild-seeming now, I nodded and kept working.

"And learned what it means to the Tumblers."

I hadn't thought. To her Tumbler perceptions, I was covered in the glittering remains of children. My paws began to shake.

"Look up, Esen-alit-Quar, and learn what it means to be Web."

I didn't understand, but obeyed. Above me was the rock slab forming the ceiling, imbedded with the lights that permitted the duras plants to grow. It needed frequent dusting, a job my Laniv-arian-self found a struggle—then I *saw*.

Between the standard lighting fixtures were others. I'd never paid attention to them before, but now I saw those lights weren't

lights at all. Well, they were, but only in the sense that, like a prism, their crystalline structure was being used to gather and funnel light from outside.

They were crystals. Tumbler crystals. *Children*.

"Like us, Tumblers are one from many," Ersh chimed beside me. "To grow into an adult, a Tumbler must accumulate others, each to fulfill a different part of the whole. The very youngest need help to begin formation

and are collected for that reason. But Tumblers are wise beings and have learned to use the sun's light to find any young who are—incompatible. It is a fact of Tumbler life that some are born without a stable internal matrix. If they were left, they could mistakenly be accumulated into a new Tumbler only to eventually shatter—crippling or destroying that individual. It is a matter of survival, Youngest."

"You could have told me," I grumbled.

Ersh made a wind-over-sand sound. A sigh. "I was waiting for some sign you were mature enough not to take this personally. You think too much. Was I right?"

There must have been thousands of the small crystals dotting the ceiling. There was room for more. "You were right, Ersh," I admitted. "But . . . this?" I waved a dirty paw upward.

She hesitated. "Let's leave it that it seemed a waste to turn them into dust. Speaking of dust, go and clean yourself. That form takes time to heal."

I nodded and took a step away, when suddenly, I *felt* her cycle behind me and froze.

Ersh knew whatever Skalet knew.

She didn't know—yet—what I knew.

Suddenly, I wanted it to stay that way. I didn't want Ersh to taste that memory of hearing a murder and not lifting a paw to stop it. I didn't want Skalet, through Ersh, to ever learn I'd been there. I wanted it to never have happened. Which was impossible. So I wanted it *private*.

I didn't know if I could, but as I loosened my hold on my Lani-varian-self, cycling into the relief of web-form, I shunted what must stay mine deep within, trying to guard

it as I always tried to hold what was Esen alone safe during assimilation.

I formed a pseudopod of what I was willing to share, and offered it to Ersh's teeth.

I'd succeeded in the unimaginable, or Ersh deliberately refused to act on the event. Either satisfied me, considering I couldn't very well ask her. Her sharing was just as incomplete. There was nothing in her taste of Skalet's attempted theft or her plans for the Kraal. Or Uriel's existence. I supposed, from Ersh's point of view, one Human life didn't matter on a scale of millennia. I wondered if I'd ever grow that old.

Our lives returned to normal under Piece's orange glare, normal, that is, until the next Eclipse. Ersh went out in Tumbler form, with me by her side. There weren't many failed offspring this time, but those she found, we brought home to add to the ceiling. More prisms to light the greenhouse. I found a pleasing symmetry in the knowledge, a restoration of balance badly shaken.

Later that night, Ersh surprised me again. "I've had enough of you underfoot," she announced without warning. "Go visit Lesy."

*Go?* I blinked, waiting for the other side of this too-promising coin to show itself.

"Well, what are you waiting for? The shuttle's on its way. Don't bother to pack—no doubt Lesy went on a shopping spree the moment she knew you were coming. You'll be in a shipping crate, of course, since you can't hold anything but this birth-shape of yours long enough to get outsystem, let alone mingle with a crowd. And don't come out on your own. Lesy is expecting you."

Don'ts, Dos, and Details went flying past, none of them important. "But I can come back ..." I ventured, holding in a whine.

A low reverberation. Not quite a laugh. Not quite a growl. "Do you think you've learned everything you need to know, Youngest?"

My jaw dropped down with relief. "Of course not," I said happily.

Ersh came closer, lifting my jaw almost gently into place with her rock-hard fingers. "You aren't ready, Esen-alit-Quar," she told me in her blunt, no-nonsense voice, the one she used before inspecting anything I'd done. "But you have become— interesting. It's time you broadened your horizons."

I trembled in her hold. Did she know? Could she? Had I been wrong to believe I could, like Ersh, hide my memories? I drew a breath—to ask or to blurt out a confession, I wasn't sure which— when she released me and turned away, saying only: "Don't worry about your plants, Youngest. Skalet's coming to tend the greenhouse. I think I'll have her dig out an extension while she's here—put some of that military training to use."

This time, I let my tail wag all it wanted.

I wasn't that old yet.