

Shadowplay

Shadith's Quest, Book 1

Jo Clayton

1990

“WARS AND MASSACRES, PLAGUES AND...

you name it, Shadith, he sits up there recording it.” Shadith's fellow prisoner, Kikun, growled, then spent some time soothing the cats; the anger in his voice made them uneasy.

Shadith scratched at her arm, scowled. “Three people? That's all he's got up there, counting him. You can't count the merc.s or the Paems.”

“He's got money and drugs and a Talent at twisting people. Given he locates a place in the right mood, that's all he needs. Rumor says he's depopulated half a dozen worlds. For what that's worth.” Kikun spat, his dreadlocks moved out from his scalp. “They say he boils down the death of a people to the peak moments, his definition of peak. They say he does one Limited Edition about every ten years. He makes a thousand copies of the show and charges a WorldYear Income for each. And gets it. I think that's why we're here. I think this world is ready to explode and we're the detonators....”

Jo Clayton has written:

The Diadem Series

Diadem From The Stars

Lamarchos

Irsud

Maeve

Star Hunters

The Nowhere Hunt

Ghosthunt

The Snares Of Ibex

Quester's Endgame

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Serpent Waltz

Dance Down The Stars

The Skeen Trilogy

Skeen's Leap
Skeen's Return
Skeen's Search

The Soul Drinker Trilogy
Drinker Of Souls
Blue Magic
A Gathering Of Stones

The Wild Magic Series
Wild Magic
Wildfire
The Magic Wars

and

A Bait Of Dreams

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Chapter 1. Fun and games in a transit mall

Shadith, Shadow to her friends, ignored a determined holoa singing its jingee in her ear, flashing its busy *im-ages* in her face, and glanced at the stretch of plate glass that fronted the shop the loa was trying to entice her into.

He's still there.

The canted glass reflected the heavy dark figure of the Transit Guard leaning on a fauxstone wall, half

hidden by the leaves of the young willow growing from the squat ceramic tub beside him, flickering in and out of the electric blues, acid greens, and hot pinks of the wander-ing holoas that drifted like feathers along the walkways and fell in slow spirals down the vast cavern of the atrium, their pitches silent, confined to color, glyph and image until proximity to a warm body triggered their tunes and jingees and whispered enticements. In and out, bare and veiled, the guard was there, always there.

Every time he looks at me, his eyes leave prints like dirty hands. Inchling! Stinkard! If I smashed you, slug, the air would turn so foul we'd all die of it. Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone.

Angry and upset, she eeled through a pack of big-eyed Froskans playing etherial patti-cake with a loa singing the praises of a sensaroo for nocturnals, ducked under the lower elbows of a pair of three-meter Bawangs stalling along ignoring with angular dignity noise and color, ad-hesive loas and intrusive shoppers, picked her way through a family swarm of arachnoid Menaviddans dressed mainly in stiff black hair 'and multiple loops of the shimmering translucent monofilament they were famous for, edged by a Clove' Matriarch with her gaggle of sycophantic attendants and stopped in the middle of a crowd of Nayids, Kakerans and assorted though less spectacular bipeds belonging to the Cousin Races gathered about a troupe of Xhenagoa acrobats moving to the beat of tenor drums and flutes and the pulsing color flows of a szimszim mixmaster, wheeling about and about slowly shifting jug-glers contorting their bodies through impossible curves to pass from hand to foot to hand to head in all possible combinations small glass bowls filled with water and bright-colored fish.

For a moment she felt secure, surrounded by, so many beings, veiled from sight by layer on layer of glimmering loan, then his breath was in her hair, his hands were brushing over her body, pushing between her legs. Queasy with loathing, she slid away from him and hurried on.

Gods, it's going to take sandblasting to make me feel clean. If he touches me again, I'll vomit on him. What a mess. How do I get myself out of this trap?

The Mall was closed off from the rest of the Transfer Station, access to it tightly controlled. One way in, one way out. She'd already tried to leave, but he was leaning against one of the twisted pillars framing the Gate, thumbs hooked over his weapon belt, the three fingers and a stub on his left hand tapping on the ugly black rod of the popper. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. This was a place of flux and strangers where travelers without local connections or powerful guarantors had no rights, no recourse against Transity Authority actions. She'd passed through here a dozen times at least—not in this body, no, she was a pattern in a node of the RMoahl diadem then, looking out through Aleytys' eyes as the Hunter went undisturbed about her business (no one in his right mind would fool with Hunters Inc)—but she was on her own now; as long as Aleytys was insplitting back to Wolff, she might as well be dead for all the help she'd be. No way to reach her.

Anyway, she forgot me the minute she dropped me here. Pregnant and playing the happy homebody. She won't be noticing anything until she starts getting bored. If she'd just stayed a while....

She smiled at the image of Aleytys at her most imperi-ous raising hell all over the Station, then shook her head.

Ahlalahlah, if I have to yell for help to take care of a shitbag like that, I'm feeble and futile and deserve what I get.

She'd have to stand on her own feet, no options, even Swardheld was out of touch, he was on his way back to Tairanna, visions of rosepearls dancing in his head. Be a year before he returned with cargo and a load of tall tales, him and his crazy crew.

Besides, even if she tried, she couldn't get a message out. The guard wasn't about to let her near a skipcom box. If she made a fuss or fought him, he'd pop her full of comealong and that would be that. She's seen it—oh, yes—sitting in Aleytys' head she'd seen it once, twice, a dozen times: a small flurry

starts and is erased before it's more than a flutter in the corner of an eye.

What I'd be, oh gods, that's what I would be, a flutter in the corner of a Cousin's eye.

She glanced back at him. Yes, he could do her any time, but he seemed to be enjoying himself too much to end the chase before he had to.

Rot and ruin, name me species dumbiensis bone-headis. He's licking me like I was a lollypop. Con-noisseur of terror, hunh!

None of the travelers around her would move a finger, claw, tentacle, whatever, to help her. Not even the Spotchallix up for a day's browsing in the duty free shops, it was their place, but not their responsibility. Why should they care? The guards wouldn't attack or harass them, they walked about cocooned in spotchala law—which didn't apply to outsiders. On the ground it would, no doubt, be different; people take a certain pride in the civility of their worlds, but up *here* no such assumption existed. This was not HOME and there was no need for pride in anything but the glittering surface. And travelers knew better than to interfere in spotchala affairs. They were here for a few hours, they had their own vulnerabilities; with rare exceptions, kind supported kind and let the rest of the zoo take care of itself. She glared at a tetrad of inoffensive Jajes whisper whisper whispering in the shadows, met .softcoal eyes filled with startled reproach and turned away, shamed and annoyed.

All right, all right, it's not their fault. It's me. Little red ryderhood all alone.

Babymeat.

Sar!

She was a slender coltish girl, a kaffolay sprite with hair like an explosion of brown-gold watchsprings. A sixteen-year-old body that looked fourteen or younger. An un-armed young girl, her knives, her stunner, her other weapons sealed in her luggage by the Customs Agent.

She watched the guard grin and flip a finger at another of his kind lounging against a beerhall facade.

I thought so. He's done this a lot. They know what's going on. If I went to one of those pimping bastards and complained, he'd probably hold me down for him, then take his turn at me.

She shivered with rage. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

She felt the Transit Guard coming up behind her again, gritted her teeth and went into a boutique whose holo has been whispering at her for the past several minutes. A delicate little Ptica-Pteeri in post-fertile plumage came rushing forward with musical twitters and a flutter of pale blue crest-feathers; she stopped in front of Shadith, black eyes bright with practiced pleasure, singing a lovely soar-ing interrogatory.

"Let me see something for the evening," Shadith said after a moment's thought. "Something simple but ele—

gant." She presented her credit bracelet, let the pteroid inspect it.

Fluting her pleasure at the request or the credit bal-ance or both, the Ptica-Pteeri led her to a viewing booth.

Shadith sat in polyresponsive pulochair, leg bent, ankle on her knee, fingers on a sensor pad as a holo of her body turned and strutted in one garment after another. She thought fleetingly about asking the pteroid for help; to hide her, to get her out of here, but she didn't bother trying it. She knew better. She'd be turned from the shop before she got three words out. Ejected by 'droid bouncers. The guard was outside the shop, wait-ing; he knew all that His gloat oozed over her.

Much more of his slobber gets on me and sandblast-ing won't do it. Don't let pride make you stupid, Shadow. Maybe I can handle him, maybe I can't. If he does me, I want to make it cost. I want him dead and I want him to know it's coming.

She called up the service menu, smiled grimly as she saw the option the loa had murmured in her ear. Any garment purchased here could be delivered anywhere in the known universe the purchaser specified, if she was willing to pay the price. Delivery by Register Circuit Drone, security guaranteed; it'd take two months to reach Wolff, but it'd sure's hell get there. The guard couldn't stop the Drone or interfere with it. Even the Head Hoofta of the Guard Service couldn't touch a Drone or its contents.

You're one smart little bint, Shadow old girl. Yeaah.

She scowled at the holo. The image was turning to show the back of a narrow gown, a green and gold sheath of Botareel spider silk. "I'll take this," she said. "Box it and send it by Register Circuit Drone to Wolff for Aleytys of Wolff, Hunter. No other designation required. I wish to enclose a card with a handwritten personal message."

Her image bowed; a tentacle of the Station Kephalos spoke to her through its mouth: "Understood. A Drone is available and has been placed at your service, despina. Do you wish a stylus provided with the card?"

"I have mine. It is permitted?"

"Provide a sample of the ink."

Shadith groped in her shoulderbag, found her stylus and scribbled a line across the test sheet extruded from the slot above the panel.

"Acceptable. The stylus is permitted."

"Time limit?"

"For thirty spotchala zurst, the Drone will be held available for one hour standard."

"Ten minutes will be sufficient. How much?"

"Half zurst."

"Confirm the option. Cost to Wolff?"

"Two thousand zurst."

"Confirm the option. Dispatch the Drone the moment the card is received. I will also require a fax tiket with details of the transaction printed out."

"It will be provided. Time starts ... now."

Shadith leaned forward, plucked the card from its slot, laid it on the tray the pulochair extruded for her convenience. She chewed on her lip as she thought over what she wanted to say, then she took up the stylus and wrote, using her birthlanguage. She was the last Weaver of Shayalin and she'd died the first time over twenty thousand years ago; Aleytys could read Shallana weave, so could Harskari and Swardheld, but no one else (particularly not the

Station Kephalos which had to be recording what she wrote). She laid out her problem, described the guard, finished: If I don't message you from University within a few days after this reaches you, Lee, it means I'm either dead or in deep shit. Come along and raise all kinds of hell in my memory, dear friend. Make this slime sorry he was born.

She slid the card back in its slot, pressed her credit bracelet to the stripper and tore off the fax tiket that arrived half a tick later. She looked at it, smiled.

If you get your hands on me, I'll shove this in your face. Read it and know you're a dead man walking.

She slid the tiket into her shoulderbag and left the booth, almost dancing in a triumph that drained from her when she stepped through the portal and saw him stand-ing in her way.

"Buy ya drink, Bait?" He reached for her.

She shied away from him, stumbled into the entourage of the Clovel Matriarch she'd seen on a lower level. Swearing at her stupidity, angry and afraid, she went scurrying off with the guard's laughter and the screeches of the Matriarch ringing in her ears; moving as fast as she could without actually running, she went up and up until she reached the highest level and there was nowhere left to go.

There was a salt taste on her tongue—she'd bitten her lip hard enough to draw blood, acid in her

throat and knots in her belly and her head wasn't working.

Futile and feeble. Come on, Shadow, get it together. Decorticate the bastard. Eviscerate him. Ahlalah, grand words, why don't you stop spinning words and DO something?

Not a good idea to go straight at him. He had reach on her, muscle enough to overwhelm her speed. The body she had now was strong for its size, quick and sure; she'd trained it to fight and was satisfied with the results, but there was no way she could face him without some sort of edge.

She looked over her shoulder, he was just standing there, watching her. A sudden attack might do it; get him set up, take him in a rush and flip him over the rail, then run for the Gate.

Some hope. And if I had my stunner ... even more futile, I can't fight the whole damn guard force....

She pulled her hand nervously across her mouth. That was the real trouble, it wasn't just him, it was the rest of the guard force, the us-against-them bonding of the guards; she'd seen it in their faces as she passed them, sometimes mixed with distaste, sometimes with pleasure, mostly with indifference. She was the outsider, the stranger, the predestined victim. He could play with her, then clean up after himself by tossing what was left of her down the nearest garbage chute and they wouldn't do anything. But if she beat the odds and it was him went down the chute, they'd forget indifference and come for her.

A table with a semi-blanked privacy shield drifted past her, following dozens of others that floated like dande-lion fluff in wide slow spirals down and around the im-mense atrium, in and out of the shimmering holoas, down and down and down until they came to rest for a few minutes in the park below. She'd seen them, but hadn't really noticed them until now; like the loas they were so much a part of the background they were invisible.

With a pot of tea and a pile of lacy honeywafers, the privacy shield tucked tight about her and tension drop-ping away for a while, she rode her table away from the platform and the guard who stood lounging against the aerie'staurant's facewall, grinning as if he got pleasure from her temporary success in evading him.

It was temporary, she knew, but she was going to enjoy it while she had it. She sipped at the tea and watched the Mall flow past.

I've got to take him somewhere out of sight. Where the guards aren't around to notice what happens to him. Hope the Kephalos won't be watching ... or the Censors won't lock on the scene before I'm out of here....

She twisted her mouth into a humorless smile.

Some chance. Well, Shadow, it's the only chance, might as well grab it ...

She rubbed her thumb along her belt: There was one weapon even the Customs scanner hadn't spotted. A garrotte. Menavidan monfilament. Let her get that around his neck and her knee in his back and it wouldn't matter how strong he was. She'd slice his head off.

That's no good unless I can get behind him without him spotting me. Won't be easy, he's creepy but I doubt he's a fool. Some kind of distraction .. what....

A flicker of gray caught her eye. A large rat darted across a stretch of pale sand along a stream cutting through the park below her. A housekeeping bot no larger than her hand speared the rat, scooped up the body and vanished under the trees. She laughed and slapped her hand on the table. "Sheep! Muttonhead! Lardbrain! Dis-traction nothing, I've got me an army."

She leaned back and sipped at the tea. Her bones felt like they were melting with the relief that swept through her. She had no more doubts. This place was old, old, old, ten centuries at least, there had to be more vermin in the walls than people on the walkways. "My army," she caroled. "My army's going to get you, creep."

As the table swung through the last curl of its down-spiral, she extended her mindride Talent and

began teas-ing together rats and hunting spiders, poison-tailed kapaweys, scavenger d'dabs with teeth capable of reduc-ing bone to paste and whatever else she found roaming that section of the innerways.

When the table settled onto the grass beside the cres-cent of sand, she took off before the guard had a chance to push away from the tree he was leaning against; she dashed across the park and plunged into the office sector beyond, a place where privacy would be easy to find; the offices were apt to be snoop shielded and what business went on there was done by appointment, with clerk bots left to hold house between visits. She slowed and moved at an easy lope down brightly-lit pastel corridors, past offices and agencies and factory outlets, ignoring the stares of the two or three traders she came on. She could hear the click-clack of the guard's bootheels behind her; he wasn't hurrying, but she could feel his growing triumph; he was preparing himself for the end of the chase.

At intervals along the corridors she passed rectangles set in the walls, hatches meant to let Station engineers into the repairways—where her army was now. She pulled that army with her as she ran, thinking of the moment when the furry horde would pour from a hatch onto him, rats biting, spiders spitting their digestive sprays, kapaweys plunging their poison tails into him, d'dabs gnawing at him and so on; it was an ugly image and she smiled with pleasure at it. All she needed now was a dark and quiet place with a hatch nearby,

She turned a corner, found herself in the middle of a kidnapping.

Chapter 2. From one frying pan into another frying pan

Before she had time to react, one of the kidnappers had an arm wrapped around her and a slicer against her temple. "Move and you're dead," he whispered. His breath was hot on her ear, she was pressed hard against him; he wasn't much taller or wider than she was, but she kept thinking of steel traps and sword blades and other hard and lethal things. Lethal, yeh. He wanted to kill her so badly she could smell it like body odor. She went stone still.

In the ensuing silence the sound of the guard's bootheels was shockingly loud. He was strolling along a few turns back, not hurrying but he'd be here in a couple of breaths; she could feel her captor tensing. "Please," she whis-pered. "He's no friend of mine, get me away from him."

Another of the kidnappers was hunched over the lock on an office Mot% He straightened and stepped back as the door slid open. The two blacksacked captives were shoved inside, the three men controlling them close on their heels. The man holding Shadith pushed her away from him so she could walk, but kept a punishing grip on her arm. She went into the office with him beside her.

The locksmith followed them in, pulled the door shut; unhurried, calm as a rock, he walked to the desk, tilted up the sensor pad and tapped on the snoop-lock. He folded his arms, frowned at her. "You know who that is?" He had a round unmemorable face ... no, it was a flesh mask; they all wore flesh masks, good ones, it took the harsh toplight in the office to show her what they were.

This shift had knocked her off-balance, but she wasn't as frightened as she had been; these were professionals, not about to start slaughtering indiscriminately—or rap-ing, gods be blessed—even that psycho with the deathgrip on her arm. Her head was getting addled trying to keep hold of her vermin army, i'was hard to talk or think, so she let them go running off, if she needed them she could always round up another horde.

"Transit Guard," she said; when the grip on her arm tightened yet more, she added hastily, "He's a veal hound with the hots forme. I was trying to get away from him." Tension made her voice husky.

The bossman lifted his hand. Muted by the thickness of the wall she heard the guard moving past the office, his footsteps quicker. He hurried on down the hall.

She shivered, sweat crawled down her neck. "It'd be a good idea to set that lock again; he'll be back to try these doors once he's sure he lost me. And in a rancid mood you better believe."

"Why do you warn us?"

"Because he makes my skin crawl." She licked her lips. "I'd rather your lot than him."

He nodded. She could feel he was pleased with her, a dusty, creaky sort of pleasure. "It locks automatically," he said. "Sit down on the desk here, child. Lute, let go of her arm, please." He waited

until she was settled, then went on, “We will stay here until that beast is finished with his explorations. Would he dare use the guard scanner to satisfy his lusts? Is the Authority here so corrupt they allow the gratuitous seduction of children?”

Corrupt? Gratuitous seduction? Pedantic prissy kidnapper?

Shadith bit her lip, winced as her teeth hit the cut. “That guard’s been harrying me back and forth across the Mall for the past hour under the noses of the other guards; they knew what was going on and didn’t give a shit.” His eyes went blank at the word, the crazy streak in him popped out like a distended vein, but he didn’t say anything.

Uh-oh, keep it clean, Shadow.

“Even if it weren’t so,” she went on, “I’m sure I could think up a dozen good reasons to scan the Station for someone. You could, too, sir, couldn’t you?”

“I see. Lute, move the screen there, get ready to open the wall, but do not do it yet. We will wait until the beast leaves the area before we cut through. Child, sit where you are and answer questions when you are asked and keep quiet otherwise. I would rather not feed you comealong and put you with them.” He indicated the silent, slumped captives with a quick gesture of a hand like a collection of sticks. “Be calm, we will do you no harm, we do not sully innocence.” After that astonishing speech, he crossed to the bright orange chairs arranged in a rigid row along the wall, sat with his hands resting on his meager thighs, his tar-colored eyes shining dully as he contemplated his captives, then turned to Shadith.

“What is your name, child?”

“Shadith, sir.”

“And your family, where are they?”

Shadith looked down at her hands; they were trembling. She pressed them together. “All dead.”

“I see. Your homeworld?”

“A place called Ibex out back of beyond. You won’t have heard of it.” She rubbed thumb against thumb, nervously amused by the prevarication; in a way it was the truth, Ibex was where she acquired this body.

He accepted the answer without comment. “Where are you going?”

“University, sir.”

“Why??”

“To learn more about music, ancient songs and an-tique instruments.”

Bossman went very still, then he smiled at his second. “My Luck,” he said reverently.

Lute lifted the slicer as if he raised a glass to toast the Lady. “Oh yes, sir. What a coup, the Singer landing in your lap.”

Shadith swallowed, stroked her throat. The room sud-denly stank of craziness. Lute was riding a wave of ... something ... high as the hips on a Bawang; her mind-ride fluttered with the fervor of his belief in his leader’s Luck.

Bossizan clicked his tongue, annoyed at losing her attention. He spoke sharply. “What ship? When does it leave?”

Her fingers jerked. She dropped her hand. “One of the Ji freighters. Paepyo Hayyun Ji. They told me the shuttle starts loading sixteen forty-five.”

“The guard out there. How did you catch his eye?”

“I didn’t do anything. I didn’t even look at him.”

If I could get at you, bastard, I’d rearrange your organs. How dare you imply it was my fault that slime went after me! Cool it, Shadow, you don’t know what’s going on here. He keeps calling you child. Be one. It couldn’t hurt.

“He kept coming up behind me,” she said, letting the words rush out as if she weren’t taking time to think what she was saying. “And ... and touching me. Yukh. It was horrible. I thought if I could just keep away from him until the shuttle was ready, everything would be all right, but he wouldn’t leave me alone.

He kept pushing me until he chased me down here.”

“I see. You have baggage?”

“Yes, sir. I left it at Customs, in a locker. What are you going to do with me?”

“Protect you, child. Now be quiet and let me think.” He leaned back, folded his arms across his chest and dosed his eyes.

Shadith ran her tongue back and forth over the cut inside her lip and tried to figure out what she’d got herself into. She couldn’t tell much about the prisoners, the blacksacks were cinched in at their waists, covering arms and hands as well as head and torso. They were both male bipeds, leg-to-body ratio about the same, they both wore the sort of trousers most travelers favored, male and female alike, the kind she was wearing, tough wrinkleproof material with a number of zippered pock-ets. One was a lot broader and taller than the other, but that didn’t mean much because she didn’t know their ages. She tasted at them with her Talent, but the comealong blocked her; the drug smothered everything individual about them. If Bossman booted her out now, she wouldn’t have a clue to the species of the captives, let alone their specific identities.

Bossman Prissyface. He wasn’t much taller than her, a meager man, all thin bone and stringy muscle. Firmly in charge of the operation. Deft hand with locks and alarms. She stole a look at him and found it hard to picture him as a prowler. He was a bookkeeper waiting for a bus, a prim, little bookkeeper who was in no hurry to get where he was going. A cool man, but weird. He handled her sudden appearance without a blink, just folded her in and went on. She kept probing at him, using her Talent like a snake’s tongue, *tasting* his reactions to her so she could figure out how to trick him into leaving an opening she could use to get out of this mess. He was opaque as a boulder and seemed about as responsive, but there was something *srAry* ... the way he handled his crew ... the way he kept control of them all with so little effort ... no feeling in him ... at least, none that she could discover, something...

Walk on your toes round this one, Shadow, don’t jump till you know how long’s his reach.

She edged around so she could see the man who jumped her. Lute. Was that his name or short for Lieutenant? Not something you make music from, no indeed. Sleek as a seal and fast? sail he was fast. Could be a heavy-worlder, though he wasn’t built like the ones she knew. Could be some kind of freak. Good name for him—Freak. He killed for the pleasure of it, she could smell it on him, see it in the wet gleam of his eyes. He was watching her now, doing her over and over in his head. She did NOT *touch him* with her talent. Yukh! Bossman had him firmly under thumb, thank whatever.

The other three squatting silently and patiently beside the captives, they were obviously mercs, hired for the job and waiting for the boss to get on with it. She *touch*ed them, read self-satisfaction and hot pride. Men with reps and fiercely protective of them. Holding themselves higher than the sca’s and jacks competing with them for jobs. They reeked contentment, which told her they had a leader they liked who did things the way they liked them done.

She glanced at her ringchron. Around an hour before the Ji shuttle started loading. There wasn’t all that much time for maneuvering. She sneaked another look at Lute. Not much chance either.

She heard a rattle—and some thumps next office over, then the click-clack of the guard’s heels. The door shook in its slot, the latch rattled as he tried it.

Get out of here, you creep.

The lock held and he moved on. Bossman sat listening intently until the sounds outside faded. One minute crept past, another. “Go, Lute,” he said. “Number One, have your men prepare the Avatars.”

Shadith blinked. Avatars?

Lute walked a hand along the back wall like a polypodal measuring worm, then made four swift sweeps of the slicer he’d held against Shadith’s head; the cuts were only a few molecules wide, visible if you stuck your nose against the wallboard, otherwise not. He laid the slicer on the desk, gave Shadith *a* hard look that told her to keep her hands to herself, took twinned suction cups from his shouldertote, set them against the board, slapped the lever down with the heel of his hand and eased the cutaway section from the wall, opening a long narrow hole that exposed the steel lattice of a repairway. He leaned the

panel against the desk, collected the slicer, and stood waiting.

While Lute was opening the wall, the mere answering to Number One got to his feet, made a quick hand sign to Two and Three, watched as they shrugged off equip-ment packs, took out a-g units and leashes. They belted the units to the captives, stretched the men horizontally on the lift fields and whipped the leashes about them, then they got to their feet and stood holding the leash handles, the bagged men floating waist high like oddly shaped balloons.

Bossman rose. "Take them out." He waited until the mercs had tugged the captives through the hole. "Shadith."

"Yes?" Shadith tensed.

"On your feet, child. We are leaving."

She slipped hastily off the desk, stood with her eyes wide and beseeching, her arms stiff at her sides, her hands knotted into fists, playing terrified child with ev-erything in her—and underneath the play trying to con-vince herself she wasn't as scared as she felt.

All right, Shadow, virgin, baby, pull out the stops and hit him hard.

"Let me go, please. I won't say anything. I'll be gone in an hour or so. You saved me from him, I owe you. I promise I won't say anything."

He produced a benign smile with no benignity behind it, not a trace of empathy or sympathy, as if they came from an organ he'd had excised or maybe was born without. He brushed her words away like wind noises or something with even less meaning. "Number One, leash the girl, take her out."

The burly chief merc clipped a leash around Shadith's waist, slapped her behind and pointed at the opening.

Asshole, keep your hands to yourself.

She was fuming as she climbed through and swung over the rail onto the catwalk.

What would you do, oinkoid, if I went weeping to Bossman Prissface and said you promised he wouldn't sully poor little virgin me?

She started to giggle, clapped her hand over her mouth, sucked in her cheeks as the giggles threatened to burst out of her; Bossman was coming through and she had a strong feeling he wouldn't approve.

Still fizzing with suppressed giggles she watched Lute back onto the catwalk and pull the cutout section of wallboard into place after him. He wiggled the panel until he was satisfied with the fit, slapped glue patches around the cut, waited until they were set, then tripped the lever on the vacuum cups and caught them as they fell away. He tucked them into his shouldertote and stood waiting.

All desire to laugh drained out of her. It wasn't funny, not funny at all.

Bossman stepped from the shadows. "Go," he said.

Lute nodded, came loping past Shadith, edged by the two mercs and their drifting captives and went off down the catwalk; the meres followed him, towing the floating "Avatars" behind them, the bodies banging against the rails, awkward, unhandy burdens dragging back on them as they ran.

Number One waggled Shadith's leash. "Gee-up," he said.

Gritting her teeth, Shadith started after them, loping over the knitted steel mesh; it rattled and gave a little under their boots, made silence impossible. They didn't seem to mind the noise.

No point in yelling for help, that's clear.

Following Lute (who seemed to be sniffing the route from the air itself) they ran without hesitation along the narrow ways, bending low when a walk overhead came zooming down until even Shadith couldn't stand upright, turning corners so acute the mercs with the captives had to rotate the bodies until they were vertical and muscle them into the other walkway. They passed half a hundred crossings, shifted through dozens of direction changes, went down ramps and up ramps, on and on through a dusty gray twilight.

Take away the leash (and she probably could have jerked free if she moved suddenly enough)—and her dismay at the thought of Lute sniffing after her through that murky twilight, beyond whatever restraints Bossman put on him—and she might have darted off down one of those sideways, counting on speed and agility to keep her loose long enough to find her way back into the Station proper. She didn't try it.

She could sense feral things scrambling through the dark around them; if she wanted to reassemble her horde, she could do it in a gasp and a half. She didn't try it.

At times they ran through ragged veils of old web choked with dust; there were spiders like clots of dark-ness stirring in the shadows, hating and fearing them, heavy with poison. It wouldn't take much pushing to goad them into an attack. If she extended herself, she—could control hundreds of them, could bring them scuttling along the upper ways and launch them at the men when time and circumstance seemed optimum. She didn't try that either.

Partly it was the Lute who stopped her, the memory of his quickness and strength, his murderous efficiency. Partly, it was the mercs and their weapons. It was also Bossman, precise, pernickety priss. She didn't know what he was armed with or how he might react. And there were other reasons, little things that weighed on the side of a temporary passivity. Bossman's cryptic remark about his Luck when he learned of her interest in music and the trouble he was taking to bring her along suggested she had some value to hint and wouldn't be swatted when he got around to dealing with her. And she was itching to find out what was going on; cat-curious, that's what Aleytys called her when she was especially annoyed at something Shadith had done: you keep sticking your nose in things none of your business, it'll get cut off one of these days.

Shadith wrinkled her nose as she ran.

Aleytys is turning positively stodgy. Going conservative on me. How dull. Dull. I'm dull. Duh duh duh dull. Bad as the Vrya who get so bored with living they dive into the nearest sun.

She loathed being dependent on Aleytys and Sward-held, didn't matter they were closer than most blood kin and willing. She wanted to support herself and her ship. Trouble was, a starship was a worse drain on the pocket than a drug habit, what with maintenance, docking fees, fuel, registration—if she wanted to go that route. Free-traders mostly didn't bother with registration—and got their ships confiscated if they stepped on the dignity of some local potenpot, same thing she faced with that creepy guard. No, she wanted her ship Registered out of Helvetia. There was a NAME with clout. There was a name that COST.

They ran on and on; it seemed to her they were going to run forever.

It was Swardheld's idea she go to University for a few years, that would give her body time to mature and bring her contacts she could use whatever she decided to do. He'd worked for several* Departments there and had connections all over the place, people who knew the mechanisms behind the facade. But she couldn't dredge up much enthusiasm for the idea. University made her nervous. She'd never been to school—not on her own. She'd got her education first from her family, then as apprentice to a series of extraordinary masters. As she loped through the darkness, she had very mixed feelings about University, even a touch of gratitude to Bossman Prissface trotting along at the tail of this parade; he was an excuse to put off something she'd rather not have to deal with.

None of which meant she wouldn't jump at the first good chance to escape.

The catwalk widened; the mercs ahead slowed to an easy amble.

She followed them round a sharp corner and stopped.

She was at the back end of a stubby offshoot with a steel door in the far wall. Bossman brushed past her and crouched over the latch as he had over the lock on the office door. In seconds he had it open with no sign he'd triggered any alarms.

Hmp. Clever, aren't you, little man.

Through the opening she saw a familiar cicatrice on the far wall of the corridor outside, the heavy round iris of a chute portal.

Shuttle berth. Hmm. I was afraid this was where we were going.

Alert, wary, but doing her best to hide both as her situation got shakier by the minute, she followed the bobbing bodies through the door, along a short stretch of wide corridor and through an umbilical chute into a small shuttle.

The mercs took their captives into the back section, a miniature cargo hold, ratcheted them to the floor and shut off the a-g units. Yawning and relaxed, they dropped onto padded wall benches and sat with their legs stretched out, feet propped on the bodies; if they'd shouted it, they couldn't have made it clearer they considered the job done.

Lute waited in the lock, his eyes on Shadith.

Same to you, butcherboy. If you think I'm dumb enough to jump your Bossman, you got ivory between your ears.

Bossman leaned over the console, touched a sensor and dropped a barrier field between them and the mercs, blocking sound and solid objects. He swung the pilot's seat around and lowered himself into it. "Sit down, child." There were three rows of seats on each side of the cabin section, two seats in each row. He pointed to the front row on the left. "There. The inside seat. Lute, bring me her shoulderbag, please."

He took things from the bag one by one, looked them over and dropped anything he found uninteresting to the floor beside the chair. Comb, tissues, a half-empty box of lemon drops, a printed book (*Songs of Ancient Elyzie*—he flipped through it, dropped it), her stylus, her antique fountain pen that she kept in a plastic wrap because it leaked (he unwrapped it, took it apart, dropped the pieces and the wrapping; she fumed silently, it was her favorite poem-pen), facepaint (when she felt festive, she painted feathers on the hawk outline acid-etched on her cheek), mirror, hair clips, rubberbands, bits of this and that. He flipped through her notebook, read a few pages of her scribbles (notes and observations, lines of poems jotted down as they occurred to her). He set the note-book aside and unsnapped her coinpurse; he inspected each of the coins inside as if he suspected they were small bombs. When he was finished with that, he set the purse on the notebook and opened out another section of the bag. He found the boarding pass for the Paepyl's shuttle, read front and back, dropped it on the floor. "I think it would be best to ignore this booking, we would draw attention by canceling it and gain nothing; if the child does not show up, Ji will mark it and forget it. She could have changed her mind, it happens all the time."

"Yes, sir. Your Luck will smooth it over."

Bossman dipped again, brought up the metal check from the Customs locker. "Now this is different, I think." He touched the timer on, read the display. "Yes. Some-thing less than an hour left before the alarm goes and triggers a Station scan along with a check on MEMORY. That we do not want. Take. this, Lute. Fetch the girl's luggage here." He blanked the display, tossed the check to his second. "Please wait until I have finished with the bag before you leave."

He brought out a letterpak, unsealed it and ran the message. (Shadith was furious at this intrusion, but found Swardheld's voice comforting right then):

//Aslan aid Adlaar/University/Institute of Xenoethnology

Aslan—who gives you this is a friend of mine by name Shadith. She plays a mean harp. Introduce her to all the ancient songs you can dig up and point her to the

better teachers, you'll know who once you hear her play. Me, I confess an utter Ignorance. Might as well confess, you say? Hahl All right, I build harps, I don't play the things. Favor for favor, teach. Ask and you will get. I'll be along In a year or so to see how things are going. If you're not off somewhere recording the tweedles of noseflutes or something equally stimulating, perhaps we can find a way to pass sometime. Should you be agreeable to this, leave a message with my housekeep. See you. Swar Quale/Cluale's Nest/Telfferll

Bossman dropped the spent pak on the floor. "Who is this Quale?"

"He's a friend of my guardian. A Freetrader. He hauls and fetches a lot for University."

"I see. A year or so. He does not seem overly concerned about you though he calls you friend."

"He's just being polite, doing me a favor because my guardian asked him to."

"Will this Aslan be expecting you?"

"No." She was running on instinct, there was no time to think out her lies and she couldn't have explained to anyone, even herself, why she said NO rather than YES. "Quale was leaving and the times were wrong for a comcall. The letterpak was instead."

"No message? He asked this Aslan to leave one."

"He doesn't like leaving messages about, he says his business is his business and he wants to keep it that way.

Too many snoops around reading other people's mail."

"I trust you are not referring to me, child."

Shaddith put a stubborn look on her face and said nothing.

He didn't push it, in fact he seemed pleased with her; she'd guessed right this time, but the need to watch every word, every act was putting knots in her gut.

He felt around the smallest of the compartments and

Jo Clayton found the tiket from the shop, frowned as he read it. "Sent to Aleytys of Wolff, Hunter. How do you come to know her?"

"Aleytys is my guardian and guarantor." Shadith tapped the credit bracelet. "It was her dropped me off here."

He inspected the tiket again. "A personal message enclosed." He smiled. "That was clever of you, child."

"Clever? What do you mean?"

"You understand me very well."

Shadith reknotted her fingers. "All right. I wrote her about the guard who was after me. I was angry, sir. Scared, too. If I couldn't get away from him, I wanted her to come here and erase the slime. She's fond of me and she's very loyal to people she's fond of, she doesn't like people who mess with people she's fond of and those people end up very sorry for themselves if they're still alive to feel sorry."

"Ah yes, child." He was amused at her clumsy threat, but it was no time to get complacent. Just because she'd been sliding her lies past him without being called on it didn't mean that old monster was any kind of fool. He lifted the coinpurse, put the tiket under it, set the purse back with a prim finality that was probably some kind of parable meant for her enlightenment. "Yes, that does make complications which we had better deal with immediately. Shadith, describe the beast, please."

Shadith wiped her palms on her trousers; she could feel sweat gathering in her hair again and trickling down her neck. "I don't like to think about him."

"Describe him for us now, child, and you won't ever have to think of him again."

Riiight, so much for the creep.

She wriggled in the chair, wondering if she were laying it on too thick. It seemed to be working so she stopped worrying for the moment and let the words gush out. "Well, he's a guard. An ordinary guard, not an officer or anything. There's nothing different about his clothes and he's pretty average size, all of them are about the same size, I suppose they have to be to get hired. Dark hair, sort of medium skin, his face is just ... oh, just a face face, nothing special about it. Um ... he ... he looked kind of ... I don't know ... kind of soft, doughy, the way some men get when they lie around a lot, there was this wobble over his belt, he wasn't even close to fat, but you could see he might be in a few years. He was ... he was thick in the shoulders, front to back and side to side. Long arms, kind of extra long, I think he was maybe ashamed of them because he hooked his thumbs in his belt a lot even when he was walking around. Um ... that reminds me, on his left hand he only has three fingers, a thumb and three fingers, I mean. His pointing finger is the one that's gone. That's all I can remember."

“I think that will be sufficient. Lute?”

Lute drew his thumb along the side of his face in an arc that followed the boneline; he smiled, a tight anticipatory gesture of a mouth with the clean curves of a wooden angel despite the muffling of the flesh mask. “It’ll do.”

“We do not want that beast in a position to give information to the Hunter when she comes looking for her ward, do we, Lute?”

“Certainly not, sir.”

“It would be a service to everyone to cleanse the Station of that sink of evil. It would also be well to bear in mind, Lute, that however noble our ends, they are susceptible to misinterpretation. Be quick and be discreet.”

“I am always discreet, sir.”

36 Jo Clayton

“Of course you are. One minute.” He touched off the barrier field. “Number One, go with Lute and bring the child’s baggage back. Number Two, take out your neural whip, please, and point it at the girl. Use it if she seems inclined to give trouble.”

Shadith let her surprise show, but hoped her dismay was pushed too deep for him to catch; she could swear she’d fooled him tip to top, that he really did see her as a helpless girlchild. So what was he doing treating her like some death-and-glory terrorist?

That old viper, he double-knots everything. How do you fight someone like that? Wonder how far he’d go if he knew what I really am?

When Lute and the merc were gone, Bossman looked at her then said, “Now now, child, there is nothing for you to worry yourself about. Sit and be patient like the good little girl you are.”

Blast the man, if he were trying, he couldn’t do a better job of provoking me. Gods, maybe he is. Maybe he’s been leading me by the nose all this time.

When she touched at him, she read satisfaction like dusty dried flowers. And a general complacency.

No. I couldn’t be THAT wrong.

She squeezed her hands into fists, then forced them open and stared into her palms.

I’ve got to do something. Transit Authority keeps the gnats away from the condors, this shuttle, it’s one of the small ones, Lee’s was about the same size, we couldn’t be far from where she dropped me off, there was a jit park just around the bend, what bend? who the hell knows? Five minutes to the freighter tikkaboro if I pick the right turn, five minutes to dead if I don’t?

She used her thumb to push the ringchron around so she could read it without turning her hand over.

Sixteen twenty-five. Twenty minutes. All right, Shadow, let’s see what you can finesse.

She lifted her head. “May I ... may I have my things, please?”

His little birdclaw hand tap-tapping on the thick, scarred leather of her shoulderbag, Bossman chewed that over. After several minutes of heavy silence, still without saying anything to her, he dropped the bag on the floor, swung round and darked the console, tied it off and slid from the chair. He crossed to the lock, stood where Lute had been. “On your feet, child, but do not move until I tell you.”

She stood up, struggling with a sense of futility that came close to despair. To get out of here she’d have to go through him. His hands were empty, his tunic hung smooth and unwrinkled over his skinny body. No sign of a weapon anywhere, but she wouldn’t trust that old viper an antiquated inch. With his over-value of his withered hide, he’d be bound to have something nasty to put down threats.

“Go down on your hands and knees,” he said. “Yes. That is correct. Now, proceed to the chair. Stop when you get there. Stay on your knees. Do not touch anything.”

As she crawled across the gritty stained carpet, she put anger and fear on hold and settled to a grim waiting.

There was no point in regretting lost opportunities—which were most likely illusion anyway.

Fly in a spiderweb, the more you struggle, the tighter the strands wrap round you.

Wait.

Keep your head down.

Wait.

Your time will come.

He hasn't a notion what you are, what you can do. Wait.

“You may begin,” he said. “Touch only your own things.”

She picked up the bag, turned the flap back, found her comb and dropped it in. Working slowly, deliberately, keeping her movements unmistakably innocent, she collected her belongings and put them in the bag. When she was finished, she sat on her heels and waited.

Bossman contemplated her, his tar eyes gone dull. “Go back to your chair, young Shadith. No. Do not stand, go on your hands and knees. Yes.” He waited until she was seated, then took his place at the console, bringing it up again. Over his shoulder, he said, “Number Two, come sit behind the girl, use your whip if she thinks of moving. We will not wait for Lute or Number One, they are taking longer than I am comfortable with. I will send you back with the shuttle later.”

Shadith sat with her hands folded, her eyes down.

Wait.

Nothing ever goes exactly like anyone plans it, not even his schemes, old monster. There's always a breakdown somewhere.

Wait and watch.

Your time will come.

Be patient.

Not like a good little girl, meek and obedient. Never!

Like a cat at a mousehole.

Wait.

Chapter 3. Riding the flying spiderweb

The door whooshed closed behind Bossman, expanding as it moved to fill the whole space of the opening as if it erased itself to underline the futility of trying to escape the cell. Hands clasped behind her, Shadith scowled at the seamless wall. “Mashak! Dafta! Your soul smells like dogshit.”

There was no response. She didn't really expect one and shrugged off her depression as she began inspecting her new home-from-home. Four walls and a floor with warts.

All the comforts of hell. Sari

She kicked at a wart, stretched out on the cot that unfolded from the wall and contemplated the gray monotony of the place. If Prissface left her in here too long with nothing to do, hallucinations would be

the least of it.

Time.

In the diadem she was essentially immortal. She'd abandoned all that when she had Aleytys decant her into this body.

I must have been out of my alleged mind.

That struck her as funny and she giggled, but the spurt of humor was quickly dissipated. Time meant more now. In a century or two she was going to die; she'd accepted that, but the idea of wasting any part of those counted hours in a hole like this with nothing to see, nothing to do, made her wild. She spent some hot, passionate moments loathing Bossman and all his satellites, then she took another minute to curse the Transit Guard's disembodied soul—Lute had to've shucked him from his body by now. If it hadn't been for him she wouldn't be in this mess.

Still muttering imprecations and incantations, she fished in her bag and pulled out the battered book, but when she tried to read, she found the light in the cell so se and dim it was like looking through a frosted screen. It made her eyes burn, her head ache. There were poems that book she'd read over and over, sucking the flavor from them one by one as if they were the sweets she was far too fond of, but when she looked at a page this time, she couldn't make sense of the marks on it. Besides, she was too upset to concentrate, especially on multi-layered poetry in outmoded and esoteric word forms. She gave up, dropped the book beside the cot and began searching through the bag for her box of lemon drops.

No box. She must have missed it when she collected her things. She swore, threw her bag across the cell, glared at it as it bounced off and plopped onto the floor. She rubbed at her eyes, got herself calmed down.

All right, Shadow, let's not sit round whining. Well, lie around. Funny, why should whining sound worse lying down than sitting up?

She folded her hands over her stomach, wriggled around until she was as comfortable as she could get on that narrow cot, then she closed her eyes and *reached*, searching for other eyes, single or compound, large or small, anything she could look through. Somewhere, somehow, Bossman must have left a crack she could 'worry at until it was big enough to let her crawl out of this.

She *touched* down, looked through one set of eyes, moved on to another, then on and on through a bewildering progression of sense structures, insect compounds, arachnid multiples, vertebrate bi—and tri-polar vision, her brain struggling to adjust to and make sense of the data pulsing into it from such wildly varying sources.

In a small second hold she found the two captives that Bossman called Avatars (of what? for what? not knowing gave her an hitch in the psyche). They were lying prone on tatty mattresses and tethered to the wall by thin almost invisible cables of Menaviddan monofilament. She slipped from a spider weaving a web beneath a catwalk into the body of a small furry like a rat but not a rat that was nosing at the big man's foot. The furry nibbled at a boot, but didn't like the taste of polish; he spat out the fragment of leather, scrubbed at his tongue with supple fore-paws. Ears twisting like radar dishes, he moved along the man, nipping at him, sniffing at him, put off by the tough cloth of his trousers and tunic. The man's hand was far more interesting. The furry patted a forepaw at short silky hair that ran in a vee up the back of the hand, pale hair like wood ash in his eyes—his vision was sharp at short distances but he saw mainly in shades of gray with a few stark patches of black or white. The man's palm was broad, the fingers long and tapering, with stiff curved claws rather than the fiat nails more common to bipeds.

The furry darted away when a finger twitched, edged warily back and nipped at the thumb.

A thready beam of light shot from a lens set some two meters high on the nearest wall, tapped the furry on the nose. He squealed and scuttled away, heat flaring through his body; he wasn't hurt but he was startled enough to keep away from the captives after that.

The big man had large semi-mobile pointed ears that twitched continually even though he was sodden

with comealong. His hair was thick and rather coarse, a dread-locked mane that reached his shoulders, middlish brown as far as she could judge, several shades darker than his skin. His eyebrows were darker yet, extravagantly tan-gled angular arcs with a few white hairs shining in the brown. His mustache was dark as his brows, like them, threaded with white; it hid most of his upper lip and drooped in long, thin tails at the corners of his wide mouth. He had broad shoulders, long sleek muscles; his sleeves were rolled up, showing thick wrists and power-ful, hairy forearms.

A Dyslaeror. And an alpha at least, Ciocan maybe. Pippon on a crab! Tippy muh toesies in a ocean o shit. Bossman, oooooehhh, he's coot crazy and slid-ing for hell.

No sane being would play games with the Dyslaera, they had a history of blood feuds that went back over a thousand years. They weren't a hasty people, they didn't take umbrage lightly, but family bonds were strong and they never gave up till they got whoever injured one of theirs. Especially the females never gave up, the Dyslaerin. If Bossman loped off so casually with an alpha male, a Ciocan, the chosen mate of a Toerfeles, a Clanmother, well, that didn't say much for Shadith's chances of surviv-ing this game of his, whatever it was. Or of getting away from him.

She gathered less about the other man because the local life walked wide around him; they didn't like the way he smelled, there was something dangerous about it. He was short and slight, with a smooth pebbly skin; she thought it was a dusty gray-green but it was hard to be sure, it might be memory overlaying present image, he reminded her of the small busy lizards that ran about her mother's garden.

His tabard was made from coarse thread the color of clean sand, thread almost thick enough to qualify as cord, knotted rather than woven into a complex pattern whose flowing textures had a subtle beauty that intrigued her, a design that resonated with her soul in ways she couldn't put into words despite her cultivated facility. She didn't recognize his species and the comealong was still smothering his mindpatterns so she couldn't get a feel for who he was that way—except for a fugitive impression of a strangeness unlike anything she'd come across before. Odder even than the vegetative Sikkul Paem doublet Kinok-Kahat who lived in Swardheld's ship and worshiped the stardrives.

She'd stayed away from the Bridge until she'd pros-pected the rest of the ship, now she went jumping from mind to mind until she ended inside the head of a small simi chained to the high back of the immense Captain's Chair. His was the most intelligent of the animal brains she hitched a ride on that day; he was also nearsighted and bad-tempered. He chattered noisily as she tried to shift-his head, went into an angry dance back and forth along his perch. She loosened her grip, afraid Bossman would notice his pet's agitation, have one of his unpre—

dictable flashes of insight and shut her down before she knew what was happening.

The Pet gibbered some more, then he folded his long skinny arms and gloomed at the woman seated on his right.

She was a small dark woman, wiry, athletic; she wore a black allbody shipsuit and a loose vest that fell in grace-ful folds about her, black suede, soft and supple as silkvelvet, with black zippers everywhere. She sat at the pilot station, legs crossed, one foot swinging as she flipped through the pages of a magazine, the reader on her knee, her thumb dancing on the jak button. The swinging foot bounced now and then as she came across something that interested her, orPasionally she read a snippet aloud to Bossman who was sitting at a com station on the far side of the Bridge pulling up data on a screen. He ignored her except for a meaningless mouth noise he produced at irregular intervals.

Before Shadith had time to get bored, Lute came in. The Pet fidgeted nervously and kept a wary, myopic eye on the slight tigerish figure. Number One was just behind Lute, hauling the harpcase and her travelpouch. The mere dumped his load on the floor beside the pilot and left immediately. Lute dropped into the Co's seat to the left of the Chair and waited for Bossman to acknowledge his presence.

Bossman finished his task at the sensor board, frowned at what he saw on the screen, swung round to face the Lute. "Well, Puk?"

"Couldn't help it, Ginny. That kaak was chargin around like his tail on fire and maybe it was. He had a herd of his lodge bros huntin with him. Took me a time to get him off by himself. I blew a leech on his neck and soon's he was out of it, I tipped him down the nearest incinera-tor chute. He's sludge brick by

now. No trouble showin when me and the merc connected, but I got a feelin we sled leave soonest. What you think?"

"Your instincts are infallible, my friend. Ajeri tiszteh, is it possible?"

The pilot lifted her eyes from her magazine. "We have a window in half an hour, then one after that every fifteen minutes for the next hour. You name it, you got it."

"We will leave soonest as Puk suggests. When you have completed the necessary arrangements, Jeri, I would like you to look through the girl's baggage."

Ajeri the Pilot set the magazine reader aside, thumbed the sensor that sent the prerecorded message; she waited for the acknowledgment, then looked around. "What for, Ginny? She's just a kid."

"I wonder. She was quite calm when she did not think someone was watching her. And there is that association with the Hunter."

Puk the Lute stirred, "Playin games," he growled.

Ajeri slid from the chair, went to poke at the travel pouch with her boot toe. Over her shoulder she said, "Some of the Cousins look like babes until they turn into little old people. What's MEMORY tell you, Ginny? The Ibexines like that?"

"I do not believe so." He glanced at the screen, turned back to the Pilot. "Although there is very little information available about Ibex. Except for the trade enclave Yastroo, it is a closed world."

"You think the girl's been feeding you lies?" Ajeri was squatting beside the harpcase; she looked up, raised her brows.

Puk stirred. "Sure she was. They drop from the womb, women lie, the first breath they take, they lie. It's their thing."

Ginny the Bossman ignored him and answered the

Pilot. "Not exactly, Jeri tisz, I think it more likely that she is not telling the whole truth."

That sent chills through Shadith because it was too close to what she'd actually been doing. He kept having them, those flashes of insight. Spooky. And frustrating. It was impossible to fight because you never knew when it would strike and undo all your plotting. He had an exalted view of his Luck and maybe he was right to have it.

Ajeri had the harpcase open; Shadith winced as the Pilot plucked the loosened strings at random, then heavyhanded a muddled arpeggio. "Maybe you ought to dump her, Ginny. She sounds like trouble we don't need."

"No, Jeri, she is a gift from my Luck; to throw her away would be a stupidity and dangerous. Would Luck stay if I rejected her and her gifts? Think of it, my friend. Without my looking or seeking, the girl came to me, a musician who knows old songs, old music. A child, vir-ginal and pure. She is the last ingredient in the mix, Jeri. The third in the holy triad, Nataminaho the Hunter, Opalekis-Mimo the Holy Dancer, and now Nikamo-Oskinin the Virgin Singer. We can proceed immediately to Kiskai, inject them into the mix, and let it ferment. There is more time for the news of their arrival to spread and stir the people up, it will have a wider impact—and we will have time to extend the drama to an explosion of blood and rage at the Culmination of the Pakoseo. Think of the intensity we can get, Jeri, what a grand finale. Ahhhhh. We will burn our candles to Luck this night, my dear, we will..." He stopped and pulled himself to-gether. "Jeri tisz, the harp seems harmless enough. Please continue looking through the girl's impedimenta and tell me if you find anything that troubles you."

Puk the Lute sat up with a jerk. "Ginny, we need more of a buffer. I think you should get hold of Betalli and turn him lose on makin fuckin damn sure we can't be traced backward forward up down any which way. I don't like that. Hunter bein involved with the girl. She'll be nosin after every ship that leaves here around the time the little bitch disappeared. Spotchals, I knew it was goin to be trouble, they a herd of needlenosed assholes wind you up so tight with their fuckin rules you strangle y'self. We're not deep enough covered, Boss. Luck or no luck, that's the truth and you know it."

"Puk, I've told you before, I will not have Language in my ears. You will be Penitent tonight in our Praisesong."

"Yeh yeh, I hear you." When Ginny scowled, Puk got hold of his impatience and spoke more soberly. "I apolo-gize, sir, but I must respectfully remind you of the gist of what I said. Buffer, sir. Betalli,

sir. Hunters Inc, sir.”

“I will consider the matter, Puk. And your apology is accepted; I understand you spoke from the heat of your anxiety, but courtesy is a virtue that must be assiduously cultivated. Cultivate, my friend, cultivate. Ajeri tiszteh, have you finished? Is there anything in that pouch that I should see?”

“Only that the girl’s hauling along a young arsenal. Seems an odd lot to be carrying to University of all places, makes me wonder what she was thinking. There’s a stunnertype I’ve never seen before, looks hand-built. And this.” She held up a tiny needier; it almost disap-peared *in* the palm of her hand. “I’d swear it’s a Pa’ao special. I know the Pa’ao Teely don’t make weapons for everyone and they charge an arm and a leg, but she’s got such high-powered friends, it probably is. Can I keep it, Ginny? It’s a beautiful thing.”

“We are not thieves, Ajeri Tiszteh. Put the needier away.”

Mumbling under her breath the Pilot tucked the weapon back where she’d found it. “I tell you again, Ginny, singer or no, virgin or whatever, I think you should dump her.”

“I will not so question my Luck, Ajeri tiszteh. You displease me by your lack of faith. You will join Puk as Penitent. Do you accept?”

“Yes, sir; I acknowledge my failing, but remember, dear sir, it is grounded in my affection for you and my respect for the artistry of your productions.”

In her cell Shadith blinked, so startled that she tempo-rarily lost touch with the Pet’s brain. She finally decided it was some kind of game they were playing. Weird.

Shortly after that she felt the ship come alive and knew they were on their way.

Chapter 4. Crazy in a can

It was a small oval room, womblike, warm, almost claus-trophobic. Shadith saw it through the Pet’s eyes; they seemed to work better in semidarkness—as if his brain reconfigured the shape of his retinas to eliminate his myopia once the sun went down.

The curved walls were a matte black that sucked up light with an avid hunger, even the ghastly blue-purple glow from lusotorches programmed to sink near extinc-tion at random intervals, then flame up into a painful glare, all the while producing goutts of illusory gray black cottoncandy smoke without stink or sting. Incense wafted about on programmed drafts, pungent and not quite pleas-ant. When a drift came his way, the Pet sneezed and scrubbed at his nose with his forepaws. The small sounds he made were lost in swelling sonorous music that set Shadith’s teeth on edge and made him fold his ears tight against his head.

Bossman knelt in the center of an elaborate mandala, lines of silver laid into the tarblack floor, raying outward from a silver disk with words and obscene drawings writ-ten in silver wire between the rays, shimmering alive and sinking into murk once more as the torchlight shifted. He chanted in a high thin voice, supported by Ajeri the Pilot who knelt at his right hand and Puk the Lute who kept at his left. The Pet was chained high on a wall beside one of the flambeaux; between attacks of incense, the beast sank into a lethargy that came from too much familiarity with the room and the goings on there. Shadith had to keep pinching at him to wake him up so she could look through his eyes and follow what was happening.

The chant went on and on, but the music changed; the smoke spun into dancers—slender, childlike female forms hidden and revealed by drifting draperies of black gauze. Flinging themselves through a turgidly erotic dance, they dipped and bowed, leaped, turned and twisted round and round the mandala.

For some time Shadith couldn’t see their faces. When she did, she gasped.

They had her face. All of them.

They were her. Deliberately her. Holo-shapes pro-grammed to repeat HER over and over, called into being by that ... that obscenity of a man. He was using her, using her body, her face for ... for ... She writhed on the cot, then forced herself to calm. She was losing the link with the Pet.

It wasn’t because of their eroticism that she found the dance and dancers so deeply disturbing. Reacquiring the capacity for sensual pleasure of all sorts and degrees was one of her strongest reasons

for abandoning disembodied immortality. No, the dance and the dancers were troubling because their-eroticism was so distorted.

Ginny Bossman, Puk the Lute, Ajeri the Pilot, they shaped the dance and the dancers, bled their own lubricity into the smoke, their passions were there under the surface, seething and burgeoning—and distorted and denied, denied, denied in their hatred and fear of those passions. Watching simulacrum with her face and body

52 Jo Clayton moving through that dance made her sick. Yet she couldn't look away, she couldn't bring herself to break the connection with the Pet.

The dance grew more and more intense.

The lusitorches blew out more goutts of smoke, thick-ening the dark; the light sank to a vague purple glow and stayed low for several minutes—then flared in a blast of harsh brilliance that seared the Pet's eyes and started him whimpering.

Puk and Ajeri were bound face inward to a pair of X-shaped bodyframes.

Ginny Bossman threw off his robe and stood naked in blinding, blue-purple light that turned his skin corpse white, his lips black, and sunk his eyes into bottomless holes. The flesh mask stripped off, he had a gaunt, deeply lined face; the lines were wounds, the shadow in them a harsh black like dried blood. He stripped fauxskin from his left hand, baring the metal beneath, twisted his thumb and extruded razor claws.

The music swelled, the dancers sang a wordless howling song and pressed in on the mandala.

Tumescant and sweating, Ginny walked with heavy slow steps to the X:frames. He sank his claws into the black cloth of the Pilot's robe and tore it away, exposing her narrow back, drawing lines of black blood on the pallid waxy flesh. He dropped the swatch, took a step to one side, and repeated with the Lute's robe. "Praise Her," he cried out suddenly, his voice a strident screech. He manipulated the metal arm just above the wrist; a limber metal-cored whip at least two meters long unreeled • from inside the arm. He closed his metal fingers about the stock, swung, the whip up. "Praise Her," he cried again and opened a long cut in the Pilot's back. "Praise Her." He flicked the tip across the Lute's hard taut shoulders.

The dancers had whips in their hands, lines of light, force lines; each time Ginny cut at Puk and Ajeri, they laid into him, back and belly, thigh and shoulder, the holo-whips raising real welts on his body. When the dancers with Shadith's face and form beat him, it was as if SHE beat him. For a few minutes she laughed and cheered them on, then she understood what was really happening in there and the elation drained out of her. Her smoke clones were pleasuring him, whores of pain.

She broke away, deeply dismayed by her reaction to that ceremony and insulted by Bossman's use of her—and she was frightened by the implications of what she was seeing.

What's he mean to do with me? He said something about drama. If that's his idea of drama, that, that thing! Gods! There's no way m going to.... Kiskai. I've never heard of it. I suppose it's another of those out the back of beyond places where they grow weirdness like a cash crop. I'm supposed to be some-thing called the Nikamo-Oskinin, the virgin singer. Virgin. Talk about your wasted opportunities, I should've teased Swar into ... well, it's too late for that now. Besides, that gorbellied old goat doesn't really give a shit about a meensy flap of flesh, it's my bodyage that's got him dizzy, that blasted twitch he's got about girls. You better watch your feet, woman. It could be you in that blackroom playing the peni-tent if he gets snarky about something you do. Penitent. Gods!

Her mind in turmoil, it was several hours before she managed to sleep.

Chapter 5. Crazy in a can 2

Day slid into day and no one came to the cell.

Every eight hours a red light blinked; a pleasant run of chimes broke the humming, stifling silence, and a tray arrived in the slot above the extensitable. The meals were ample but bland. Dull. Monotonous. The

same four meals in the same order, over and over and over.

She still couldn't read. The lighting seemed designed to prevent it. When she tried, nose an inch from the page, the strain brought on a roaring headache.

She couldn't write. She tried scribbling words and phrases she couldn't read, but seeing what she wrote was so much a part of her way of working she couldn't make anything come out right and that built up so much rage and frustration in her that she screamed and threw the notebook and stylus at the wall, flung herself on the cot, and beat her fists on the pillow. And felt like a fool once she calmed down. —

The cell was gray. Everything in it was gray. Even the light was gray. She looked at gray until it seeped so deep in her she felt her bone marrow turning gray. It was like living in a fog. A small fog. When everything was folded away, the cell was barely six paces wide and seven long.

At times she plunged round and round for hours, driven by the clamor of her body for exercise, for some way to vent the restless energy that built up in her.

Day slid into day. The ship plowed on through the insplit. There was nothing to break the slow passage of the hours; transit time was time out from life. Nothing to do but wait.

One week slipped away. Two.

Shadith paced and raged and slept, glared at the food with loathing when the trays arrived on their unvarying schedule with their unvarying menus.

"I want someone to talk to," she yelled into the slot, knowing it was futile. "I want something to do." She kicked at the wall where the door had been, hammered at it with the heel of her boot. "Talk to me, you turds. Say something. Anything!" The only response she got was the dull thud of leather against unyielding steel. And the equally adamant silence from her captors.

Even mindriding lost its charm; there was nothing new to look at, no matter how diligently she searched—and, more than that, not a single crack in Bossman's security, no hope she could dig her way out of this mess.

Most days Bossman Ginny was busy at a workstation, but the Pet was never close enough to let her read the screen and there wasn't a lot of interest in watching a man play with a sensorpad when she couldn't inspect the result. When he wasn't at the workstation, he sat in the Blackroom, meditating, which was even less interesting.

She avoided that room during shipnight or any other time when Puk or Ajeri were in there with Ginny. She was afraid of it. She had enough strains on her sanity without dredging up more of her own darkside.

After Ajeri the Pilot went meticulously through her daily check on the ship's position and condition, she ate a substantial breakfast, read her magazines until she con—

56 Jo Clayton sidered the meal sufficiently digested, then she shifted to the gym where she ran a series of tests on her body; she marked the results on a pressboard, pulled up a chart and inspected that, then worked her way through inter-minable exercise programs, doing the stretches, kicks, and the rest with obsessive concentration. After the first week Shadith got so bored seeing the same thing over and over and over again that she didn't bother tuning in on the Pilot and her solitary cavortings.

Except for his daily visits to the hold where he pumped high-energy concentrates into the prisoners and renewed the drugs that kept them unaware of where they were and what was happening to them, Puk the Lute stayed in his quarters, wandering through the labyrinths of his mind with the help of a small pharmacopoeia of pi-dramins. After watching him sweat and make faces for a while, Shadith sighed and left him to it. Because his drug-fantasies were probably the most interesting things happening on the ship, she wished for a moment or two that she could take a walk through them, wished that she were one of those rare full range telepathy the universe threw up to make life a bitch for students of psi who swore that true telepathy was a phantasm created from the yearning of the powerless for an ultimate kind of power. But she wasn't and she couldn't, so she went on searching for some other distraction to boot her out of her growing lethargy.

The three mercs knew each other too well, they'd exhausted the entertainment in old exploits; whenever one started up a story the others had heard too many times before, they stopped him with howls and thumps. The little bit they did talk, it was about women. She listened now and then, but

generally tuned out after a short sample, either bored to the point of ossification or furious to the point of indigestion. She went back a number of times, hoping to catch them speculating on the purpose of this expedition, but even among themselves they didn't discuss the affairs of their employer. Their reticence was either principle or prudence or both (knowing old double-knotter Ginny like they must, they had to suspect their quarters were EYEd). So they spent their time bragging about their women, going over their equipment, exercising almost as fanatically as Ajeri, read-ing or sleeping. She got some amusement out of inspect-ing their equipment, what the well-dressed merc was wearing these days, but somewhere around the twentieth time she watched a merc break down and polish his needier, the last motes of interest were wiped away with the last infinitesimal motes of dust.

Engine crew were a pair of Sikkul Paem doublets; they were passing the insplit rooted out and contemplating whatever they used for a navel, so motionless in their dirt beds they might have been still-life holos.

Nothing. *Nothing*. NOTHING.

Gray.

Gray entered her mind and soul; gray sucked the life out of her. It wasn't something new or wholly unex—pected; it'd happened to her once before—last year when she was rattling about Wolff wondering what she was going to do with her life. Aleytys recognized her state near its onset and acted immediately; without bothering to ask her consent, she kicked Shadith's feet from under her, knelt on her and set her healer's hands to work, readjusting Shadith's metabolism, then she shoved her into a flitter and dropped her in the middle of the Wildlands to live or die as she chose. Shadith discovered she wasn't ready to die yet; besides, she was too irritated with Aleytys to give her the satisfaction. That irritation and the struggle to survive jolted her loose from the gray doldrums; it was heart massage in every sense of the word.

There was no one to jolt her now.

On the forty-ninth day out from the Spotchals Transfer Station she stopped eating. There was no purpose behind it. She simply lacked the energy and the will to leave the cot. She turned her face to the wall and began shutting down.

She woke in the sickbay with Bossman standing over her, looking annoyed.

"What did you think you were doing, child?"

Weak tears gathered in her eyes and spilled over. She stared at him without trying to answer. Dimly she re-remembered that she wasn't supposed to know this face. "Who're you?" she said finally, her voice a dry-leaf whisper.

"That is not important. Answer the question, please."

"Your voice..." She closed her eyes. "Nothing."

"That is not an adequate response. What do, you mean?" She turned her head away. How could she explain when she didn't understand it herself?

"You had food, a comfortable bed, facilities for wash-ing and elimination. Everything necessary."

Resentment giving her a spurious energy, Shadith kept her eyes closed and jeered silently at him.

Stupid old Wahw! Don't know ass from eathole.

"What is wrong with you, child?"

Shadith kept a tight hold on her pride and said noth-ing. Her mind told her it was stupid, but her body got satisfaction out of silence. She went with her body.

Ajeri snorted. She came swiftly around the couch, caught Shadith by the shoulders and shook the breath out of her; all that exercising had given the Pilot a tigerish strength which she didn't bother trying to con—

trol. "Stop sulking, brat. Act like a baby and you be treated like one." She threw Shadith away from her. "Get your little mouth in gear, or I give you a spanking you won't forget."

Rage exploding through her, struggling to retrieve her self-control, Shadith lay sprawled and panting where Ajeri had flung her.

Careful, Shadow. That miserable ooj, that creeping bakbook. Wait, you remember wait? That braindead pervert, that ... she ... they.... You can't do anything now. Not in the insplit. And not tied to this stupid cot. Can't do shit till we get where we're going. Fool them, pull their rotten strings and make the bastards dance.

She crammed herself back into the role of child and let the child's words pour out: "I'm going crazy in that coffin. I need something to do. Give me my harp. Give me something bright to look at, red or blue or green or yellow, all that gray turns me moldy. Mold growing on my bones, mold growing over my eyes and on my tongue. I'll rot if I have to look at all that gray much longer. And fix the light so I can read. Give me books, magazines. Something to pass the time. Talk to me. What harm would that do you? You promised to protect me. You're killing me. Why can't you understand that?"

He rubbed his stick thumb up and down his bony chin as he chewed over what she'd said; the harsh toplight shadowed his eyes and deepened the lines in his face, put a shine on the end of his long nose. There was less expression on his naked face than there'd been on the flesh mask he'd worn before.

Ajeri stood behind him, watching skeptically, not wholly buying the innocent bit. She had more ... *call it* connection ... with others than he did, which meant that right now she was more dangerous than he was. Unless he got one of his insight flashes which the gods forbid.

He cleared his throat, said mildly, "I put you there for your protection, child, for your purity. You were dis-tressed by the, advances of that guard, I did not wish you to fear similar treatment here."

Shadith told herself she was too tired to keep gnawing at her resentments. She pushed the hair off her face, looked vaguely around, then sat up. "I'm not afraid of men, I just don't want to be raped." She shrugged. "Who does? I mean, it's not the sort of thing a girl dreams about when she becomes marriageable."

He nodded. "I see. You will go back to where you were, no, be quiet and listen. I have heard you. Some of what you have said will be done. Not all, you must not expect that." He produced a smile like a wince. "Come," he held out his hand, waited for her to take it. "Be patient with us. We are not very experienced with children."

"Well, now you know what happens." She slid off the couch and let him lead her from the chamber.

Twenty minutes after Shadith walked into her cell, the dim grayness changed, brightened all over, while a spot—a reading light—focused on the pillow end of the cot. She felt herself expanding like a paper flowerbud dropped in water. She laughed, clapped her hands. "Better better better," she caroled. "Oh, betttterr."

An hour later the chimes bonged, the slot slid open. Instead of food, there were six magazine paks and a reader on the tray.

* * *

Ajeri stood in the doorway, a dark blue blanket draped over her arm, Shadith's harpcase hanging at her side. "You wanted it, you got it, brat. Hope you satisfied because you an't getting any more." She dumped the blanket on the floor, slid her arm from the strap and set the harpcase on the blanket, then she stepped back and the door slid closed.

Thirty-four days later, eighty-three days out of the Transfer Station, Shadith lay on her stomach scribbling in her notebook. She dropped the stylus and closed the book when she felt the lurch as the ship emerged from the insplit and began droning along sublight. Her hands were shaking. She rubbed them along her trousers, pressed them hard against the zippers on her thighpockets, the little pain lost in the thunder of her uncertainties. All her playacting, all her maneuvering hadn't gained a millime-ter's freedom; the most she'd achieved was the illusion she had some control over her situation. Illusion, not reality. That could change now. Bossman meant to use her; to do that, he had to take her out of storage. If she couldn't manage something once she was loose, she might as well pack it in.

The vibration stopped.

Orbit.

Shadith was so familiar with the Pet now she was looking through his eyes almost as soon as the thought flitted through her head.

The huge forescreen was lit. A blue and white world turned in it, the image large enough for the Pet to make out most of the detail despite his myopia.

For the first time she saw Bossman Ginny sitting in the Captain's Chair; the Pet looked down at the skim of ash-gray ash-brown hair laid across Ginny's pale pink skull whenever he needed reassurance which he did fairly often; Ginny's mix of tension, eagerness and triumph made him nervous.

Cool man wasn't so cool any more. He drummed fin-gers on the chair arm, clicked his tongue as he scanned readings and peered anxiously at the image of the world they were orbiting. "Kiskai. And three months early. Ajeri tiszteh, show me Aina'iril."

"If you want a direct drop, it's over the horizon at the moment."

"How long?"

"Should be coming up round two hours twenty min-utes on. I can pre-empt the Wapa-sat's receipt-time, break off the collecting, or shift the ship, which means we'd have to move out of Sisipin's shadow."

"We will wait. You can use the time, Jeri tisz, to test the functioning of the pickup/shunts for all the satellites and start recoding the EYEs onboard. Impatience is a weakness we do not need to encourage. Moving the ship could be destructive. There are too many chart readers down there with a glass on the sky. We are vulnerable in the visible spectrum and I have no means of determining what the effect of a new celestial inhabitant would be; it might even wash out the Pasepawateo Mitewastewapal. That would leave us without the centerpiece of the production."

Ajeri laughed. "What a mouthful. Only you, Ginny."

"And forty million Kiskaid. Show me the Mistiko Otcha Cicip. It should be possible to do that without disturbing anything important, the Cicip should still be deserted, just a patch of trees and some bare rock."

"One sacred playground coming up."

The POV shifted rapidly, swooping down at terrifying speed. The Pet would not look at the screen, it made him dizzy. He curled up and licked at his genitals until the scene settled down.

Even with the Pet's deficiencies of vision, Shadith could see a vast natural amphitheater, the crater of an anciently extinct volcano with grass like short green fur carpeting the interior, patches of trees scattered about, a rugged upheaval of naked stone.

A number of small figures worked diligently at the grass, mowing it, pulling weeds, planting turfs wherever the crop looked thin or there was bare ground showing. Others, wooden yokes on their shoulders, were going and coming from beneath several broad low arches at the base of the ripple-fronted cliff, carrying buckets of water and tiles and mortar in, buckets full of rubble out.

Cave under there. They're getting it ready for something.

Ginny knows what, curses on his pointed head.

Shadith yawned, blinked her surprise. Her head felt so heavy it was hard to keep focused through the Pet.

Ginny cleared his throat. "It seems it is a good thing we are here early, Jeri tisz. The tapwit priests are al-ready beginning to put the place in order. Hmm. The Kihcikistilik island chain is below us now. Before you start the shunt tests, run a POV along it, I want to see...."

His voice faded, the scene faded ... Shadith plunged fathoms deep into sleep.

Chapter 6. Hang your harp on a whisper tree

Someone was shaking her.

She came painfully awake, looked up into the liquid copper eyes of the lacertine captive. She was lying on a floor somewhere and he was kneeling beside her. She wasn't tracking too well, whatever

Ginny used to put her out seemed to have pushed the slow-button in her head. She rubbed at her eyes, groped around with numb hands.

Wood. There was wood all around her—floor, walls, ceiling, it was like being inside a crate, no, not a crate, more like being inside a jewelbox, beautifully assembled rectangles of wood, grain flowing into grain, the joins so tight they were invisible. There was a band of carving up near the ceiling, she could see shadows shifting across the low relief, her eyes blurred when she tried to make out the design. No windows. But the room was filled with light, dancing light, dappled with leafshadow. Thinking about that made her head ache, so she stopped. Door. She couldn't see the door, probably it was somewhere behind it—if there was a door. The room seemed to be rocking slowly in time with groans and creaks that crept through the walls. At first she thought it was her head playing games with her, then she felt the shifting of the floor under her back, the pressure and release. “Awawasha-hiken wepastan.” She heard what she'd just said, blinked. “Kekwa... ?”

The lacertine grinned, baring a pair of curved needle fangs and the small sharp chisel teeth between them. “Yes, the room is moving, you're not off your head. And your tongue's not gone wild on you, give it a minute or two, it'll come loose from the local langue. We been imprinted. One of the more useful things our captor did us, though I hate to think what else he might've fiddled with.”

“E-heh. Ahhhh.” She slapped the floor, then forgot speech for the moment and pushed up onto her feet. “Shadith,” she said and held out her hand. “Of nowhere in particular.” She blinked again. He was right, the twist of her tongue was gone.

Eyes slitted, face contorted with silent laughter, he looked at the hand, then took it as if it were a precious object and bowed over it with exaggerated grace. “Naiyol Hanee, late of Spotchals, born and bred of DunyaDzi which you won't have heard of.” He straightened and shook her hand gravely, removed his own and watched with amiable interest as she let her arm drop. “Call me Kikun.”

She raised her brows, not quite sure how to take him. “Kikun it is.” Hearing a groan behind her, she turned.

The other captive was sitting up, clutching at his head. “Wa!” he roared, “Misht'co mameash! Olowashish n'ta kawinosikoo! Yaiiii.”

She chuckled, met a hot yellow gaze. “I know, I know,” she said. “My head was sore as a boil, too, and I was ready to bark like a dog and bite anything that moved. Yeh. Kikun said we been imprinted with the local langue. My name's Shadith. Who're you?”

“Rohant vohv Voallts, Ciocan of Family Voallts, Gazgaort of Company Voallts Korlatch of Spotch-Helspar. I don't know you.” He'd got his tongue untwisted faster than she did.

“No reason you should. I've never been down on Spotchals surface. Ginny scooped me up when I came round a corner minding my own business and ran into the lot of you. According to him, his Luck brought me to his hands. What I think of my Luck is too obscene for mixed company.”

Rohant the Ciocan went still as a startled yool, though only for a moment. Then his ears twitched, twitched again; a translucent inner eyelid swept across his eyes, snapped down. If he'd had a tail, it would have been switching back and forth, in short, sharp jerks. “Ginny?”

She shook her head. “I don't want to talk in here.”

—Your call, csecse.” He came to his feet with an im-pressive elasticity given eighty-three days under drugs and bloodfeed. Fists on his hips, his mane brushing the ceiling, he inspected the room.

The floor shifted under them.

“What the hell is this place? It's moving.” He sounded so indignant that Shadith was surprised into a giggle.

He glanced at her, snorted, then crossed the room in two long strides, slapped his hand against the broad button on the jamb.

The door opened toward him, nearly hit him in the nose. He snorted again, ducked through the opening.

Shadith blinked as Kikun came round her and went out after the Ciocan; she'd forgotten him completely. It was as if he'd erased himself from her senses—all her senses. Which was very odd indeed. She was ALWAYS aware of people around her. She might not pay any attention to them, but

she knew they were there. Slowly, thought-fully, she followed Kikun and walked into a bare box like the room she'd just left, though about twice as large and with a few welcome additions, her harpcase, for one, and her travelpouch, along with two other, smaller pouches sewn from twill.

She toed a twill pouch. "Yours?"

Rohant shrugged. "If they're strangers, I suppose so. Courtesy of our captor."

She opened her case, smiled as she touched the instrument inside. Swardheld had spent months on the harp, getting her shape right, polishing her wood, dark chest-nut streaked with umber, until it glowed, carving her floral cartouches, laying in her ivory plates and scrolls of copper and silver wire. Shadith set her hand flat on the strings, a gentle caress meant as much for Swardheld as for the harp herself. She shut the case, clicked the catches home and began looking through her travelpouch-everything in place, even her weapon satchel. She thumbed the locks on the satchel, scowled as nothing happened.

"That bitch, she broke my locks."

She tipped back the lid, took out her stunner, checked the charge.

Topped up. Busy little minkhas, aren't they. Nee-dier? Yup, clip's full, juiced up and ready to go. Cutter. Pry-tractor. EY Es. Picklocks. Rand-read. Miniprobe. Knives, one, two ... uh ... hunh! All seven. With fingerprints all over them.

She didn't like people handling her things, she didn't like it almost as much as she didn't like that creep guard handling her. She found a scrap of sham and began polishing the blade of the buwie.

"You're a surprising little kit-cat, Shadith." Rohant the Ciocan wiggled his shaggy brows. "Where you taking all that?"

"University." She inspected the steel, smiled when she saw the fingerprints were gone. She slid the buwie into its slot and drew out the crystal stittoo, swore at the cloudy marks on the transparent blade and exchanged the sham for a glassrag.

"Always struck me as a peaceful sort of place. You planning to make war on the professors?"

"That's stupid. We'll get along a lot better if you forget what I look like and stop treating me like some vacant-brained nit. While I'm finishing here, why don't you .." she looked around, scowled when she saw Kikun had gone somewhere; she'd missed him again, "... that little man's a ghost! Why don't you follow him and find out what this place is?" She began working on the stittoo's blade, very careful around the edges.

He grunted, went stomping off.

Shadith smiled.

Should be used to it, old lion. What I hear, a Ciocan's Toerfeles beats up on him just for the practice.

She inspected the stittoo, slotted it and took up the first of the throwing knives, then worked steadily until she had all the blades smooth and gleaming and back in their slots. She looked through the rest of her instrumentation, gave the surfaces a quick wipe with a dustcover. She tried out the latches; they snapped home with satisfying chinks. The locks were broken, but she could clamp the satchel shut and be reasonably certain it'd stay closed. She rubbed at her nose, contemplated its battered simleather sides, thinking over what had happened to her, wondering where she should go from here.

I'd forgot what it's like being weak, how you have to behave, how wary you have to be. It sucks, having to walk round ready to massacre people. Words, words, Shadow, just words. Why'd you bring these toys if you didn't plan to use them? Wrong mindset, that's what. If you'd had one of those shooters back there, what would it've got you? Dumped in a lethal chamber, that's all. Can't fight the fuzz with force, you've got to use your head, not your gut. I suppose so. Right. You should have gone straight for Guard Headquarters, dropping Lee's name whenever you had a chance. You should have flattered them, got them to show you around their operation as a courtesy to Hunters Inc. You played the child well enough for Ginny, why not for that creep's boss? Tell that High Hoofta stories enough about Lee

to addle his brain, if any, and tickle his gizzard, tease him into escorting you to the shuttle. What could the creep do then? But your mind wasn't right, was it? Blind and bedamned. I suppose so, but cleverness doesn't work all the time; people can be so sharp they cut them-selves. I need friends, connections, backing. And in the meantime, I need the damn gun.

She opened the satchel, took out the needier, clipped it inside her shirt. Swardheld had pulled a Pa'ao Teely weaponsmith out of a bad hole last year and got the needier as a thank gift; he passed it on to her along with the harp. He was a good friend, generous, and she seriously adored him, but she was getting deathly sick of saying thank you, thank you for everything she owned. She twitched her shoulders and bent over the satchel, running her finger along the knife hilts. She chose her hideaway knife, its hilt and blade molded from the same piece of Jaje braincrystal. It was flexible as an armsdealer's morals and a bitch to use with any skill, but it was as close to undetectable as a weapon could get. She slipped it into the crystal-lined sheath in her left boot and stood.

As in the other room, there was a band of carving in low relief about three hands wide around the top of the wall, blocky, simplified, animal forms which incorporated side, front, and top views in each image, along with inside and out. A berry vine (click on the langue imprint: amtapishk) twined about them and spread its leaves between them, punctuating the spaces with its bumpy fruit. There were ventilation slots above the frieze and holes pierced through it among the twists and turns of the amtapishka vine; the light coming through those holes was diffuse and unsteady; a rustling whisper came with it along with an assortment of muted creaks and groans; if she had to guess she'd say whoever built the place had mirrors bringing in sunlight from outside.

She slung the strap of the harpcase over her shoulder and went out.

The hallway beyond the door ended in a wall on her left; to her right she could see several other doors, each with a spiral of running felinoids (click, mioweh) in a central cartouche with a white card in the paws of the ursinoid (click, maskin) at the heart of each spiral.

She turned round. There was a card on the door she'd just closed behind her with an arrow scrawled across it, pointing away down the hall.

The spoor of the Ciocan. Or is it Kikun? Hmh.

She took the card, put it back blank side out.

Better not leave obvious traces.

The wind noises got louder, the floor moved under her feet.

All right, all right, don't have to get snarky about it. I'm going.

She went round one corner, then another, following the track of the arrows, flipping the cards as she came on them, passing several crossways as she had when she was running on a leash inside the Station, an uncomfortable comparison she put out of her head as soon as it occurred to her. She moved faster and faster in her impatience to get out of there.

The card trail ended at a wide, heavy door, every inch of it deeply carved into a single beastform, maskin male in a threat posture; it was less complex than the frieze designs, more realistic. The maskin's massive back was turned to the hallway, his snarling muzzle in side view so his teeth and tongue were visible, one little squinty eye.

She closed her hand into a fist, banged it against the stud in the center of the iron wrist-ring on the maskin's left forepaw. There was a low thunk and the door opened a crack. She gave it a shove, stepped onto a small plat-form and looked around.

Tree. We're up a damn tree.

The house was built over the massive central trunk (to her eye it was at least fifty meters wide) with wings connected by crosshalls spreading another fifty meters along side branches supported by hundreds

of secondary trunks. Slender leaf-bearing limbs rose vertically around the perimeter of the building, curved inward above the house to form a thick green dome. It was pleasantly cool with enough sun filtering through to send leaf shadows dancing. She could see motorized mirrors fixed to the rib branches, catching that light and shooting it at the roof of the house, confirming her earlier guess.

Riiight, I am one smart little bint.

Hah! If you so smart, Shadow, what you doing here?

The leaves brushed against each other with a finely nuanced sound that was very much like a room full of whisperers. The name drifted into her mind, click-click. "Whisper Tree," she said aloud. "Yeh." She leaned against the rail and looked around. "Where now? How does one get to the ground?"

At the left end of this front porch there was a square of a different sort of wood, dark blue almost purple with brown streaks in it, big enough to hold two of her but a squeeze for the Ciocan. There was a pillared railing around three sides, carved from more of the purplewood. A gate of purplewood was swung back against the wall, pinned there by a bar-and-magnet latch. About two me-ters above the square, there was a domeshaped canopy carved from the purplewood, with two long reels tucked up under it and cables running from each end of each reel to the corners of the railing. There was a green leaf caught between the end of the square base and the house platform, the sap oozing from it still wet. She scowled down through the heavy shadow around the secondary trunks, but didn't see any broken bodies on the dirt below.

That's reassuring, I think. Well, if it worked for the Ciocan.

She stepped on the base, tugged the gate from the magnet and slammed it shut. Above her, something whirred; after a slight hesitation the cables began to unwind and the base went down smoothly, swaying a little as the cables lengthened, scraping against the secondary trunks that were clustered close about it, de-scending into the stifling green twilight around them.

It stopped a handspan from the ground.

She opened the gate and stepped down, edged past air roots like straggly white hair that wobbled around her, scraped along the harpcase she had slung over her shoulder; they brushed against her body, her face, they tickled her, seemed to reach for her eyes.

Yukh. Why don't they shave the damn things off?

Behind her she heard the soft sounds of the lift retreat-ing upward, the brush-thunk as the open gate banged against the trunks.

Paranoid little minkhas, or maybe it's Ginny doing his thing. I suppose we have to climb the tree to get back in the house. I knew I should've brought every-thing with me.

She worked outward toward the light. The supports were wider apart and got smaller as she moved away from the main trunk, the air roots were wilder and wispier.

She emerged into the slanted sunlight of late afternoon and found herself wading through the short curly grass of a mountain meadow half a kilometer across, ringed by huge ancient conifers like a scraggly, green-black hedge.

WATCHER 1

The immense screen that stretched across the entire front of the Bridge was lit from end to end, divided into dozens of cells, most of them still empty.

One by one, slowly, two or three an hour, the cells were filling with scenes from the world below them as Ajeri Kilavez and Pukanuk Pousli spoke with onpianet agents and deployed Ginbiryol Seyirshi's pathe-EYES.

CELL 10

At the edge of night a raiding party was attacking the big house of an estate, mostly pellet weapons, though some cutterbeams were visible, along with a number of sliced-and-diced bodies.

CELL 11

In the hot morning sunshine of a market square of a small farm village not far from the ocean, three men were tied to whipping posts while a fourth man with his sleeves rolled up to show his massive forearms was laying into the back of one of the prisoners with a two-meter long stockwhip; he'd already drawn blood and was concentrating on the precision of this crisscross cuts. The POV lingered on his face, then moved to the face of the man being whipped, then to the faces of the men waiting their turn for punishment, lingering lovingly on them, tracking every nuance of expression. The villagers watched silently, sullenly. The local VIPs sat in shaded comfort in a permanent bleacher affair, the older males stem, the younger ones wagering on how long each victim would last or anything else that struck their fancy.

CELL 12

A house was burning, small, thatched roof; someone, it sounded like a small girl, was trapped inside screaming as she died very very slowly. A woman was shrieking and struggling in the arms of several men who were themselves cursing and weeping as they kept her from running back into the house.

CELL 13

A young woman pulled herself with furious agility onto the back of the stony riding beast of an equestrian statue, stood there declaiming verses in a powerful contralto, angry, satiric verses that brought cheers from the crowd of listeners drawn by her voice, shouts of go go go! until black-clad, half-armored guards came raging through the crowd, slamming their clubs into any part of anybody within reach. The poet jumped from the statue and vanished into the throng before the guards reached her.

CELL 14

Singing in a basso drone OP PAL LAN OP PAL LAH TIN OP PAL OP PAL LA TIN OP PAL OP PAL LAH TIN a double line of long haired men in beaded robes hauled sacks of grain, beans and other dried foods into a stone pyramid with a massive plank door. The pyramid was one of a long line of caches built along a broad unpaved road that stretched from horizon to horizon across a sea of silver-green grass, an endless, dramatic sky arching overhead. The POV moved on along that broad, unchanging track bisecting the Plains of Kwamitaskwen, showing more lines of the tapwit priests provisioning more pyramids as they got ready for the mass march of the people in the Pakoseo.

CELL 8

The room was antiseptically clean, white tiles on the floor and wall, stainless steel appointments, smooth shiny black wires for the electrical equipment; the men working there, all but one, wore surgical garb with gauze masks and black goggles that hid all expression and turned them into vaguely insectile figures. The odd man was tall and lean with a handsome lined face and a thick flowing mane of white hair. He wore a starched, wrinkle-free white cassock that brushed against black sandals and a robe beaded with totems and symbols in icon panels down the front, around the hem and sleeves in bright jewel colors that might have been garish but weren't.

A naked woman was stretched out on the steel table, glaring at them, terrified but defiant; she looked very much like the rebel poet of Cell 13, but was perhaps a few years older, she might have been a sister or cousin.

One of the masked figures bent over her, drew a scalpel in a slanting line from the hollow

of her throat to the nipple of her right breast. She screamed and tried to struggle, but she had little leeway for movement; she gathered herself and spat in the face of the man bending over her. He ignored it and continued with his delicate work. The blade barely broke the skin, the cut burned a little but that was all.

"Give one the names of your cell," the robed man said; it was a beautiful voice, a warm creamy baritone, a voice made for caressing the ear. "Just the names. All one wishes is to persuade them for good of their souls and their brothers to abandon this foolish rebellion against the order Oppalatin decreed for us all. You and I, child, we have our place and function in life. It is not good to deny this. There are enough terrors and evils that one has to face from sun to sun, why create more? Give one the names. You will, you know. Don't make one hurt you, child; one doesn't want to hurt you. The Na-priest will remove your skin bit by bit and his assistants will paint pimikot tincture on the wound. Yes. I see you understand. Tell one, child, name the names...."

CELL 7

Each circle was closed about a small bonfire sprinkled with aromatic resins, a fire streaked blue and green. The matrons sang their caste hymns, preparing to receive the blessing of the Pasepawateo Mitewastewapal, each set of hymns counterpointing the other, the women were apart yet one, parts of a greater whole, celebrating Oppalatin's creative force in ways profoundly traditional and profoundly subversive. Ignoring the former and incensed by the latter, the Gospah (High Priest) Ayawlt sent his enforcers out and whipped the women from their circles. Na-priests in masks and black leather beat them while their families watched, took the Malta leader from her circle and the Tanak leader from hers, and led them to the Ma Msthakan and the Question.

And so it went, violence and destruction present in every scene except those with the tapwits and their provi-sioning, Ginbiryol Seyirshi examining and testing each of them, rejecting some, marking others for further explo-ration, selecting the rest for storage. There was a film of sweat on his face, but no other sign he was affected in any way by what he was seeing in the cells and feeling through the instrument on the ledge before him, the one he called a pathecorder.

He saved the central cell for last, the one that was larger than the others, the one with his prime actors in this bloody drama. He watched with satisfaction, then apprehension and anger as they struggled to understand what had happened to them.

CELL 1

A bright green meadow cuddled by pointed peaks and a ring of ragged conifers. An immense tree grew in the center of that meadow, spreading out over half the open space. A larger wicker basket lay on its side and a wicker trunk, its top thrown back, sat beside the basket. Shadith stepped from the shadow under the tree and walked toward Kikun who stood beside the trunk, delicate reptilian hands on his nonexistent hips, watching Rohant the Ciocan wrestling with a pair of large black cats, roaring his pleasure at being reunited with them.

Ginbiryol Seyirshi made a slight adjustment to the pathecorder, then he touched the transfer:test sensors and shivered with pleasure as Rohant's currently uncomplicated joy rolled through him, and Shadith's anger and Kikun's less classifiable emotions. He touched his tongue to his lips, closed his eyes until he'd composed his face into its usual calm, then he looked up. "Puk."

Pukanuk Pousli put an agent on hold, turned his head. "Ginny?"

"Where is the ambush? I do not see the locals and they are not registering on the pathecorder."

"They're flyin in, Ginny. Havin to scramble a bit, remember, we're three months early."

"Get them in position as soon as possible. I will not tolerate sloppy work." He watched the action in the center cell for a moment, scowling at Shadith who'd walked over to join Kikun; that was a nuisance, the girl knowing so much she shouldn't know. He snatched a quick look at Ajeri and Puk, they'd both argued against bringing her. If they thought Luck was leaving him, they'd come at him like sharks, ready

to tear into him the moment he let his guard down. That was not comfortable, he'd have to get rid of them and he didn't want to, they were satisfactory subordinates. Say it and see how they jump. Yes. "The girl knows my name, Puk. How does she know my name? I do not like that. She is too closely connected with the Hunter. I think we must do something about her."

Pukanuk Pousli grinned, insensibly reacting to the implication of control, reassured for the moment that Boss knew best. "If the final scene works out like you've planned it, Ginny, none of them down there's goin to be a problem. Not 'less there's such a thing as a real spirit-talker. Dead is dead and there's nothin quieter'n that."

Chapter 7. So that's what it's all about—maybe

Kikun looked at Shadith from some unfathomable distance, his narrow, lined face blank, no recognition in his copper gaze. As if her appearance triggered something in him, he dropped to a squat, moved his arm in wide sweeps over the grass. With a frog-tongue snap of his hand, he trapped something small down among the roots, held it between his two cupped palms as if he were tasting it with his handskin.

He shook his hands. She could hear small eeping sounds from inside them, smell a sudden stench wafted toward her by the crisp breeze.

He matched his voice to his tiny captive and sang it from terror to a burring calm. Slowly, carefully, he lifted his top hand, slid it away. A small gray-green lizard lay curled on his palm, its color his color so it was almost like a blemish on his skin rather than a separate entity.

It opened white-ringed yellowbrass eyes and stared into Kikun's copper irids. It yawned. He yawned. It stared. He stared.

Shadith looked round as Rohant the Ciocan came ambling over to her, his cats walking beside him, wreathing round his legs, rubbing themselves against him. "Your friend there, he's weird."

Kikun tossed the lizard to the wind, flung himself flat, and began rubbing his face against the grass, snuffling and biting at it and the earth it grew from.

Rohant yawned, brushed at the shreds of dried grass clinging to his dreadlocks. "What do you expect from a god incarnate?"

"Huh?"

"What m' son says. Lissorn ran across him on a capture run, hired him as a guide, and brought him back with the load. Had his reasons, no doubt. We haven't talked about it."

Kikun seemed to explode off the grass; he went running about the meadow with the wild abandon of a cat kept shut up too long. If there'd been walls, he'd have been bouncing off them.

"Opalekis-Mimo," she said. "Holy Dancer."

"Nanilody," he said. "In his home language. Clown-dancer god. What are you talking about?"

"What I heard Ginny say." She dropped onto the grass, settled the harpcase beside her and folded her legs in a lotus knot.

He lowered himself with the smoothness of movement that kept surprising her in a man as big and bulky as he was; the cats curled beside him. "You ready to talk now?"

She squinted at the sky. A large hawk was swinging in slow circles over the meadow. "Yours?"

"Mine."

"Ginny went to a lot of trouble, didn't he. Cats, hawk, he must have carried them in stasis pods, I didn't ... um ... and snatching you two, keeping you drugged so you wouldn't know who had you. Why?"

"My answer depends on yours."

"I don't like talking about ... well, I suppose we're in this together and it doesn't matter all that much what that b'naduk finds out. I mindride. Just animals, people are too complicated, signals clash, give me a headache. Anyway, what I mean is when I want, I look through eyes, hear through ears not mine."

Kikun came ambling back; he dropped on his stomach beside her, pulled loose a strand of grass and began chewing on it. After a minute he spat out the shreds of fiber, reached round the harpcase and

began stroking her arm.

Shadith ignored him. "The man who snatched us, he's got this pet, a simi; he likes to keep it around. I used its eyes and ears and picked up a few things. Names, for one. Ginny the Boss, Puk the Lute, Ajeri the Pilot. This world's called Kiskai."

Kikun wrapped his hand about her wrist, rubbed it against his face, smelled at it. She tried to pull away, but his long slim hands were much stronger than they looked. She jerked at her arm, glared at him.

An image bloomed in her head: Kikun and not-Kikun, painted in black and white stripes, head to toe, dancing with energy and an oddly attractive awkwardness, naked and grossly priapic, grinning amiably, that friendliness a little frightening.

Another image: Her original body, angular, phthistic, long throat distended though she couldn't hear the song, vague figures behind her, her sisters dancing the dreams in that song.

"How...." she said, aloud; she glanced at Kikun. His eyes were closed, there was a satisfied smile on his face. She shook her head, pulled her hand free, reserving her questions for later. "Where was I?"

"Ginny."

"Right." She thought a minute then laid out what she knew of their captors, finished, "You know who he is, what he's doing, don't you."

"Think so. About a year ago there was a man come to Voallts Korlatch in Spotch-Helspar. We deal in rare beasts, train exotics for pets and stock hunting preserves, that sort of thing. Though I say it myself, we are the premier traders in the field. So we have a lot of scouts out looking for new material and a lot of stock on hand. The man, he called himself Zradit do Watts, he wanted to buy old records from us, worlds we looked into where the beast stock wasn't worth the bother collecting. Which we explained to him were Family property and not for sale at any price. Then he wanted to buy a pair of Ri-Tors, offered half again what they were worth. Don't know if you know the Ri-Tor. Hard to keep captive, tend to die on you trying to escape. About ten times the size of Magimeez here." He stroked the sleek black head of the cat pressed against his thigh. "Happens we had a pair, but they were already contracted for. Besides, we want to know who we're selling to, we like to know where the beasts are going and how they're going to be used. So we do background checks on our clients." He grinned as he met Shadith's skeptical gaze. "It doesn't cost us, csezheri. On the contrary. Very much on the contrary. Those that can afford what we provide are the kind to run like scalded moggies from any smell of sleaze. We don't have to pander to the sickheads which suits us just fine."

"If you say so. Watts was Ginny?"

"No. Agent. Go-between."

"I can certainly believe that, he likes his skin, our Ginny."

"Right. But we didn't have much trouble making the connection. Watts' list wasn't long, just slimy, with Ginbiryol Seyirshi perched atop the pile. We took a good look at what we found and we said no thank you, we don't care to deal."

"Why? What's wrong with Ginny, besides him being a murderous kidnapping little bastard, I mean."

He sat rubbing the cat behind its mobile ears and scowling at the sky. "Ginbiryol Seyirshi, entertainment entrepreneur extraordinaire. Phah! The butabek makes snuff-flakes. Torture milked to the last drop. His client lists read like a roll of ... hmm, well, say a list of those Voallts Korlatch will not deal with. Hunting is one thing, but slicing up a beast while some mokus jerks off, that's different. He's also got a thing for offing children. Nice huh?"

Shadith frowned. "That doesn't quite ... he likes creatures more than people, the children, all right, he's weird about children, especially girls. Don't get your backhair up, Ciocan. I believe you, it just means he's more complicated than I thought? She moved her shoulders uneasily, not happy with that idea, then shifted focus to another suggestion. "You said his agent wanted Ri-Tors. You think he's planning to exchange you ... us ... for them? Or maybe he's running out of victims and wants the world list you wouldn't give him."

"No, I'm afraid not. Nothing so simple. I think we're players in one of his Limited Editions. A snuff job on a grand scale, if anything that drunk does could be called grand."

The hawk came wheeling down, lit on the trunk, wob-bled a little, then perched there, treading the

wicker uneasily, his eyes fixed on Rohant.

After staring at the bird for a long moment, Kikun turned to the meadow in front of him, pounced on a tuft of grass and came up with a small rodent. He jumped to his feet, took it to the trunk, and tossed it to the hawk.

Rohant scowled. "Don't do that, Kikun; I don't want Sassa taking food from anyone but me."

"He won't." Kikun's nostrils flared as he watched the bird tear into the rodent. "You, me, same thing to him." He came back and sat beside Shadith, slender wiry arms draped over his drawn-up knees. "Tell the tale, shi'che'i Ciocan."

"Not much left worth telling. Wars and massacres, plagues and ... you name it, he sits up there recording it." He growled, then spent some time soothing the cats; the anger in his voice made them uneasy. The hawk screamed and beat its wings. Kikun chirrupped at the bird and calmed it, though it still stepped nervously from foot to foot.

Shadith scratched at her arm, scowled. "Three people? That's all he's got up there, counting him, you can't count the mercs or the Paems."

"He's got money and drugs and a Talent at twisting people. Given he locates a place in the right mood, that's all he needs. Rumor says he's depopulated half a dozen worlds. For what that's worth." He spat, his dreadlocks moved out from his scalp. "They say he boils down the death of a people to the peak moments, his definition of peak." He spat again, wiped his hands on his knees; his golden eyes narrowed to threat slits as he contemplated Ginny's iniquities. "They say he does one Limited Edition about every ten years, he makes a thousand copies of the show and charges a WorldYear Income for each. And gets it. I think that's why we're here. I think this world is ready to explode and we're detonators. We could be infected with some plague, we could be put here to start a war, you name it, csezheri."

"Sari What a mess. By the way, call me Shadow, hmm? I think you're right. Any ideas what we do about it?"

Kikun laughed suddenly. "He's mad as a wish with its foot in a hole. Hopping. You had better walk very soft, Shadow our friend."

Shadith blinked. "Mindread? You can stretch it that far?"

"Oh, no. It just come to me. Things do that. Now and then, then and now." He blinked at her, looking for the moment as mindless as the little lizard he'd held a while ago. "What is, was, will be, it's all here, in me, in you, Twiceborn. In this also." He pulled a blade of grass loose, handed it to her.

She let the grassblade fall, switched her stare to the wide blue stretch of empty cloudless sky. "Then he's watching right now. He'll always be watching. Listening to everything we say. Whatever we try, he'll know it and can counter it before we can do anything."

Kikun shrugged. "So so."

"Tsoukbaraim!"

Rohant chuckled, bit it off, more anger than humor in the sound. "I figure that doesn't need translating."

"Fill in the blanks," she pulled her hand across her mouth, "any little obscenity you feel fits the occasion. I might as well be back at the Station with that creep herding me."

"What?"

"Never mind." She made a face. "Out of the fryingpan into the fryingpan. Well, remembering that the little viper's listening, any ideas for getting us out of this?"

"You know Dyslaer?"

"No and even if I did, he's got plenty of translation capacity in that ship of his, it's half kephalos." She shook her head at the Ciocan's skeptical grunt. "Eighty-three days is a long time, that's the insplit count from the Station to here. I'd 've gone crazy sitting there staring at the walls, so I went mindwalking round the ship, picking up whatever I could. You never know before the moment what you're going to need when. Which reminds me, I have a sinking feeling, if the locals don't kill us he will. He'll make sure there's nothing left to tie him with this place. He's got enough firepower aboard to ash a small fleet. Nasty stuff. Including a worldbanger. I think. Looked like it, anyway, from what I've read."

“Boom,” Kikun said. His voice was soft and sad. “Doom. Some say the world will end in ice. Ice is nice, but fire is surer. You have said too much, Shadow twiceborn.”

“I said too much when I named him, Clowndancer. All the rest flows from that...” She stopped talking because Kikun wasn’t listening any more, he was staring fixedly into the empty sky. Before she could say any-thing, he went limp, giggling to himself, in some world she had no access to. She turned to Rohant.

The Ciocan shrugged. “Don’t ask me. He gets like that when there’s a change in the wind.” He gave Magimeez a last headrub and got to his feet. “You the only one had a look at the lay of the land, Shadow.” He scratched at his mustache, smoothed his thumb over the dangling ends. “Dio! I’m tired of dancing around the obvious. Only way off this world is someone comes and picks us up. You know, I know, the one place we’re likely to find a skipcom is where Ginny has his surrogates running this operation and that’ll be in the biggest city around. Which way do we go?”

Shadith flung her arms out, let them drop. “East, west, I don’t know, either way we get there. The biggest cities I saw were on the two coasts. Mountains.” She flicked her fingers at the peaks beyond the tree tops. “I saw two ranges of them, one on each side of this conti-nent, both of them run north/south. Tell me which one we’re in, I’ll tell you where we go.”

Kikun yawned, flipped onto his back. “Backtrack the sun.” He laced his fingers over his rib cage and smiled amiably at Rohant, then Shadith.—

Rohant growled, irritated by Kikun’s deliberate obscu-rity. The wind whipped his mane about his head as he thrust his hands into the pockets of his tunic. “Diol why....” His face went blank, he crumpled to the grass.

Shadith swung around. Three men stood in the shadow of the Whisper tree. One of them held a weapon to his shoulder, he was bringing it round to her. She flung herself to one side, diving behind Rohant’s body for its minimal protection while she *reached* for the hawk, mean-ing to send the bird at them....

She ran out of time. The stunbeam swept over her and she went down and deep.

WATCHER 2

On the Bridge, the scenes in the cells kept changing, a mosaic of hate and pain and terror.

CELL 20

“Wicikinkatim nanipotima,” the street boys chanted, faces blacked with mud—filthy dog, murd’ring hound—slings whirring, petting with pebbles the kipao (street guard) who backed away from the whore who’d tolled him into the alley. Holding his pants up with one hand, he fumbled for his gun with the other, his eyes searching the murky shadows for the taunters; he was young and frightened, greasy with sweat. “Pipo, pipo,” the street boys chanted, hidden in the smoky shadows. Pigflea, pigflea. Giggling and whooping, a boy came darting from a doorway and flung mud at the guard’s face, went scrambling away as the man clawed at the mud and began shooting at the jeering children he couldn’t see. The teener whore dropped flat and crawled away as a second boy rushed silently up behind the guard, snatched the gun away from him and faded back into the night. The young kipao panicked and started to run. A shot came from somewhere behind, blew his head into bloody shards. The street boys whooped their triumph in wild ululating howls, a boy soprano sang, “Tocikatim tocikopipo”—dead dog, dead flea.

CELL 21

Flitters whine over a dark huddle of shacks, search lights spear down into the narrow, crooked streets. In the flitters, dark intent faces are lit by the amber glows of the of the control panels, kanaweh all, the Nistam’s secret security police.

Light from one flitter flowed over a ragheap In a boarded-up doorway, came sweeping back; the ragman scuttled off, running as fast as he could in a lurching lopsided panic.

The kana handling the light Impaled the tcuttler with it, thumbed a jak stud, triggering a spray of explosive pellets from the gun tied into the light.

"That's another one for us, he said. "Scratch it down, Kaweeshk. Two more and Itoshin buys the beers this week. Come on, Weeshk, let's lob a gas grenade in house that pikshikoshk come out of, see if we can flush the rest of 'em."

"Put a cork in it, Wakso. You know what the Gospah said. Street is fair game, houses we leave alone.

"Damn jerkoff, sticking his twitchy nose in places it don't belong. Let him play with his Na-priests and leave us do our job. I'd like to...."

"Shut up, fool. And pay attention to what you doing, I thought I saw something move down there."

CELL 22

The streetsinger looked carefully around, set out her silverbowls, adjusted the patch over her empty eyesocket and shoved a fragment of wood against the forward wheel of the skateboard she used to get around since she had her legs crushed under a Na-priest's ground car a few years back. She settled the kitskew (a stringed instrument like a lute) on her stumps and began playing a lively air, one meant to draw attention to her. She knew better than to stay long in any one spot, so she'd developed her act to make her impact fast.

"Miowee, Miowee, It's Miowee." The urchin she'd paid was doing a grand job, he'd got his friends to help, they were dancing and clapping and laughing; they probably would have done it without pay because they liked her, but she never took advantage of that—which was why their enthusiasm lasted. "Miowee," they cried, pulling in the crowd to hear her. She increased tempo for a moment, then slid into her favorite complainsong:

*Eh, Oppalatin, it's Miowee speaking. You
Haven't been round here lately and we
Have built ourselves some misery.
What, God? You been busy stringing
Cloud to cloud, sick of seeing
Ayawit's fat ass raised In prayer?
Oppalatin, I Miowee do respectfully
Suggest you straighten out a thing or two:
Childs who dine on dreams and drink cold air
Who sell their bodies till their souls
Are no longer there.
Us who fry for saying things that's true,
Who drip our fat on Ay-No-Wit's
Designer spits and dip our tippy
Tosies in his hot and holy coals.
Us who're beat and booted out when all we do
Is ask the bloody bosses for our due
And proper wages. Do you hear me,
God? Is your ear free? Listen!
Eh, Oppalatin, it's Miowee asking.
Do you have a nose, oh God? You
Haven't poked it out in ages. Oh?
Can't stand the smell of blood? Then do
Something 'bout the dogs that make it flow.
Eh, Oppalatin, if you don't know
Them, here they come, I gotta go.*

The crowd melted away from around her. The children scooped up her silverbowls and gave them to her, then they ran before and behind her as she dug her sticks into the paving and sent her skateboard racing down the bolthole she'd laid out for herself before she began her song. Behind her she heard a child cry out, she sobbed with rage but she didn't turn back, there was nothing she could do. Nothing but keep singing out her fury and her condemnation of the way things were. Maybe, someday, kipaos wouldn't beat children in the streets.

CELL 23

Chanting in the Oldlangue, the line of Kampriests dropped incense into the half circle of bronze braziers.

Kneeling on a totem inlay, the Kawa totem, a group of Kawa families with infants wafted for the Singing-in and the smoke blessing for their children. Suddenly, one woman gasped, pointed at the streamers of smoke twisting above the braziers. "Them," she cried, "The Three, do you see them? There. Nataminaho. See! See! Beasts beside him, There. The bird over him. And there. Opalekis-Mimo. And there. Nikamo-Oskinin."

As she began there was silence, then another and another cried out Yes, yes, I see them. Eyes widened, went dark as pupils expanded. Even the priests succumbed to the general hysteria and SAW.

CELL 24

A line of dancers serpentined through the mean streets of the Maka Quarter, acquiring new dancers with every undulation of its ever lengthening body. Drummers marched beside them, tapping out the heartbeat of the dance, the support of the song, the ancient street song of the Pakoseo attributed to the Prophet of the first Pilgrimage.

Children ran with the dancers, a mob of street urchins, blowing crude whistles or swinging bull-roarers, dancing with the Serpent though not part of it.

Women leaned from upperstory windows in the decaying houses, throwing down offerings of grain and bits of cloth and colored paper, a rain of prayer for fertility and empowerment.

Bands of Na-priests and pairs of heavy-armed kipaos watched from side streets, waiting for the order to break up this defiant and patently subversive festival. It would come, they knew it, they just had to wait until the edge was off the crowd, until the miserable Makas had exhausted themselves and their passions.

CELL 1

Shadith lay cuddled next to Rohant, both unconscious, the cats were slung across the Ciocan's legs, also out. Kikun sat beside them, watching events with his usual detachment. They were in a cage made from limbs the site of a man's arm, pointed and pounded into the dirt, net over the top, ropes pulled taut around them and around, knotted and reknotted to each of the uprights. The hawk flew in. uneasy circles overhead, having followed the flier that brought the captives to this clearing in a forest of antediluvian trees forty meters across at the base, the smallest a hundred meters tall. Half a dozen men sat round a fire in the center of the clearing. Several others were moving in and out of the moonlight, busy at obscure tasks. Two men stood arguing in low tones, stiff with anger. Sisipin had set long ago, Natamin was a faint glow behind the tree tops, Niskikin was a fingernail crescent directly overhead.

Ginbiryol Seyirshi ran his eyes across the cells, caressed his pathecorder with the side of his thumb. It was all going very well despite the girl's unexpected Talent. He wasn't about to let the others see his satisfaction, however; they worked best with spurs in the ribs. He thought about spurs and began to feel excited, Praisesong soon. Must be soon. Yesss. In the meantime.... "Aina'iril is developing satisfactorily, Puk, the Pliciks are frightened, they smell the hate growing day by day and everything they do breeds more, but the farmers and factory work-ers out on the Plain seem reluctant to rebel against the landlords. Get hold of that man of yours and set up some incidents to stir the yokels out of their lethargy. I do hope it will be accomplished more efficiently than the pickup."

Pukanuk Pousli nodded. "The Makh Hen needs a boot in sometimes, he's got his mind on his own ambitions. I'll remind him he can be replaced real easy." He scratched at his nose. "Truth is, Ginny, we can't do better than the Head of the Nistam's secret police. There's no one else with his scope, at least no one we can get at. We'd have to try Ayawit and his Na-priests," he giggled suddenly, "that was a good one No-legs got off, Ay-no-wit, that's him all right, mean as a snake but he couldn't find his

asshole with a map ...” He saw Ginbiryol frown at him, went on hastily, “We could try him, but I don’t know how far we’d get...”

“Don’t be absurd. We will obtain whatever services we need, Puk. We always do. It is only a matter of correctly assessing the price. Keep an EYE on that legless street-singer. I read her as a developing vortex. She evokes powerful emotions, even a spark of hope, which makes an effective counterpoint to the rage and increases the eventual pain.” He glanced at Cell 1. “I think we should permit the Avators to escape the Question and the Na—

priests. It will enhance their value. When they’ve been loose a day or two, guide KiscoMaskin’s forces to them. I believe the girl will be especially attracted to him, she is at base a disruptor. Luck was truly with us that day she came to us.”

Chapter 8. On sale/marked down

“Sssh.” A hand was cool on her mouth. Kikun. She touched it and when he took it away, tried to sit up. The pain in her head was so bad she nearly bit through her tongue trying to hold in a groan. Stun rifles here were effective all right, but probably not too safe. She sat with her head in her hands, wondering with considerable trepidation just how mangled her brain was.

Kikun took hold of her wrist. “Shadow,” he murmured, his mouth close to her ear, “the cats are waking and Rohant’s still under.”

“Yahhh,” she breathed. “If their heads are like mine...”

“Can you...”

“See what you can do about him.” She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes and tried to think.

We’re in some kind of cage. This isn’t the first time they’ve held prisoners here. This thing’s been around a while. Ahlahlah, it’s cold. Pouches in here? No. If those d’babs junked my harp, I’ll ... I don’t know, something.... Smells like rain, they going to leave us to catch pneumonia? Gods! I’m wandering all over the place. Get your head together, Shadow, before you have to pull it out of a cat’s mouth. Preposterous gowks, putting those carnivores in with us without bothering to tie them down! Ya-Yah! My head’s going to blow apart....

She thrust her fingers into her hair, massaged the back of her head, a futile thing to do, but the breathy broken growls from the cats, the scabble of their claws across the packed earth of the cage floor sent shivers crawling up her spine and tied knots in her stomach, especially since every time she reached for them, her brain whited out.

She scowled at the black figures seated by the fire, two of them standing, and shivered involuntarily as she heard the two on their feet arguing on and on about something she couldn’t make out. Fragments of words in the series of staccatos of the liquidly rhythmic local language floated to her on the wind. One voice: “Itwewe, KiscoMaskin p’taw..” Another voice: “Gospah Ayawit sh’pikew omish...”

It was about her and the others, she knew that, it was like an auction in a way, as if they were agents bidding for the contents of the cage. She squeezed her eyes shut, her head was trying to translate the jumble and not quite making it and generating another humungous headache.

Ahlahlah, ya-eeh! Forget that, Shadow, think about getting out of here. Mmh, I wonder.... Yesss...

She thrust two fingers into her boot, smiled as she touched the hideout’s hilt. And the needler was a cool spot under her breast. The locals hadn’t bothered to search their catch—at least, they’d left her alone, maybe they’d gone over Rohant and Kikun, that pair being more obviously dangerous.

Sometimes it pays, I suppose, looking like a child.

She jumped as Magimeez produced a coughing spitting snarl.

Sheesh! Once they shake off the stun, the cats'll turn this cage into an abattoir. No running room in here, hardly big enough for the lot of us. Ginbiryol Seyirshi and his Limited Editions! It's a farce he's producing, that gormless cretin. His god/avatar heroes are going to be hamburger before the first act begins.

Behind her, she could hear Kikun massaging Rohant, murmuring to him with no response that she could de-tect. She pushed onto her hands and knees, but froze in place as Magimeez lifted her head, shook it, her ears flattened against her skull; her tail switched back and forth slapping against Shadith's left arm. Beside her, Nagafog was sheathing and extruding his claws, his snarls peaking to squeals as pains like those stabbing into Shadith's brain ripped into him. She smelled rage rising in both cats as their bodies began to respond. Magimeez was trying to get to her feet. Her hindquarters were still numb so she whipped around, bit at her own flank.

Gods!

One, breathe, two, breathe, three, breathe, pussshhhh, Here we go round the ambury bush

Ambury lambury diddledee hussshhh

Out of the cradle .endlessly ... something.. Where did I hear that?

I know it's not mine.

One, breathe, two, breathe, three, breathe, pussshh, Turning and turning in a widening ... something....

Sorrow is a forest of black widows, red bellies shining....

There was a time when I believed in, gods.... All right, Shadow, you can do it. Reach!

Focused at last, she plunged into the hot red brains of the furious, hurting cats, took hold of them, locked them down, then spent the next minutes soothing them, com-forting them, working away their pain, losing her own pain as she worked.

Rohant's hand closed on her shoulder.

Impatient at the interruption, she snapped, "Leave me alone, five minutes, will you?" She didn't bother lower-ing her voice, she wasn't thinking about the cage, only about the cats; she continued to work with them until they were relaxed and purring like idling dynamos. Then she sighed and sat on her heels. "All right, what is it?"

"Company." Rohant's voice was dry, all expression squeezed out of it. He was rigid with fury. Musk rolled off him in clouds, pungent and aggressive, the kind of aroma that was an assault in itself.

Old lion, he doesn't deal well with cages when the bars are round him, not one of his beasts.

Can't say I do, either.

Company?

She turned her head. A weedy looking reject with a straggly beard and mustache was leering at her through the bars, a silver tooth gleaming in a loose-lipped mouth. He wore a big felt hat with round silver medallions linked together for a hatband, in fact he had silver hang-ing all over him, linking and tunking in time with his twitches, shimmering in the light from the sliver of a moon starting to slip from view behind the trees. He had enough knives to supply a knife act, was cradling a pellet rifle, wore ammo strips over both shoulders, the loops decorated with silver wire.

Yukh, what a winner. If he's got notions he can forget it, I'm not going through that again. Hmm, wonder who that other one is? He comes from a different litter, that's for sure.

A second local stood a step behind the Silvercreep, a solid square man with a hard knotty look and the eyes of a fanatic under shaggy brows that jammed against the heavy vertical crease in his forehead. He gazed with contempt at his companion, then at Shadith and the others, his lips pressed into a tight line.

Silvercreep scratched at his jaw. "Tan'eshinisasho-ya'akila'am?" His eyes lingered on Shadith, but he turned to Rohant for an answer when he finished speaking. He wanted to know what their names were. Affronted by his dismissal of her as a person of substance, acidly amused by her reaction, she decided to keep her mouth shut and let Rohant do the talking; besides, she didn't feel like telling that Weed anything.

His mane brushing the net pulled tight over the top of the cage, the Ciocan loomed like one of the giant trees over the Weed, who tried to control his squirming but couldn't quite manage it. After a thick silence, the Dyslaeror spoke in his deepest voice, "Mola

I don't know you, with the implication I don't WANT to know you.

Then Shadith's mind completed the shift between langues and she started thinking in East Kiskaidish or Awenakis, the indigenes' name for the dialect.

Silvercreep snarled. "Hoity-toity, beeg man, won't be so big when the Gospah's screws get finish with you."

Gospah? Who's ... aid Head Hoofta of the local religion.

Rohant looked at him, long and cool, then he grinned, baring his formidable tearing teeth. He folded his arms and looked down his long nose at the man.

Kikun squatted by the Ciocan's left knee, fluttered his hands and giggled.

With a glare and a spit, Silvercreep swung round and stalked off.

The silent one, the fanatic, stared at the three of them another minute or so and continued to say nothing, then he strolled slowly off toward the fire. Shadith watched him start talking at Silvercreep, arguing with him, continuing the argument she'd seen them having before this bit of playacting.

"That was sweet." She scratched at the skin between her thumb and forefinger. "They didn't bother searching me. Should the occasion arise, I've a Pa'ao needier with lethal loads and a braincrystal knife. What you think, one of them belong to Ginny?"

"Don't give a shit." Rohant wrapped his hands about two of the bars and tried to shift them, but they were set solid; changing his attack, he tested a claw on the heavy rope, grunted with satisfaction when he pulled several threads loose. "What I want to know is what's their transport and how do we get hold of it?"

"Want me to look round?"

His ears twitched in the twin sharp jerks she was beginning to associate with embarrassment; obviously he'd forgotten about her Talent. He scowled along his shoulder at her. "Do it. Don't waste my time asking."

Kikun winked at her.

She felt a flush of warmth, almost affection for the little lacertine; it startled her and suggested something rather chilling. Had Ginny been running his fingers through her head, knotting in ties to keep the three of them bound together? She resolved to think about it later when she had time for playing with what-ifs. She gave Magimeez a rub beneath her chin, settled with her back against the uprights and closed her eyes.

There was a complex web of small-lives living around the clearing, but most of these were tucked away for the night. She extended her reach, sweeping through wide arcs, finally touched on a big-eyed moth hunting gnats along the dark. The broadwing saw in the infrared, supplemented by a complex radar system and her tiny brain sorted through the gusts of data she sucked in with surprising efficiency. Shadith had trouble translating the impressions into something she could use, but once the adjustment was made, she found the flight so absorbing she almost forgot what she was supposed to be hunting for.

She went swooping through the dark with the prowling moth, in and out among the trees, soaring on muffled wings that read the air currents so exquisitely they beat just once or twice a minute, only speeding up when she rushed down on a swarm of prey insects. After a few minutes the moth swung across a creek that curved about the glade without coming into it. There were immense congeries of insects buzzing about the waterweeds and suckerplants growing on the banks. She plunged into those swarms, feeding avidly.

A sudden burst of heat drew her like a magnet—heat radiating away from the cooling engines of a grounded flit, an open flier capable of lifting a score of thinnish males. There were some assorted lumps in the back that might be their luggage. Good to know—if true. The moth played in the thermals like a child dancing in wavefroth, forgetting her hunger in the exuberance of her tiny joy.

Shadith slid reluctantly from her mount—and almost vomited at the reaction as she crashed back into her usual sense-set.

While she was struggling to re-orient her brain, she heard someone shouting. She paid no attention until Kikun wrapped his fingers around her arm, shook her lightly, murmured her name, “Shadow, Shadow.”

She forced her eyes open, shuddered, then steadied as the world settled in ordinaryness about her. “What?”

“You’re being summoned, twiceborn.”

The Fanatic was standing by the bars holding the harpcase. “This is yours, girl?”

Still dizzy from her moth flight, she stepped over the cats and stopped a handspan from the bars to stare at him. After a minute, she said, “Yes.”

“Good.” He shoved the case between two of the bars: “Take it. Play.”

She caught it as he let go. “Why?”

The crease above his nose deepened, his brows squeezed closer. “Persuade me to stop Kwantawiyal selling the you to the Na-priests.” He produced an angry smile. “Since you’re new here, maybe you don’t know them. Take my word for it, you won’t like them.”

She hesitated; she had a strong suspicion he was right about the Priests, but performing for this bunch of ... she turned to Rohant. He was stinking like an angry civit, eyeing the Fanatic as if he were a bloody haunch he was about to take a bite out of—all of which gave her no help. Kikun touched her arm, let her feel the urgency in him.

All right, this puppy wags her tail for you. Hope you know what you’re doing, Clowndancer.

She dropped to the ground, opened the case.

When she had the harp the way she wanted, she began playing snatches of dancieries and balladins she’d col-lected in her wanderings, the time twenty millennia ago when she had her first body and was free to go where she would. For a while, despite the pressure she felt from the listener outside the cage, she couldn’t settle to anything more, but when the Fanatic knocked against the bars with the hilt of his knife, she pulled herself together and played a Uejasoh stomp all the way through, then a Herkulkana jokesong that was intransigently untranslat-able since it consisted entirely of puns that only worked inside Haarakiena.

The music was laughter’s mother; despite his dour expression the Fanatic tapped his knife hilt in time with the beat and when she finished, he snapped thumb against forefinger, hissed his pleasure, and asked, “Does that thing have words?”

“Yes, but there’s no way I can translate it. You satisfied?”

“You can play. Can you sing?”

“I don’t know any of your songs.”

“Sing.”

She stiffened; once again Kikun touched her arm, calm-ing her. “Hmm. There’s a thing I came across on a green world a lot like this, a Lost World ...” she paused and smiled sweetly at the Fanatic to make sure he caught her meaning, “.. going wild fast, seeding out, whatever you want to call it. Song’s called

Mad Mara's Lament. Who Mara was I have no idea, the man who taught me just knew the song and liked it, he was a man with a penchant for hurting women .." she paused again, smiled at him again, then shook her head. "Now, that didn't come out quite right, what I mean is he attracted and was attracted by women who'd been hurt. I'm going to have to switch langues, I can't translate on the spot like some. You want to know what it says, I'll tell you after." She checked the tuning, played through a verse to catch the mood, it was slow and sad, lovely in its simplic-ity. Then she sang.

*O wild wings fluttered in my head
And wild thoughts muttered there
In waking dreams I saw you dead
Your body rent, your throat gone red
Your splendid thighs ripped bare.
I cannot sleep, cruel love
Memory's my Mourning Dove
Cuckoos call out: horned maid
See your faithless lover fade
All oaths broke, all hope betrayed.
O wild wings fluttered in my head
And wild thoughts muttered there
In waking dreams I felt you near
Your honey hands, the words you said
In my willing waiting ear.
I cannot sleep, cruel fair
Memory's my Roan Nightmare
Cuckoos call from everywhere:
Lover's oaths are writ on air.
O wild wings fluttered in my head
And wild thoughts muttered there....*

Her voice rose in a final mourn-filled cry; she broke it off, flattened both hands on the strings, silencing them. For a minute she couldn't speak; she cleared her throat, forced her mind back into the Awenakis, said huskily, "Satisfied?"

He wiped his hands down the front of his jacket, jerked his head up and back, his long fair hair dancing in the wind. There was a yeasty excitement in him that she didn't trust, a softening, almost a change of face. "You'll have to learn Kiskaid songs. Are you a quick study?"

"Depends upon the material." She cleared her throat again. "And the inducement."

"I see."

While she was singing, Silvercreep had walked over to the cage; he was leaning against the bars, watching her from squinted eyes. The Fanatic got a grip on his arm and hauled him away to the fire, took up the argument again.

Shadith wiped off the harp, eased the strings and set-tled it back in the case. After she'd snapped the catches home, she looked up. "Well," she said.

Rohant's eyes were red slits, his ears were fflicking back and forth as if he were fly ridden. She smelled the rage on him again, part of it was turned on her. "Anooristi?" he snapped at Shadith. "Toh anth?"

"Wha.. Oh." He was back in interlingue—what did you find? where is it?—this jumping from langue to langue was starting to scramble her brain, which was in no great shape to begin with, not since Ginny then the locals started booting her head about. She glanced round; there were a number of locals staring into the cage. They looked away rather than meet her eyes but showed no sign of moving off, reason enough for caution.

She rubbed at her brow, sighed. "There's a stream, I think ... um, I don't know, it's difficult. I think

it's over there on the other side of the clearing, far enough into the trees that the firelight doesn't reach it. There's a flit tucked away in the brush beside that stream. I think ... it was almost impossible to be sure with the kind of eyes I was looking through ... I think our gear is in there, which is good if true. Case you're interested, I can tickle a lock with the best."

He gave a shout of laughter, shook himself. "Univer-sity can't know what it's missing."

"Hmm. You think these d'dabs are ever going to sleep?"

"Shouldn't 've stirred them up so much."

"Well, thaaank you, so glad you enjoyed my singing."

"Didn't say that." He wiggled his heavy brows and smiled at her, mouth shut, mustache tails lifting—not the grin he gave Silvercreep; tooth baring was a threat-gesture among the Dyslaera, not a pleasantry. He waited another beat. "I did, though. You're older than you look."

"I told you that."

"Yeh, but I didn't believe you, it's the sort of thing kits always say. They're putting more wood on the fire, seems like they plan on staying a while."

"Waiting for the high-bidder to arrive, I suppose."

"Could be." He looked up, produced a peculiar flut-tering whistle. Sassa came swooping down, flew over the cage; at another whistle, he went spiraling up again to perch among the fronds of the tree top. "Good bird. I raised him from the egg. Braincrystal knife, hmm? Should cut through that wood like cheese. They'll have a sentry posted. What kind of a shot are you?"

"Adequate for the occasion."

"Lots of occasions it seems."

"Flattery? What do you want?"

He laughed, slapped his leg. "I do like you, little cat. Lovely claws you've got there. Remind me of Miralys when she was a kit."

"Toerfeles?"

"Vanity, vanity, thy name is woman."

"Well?"

"True."

"So?"

"Let me use the needier."

She caught hold of his hand, measured her own against it. "I don't know. It's so small you wouldn't even feel it." He gave her a smoldering look. "I can handle little things."

"You think so, huh?"

"Know so."

"All right." She yawned. "I'm going to snatch some sleep, wake me whe ." she yawned again, "aahhh! When it's time."

Chapter 9. Fugitives

A cold drop splatted into the hollow at her temple, trickled into her eye; another hit her mouth. Shadith sputtered, sat up. "Sar!" She reached for the harpcase, shifted it until it was standing upright, pushed between two bars, presenting the minimum area to the wind and the rain. Swardheld built tight and strong, but there was no point in putting unnecessary strain on his work.

The night was a black felt blanket thrown across the glade; the fire's light made little impression on it. She held her ringchron close to her eyes and clicked her tongue when she saw what it said; she'd only been sleep-ing an hour. More drops hit her, a flurry of them; the wind coming through the bars was chill and damp, it cut to the bone.

The locals were running about as if the storm had blown in out of nowhere, as if the clouds hadn't been piling up all evening—and they were completely ignoring their prisoners.

Rohant dropped to a squat beside her. He was shiver-ing but trying to ignore it; he wasn't dressed for the weather and Dyslaera were savannah bred, used to dry heat and dust. His eyes shone red like bits

stolen from the embattled fire as they watched shadows chase each other about the glade while the fire sizzled and smoked and threatened to go out and the locals struggled with “wind gusts and an unwieldy tarp, trying to hoist it over a rope they’d tied to staples driven into two of the trees. “City boys.” He snorted. “Like a bunch of ants, you kick over their hill.”

More flurries of the icy drops hit Shadith in the face, went trickling down her neck. “Tsoukbaraim!” She scraped the wet out of her eyes, pulled her shirt together at the collar and glared at Silvercreep who was yelling invective at his men while they fought the canvas and the wind and tried to pin the tarp’s edges to the ground with a handful of wooden pegs.

After they got the improvised tent anchored solidly, the locals went rushing about the glade collecting their blankets and the pile of firewood. The rain started coming down steadily, the wind driving it at a strong slant.

Shadith thrust two fingers in her mouth and produced a whistle that knifed through the storm noise. “Hey,” she yelled, “What about us?”

They ignored her, treated the whistle and her screaming like windhowl and forgot it as they built a new fire under shelter of the canvas and left the old one to drown in the rain.

Well, that shows what we’re worth.

Sar! Bless us Three, pneumonia and catarrh and misery.

A few minutes later one of the locals came out, a smaller piece of canvas wrapped about him. Shoulders rounded, the wind at his back snatching at him, making him unsteady on his feet, he crossed the glade to the cage and settled himself on a root of the nearest tree, out of reach but close enough to hear them if they moved or spoke.

Rohant leaned down, his mouth close to Shadith’s ear. “The needier, you think it’ll penetrate that tarp?”

“With this wind? I don’t know. To say true, I’ve had it less than a year, just took a few practice shots. On a calm day ...” she peered at the huddled figure of the sentry, a blot barely visible in the rapidly diminishing firelight, “at about twice that distance, a needle’ll go through an inch of hardwood. I never tried it on cloth, so I don’t know ... anyway, I doubt it would reach him from here, it’s too light to carry well against a blow this strong.”

His fingers beat against his thighs, he whistled an irritating two-note dirge. He was close enough for her to feel the shiver-pulses shaking him. “We wait,” he said finally. “Let them get to sleep, it shouldn’t take long.”

Shadith smiled at the red glint in his narrowed eyes. “Tell you what, Ro, take the cats over with you, and you and Kikun and them clear out my way and I’ll operate on a couple those bars. It rains much harder you can walk right up to that d’ab and tunk him on the head before he knows what’s happening.

Shadith stretched out on her stomach and felt at the bars near the ground because she couldn’t see much more than black columns barely blacker and more solid than the night; they were slick with rain, slimy with debris from the slow rotting away of the outer layer of wood. She sucked on her teeth and thought about that a minute.

Take it slow, Shadow old girl, or you’ll be without a hand. Ahlahlah, this mud is ice.

She pushed up, laid her left leg out straight and drew the knife from the bootsheath. Holding it carefully away from her, she eased herself onto her stomach, slithered to the chosen bar and set the cutting edge against it. Wrist resting on her fist so she wouldn’t tremble, she applied pressure whisper bit by whisper bit. A shake at the wrong time or a shift off the horizontal and the blade could whip back on itself and slice her hand off. Slowly, slowly, the knife sank into the wood, cutting through the bar like a hot wire through butter.

When the blade was nearly through, she let go of the hilt, sloshed onto her back and lay massaging her wrist, her arms and hands shaking. She tucked her hands into her armpits and lay with her eyes closed, the rain beating on her face, until the worst of the tension was out of her.

On her stomach again, she braced her wrist, eased the knife from the wood and stopped her hand immediately. "One," she said aloud.

She dealt with the second pole in the same way, then slid the knife into the wood again before she tried getting to her feet so she could make the second cut in each of the bars. "Two," she said. She was cold, stiff, suddenly and desperately tired, but she wasn't going to get warmer or more comfortable, so she lifted onto her knees, then pulled herself all the way up; when she felt ready, she bent down, retrieved the knife and, braced herself against the next bar over, set the edge against the wood and started the freeing cut.

"Three." She turned her head, called to Rohant, "Any interest in us?"

"None so far." She could barely hear him through the rain.

She moved cautiously to the second vertical, making sure of her footing before she shifted her weight. Again she braced herself against an intact bar and laid the knife against the wood. She closed her eyes a moment before she began this last cut, this was the dangerous one, this was the time when patience frayed and caution ran out.

Slow and slow, the knife moved through the wood, slow and slow and slower as it neared the far side. She forgot the rain, the cold, the locals, everything but the knife. The blade oozed out of the wood. She stopped it. Held it steady for a moment. Using the bracing bar as a support, she sank to her knees, eased around until she was sitting in the mud. When the knife was finally back in its sheath, she started shaking all over. She tried to say something, but her teeth were chattering too badly and she couldn't talk.

Rohant got to his feet, crossed warily to her, moving more quickly when he could see that her hands were empty. He scooped her up, took her to the place where he'd been sitting and slid to the ground, his back against the bars. "I've warmed up this patch of mud," he said, "no use wasting the heat." He held her until her shaking stopped, murmuring the liquid purring nonsense he'd used with his children.

She tilted her head, looked up at him. "It's done. Pressure's keeping the sections in place, but a kick will knock them out. Whenever you're ready." She yawned, murmured drowsily, "Cut the ropes." She yawned again. "When you're ready." She nestled against him; she didn't want to move, she didn't want him to move.

The rain hissed down, a steady soporific drone, the wind groaned and moaned through the trees, whined across the glade, boomed against the canvas of the big tent; darkness was a blanket wrapped around her head, but she was content to feel the strength and cradling gentleness of the arms wrapped around her, she didn't need to see them.

The minutes slid past. The camp settled deeper and deeper into sleep.

* * *

Rohant sighed, shifted under her. "Time to move," he murmured.

"Mmmmmnnn, not yet."

Staggering a little because his legs had gone to sleep, the Ciocan surged onto his feet, lifting Shadith as he rose. He shifted his grip on her, set her on her feet. "You don't stand up, it's mud in the face."

"Tsoukbaraim!"

"No doubt. Someday you'll have to tell me what that means."

"Whatever." She reached inside her sodden shirt, brought out the needier and thrust it at him. "Here. Take this. You might's well have it. Wind doesn't seem like it's going to calm down for a while yet. There's a clip on the butt, it'll snap onto wherever you want to put it for safekeeping. It's a present from a friend, so don't lose it."

He snorted but took the weapon without comment. A deeper darkness in the darkness of the night, his outline shifted as he ran his fingers over the needier, the reached inside his tunic and clipped it to the cloth. He lifted his head, there was still enough light coming from the second fire under the canvas to wake the phosphor in his eyes, they shone with a fugitive crimson as he smiled down at her. "So. Time is..."

A low whistle came from the darkness. Shadith started, swore; she'd forgotten Kikun again. The

lacertine was a blot down low against the bars, he seemed to be staring toward the guard. "Someone's come out of the tent," he said, "he's a little behind the guard now, talking to him. Hanh! Hard to be sure, but I think he's just cut the guard's throat. He's coming here now."

"Huh?"

"Listen."

She heard the chains rattling on the cage door; some-one was there, working on the padlock. She reached out, *tasted* with her Talent. The Fanatic.

Ahlallah, looks like he lost the bidwar.

That's one way to recoup, steal the prizes.

Yaiii! that's bright.

As soon as the Fanatic had the door open, he'd turned a blinding flare on them, obviously not worried about trouble from Silvercreep and the men in the tent.

"Out," he shouted at them. His voice was gruff, tight, the only evidence of his tension; the full-mouth tonguedance of the local langue went mushy with the stiffness of his lips. "Don't try games. One will kill you before one sees you go to the Gospah."

Rohant cleared his throat, spat to one side. "What do you want?" His deep growl was surprisingly easy to hear through the storm noise, which was just as well since he was taking no trouble to be heard.

The wind whipped the answer back at them. "One means to take you to someone. If you cooperate, we can go easy, if you want to make it hard, hard it'll be." He backed away from the door, but kept the light fixed on them. "Come out. Now. Bring the cats with you. Stop soon as you're out. One will tell you where to go then."

Switching to interlingue, Rohant said, "If we let him get us away, then...." He broke off as Shadith pinched his arm. "What?"

"He understands interlingue. I can feel him react to what you just said, to what I'm saying now."

"Dio."

Kikun strolled past them, went out through the open-ing and stood waiting for them.

Shadith sighed.

Here we go again, plans down the tubes. All that work wasted. Ah well, tie a knot and go on, where's that case? Ah.

She slid the muddy strap over her shoulder and fol-lowed Kikun. After a minute, Rohant growled and fol-lowed her.

With the Fanatic's flare lighting the way, they moved quickly through the trees, despite the rain and wind and the treacherous, thorny canes of the amtapishka vines that sprawled in furious complication between the root gnarls, canes the wind whipped about their ankles like sawchains. Shadith was very glad of her boots and amused despite her predicament by Kikun's skip-dance as he adroitly and effortlessly avoided the thorns. He had even less trouble than the cats who loped along unconcerned, though they were still not liking the rain much.

The flit had its canopy pulled over and one of Silvercreep's men was visible through the translucent bubble, curled up asleep in the back. The Fanatic made them crouch down beside it where they couldn't be seen; when he was sure Rohant had the cats under control, he rapped on the canopy. "Ocsipishopasti."

Shadith wrinkled her nose as the click failed to happen and the word stayed a collection of nonsense syllables.

That's not in the vocab Ginny put together for us; it's either obscene or a password. Maybe both.

There was a sleepy grumble, then a hatch opened in the canopy and a tousle-headed local looked out. The Fanatic shot him, wagged his gun at Rohant. "You, Hunter. Pull him out," he snapped. "Move." Rohant didn't move. "I'm going to bring Sassa down. Stay loose, will you?"

"What is this Sassa?"

"Bird. Raptor." The hawk came dropping through the trees, perched on the canopy. "You see." Rohant got to his feet, hauled the dead local out of the flit and, tossed him to the ground. Arms crossed over his chest, he faced the Fanatic. "Anything else?"

"Get the bird away from the flit and keep it away from one if you want it alive."

"He comes with us. Like the cats."

The Fanatic stared at him, his face deeply shadowed, illuminated by the dim light coming from inside the canopy and the backleak from the flare. "I see. You and the others move away from the flit, take your livestock with you. Don't make me shoot, the noise might bring company none of us would like. I repeat, I will NOT allow the Gospah to have you. I'll kill you if I think Kwantawiyal is about to get his hands on you."

Expressionless and silent, he watched them move away from the flit; when he considered they were far enough off, he stopped them and backed toward the hatch. Without taking the gun or the light off them he sat in the opening and drew his legs up, then maneuvered himself inside. "Hunter, come here. Climb in and sit at the offseat, put your hands on the board and wait."

He gave Rohant no chance to jump him and when the Dyslaeror was in place, he called Shadith, then Kikun. Getting them into the flit was tricky and difficult, but he managed it without losing control over them, which considering the storm and the darkness and the cramped quarters was an impressive feat of juggling.

"Hunter, call your beasts. One humors you for the moment, but if you wish them alive and intact, don't push."

Rohant snorted. Staccato whistles repeated in groups of two brought the cats leaping inside. He settled them by his chair where they lay grooming each other, happier than they'd been anytime since the rain began. He had more trouble with Sassa, had to land him on the rim and walk him inside. Announcing his disapproval of all this with short sharp cries and ruffled feathers but pleased to be out of the wet, Sassa let Rohant coax him onto one of the seats with no more than a token protest.

The Fanatic pulled the hatch shut and locked it.

The space under the canopy filled with the smell of wet fur and feathers—and the anger-musk boiling off Rohant.

"Singer." The husky hoarse voice brought Shadith's head around.

"What?"

"Do you know anything about these machines?"

"Why me?"

He answered with iron patience. "Being female and a child you are less apt to let pride lead you into foolishness. Well?"

"I can fly this one, yes. Give me *a minute* to look over the board."

"Do it."

She tapped up the lights, nodded to herself.

Export job, not much more than three buttons and a lever, as foolproof as you can get, probably sealed drives, unit replacement when something breaks. Wonder how long it's been since anything on this piece of junk has been replaced?

Clicking her tongue with disgust, she ran her fingers across the stained and gritty board (carefully not-thinking about what those smears were made of), flicked on the drives and listened to the whine build up louder and louder with an ominous beat in it that set her nerves twanging.

She started to say something, clamped her teeth together at a loud yell from outside. Two locals came from the trees and rushed at them. Swearing under her breath, she fed in some power and felt the flit wobble as the ragged drives began lifting them slowly too slowly off the ground. Despite her

misgivings, when she saw one of the shadowy forms raise his rifle, she turned up the feed. The pellet ricocheted from the nose of the flit, went screaming away, then the drives kicked in, the lift sud-denly accelerated and the flit went surging into the tree tops. Breath catching in her throat, she managed a ner-vous laugh. “Nothing like a little encouragement.” She took the flit crashing through the springy fronds as more pellets went whinging off the sides or whistling through the canopy—one cut a hot line across her arm. “Sar!”

The lumbering flit was a beast to fly, with all the responsiveness and airworthiness of a mud turtle, but she wrestled it a bodylength above the fronds and brought it to a precarious hover. Over her shoulder she said, “Where now?”

“You see the compass?”

“Of course. So?”

“It’s corrected for these latitudes and true north, so you don’t need a deviation chart. Do exactly as one tells you. Put the nose on and proceed along that line until one tells you to turn again.”

A lot more than I need to know, you makbee minkha. Deviation is your problem, no sweat for me. Iust give me the line. Why southwest? Kikun said we should head east. The coast is that way. I don’t want to go away from the coast, we need to get to that city, what’d Ginny call it? Ah. Aina’iril. Someone’s going to have to do something about this idiot. Some-one ... I suppose that’ll turn out to be me. Ya-yah, that crease burns. Got to get a bandage on it when I have a minute. I’m leaking like a dripping faucet .. blub blub. Gods, who knows what filth is get-ting into my blood!

Shadith brought the flit around, flew for a few minutes longer on manual, listening to the laboring of the drives. “This thing sounds sicker than before. You think those d’ dabs might’ve hit something?”

The Fanatic settled his gun on the armrest. “It flies, forget the rest.” There was a throaty purr in his voice; he wasn’t trusting her an antiquated inch, but she thought she could feel him developing a kind of proprietary fond-ness for her.

“Hmp.” She waggled the lever, clicked her tongue as the otto:P refused to engage. She repeated the shift several times, feeling about for the catch. It finally kicked in with a lurch and a shriek that made her wince. “That’s the question, friend. How long it’s going to keep flying.”

“One will deal with that when one can’t avoid it any longer.”

She shrugged, winced. “You’re pulling the strings right now. Tell you this, if I think it’s about to blow, I’m not going to ask permission to land, I’m going down. I have no desire to end up splattered across a mountainside.”

He clicked his tongue, but said nothing.

She touched the crease, looked at her fingers. Blood. Lots of it. The drip wasn’t slowing down any.

Looks like I’m still getting the backside of Ginny’s Luck

Hand clasped about her arm, she swung the chair around. “Those our pouches back there by your feet?”

“Why?”

“There’s a first aid kit in mine, I’d like to get a ban-dage on my arm before I bleed to death. Also some antiseptic, that bunch back there didn’t impress me as any too clean.”

He thought about that a minute. “I see. All right, come back slowly and show one everything you touch.”

She grimaced, stood up, swaying a little as reaction hit her.

Why, why do I keep running into these damn double-knotters!

He sat brooding as Rohant cleaned the wound for her and sprayed a bandage on it. “Why are you here, the three of you?” he said suddenly.

She looked up. “What?”

“Why did you come here?”

“We didn’t. No no, it’s the truth. We were thrown here, only thing we want to do is get the hell out. Help us do it and you don’t have to worry about us being used.”

“Who brought you here?”

“I don’t know. How should I know when I don’t even know why it happened, all I know is someone snatched me and dumped me here. I never saw him, I don’t know who or why.” She waggled a hand at Rohant patient and silent beside her, at Kikun cross-legged on the floor. “If you want to know about them, ask them. I never saw them before we woke up in that tree.”

Rohant had left off smelling angry, he was amused now, probably by the fluency of her lies.

Ahlalahlah, the things that come out my mouth. I’m going to have no character left at all when this is over, I won’t even know what the truth is. Oh, well, needs must where the Devil drives. Where’d that come from? Something I picked up from Lee? Sounds like the kind of thing phony rustics are wont to spout to each other in bad triddas.

“I see.”

He says that all the time. I think it means he hasn’t a clue what’s happening. Talking about clues, what’s all this business about one this and one that? I can’t figure the rule and there’s nothing about it in the imprint. Local variation? Hah! Shadow old girl, you’re, cracking up. This is no time for fussing over pronouns.

“When one tells you, change course, put the nose on 52.”

“That’s almost switching ends, going right back where we come from.”

“Not really. We’ve avoided a place it’s dangerous to fly over, a protected area. Kanaweh won’t bother with who we are, they don’t know us so we’d be ash and bone before they thought to ask questions. Much better to circle round.”

“Oh. Northeast it is. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“One has survived forty years of this. I know. Turn ... now.”

The flit whined on through the night, the drives hic-cuping and beating, jolting them up and down though the air was smoother as they left the storm behind, the winds fell and the sky cleared.

At the end of the first hour, he called out a new course, sending the flit directly east. At the same time he made her drop it down until it was barely four meters off the ground. The three moons were all set by now and the stars were thin in this region, with few first magnitudes visible, but they gave enough light in the clear sky to make that skimming flight possible without having to turn on the baselights, which she was happy enough to do without, infected by the tense wariness she felt in the man.

Staying this low, with obstacles continually popping up, she had to keep corn herself; she didn’t trust the otto:P. It was hard. Her stomach cramped with hunger, she hadn’t had anything to eat for she didn’t know how long, her arm was aching like a sore tooth, even her hair felt tired. They’d moved into a heavily developed area so the strain never lessened, she circled past factories with their attendant villages, farms being triple-cropped with barracks full of laborers, villages snuggling against the walls of the Ispisacos (the Bighouses of the Plicik land-lords), other villages that were huddles of small houses set up at crossroads and on the banks of the three rivers that the flit crossed and recrossed as it labored eastward, its course like the trail of a snake with indigestion; in addition to the detours forced on her by the topography, the Fanatic was calling out a change of direction every ten minutes or so, working from landmarks and some system he pulled from memory.

Kikun whistled, a short sharp sound.

Startled, Shadith snatched time to look over her shoul-der. “What?”

“Get us down fast as you can. Or Boom! we’re ash.”

“Right.” She glanced ahead, frowned at the broad river curving back across their course, the village tucked into the bend. There were lights coming on in the win-dows of the small houses though the Ispisaco was still dark except for the servant warrens up under the slates. There were tangled brakes down near the water and scattered groves on the banks; a narrow, rutted, dirt road ran along the top of

the high solid levee on the left side of the river; it was deserted now, but it looked like it might be heavily traveled during the day. Patches of fog hugged the ground and drifted above the water, compelling her search for a place to put down where they could stay undercover if they had to. She wiped at the sweat trickling into her eyes. "Ro, you can see better than I, can, pick a spot." The flit lurched, the drivewhine peaked, went silent for a second, then picked up again. "Listen to that! Hurry, man."

"I'm ahead of you, csecse, spotted one already. Turn south, we want to get away from the village, there's a broke down wharf, couple warehouses, some shacks. Right. Straight ahead ... go on ... on ... now! Down."

When the flit was finally grounded, she breathed a quick sigh of relief, collapsed the canopy and lowered the powerfeed to a trickle, not quite daring to shut it off completely because that might be enough to trigger an explosion. She swung round. "Well?"

The Fanatic switched on the flare, twisted its beam to a thread of light that played on Rohant's face. "Hunter, your companion, how accurate are his instincts?"

"Why ask me?"

A dry chuckle. "One has the feeling your answer might be more reliable."

"Got a point there, Kikun runs on his own rules. From what my son tells me, if his life's on, the line, he's pretty damn accurate."

"I see. Over the side, Hunter. Take your creatures with you." He smiled, a weary grimace warm with unexpected charm. "If you decide to vanish, there's not all that much one could do to stop you. But then one would have to break the set. One would have to kill one or more of your companions. One would rather not do that."

When Rohant, his hawk and the cats were overside, he turned to Kikun. "Now you."

Kikun set his hand on the rail, gave him a look like a lepidopterist inspecting a substandard moth, swung over, and went to stand beside the Ciocan.

"Singer, collect your belongings and anything else that's loose, whatever you think might be useful, and pass it out to your friends."

When she'd finished that, he sighed. "Now, child. Come here. We'll go overside together."

"No." Shadith scrubbed a hand across her face; she was so tired her brain was on strike but what she had to say didn't need all that much celebration. "Listen, I'm not playing games. This isn't about getting away from you." He looked skeptical; it was logical enough, he had a gun on her, how could he believe anything she said?

Never thought I'd miss Ginny the crud. He might not have a clue about people, but he jumps fast and accurate where his skin's involved.

"I like lice, by which I mean your secret police who as per usual are not so secret—I like them about much as you do, I suspect," she said. "I don't want them on my neck when I've got no chance to run. And we will have them on our necks unless we get rid of this flit. It's a beacon saying here we are come get us. Besides, I want it to be somewhere else when it blows."

"I see. What've you got in mind?"

"I take the flit up, set the otto:P, ditch myself in the river, and swim out. You could help by giving me a course so it'll do least damage to your people." She brought her arm round in a sweep to take in Rohant, Kikun, herself. "And one that will maximize our chances of surviving."

He got to his feet. "Back along the river. Set the otto:P at 250. About twenty iskals inland there's a Royal Enclosure, the Iskota Estate; if it gets that far without exploding, it'll be shot down, which means the search should be concentrated there, it's an obvious target for an attack by what they call terrorists. The kanaweh, if you didn't know, those are the Nistam's security police, your lice, they'll be out like ants (one's contribution to the field of insectile simile) swarming round the estate. With a little luck, we'll be beyond the bounds. One must concede it, Singer, this is a good idea." He glanced at the sky. "There's less than an hour till dawn. You'd better get started."

She sweated out the lift, got the otto:P engaged more by will than skill, slapped the go button, and went over the side.

It took her forever to hit the water, when she did she wished she hadn't, it felt like her ankles broke, she went in and down, her arm hurt, she'd forgotten the wound, she couldn't get any pull with that arm, the current seized hold of her, rolled her over and over until she didn't know up from down....

A blinding light....

She struggled, toward it....

Her head broke surface, she gulped in air and water, began fighting toward the light. She knew what it was now. The Fanatic's flare.

"Shadow."

Rohant. His arm came under her. He was on his back, kicking powerfully. She collapsed against him, let him tow her.

The current sucked at them, it wouldn't let go, they were being swept down and down ... a shout ... Kikun. Something hard and rough slapped against her, started pulling along her body. Rope. She felt Rohant's body convulse and drop away from her. He still gripped her tightly, he was dragging her across the current now, water was in her eyes, her mouth, she didn't know what was happening until he managed to find footing and start walking out, carrying her.

Chapter 10. Myth before breakfast

With chill dawn drafts eddying around her like scalpels probing the places where they'd hurt the most despite the dry clothes and the blanket she'd pulled around her, Shadith sat shuddering with depression and fatigue in the corner of the shack; she hated her feebleness, she felt like some fainting miss falling out at hide 'n seek, but she just couldn't go any more. Much of the time she stared at the dead smelling dirt of the shack floor, dirt she could barely see, and wallowed in uselessness, but when she was at her most morose, she flagellated herself by watch-ing Rohant, Kikun, and the Fanatic (that epithet didn't fit any longer, but she had no other label for him) bus-tling about, collecting wood for a fire and castoff tree fronds to drape across the rafters and stuff into wall cracks so fliers passing along the river wouldn't spot light leaking through the rotted out places in the roof and walls. The Fanatic had put his gun away somewhere inside his clothes, as if he were embarrassed by it, and was toting fronds into the shack with an amiable determi-nation that amazed her; it would have amused her if she'd had any humor left in her.

They finished with the fronds and went out, pulling the ragged door shut after them, leaving her in there with the wind whistling through the cracks in the walls and a young fire in the far corner that flickered and threatened to go out but never did. She watched the feeble, uncer-tain flames shiver in the drafts and thought if fires could feel, that one had to feel about like her.

Left behind with her, Sassa perched in the rafters, waiting for Rohant's permission to hunt while the hun-gry, fractious cats stalked about the shack like shadows snatched from the fire.

Rohant brought in an armload of boards torn off the other shacks, knelt beside the fire, breaking them over his knees and coughing, stopping now and then to wipe his nose; coming into the river after her had finished off his immunities, looked like he was in for a long hard cold. She ground her teeth and wallowed in guilt.

Kikun came in with his arms full of fat tubers. He used a knife, a hefty baynet that he'd acquired from some-where, not one of hers, to loosen the dirt, then he scraped out a hole with a piece of board until it was big enough to hold the tubers. He covered them over, built a smaller fire on top of them and went trotting out again, resilient as a length of gray-green rubber. Water, wear-i-ness, hunger, cold, they rolled off his back and left him untouched. It was more than depressing, it was disgusting.

The Fanatic brought in a dripping can of river water, left it by Rohant, then went to squat in the other corner on Shadith's end of the shack, looking from her to the Dyslaeror with a bemused, faintly amused expression on his square face. His forearms rested on his knees, his hands hung empty before them; he seemed tired but content.

"You asked me why we're here," she said, driven by an impulse born out of a growing distaste for

her own mentations. "I think you know more about that than we do."

Rohant sneezed, grumped under his breath as he got to his feet; he called Sassa, held the door open for him, whistled to the cats, and went out with them prowling at his heels.

The Fanatic rose, stretched, then went to the door and stood looking at the sky. "I wonder if it's blown yet."

"The flit? I don't know. You said twenty iskals. You know interlingue. How long's an iskal?"

"Little over a kilometer. Say one and a half."

"Thirty kilometers." She flattened her hand on her leg, scowled at the ringchron. "And more than an hour since I went in the river. Even if it wasn't shot down, it shouldn't 've lasted this long."

"Odd we didn't see anything."

"I didn't know, maybe it hit ground first." She yawned, rubbed at her forehead. "Maybe it missed the Estate altogether and it's still going. Whatever, it's not some-thing we have to worry about any more. Talking about worry, why are a clutch of outsiders so important you'd kill them before letting them out of your hands?"

He didn't say anything for several minutes, then he sucked in a long breath and let it out slowly. Still saying nothing he turned from the door, moved across to the fires and laid wood on each. Finally he stood with his back to them, his face in shadow, his hands clasped behind him. "You ask a difficult question."

"Seems simple to me."

"That, my dear girl, is because you don't know any-thing about us. Ignorance is a great simplifier."

"I had a master said that once. I poured peppersauce in his tea." She giggled, sobered. "So?"

Kikun came in with a battered pot he'd collected some-where, some heavy wire and an armload of smooth stones which he arranged in a cee-shape at the edge of the larger fire; he scraped part of the coals from the fire into the cee and laid the wire across the stones, filled the pot from the can and balanced it on the improvised grid, setting the water to boil. After adding wood and reshaping both fires so they burned more evenly, he moved a short distance away, dropped to the dirt and sat watching the other two, the firelight turning his eyes to orange lava.

Shadith raised the harpcase on end, tipped it over so it was leaning against the wall; she rearranged herself, curling up with her back against the case. Despite the drafts the fires were beginning to warm the shack—and her—and she'd turned the curve on fatigue, passing the point when the need to sleep was overwhelming; if she didn't move much or try to push her thoughts too fast, she was all right for the next hour or so. She yawned, blinked at the door Kikun had left open a crack. The darkness outside had lightened to a steely gray and the sounds of dawn were coming in to her, bird twitters, a honking bray, a motor coughing, its sputter muted by distance. Maybe Rohant would be back soon with meat to add to Kikun's tubers and brew. She'd stopped feeling hungry, but she knew her lassitude came partly from lack of fuel in her system.

You should sleep, Shadow. You can eat later. I don't want to sleep, I'm too tired to sleep. Tired! Huh! I'm tired of scratching and scabbling and it making no difference. I plan and do and it turns out a waste of time. Like with the guard and then those bars. Well, you couldn't know that ahead of time. And if things hadn't turned out like they did, what

you did would've got you out of a mess. I suppose so. You can't read the future, take a cue from Ginny and trust your luck. All right, all right. So, see what you can squeeze out of our resident local. He can probably tell you something about why Ginny's doing this to you and Rohant and Kikun.

"You're good at not answering questions," she said. "I suppose you don't want to tell me your name, but give me something to call you; I dislike very much having to say hey you when I want your attention, even if it's only implied. My name is Shadith."

He walked to the door, pulled it shut, came back and settled onto the dirt beside her. "Shadith," he said. "Does it have a meaning?"

“It’s the name my mother gave me, it doesn’t need a meaning. Very good at avoiding answers.”

“In this place, answers kill people. Side-stepping be-comes a habit which one means to keep well honed.” His eyes drooped half-shut. “Need one say, Kwantawiyal knew one not.” A quick flowing gesture, his hand sweep-ing from head level toward the floor. “I am not so memorable a man as to make recognition immediate. However...” With a wry twist to his mouth, he spread his hands, dropped them on his knees. “One is called Asteplikota, Aste for those who prefer less of a mouth-ful. It is one’s personal name. Since one’s family has cast one out, it is the only name I own.”

“Aste it is.” She blinked sleepily at him. “I did notice that you didn’t seem to fit very well with Silvercreep and his collection of sweepings.”

“I’m flattered. Silvercreep?”

“He was loaded with it.”

Asteplikota chuckled. “In every sense.”

“True. Well?”

“Doing it again, eh?” He shook his head. “Ah, habit. Someone I owe a favor wanted an agent he could trust to act for him; he said he’d heard rumors something impor-tant was going to happen and he’d bought rights to be in on it from Kwantawiyal ... urn ... Silvercreep. One does like that name, it catches so nicely the essence of the man.” A brief smile, charming, shy. His voice was quiet, musing, a pleasant gravelly tenor, its roughness comfortable like a worn-out old shirt. “No one sane and with a modicum of intelligence would trust him to stay bought; one was along to keep him honest, though he’s a lot more frightened of the Na-priests than he is of us. We’d only kill him. The holy screws, well... He didn’t want one along, but he was too greedy to refuse the sponsor’s gold. There you are.”

Shadith moved uneasily.

Tsoukbaraim, I’m starting to like the man. That’s a complication, it was easier when all I had to do was lie up a storm and get the hell out. It’s obvious, what happened was Ginny pulling the strings and making the puppets dance. That someone he’s talking about, he’s either Ginny’s man or in Ginny’s net somehow. What do I tell this Aste? Him knowing about Ginny won’t change anything. Ginny’s watching us now, bastard! Watching me twist in the wind. Somebody has to do something about him. Killing a world to titillate ... gaah! Admit it, Shadow, moral indigna-tion isn’t in it, you want to put the boot where it’ll hurt because the d’ab’s leading you around like his pet simi and it kills your pride. I HATE being help-less. I LOATHE being helpless. All right, all right, all that’s given. Settle down, woman. Information—you need information. Can’t make a plan till you know the parameters.

She shifted her legs, they were going to sleep on her.

A hiss came from the fire, the water was boiling. Kikun reached under his tunic, brought out a handful of herbs and dropped them into the pot. He contemplated them a moment, fetched out a dry stick, and began stirring them. A faint herbal smell drifted over to her. She sighed, folded her hands across her stomach. “All right, we’re important. Why?”

“Because you mean hope to people who have none and where there is hope, there is a will to change present evils for future goods. Which means those now in power will do anything they can to co-opt or kill you.”

“But why us? We’re alien, even different species. What’ve we got to do with you and your people?”

“One said it was a hard thing to explain.”

“Try...”

“You were jabbing at one about this being a Lost World. Back there at the cage. When you sang that song. By the way, when there’s a moment you’ll have to trans-late it for one.”

“Yes, yes. So?”

“We know we were born as a species on this world. That we came here as fugitives...” He looked down, pulled a finger along the dirt beside his buttocks. “Funny, once upon a time, it was a lifetime ago almost, one was a teacher, a historian and a writer of histories. A danger-ous occupation these days.” He

straightened his back, a distant look came into his eyes. "This is how it was...."

Across the shack, Kikun took the pot off the grid and set it on the ground. He pressed his palms together and leaned forward, a matching distance in his gaze as if he followed Asteplikota past time into myth.

In the time before time, there was only Oppalatin dreaming that he was. There was no beginning and no end, no time, no shape, no life. Only Oppalatin, dream-ing. In his dreams he conceived himself and brought himself into being. And when it was so, he knew that he was alone, and being alone, conceived The Other.

He contemplated The Other, then he spoke: You are Kotakin, I have created you.

And Kotakin said: You have created me. I am Not-You. And Kotakin wept because he was separate and greatly alone.

Oppalatin saw and was grieved.

Oppalatin said: I am your Uncle. You are my Nephew. Go now and lay out worlds for Me and make creatures to dwell on those worlds and I will give you the Lifebreath to breathe into them. Let there be a world where I may contemplate Myself and dream without disturbance, let that world be called Yahwihakai which is My Glory. Let there be a world where You, Kotakin, may contemplate my Greatness without disturbance, where You, Kotakin, may bring such as may please you to make on that world a garden of tranquillity and joy, let that world be called Nahelikai which is Garden of the Blessed. Let there be four lesser worlds for the life to come.

Kotakin went and did this and he returned to Oppalatin and said: Thus and so have I done. Is this according to your plan?

Oppalatin contemplated the work of Kotakin and was pleased. He said: It is good. You have done a great work, Nephew. But your work is not finished. Go upon the first of the lesser worlds and make a Woman and I will put life into her.

Kotakin stood upon the face of the lesser world. He said: I name you Pitamaskai.

Earth drew apart from water, sky from ground and the world was solid around him. He took clay from the bank of a river and shaped a Woman from it. When he fin—

ished, he took Breath from Oppalatin and blew it into her mouth. He said: I name you Ni-tahwaikis, She-Who-Plants.

Kotakin gave the Woman a Blanket, a white Blanket with a thread of black woven through it. He told Ni-tahwaikis: You will do thus and so.

Ni-tahwaikis took two lumps of clay from the river bank and lay them upon the land and lay the Blanket over them. She sang the Creation Song over them and took the Blanket away.

When she uncovered them, two beings, twins, sat up. They sang: Who are we? Why are we?

To the one on her left, She-Who-Plants said: You are Tahnokipo Waposh. You sing the world into steadiness, it is your duty to see that order and extension remain. Go now about the world and put your hands on it so it will have substance and shape.

Tahnokipo Waposh left her and traveled through the world and through it again, singing it into order and extension. He sang the mountains into shape, sang the courses of the rivers, sang the rock into long slow being.

To the one on her right, She-Who-Plants said: You are Shapostim Mayah. You sing the world into movement and change, it is your duty to see that the winds blow when it is time and water flows. Go now about the world and sing without ceasing to wind and water and all things that change.

Shapostim Mayah left her and traveled through the world and through it again, singing into movement all things that by nature moved. From pole to pole Pitamaskai resonated to his song, wind and water moved and sang the Greatness of Oppalatin the Creator.

Then Ni-tahwaikis moved about Pitamaskai, creating trees and bushes, plants and flowers, all kinds of seed-bearers and nut-bearers to clothe the earth, giving to each from the Breath of Oppalatin. In the same manner she created all kinds of birds and animals—molding them out of earth and spittle, covering them with the Blanket of Oppalatin, singing the Song of Creation over them and sharing with them the

Breath of Oppalatin.

Kotakin went to Oppalatin and said: Behold, Pita-maskai lives.

Oppalatin saw how beautiful it was, the land, the plants, the birds and animals, and he was pleased. He heard the quick bright song of Shapostim Mayah, the slow dark song of Tahnokipo Waposh and he was pleased. He saw the Woman Ni-tahwaikis laid on her face before him, worshipping him, and he was pleased.-He said: It is good. It is very good.

Oppalatin said: It is time, Kotakin. Lie with the Woman and make children with her that they may grow and tend the world and be Companions for You and Worship Me.

Kotakin went unto the woman and put his seed in her.

On the first day, the day called Payatanwahash or the day of the earth, she bore Nataminaho the Hunter. He dropped from her womb fully formed. When she put him to her breast to suckle him, his teeth tore her flesh and she cast him away, crying out in pain.

He landed in soft warm mud and crawled beneath a shakan bush and slept for two days.

When he woke, he was hungry. He—called out for Ni-tahwaikis, but she was not there. He stamped the earth in his anger and Tahnokipo Waposh cried out: Who is moving what should not be moved?

Nataminaho stopped stamping. He considered himself. Standing without moving for a day and a night, he brooded over who it was that stamped.

Hare came hopping past. Nataminaho smelled the blood in him and remembered his hunger. He seized a stone and killed Hare and ate him. When the bones were bare he looked at them. He looked at the stone. He cried out: I am Nataminaho the Hunter.

On the fifth day, the day called Niyotansahash or day of the winds, Ni-tahvvaikis bore Opalekis-Mimo the Holy Dancer. He dropped from her womb eyeless and un-formed. She lifted him and tried to make him suck, but he had no mouth. He wriggled against her and wept with his body from a hunger he could neither endure nor end. Day melted into night and night into day and still he wept and still his voiceless hunger grew. Ni-tahwaikis laid him on the Sacred Blanket, but he wriggled off. She wrapped the Blanket about and about him and rocked him in her arms and called out to Oppalatin to give him ease.

Kotakin came to her. In his left hand he had white clay, in his right hand he had black ash.

Ni-tahwaikis took the Blanket from Opalekis-Mimo and held him still upon the earth.

Kotakin smoothed white clay over the blindworm baby, covering him from end to end. With the black ash he drew broad bands around Opalekis-Nino so he was striped black and white. Where his face should be, he drew eyes and a nose, a mouth and ears. He drew arms and legs, fingers and toes.

Ni-tahwaikis spread the Blanket over Opalekis-Mimo and sang the Creation Song. When she took the Blanket away again, Opalekis-Mimo jumped to his feet and went dancing and dancing and dancing until the wind shook with his dancing. Shapostim Mayah cried out: My winds are shaking out of their courses. Who is shaking my winds?

Opalekis-Mimo stopped dancing. He considered him-self. He looked at his feet and his hands, he touched his mouth and his eyes. He flung out his arms and laughed. I am Opalekis-Mimo and I dance. After that he went back to Ni-tahwaikis and suckled like any ordinary baby.

On the thirteenth day, the day called Milawehtan-sahash or day of blessings and coming together, Ni-tahwaikis bore Nikamo-Oskinin. The girl baby dropped from the womb small and neat and fully formed. When she touched the earth, she tore up fistfuls of it and ate it like it was porridge and when she could eat no more, she sang and sang and sang. Her song resonated with the earth and the earth sang in her, her song raptured the winds and they came from the Four Directions to spin about her and sing their descants with her.

Tahnokipo Waposh cried: Who shakes the stones and the earth, who makes the mountains dance when they should be still and seemly?

Shapostim Mayah cried: Who tears my winds from their proper courses and sings them dizzy....

Asteplikota stopped talking when Rohant came in, carrying a bloody piece of hide with a lump of meat wrapped in it, the cats following him looking sleepy and content. Sassa swept down and landed in

the doorway with a small rodent in one talon; he shivered his feathers, settled his wings, and began tearing at his catch. Rohant sneezed, sputtered, dropped his burden by the fire, and began unwrapping the hide; over his shoulder he growled, "Flits going past like swarming blackflies. Why it took so long to get back, we had to duck for cover every second step."

Asteplikota rubbed at the tip of his nose. "Swarming?"

"Looks like someone wants us a lot." Rohant began cutting the meat into small chunks and threading them on pointed sticks, leaning the sticks against Kikun's stones when he finished loading them. "How come they know it's us? Or do they?"

"Oh, yes. How? Kwantawiyal. All he had to do was get into a treelodge and make a conical Once he finished describing you, whoever he called would be as hungry for you as your cats were a couple hours ago for anything with blood in it."

"Mm." Rohant finished with the meat, began scooping coals into the cee and feeding more wood to the fire, broken pieces too dry to smoke. "What kind of detection equipment do your kanaweh use?" He laid the sticks across the coals, scooped water from the tin and washed the blood off his hands. "Bodyheat? Motionsensors? Vi-suals? A combination of some or all of those? We need to know." He wiped his hands on his trousers, straight-ened up.

Asteplikota scraped his hand across the dirt beside his thigh, frowning. "Depends on what they've been able to buy from offworld traders and that's classified informa-tion. There isn't much leaks out of the Kasta—that's Security Headquarters. Last month I heard they hung some poor sotch for talking out of turn. We try, but it's rind squeezings and sludge, nothing worth trusting to."

Kikun dug into his pouch, brought out collapsed cups, memorplas compressed into a dense rod. He broke off a section, twisted it open, dipped the cup into the infusion and carried it across to Shadith.

She looked at the murky liquid, looked up at him. "Just what is this supposed to be?"

"Good for you. Energy. You'll need it. We moving. Tastes all right, you'll see."

"I was still a babe when I learned what good-for-you meant." She grinned at him. "Oh all right, medicine works best when it tastes bad, give it here." She sipped at the warm drink, grimaced, it was about as foul as she'd expected, but it slithered down her throat and warmed her and swept away the clinging fatigue that weighed her down, mind and body. The meat was bub—

bling and charring, sending out smells to tempt the dream-ing Oppalatin and she was suddenly very very hungry. "Ro, what he said..."

"Well, think about it, Shadow. Standard search, grid over the target area, sweep along obvious go-routes, what's more obvious than a river? It shouldn't take Kikun's visions to tell us we need to move."

"Fine time to be bringing that up now. Why'nt you say something before we hit ground?"

"One, I didn't hear you making any objections, girl. Two, you told me and Kikun shit-all about what you and Aste here were planning to do with the flit."

"Had all I could do to fly the damn thing and keep my eyes open same time." She set the cup down, brushed her hand across her face, depressed again. "I don't know why I'm fussing, we can turn and twist all we want, but Ginny's pulling our strings, we can't get away from that. He takes a notion, he can bring all hell down on us."

Roh ant stretched, growled, "That's your bones talk-ing, Shadow. Get some sleep, kit-cat."

Shadith snapped thumb against finger. "My bones are just fine, thank you. You'd better see to that meat before it burns."

"Meat's all right." He coughed, turned his head, spat. "Hmp. With a pinch of luck, we can flit this around. Sooner or later someone's going to take a look at these buildings. Unless it's a circle of beaters moving out from the Estate..." He glanced at Asteplikota; the local shook his head. "Glad to hear it. Makes things easier. Probably a squad in a flit, then. Or a boat. Four, five, six men. We can handle that if we work it right. And we get transport out of it." He took the cup Kikun handed him, scowled at it, then drained it in one long gulp. "Dio, that's slop." He sniffed, rumbled with satisfaction as his nose began to clear and the fatigue washed out of his body. "Works, though. Thanks, Kikun."

Shadith sat up. "Ante, this is your world, is the Ciocan right? We have a chance of breaking loose?"

Asteplikota smiled at Rohant, his eyes sinking into a web of wrinkles. “You think like my brother, Ciocan. Yes, Singer. The kanaweh aren’t all that bright, you know. Intelligence is a handicap in a headbuster.” He looked up as Kikun came across to him with a third cup; he took it without comment, drank it and set the cup down.

His attention drawn from the meat he was tending, Rohant looked over his shoulder, showing his teeth in a sketch of a challenge grin. “Your brother, huh. We get a minute, I want to know about him. Kikun, those tubers about done? We’d better eat now, time’s running out on us too damn fast to be fussy.”

The powerboat came down the river, buzzing like a swarm of elephantine mosquitoes, the noise announcing it several minutes before it appeared, a squat black bug crouching close to the water. It curved over to the sag-ging wharf, dumped out four half-armored kanaweh, who yelled and swore as the rotten, waterlogged timbers gave under them and threatened to drop them into the muck below. Their leader leaned back, put his feet up, pulled his helmet visor down and prepared to doze until the search was finished.

Stretched along a wide flat branch in the thickly fronded tree growing close to the shack they’d sheltered in, part of the dense tangle of trees, vines, and thornbrush behind the abandoned landing, Rohant worked his mouth, the drooping tails of his mustache twitching in derision as he watched the men blundering about, visors carelessly pushed up. They were just going through the motions, convinced this search was a waste of time. The Ciocan winked at Shadith who was perched on the next branch over, dragged his sleeve across his dripping nose, then darted two of the kanaweh as they rounded a corner and moved out of sight of the others—a dart in each face, inch-long translucent slivers that drove through flesh and bone and exploded poison deep into the brain. When the men dropped without a sound, he looked at the tiny weapon, raised his brows. He gave Shadith a tight-mouthed grin and rubbed his thumb across the polished wood inset in the grip, a small silent accolade. Shadith eased her finger away from the trigger sensor of the stunner, tucked the tube into the fan of frondlets before her on the branch. Rohant went back to watching and waiting for another shot at the kanaweh.

Stripped to his dry rough hide, Kikun strolled away from the cluster of buildings and walked along the ruts to the wharf. Shadith looked at him, found herself looking away, forgetting him, looking back, startled each time she saw him. His hands were empty, he had no weapon, nothing visible anyway. She looked away again, forgetting him again as she heard yells of anger and disgust, then a rattle of shots from the largest of the crumbling warehouses. One of the searchers came out, kicking ver-min from around his boots, cursing them. He shoved his pelletpistol into its holster, gave a mangy lump a last kick. “Dyesh, Mikka, Tank, where the hell are you? Nobody in this dump but cha-sakin’ mitsish.”

The second kana came out of a shack, brushing cob-webs off his arms. “E-heh.” He glanced toward the wharf, saw Kikun step into the boat. “Kekwa?” Shouting as he ran, he lunged toward the wharf.

Shadith lifted the stunner, waited.

Not trusting his aim at that distance with the unfamiliar weapon, Rohant tapped the darter to spray and swung the line of darts across the face of one runner then the other, dropping them in mid-stride.

In the boat Kikun was behind the driver; as the kana jerked awake, the lacertine took his helmeted head into an enveloping embrace, twisted sharply. Shadith winced. She was too far away to hear the CRACK, but she felt it in her own neck. With a continuation of the neck whip, Kikun flipped the local into the river on the shoreside, used a boathook to shove the body under the wharf where it got hung up among the rotting piles.

Shadith and Rohant swung down from the tree and started toward the boat as Asteplikota came hurrying out of the tangle behind them, carrying their pouches and Shadith’s harpcase, the two cats loping beside him, watching him with the amiable speculation of sated carnivores. Sassa spiraled into the sky and circled overhead, waiting to be summoned.

Asteplikota joined the other two as they stopped beside one of the bodies. “That was the last easy thing,” he said as he shrugged out of the tangle of strapping. “When they find these dead, there will be no more lazing on the job.”

“No doubt. Shadow, you and Kikun load up the boat, get the cats settled, get it ready to go. Aste, you and me, we’ll clear up this refuse.” He strolled to the corpse, coughed and spat, landing a gob of clotted mucus on the turtle armor bulging over the dead man’s chest. “We’ll put these bodies under the wharf with the other one. Give us a bit of luck, they won’t be noticed for a while, long enough for some lead time. I take it, it wouldn’t be a good idea to be found with kana equipment on us.”

“Right. On the other hand, we don’t want anyone wondering who’s that in a kana boat. The cats can go under a blanket, but we better have those helmets; we can leave them with the boat when we leave the boat.

We can’t ride it all the way to Aina’iril, there’s too much traffic. Go through their pockets for their money, it’s anonymous enough and we could need it.”

“Mmh. Grab his feet, will you. Let’s move.”

Twenty minutes later, they were on their way, going full out down the river, riding the edge of disaster. Since Shadith didn’t dare explore the instrument board, she didn’t know what the riverbottom was like. Asteplikota lay back in the seat beside her, his eyes on the cloudless sky, scanning for the flits Rohant had seen earlier. Kikun sat in the back with the brewpot between his feet; it was sending out wisps of steam and a thickening green smell. Eyes glassy, faced flushed to a dark copper as his cold took a deeper hold on him, Rohant sprawled beside Kikun, the cats leaning heavily against him; he was cough-ing and sneezing between sips at the brew. After a while he slept.

She turned bend after bend, the boat droning through a bluesky morning and an increasingly busy countryside. Hundreds of flits zipped back and forth like lie blackfly swarms Rohant had called them; they ignored the boat, but Shadith could see grounded flits and men stopping trucks on the levee road, other flits dipping down at what looked like random intervals so kana could search groves and farms, factories and anything else that caught their attention; at first, the search was disorganized, chaotic, but as time passed it tightened up and she began to wonder just how long they could go on unmolested.

The river was wide and muddy, the current was fright-eningly powerful, a giant hand grasping the keel; as the traffic thickened, she slowed and as she slowed, that current took on a demonic perversity and seemed bound to smash her into something. There were barge strings around every curve; there were freighters and tankets, fishets, sailers, even rowboats. There were snags and shoals, bridges and wharves. Trouble and trouble and trouble.

On and on ... Kikun fed her more of his brew; the taste didn’t improve as it cooled, but it kept her going ... on and on ... Rohant woke briefly several times, grumped under his breath, cleared his throat and spat overside into water, went back to sleep ... on and on

.. there was an air of desperation about the flits swoop-ing overhead, but none of them seemed interested in the kana boat, no matter how erratically it raced down the river ... on and on....

“Turn soon,” Kikun said.

“Yes,” Asteplikota said, “We’d better get off the river.”

“Where? What side?”

“Left. Into the Wetlands. There’s a branch should appear soon.... There. Now.”

WATCHER 3

CELL 27

The fire bloomed in the dark, sudden as a sneeze. A naked man painted in horizontal stripes of dusty black and chalky white rose from the ring of painted men who raised a noise of rattles and rattling drums that seemed to lift him off the ground. Nata kata atahao, they sang in the Oldiangue, Kiki kiska kiskelita.

The dancer scooped resins from the spirit pouch and flung them into the fire with passionate intensity in every line of his body, flung himself into leaps and cartwheels, the capers and caprioles of his sacred dance. The ring of men swayed and chanted in unison,

breathed in unison, even thought in unison.

Na-priests came from the trees in black cowls and black leather, pellet rifles in their black-gloved hands. Sunk deep in their outlaw ceremony, the celebrants saw nothing, the dancer saw nothing but the grand images of the dreamgods. A black hand lifted, the rifles snugged against black leather cheeks. The hand fell. There was a rapid, spitting volley. The celebrants fell over between one breath and the next, dead before they knew they were shot.

Several of the Na-priests gathered the bodies into a pile while the rest of them vanished into trees. There was the shriek of chainsaws and other less definable noises, then the priests were back with chunks of wood which they piled around and over the bodies. They emptied half a dozen carafes of fuel over the pyre and tossed matches at it. In silence as intense as the chanting and the dance, they squatted and stared into the fire until the pile was ash, flesh and wood alike.

CELL 26

PAKOSEO PAKOSEO PAKOSEO The Serpentine grew and grew as it wound through the workers' quarters and burst into the streets where the Tawa merchants had their clan houses, the Tanak and Maka folk would not have dared this intrusion even a month ago, but the Pakoseo fervor was building among the despised and disenfranchised and beginning to catch among the young in the more advantaged castes. Shy and a little afraid, young Tawas, male and female alike, slipped from the dull-faced Tawa compounds, Pakoseo ribbons fluttering in their hands, tambours tied to their belts and sashes. They caught hold of Tanak and Maka hands they wouldn't have touched in ordinary times and raised their voices in the driving beat of the dance: PAKOSEO PAKOSEO PAKOSEO

CELL 28

A two-wheel racer went roaring and squealing through the filthy, rain-sodden streets of the laborers' quarter, in the factory town called Alomapoy. When it came to the town square, the rider reached back, slashed at the cords binding the bundle on the rack, then went racing off, leaving the mutilated body of the kipao sprawled on the worn cobbles.

CELL 18

His ancestors had dug the Room, lined it with stone and timber, then laid plaster frescos over the stones, images of rites that excited him desperately when he first saw them and realized what they promised. He found the place by accident of rot and worm, stole money from his father to hire a Tanak tramp to repair the panels and restore the secrecy. Killing the Tanak wasn't very satisfying, he was so ignorant those days, he'd known nothing. He used the frescos as a crude guide and buried the man folded in fetal position beneath the hearth. He hadn't read the books yet, he hadn't heard the Secret God whispering in his ear. He hadn't known about Becoming or Hitsa or how Hitsa could help him Become. He hadn't known who he really was, that he was Nataminaho the Hunter being reborn from the flesh of man.

The EYE followed him, recording his satisfaction as he marked a girlchild as his next sacrifice, recording his impatience as he waited for the proper moment to take her. It was not yet time to move openly. His time would come to him. God's Voice told him she would come. And it was so.

He collected her like a ripe fruit, took her to the Room and followed in loving detail the ritual he had derived from his reading.

When she was at last near her peace, he took her beating heart from her body and ate it, slicing it thin as paper and roasting the slices over the ritual fire, consuming the Hitsa with her heart, drawing into himself her purity and her strength, taking another step toward the Great Transformation. The God Voice had promised him a Pakoseo Year and it was upon them even now. Everything the Voice had promised had come to him. He was very happy.

When the heart was gone, he wrapped the child in a clean sheet, took her out into the night. She was an empty vessel; if he buried her as he had the Tanak, she would begin to draw back into herself the power he had taken from her. He dropped her in the ditch, took the sheet back to the Room and burned it.

It didn't matter what happened to her leavings. She was empty, she had played her destined role and all that was sacred in her lived in him now.

CELL 19

A little girl's body lay sprawled in stinking water and rotten weeds; she was naked and she'd been beaten until her face was a pulp, broken ribs glistened white and yellow through the mud and putrifying meat; her torso was ripped open from pelvis to just above the heart which was missing and there were other mutilations, at the moment mercifully hidden by the mud and broken weeds draped over her corpse.

She lay undiscovered for several days, then a farm laborer came past on a tractor, intending to get a field ready for planting. He saw the body, fell off the machine, and waded into the ditch. He eased her up out of the mud and slime, wrapped her in a bit of canvas, and took her to the village.

The villagers gathered around him, wordless, their anger so deep they could only moan and sway. A woman came pushing through them, uncovered the body. She screamed, tore at her hair, her face, her clothes. Her sisters and the other women led her off.

When she was inside her house, the men of the village took the child's body to the Ispisaco and banged on the Great Door, their heavy somber blows the dead child's knell. There was no response this time, there'd been none the time before or the time before that. They didn't expect any. They took her head and her hands and left the rest of her in silent accusation.

CELL 4

The thin wiry man was pacing about the command center with the furious energy of a fruiting tornado as he listened to the reports coming in from assorted sources.

"Kwantawiyal lost them, he's been disciplined and is hot to go after them, we have promised him a bounty for each head if he brings them in alive. There is nothing in writing, so that is no problem."

"A patrolboat on the Kinosipa is about an hour overdue with its call-in. Five kanaweh crewing it, Wisake no Wohtin, the Ni-sec. A slug, him, been disciplined so often he's worn a rut in the Cage. But you-know-who's his Uncle. We have attempted to establish contact, but we haven't been able to raise him. Since he was in the grid, seems likely his continued silence is directly connected with the explosion that occurred just before dawn at the Iskota Estate. The flit that exploded was reduced to shards as we reported-earlier, but we did manage to locate a section of the drive pod with a serial number. We ran it through the Log. It's legit. Flit's registered to one Napechiko, a Kawa in a twoboat fish village named Wanshin, about thirty Iskals north of Aina'iril. It's a junker he rents out to whoever comes up with the price, the last one being a gutter-bait go-between of even less worth than the flit, guess who. E-heh. One Kwantawiyal. Tests are still being made, but it is becoming clear that there was nothing organic in the flit when it blew. It is possible, therefore, that the patrol came across the fugitives and was killed by them. The Ni-sec being our favorite slug Wiseacre, there's not much doubt of it. Most likely those terrorists have taken control of the boat and are using it to escape the search grid. We are combing both riverbanks for evidence this happened. So far there is no result from that investigation.

CELL 1

The squat black powerboat surged past a long string of barges, swept round a bend and went into a wild, slew as Asteplikota saw the Branch he was looking for, where the ancient delta was once, where the present-day Wetlands began. Shadith fought the current, clawed her way back to the mouth of the Branch and started down it, slowing as quickly as she could so she wouldn't run aground before she got far enough from the river Kinosipa.

The trees closed in over the boat and the POV dipped lower. The stream was sluggish, a greenish-ocher brew that looked solid enough to walk on.

The boat-worked north along the edge of the Wetlands as the sun passed zenith and crept toward the western mountains. It was twilight—a stinking, steamy twilight under the giant ferns and the squat, spongy palms with their festoons of moss and tangles of

vine—when they reached an islet of fair size, relatively dry, with thick grass, a cluster of trees and even a small, clear stream.

They piled out of the boat, unloaded it, stood arguing for several minutes, then Kikun turned his back on Rohant and walked away. He stepped into the boat, reversed the water jets until it was clear of the mud, then went scooting away from the islet, vanishing almost immediately into the murk.

Hands on hips, Shadith stood looking after him, then she shrugged and went to join the others setting up the camp.

Pukanuk Pousli scowled at the cell, swung round. “Ginny, should I give the Makh Hen a yell? You don’t want that bunch runnin loose in Aina’iril. They’re too hard to handle long distance.”

Ginbiryol Seyirshi looked up from the pathecorder. “Not yet. And not when they are with Asteplikota. I prefer to keep him out of the hands of the Nistam or the Gospah. He is the planner; the balance wheel, the rebel-lion will sputter to nothing without him.” That is so obvious, he thought, why do I have to keep saying it? Ah well, it is the nature of the beast; if he were smarter, he would be unusable. “No, Puk. Kiskomaskin needs his brother. If the Avatars decide to go with Plikota to the Islands until the stir dies down, we will let them keep running. The Islanders have no skipcom for us to worry about and time is a thing we have plenty of. If the Avatars break off and head for Aina’iril, then you may inform Makwahkik where they are so he can pick them up. I will expect you to see that Plikota is sent on his way unharmed.”

“That might be touchy, sir. What if that little bitch starts dumpin what she knows? He’ll be spooky as a three-legged rabbit.”

“I think you will find he cooperates with whoever is sent to draw him off. He is a modest man, but a clear sighted one. He knows the weaknesses in his brother, he knows how much he is needed to keep Kiskomaskin steady. Discretion, Puk. You know whom he would be most likely to trust, arrange for such an individual to be available if he is required.”

“Yes, sir. Ahh, one thing I might mention, the Makh Hen’s gettin resty, he wants us to Pin the Avatars for him.”

“Quash that immediately. Inform Makwahkik that we will withdraw completely if he presses us.”

“He’s not goin to like that. He don’t follow the bit, he got a hard mouth on him.”

“You must simply be harder, Puk. I trust your gifts in that direction. Once the point has been made, however, you may sweeten him with a personal handarm and slightly more advanced surveillance equipment than we have pro-vided before. Tickle his ambitions and he will quickly forget the strings.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 11. History for dinner

As the sun went down, blackflies, gnats, and other biters rose in thick clouds; with them came flocks of small, hairy fliers who went swooping through and through the swarms, sucking, in the insects like whales straining plank-ton out Of seawater, yet even they scarcely made a dent in the hordes; more and more of the biters appeared as if the air itself squeezed them from the dark. Shadith scratched and slapped, then pulled a blanket around her and huddled close to the fire, privately mourning the absence of bugbombs and silentscreamers; technology might have its drawbacks, but meeting nature face to face wasn’t all that great either. She waved the endbit of a dried frond back and forth before her face and squinted across the fire at Asteplikota.

“Pakoseo,” she said. “What is that? I know this much, it’s some kind of pilgrimage.”

He looked up from the pot where he was stirring the soup he was making from the remnants of supper. “His-tory lecture?”

“Yeh. About the Pase-something-um-wapal, something long like a river.”

“Pasepawateo Mitewastewapal, from the god-tongue, the god-time. It means the time of dreaming and desire when lightning strikes the heart. Where’d you hear that?”

“About and about, I’ll talk about that later.” She whipped the frond fan back and forth, taking out her

irritation on the bugs and air. "It's your turn, professor." She dropped the fan in her lap. "Give us your lecture, historian, tell us what's going on here."

Asteplikota moved the stirstick round and round the pot and frowned at the fire. "So. Lecture as requested."

Five thousand years ago the People came here to es-cape the chaos of dissolution, a thousand worlds pulling and tearing apart. The Omniskaal Empire. We were out on the edge, fair game to any warlord with the power to take and hold us. Those who could, left. There were three ships in our lot. Do I need to tell you their names? Right. *Nataminaho*. *Opalekis-Mimo*. *Nikamo-Oskinin*. We came here, not by choice,, we came trusting to fate which. almost killed us. We were flying on fumes when we landed.

We fled and found and thought we were safe.

It was a cold world, harsh everywhere except around the equator. We landed where we had to and marched south. It was a terrible march and only a tenth survived it. Myth tells us that Nataminaho hunted for us, Opalekis-Mimo found the path and led us along it, Nikamo-Oskinin sang strength and endurance into us, sang the worst of the evils away from us. It is possible this is sign for the captains of the ships, I don't know, there's very little written from that time.

For a thousand years we lived there in those high-walled fertile valleys and fiords. We prospered and spread out. And we exiled into the icy northlands anyone who disturbed the peace of the wealthy and the powerful. We sent our criminals and rebels to that high plateau with its monster glaciers. We sent them to die off where we wouldn't see them suffer. And we shot them if they came back. We lost a lot on the hard trek south, books, tech-nology, history; sometimes I think we lost our souls.

At the end of a thousand years, everything changed. The sun kicked into a new phase, it was suddenly much brighter, much hotter. The ice began to melt off the northlands, the lowlands became unlivable even before they flooded. The powerful claimed the mountain slopes, then the mountain tops, fighting to keep their hold on the riches they saw as their right. They were not given to flexibility. As far as they were concerned, what had always been would always be.

Bit by bit the rest traveled north and tried to claim land there. The difficulty was, the northland wasn't empty any longer, the exiles were there. The Pliciks they called themselves. Yes, our present day landlords and rulers. They were nomads, hunters, trappers, herdsman. The melting of the ice nearly destroyed them before they figured out how to change with the changing land. At first they killed the people coming north; they had centu-ries of hate to purge. Then some Plicik had a bright idea and-made slaves of the newcomers, used them to help him and his clan not only survive but prosper.

That first wave became the Maka caste. They were mostly landless workers whose only value was the strength of their backs and arms, kept ignorant and unlettered because they were more tractable that way and thus more valuable—until the floodtime when there was no more room for them and they were stripped of value and discarded. They are still ignorant and unlettered. The powerful may change their faces, but never their natures.

Fifty years passed. A second wave went north. These became the Tanak caste. Farmers and fishermen, miners and smiths. Skilled laborers. Like the Maka they were men who worked more with their hands than their minds; they could read and write and cipher but had little inter-est in book learning beyond that bare minimum. They lost their value like the Maka had, but reclaimed it in the North as slaves. The Pliciks had learned not to waste good sturdy workstock.

There were two other waves before the southland was finally abandoned to heat and flood—which happened several centuries after the change began. The third wave were the merchants, the Tawa caste, they were not made slaves, they negotiated their way in. In the fourth wave were the priests, officers, administrators, landowners, the rich and influential, the Kisar; they bought their way in.

This is how our world wags, Shadow. No slaves now, but Kisar sits on Tawa, Tawa on Tanak and Tanak on Maka, with Pliciks atop them all.

With one exception, the Islanders. The exiles created exiles of their own, banishing folk to island chains off the coasts, the remnants from the parts of the northlands that got drowned. The Islanders do

not permit castes and they take in fugitives from the Pliciks and *the* Priests, rebels, the disappointed, the disaffected, whoever wants to come. Naturally they don't do this out of altruism, they are not saints or holymen, they do it out of a profound hatred. for the mainlanders and for profit's sake. They tolerate no one who cannot earn his way either with a skill or as a weapon against the Pliciks and the Priests. I would not say it to them because they could not hear or understand it, but in their way they are nearly as rigid and oppressive as the Pliciks and the caste system.

Don't worry, Shadow, there isn't much more, I am winding my way to the explaining of the Pakoseo Year. Rigidity has its strengths and its breaking points. Near the end of the first millennium after the Flood, a Prophet arose among the people. He called himself Oplanikamon, God's singer, and he cried out against the evils he saw around him. It was a time of famine and terrible storms and great corruption among the Pliciks and the Priests. He sang his visions so powerfully that those who heard him saw them also. Nataminaho, Opalekis-Mimo and Nikamo-Oskinin stood behind him and guarded him and set their seal on him. The people saw Visions and be-lieved him. He sang of returning to the holy time, the first-flight time, returning to the beginning and recreating virtue. With the Three striding before him, he led the first Pakoseo to the landing place, walking across the land, going from nation to nation and gathering in the people, taking them with him to the place where the ships came down. They tended the place and made it beautiful; they sang and saw visions and went home again, and—who knows why—life was better for a while.—No more slaves, for one thing.

I'm skipping over a lot, all you need is the outline and the understanding that what happened was wholly beyond the control of either the Priests or the Pliciks. They took bitter bloody measures to stop it and they could not. The Question and the Secret Police in each of the five nations tried to stop the Pakoseo and they could not. People left their villages, their farms, their businesses, their jobs; they traveled in a great river across the land. They were shot, axed, hung, imprisoned, beaten, tortured. They suffered hunger, thirst, exhaustion. Thousands died, but more thousands, came and finally there were not enough soldiers or prisons to hold them. The Prophet walked with the Three through the five nations and brought the people to the landing place and no one could stop him.

Five nations. Wapaskwen, where you are now; we here have control, of the landing site, the Mistiko Otcha Cicip. There are also Kwamitaskwen in the central plains, Kwamaskwen, north plains, Swamiskwen, south plains, south coast and Nakiskwen on the west coast. Except for small differences in dialect, they are much the same. The Nistams loathe each other, they're bitter rivals, but they stand together against internal and external threats. It's why the Islanders never try invading the Main. It's also why rebellions have never succeeded before now.

Let's see. What else is there?

The Pakoseo Year happens when it happens.

The Priests and the Pliciks always try to suppress it. They never succeed.

Then they try running in front of the swell and turning it to their advantage. That generally does work. Eventually. It happens in times of anger and suffering.

Three years ago there was a plague in Aina'iril and a dozen other cities. Outbreaks in all five Nations at ap-proximately the same time. And in all five Nations, the Pliciks and their sycophants ran for the country and left the city to the dying. Which spread rage and despair among the people who couldn't get out and among the factory workers and farmers when the Priests and Pliciks brought the plague with them. Thousands died before the sickness went away as mysteriously as it came.

The signs and portents arrive with the rising rage of the people.

Prophets appear and call for atonement, poets sing subversive rhymes.

Students rebel and children go wild, destroying and killing.

People dream of the Three. Some see Them walking.

The whisper starts: Pakoseo Pakoseo Pakoseo.

Last Harvest Festival the Gospah Ayawit proclaimed the Pakoseo Year. He didn't want to, but he had no choice.

It's been three generations since the last, but our souls remember and when the time comes we know it and we walk.

The insect horde grew quieter as the night got darker and older, they weren't flying about so much; instead, they crawled into every crevice and ran on any bit of exposed skin. Out in the murk around the islet there were coughing grunts, howls, peeping cries, hoots, splashes, and other less identifiable noises. Shadith sipped at the broth from Asteplikota's pot and frowned at Rohant's back.

The Dyslaeror was standing at the edge of the islet, sniffing and hawking to clear his head and staring down the stream where Kikun had gone—not that he could see anything except the occasional glimmer of moonlight re-reflecting off the leaden, viscid water. He felt her watching him, coughed, spat into the water, and came back to the fire. "He's probably in the belly of some crawler." He shook his head vigorously to drive off the crawling biters. "Dio! Asteplikota! There any kind of bugoff in your gear?"

Asteplikota looked up, startled out of the unhappy memories his minilecture had provoked. "What?"

"Never mind, we couldn't be that lucky." He dug out another blanket, scrubbed it over his face and arms, snapped it through the air to shake off smashed and clinging bugs, pulled it around his shoulders and he dropped to the ground. "Shadow, that Talent of yours, how far can you stretch it?"

"You're that worried about him?"

"He should have been back an hour ago. All he meant to do was ditch the boat soon's he found a good spot, sink hole or something like it."

"Maybe he got lost, you can't see—much of the sky and one muddy tree looks a lot like another muddy tree even in the daylight"

"He doesn't get lost, Lissorn says it's one of his Tal-ents." He shook his head again, violently, not in nega-tion but to send his dreadlocks flying and drive away the biters that were crawling after the moisture in his nose, eyes, mouth. "Can you find him?"

"Keep the flies off me and I'll try. I think we'd better not talk about limits, the air has ears, remember?"

"Dio." He got to his feet. "Stretch out and give me that fan."

She lay for a moment doing nothing, just enjoying the freedom from buglegs and the coolness of the dirt, then she began considering the mechanics of this operation. She was fairly sure her Talent wouldn't operate much beyond the local horizon—unless she had a mount she was specially tuned to.

Sasso? He's handy and he has a raptor's eyesight...

She *felt* around for the hawk. Comfortably filled with fish, lizards and hairy fliers, he was asleep in the tree that arched its fronds over the fire and concealed its glow.

No. He doesn't know the terrain—if you could call it terrain, being it's mostly water and muck. Horizon, hmm, I doubt Kikun went that far anyway, once he ditched the boat he'd have to walk the glop back here. He's not lazy ... he's not stupid either. Local forms will have to do the job. For lagniappe, get more data about this gunge we got to travel through.

She *reached* without trying to touch down, just setting the direction in her mind, getting a feel for the envelope of life about her; all that practice in the ship had honed her skills until she was sharper than she'd been any time since she acquired this body and its Talent.

Ginny monster's good for something.

Funny, it's hard to think about him as a monster. He's so, I don't know, so commonplace.

There's nothing GRAND about him, just a little man ... yeah ... with some weird twists in his psyche.

Forget that, Shadow, you got work to do.

She *touched* one of the furwings, a female. Her cheekpouches were stuffed with the bodies of

insects; if archetypal patterns held true here, she was taking her catch to her nest so she could feed her offspring. It was the time of year for births ... or hatchings ... no, births; as far as Shadith could tell, the local warmbloods weren't mammalian, but did birth live offspring. Undeveloped. Not quite marsupials, but close. She slid deeper into the brain and looked out through furry's eyes; she didn't try to control the little creature, it was going in the right direction, that was enough for the moment.

Ahlallah, I was right, one gloppy tree is just like the next. No sign of people. Aste didn't say anything about people living in here. Hmm. Plague in the cities. I know what that means, Ginny's fingers twiddling in the stew. Plague, tsoukbaraim, it hadn't got to me, not really, what he plans for this world. Rohant said. I believed him. In my head, not my gut. Gods, it's sick-making. He's using us to make it worse. We've GOT to get away from here. Lee, do I wish you were here! You and Gray and Swardheld and anyone I could dig up. If we can just get away, maybe it'll scare him off. We've got GOT to get away.

The furry dipped toward one of the pulpy trees; she was heading for her nest. With a mindsigh Shadith slid out of her and probed about for another mount.

She brushed past a number of wispy animal souls but nothing she cared to seize on until she sniffed out a grumbling hunger sliding along beneath her. She dropped and nudged inside the slither's brain. The beast was mostly mouth with row on row of snag teeth like a slowly revolving saw, as one set wore out another marched into place. He was sinew and gristle, six tentacles rippling powerfully, driving him through the water faster than the boat had gone. His eyes were as primitive as his teeth, but his nose was extraordinarily subtle, reading scent streams as easily as she read print. She slid more firmly into that section of the brain and for the first time began picking up traces of Kikun, scent traces lingering on the surface of the water; her excitement made the slither nervous, he jerked about briefly, then sank into the mud and sulked.

Shadith swore, calmed herself, and began soothing him. Because he was hungry and hunting and anyway had the attention span of a gnat, he forgot his pique and went back to his cruising. He darted his head to one side, caught a fish, chewed it once or twice and swallowed without a pause in the beat of his tentacles.

He kept on, snatching, chewing, swallowing; the rambling stream was a soup seething with life. Kikun's scent traces were fresher with every beat of his tentacles. Fresher and fresher—and then gone.

With some difficulty Shadith disengaged from the slither, hovered until she felt her reach melting on her, the pointthrust of her mind getting set to snap back into her body. She groped about for another mind, a land mind, nothing, nothing, then a flat warty hopper like a cowpat with legs. She slipped into him, it was like trying to squeeze into a too-tight dress; that brain barely qualified as more than a switching station. The hopper had almost no long-term memory and no more than a few concepts which were on the level of this-hurts-keep-away and this-tastes-bad-leave-alone. Sense data flowed through him without lingering, his very efficient because very simple instinct-sieve separating out the few elements that meant danger or food or sex and allowing the rest to drift away unacknowledged. As she was settling in, the hopper flipped out his tongue, gathered in a lacewing, crushed it against the horny roof of his mouth and gulped it down. When the tongue was out, she quivered to a doubling in the breadth and intensity of the sense data; like many reptiloids he had scent receptors in his tongue, receptors that drew in faint traces of Kikun.

. While the hopper speared and crunched more insects, she left the pointthrust in him and retreated to her own brain to sort through what she'd found and decide what to do next.

Kikun walked by there. When? Can't be less than an hour. More like two. When we were starting supper. Even if he crawled it wouldn't take more than twenty minutes to run the boat this far. How long does scent linger on land after the maker passes? Wonder if Rohant knows? Should I surface and ask? No. It doesn't really matter, you don't need to know. He went past there all right. Why? He's going the wrong direction. Lost? Rohant says no. Hmp. I need another mount, I can't do anything with this creature. Looks like I

come back to Sassa after all.

She snapped the pointthrust loose, reorganized herself, and slid into the hawk's brain. This wasn't just a matter of riding, she had to take control and force the bird into doing something against his will and his nature. There was another distraction that made her task doubly difficult. The Ciocan was tightly linked to his hawk, he knew where Sassa was at all times, shared his tactile sensations—rode the air with him—shared his emotions, though he couldn't look through his eyes as she did. He could feel her easing into Sassa's brain and was jealous of her Talent, that came through strongly, it was rather like being whipped with nettles—though not all that unpleasant even with the scratchiness because he liked her and seemed to want to see her as a Dyslaerin (he'd said something like that once, that she reminded him of his toerfeles, Miralys), probably because he felt himself, challenged by her and had no other way of dealing with what he felt. (Courtesy of that bastard Ginny? Oh, gods.) He was managing well enough before this touching/rubbing thing, handling the (artificially imposed?) relationship by seeing her as an out-season Dyslaerin. Trouble was, she wasn't seasonal—that screwed everything up for poor old Rohant. Dyslaera females were essentially asexual when not in heat, insatiable when in; they were sleek and powerful, tough as hard rubber and apt to vent both annoyance and passion with claws that were smaller but sharper than the males'; sex among the Dyslaera tended to be a noisy combination of wrestling match and knife duel. Shadith knew enough about them to make her wary of getting involved with a male capable of satisfying a Dyslaerin, especially an alpha....

But he was *a* hot pressure in the hawk, powerfully sexual—in fact, the hawk acted as an amplifier as well as a transmitter of emotion and even that short time they'd rubbed against each other left them both aroused and wanting, at the same time wary of doing anything about it; their branches of the Cousin tree had diverged too far from the trunk.

And all of that was beside the point. She tried ignoring him; it wasn't easy. Even with her attention focused on Sassa, she was intensely aware of Rohant bending over her, waving the fan across her face to keep the flies off, she could feel his heat, she could smell him, smell the rich musk rolling off him, sending her barely post-pubescent body into an uproar that made thinking the hardest thing she'd ever done; much more and she was going to forget all about size differences and the bloody habits of mating Dyslaera....

She clamped her teeth on her tongue and wrenched her mind once more from her erogenous zones, furious at herself, raging to get after Kikun, to find him and bring him out of whatever he'd fallen into. Even as she struggled, though, there was a small voice down under that turmoil saying: why all this passion, Shadow? You've known this pair three days, to speak to. They're not friends, they're barely acquaintances. That's not to say don't go after the little man, he's an odd and charming little man and doesn't deserve to be abandoned, but cool it, hmm? She ignored the voice, got Sassa under control and sent him winging north and east, hastening to the place where the hopper was, the place where Kikun had come out of the boat to walk on land.

Shadithmind rubbing uncomfortably against Rohant-mind, she sent the hawk swooping low over the treetops, discovering then following a ridge of dry ground that wound through the water and the muck, the reeds and gnarled trees standing knee-deep in the wet, a ridge frequently interrupted by sections where water had eaten away stone and earth.

A faint glow seeped through the heavy canopy off to the left of the ridge, a subtle graying scarcely perceptible in the light of the largest of the three moons. She took Sassa down into the tops of trees growing thickly on an islet like theirs, let him find a perch among the fronds, then looked through his eyes at the scene below.

Kikun was tied into an inert package and thrown on the ground beside one of the several small fires, tethered neck and ankles to two trees. At the moment he was being ignored, but Sassa's eyes showed Shadith the tears, abrasions, and assorted bruises developing on the areas of flesh visible; he'd been beaten savagely. She shivered with rage, but clamped down on the reaction before she lost control of the hawk. She began scanning the rest of the camp.

Four ... six ... seven men.... What a bunch of scraggs. At least three rungs down from Silvercreep's lot. Which I didn't think possible. Gods.

One of the *men* was kneeling beside what looked like a pile of junk. He cursed, slapped at a part of the pile, getting a wobbling shriek that went through to the bone but cut off before it did major damage. Sassa shook his feathers, then settled to sulk as Shadith blocked all his attempts to get out of there.

“Pey, nish, nisto, Shaker. Come, come, come. Swamp-man here.”

The com sputtered, broke into a low whistle; riding the whistle, a tiny, tinny voice: “Mita, sanki, niya, Swampman. Make it fast, kana swarmin all over us.”

“Pass word, Shaker, we got part a what the’ wan’, gonna go lookin fer th’ rest come mornin. Set a meet. T’morra night. Tell ‘m don’ push, no way the’ gonna find ‘em ‘thout us. Nish, pay, niya, out.” Swampman slapped the corn off, got to his feet. He was a tall man, bone thin with a head like a skull. He wore a profusely fringed leather shirt and leggings, a bright red loincloth, bones threaded on string, along with nuts, seeds, and bits of mirror. He strolled over to Kikun, kicked him in the ribs, not a gentle tap, but no hostility behind it or malice, Kikun was just meat, Shadith fought down another spurt of fury, then loosed Sassa and let him climb into the sky; the hawk was eager to get back, he needed to be closer to Rohant and he wanted more, sleep.

Shadith sat up, leaned against Rohant’s knee and drank another cup of Asteplikota’s soup. “Trouble,” she said. “A band of swamprats have him, seven of them. Seems they have connections outside, the leader made a corn-eal! while I was watching, probably to Aina’iril. How close are we?” She set the cup beside her, drew her hand across her mouth.

Asteplikota sat on his heels, stared past her into the dark beyond the islet. “Say, forty iskals. We’re in the outer edge of the Wetlands. The Fringes. You saw a comset?”

“What’s so surprising about that? This world seems littered with them. He had a comset and he was talking to someone about selling Kikun. Us too, by the way. The rats are coming for us in the morning.”

“Yes, yes. Of course. You heard what you heard. What’s odd is comsets are bad Oteh, um, luck, fate, something like that, to the shikwakola, the people who live in these Wetlands. They’re skittish folk, they don’t like drylanders and they won’t have dryland Wiha, tech, in their makees, those are the clan houses in, their tempo-rary villages, they’re nomadic, pick up and move every few months, take their houses with them. Dryland Wiha puts bad Oteh on a makee. Probably some instrument shorted out in the wet and burned a house down, killed people. Even the Pariahs don’t .. .” His mouth twitched into a brief smile. “Sorry, Shadow, seems one is a crea—

ture of habit, ancient habit.” He rubbed his hand along the gray/blond stubble blurring his jawline. “One sup-poses what you saw was a band of Pariahs.”

“Pariahs?”

He looked away again, a mix of regret and amusement on his square face. He wasn’t a handsome man and he wasn’t young; as he himself said, he wasn’t the sort you looked at twice, but the more she knew him, the more she found herself liking him. “We do seem to have a propensity for exiling our misfits. What did they look like?” When she finished, he nodded. “Yes, one could even put a name to him. Bonetalker. Not one of our finer citizens. Pariahs. Drylanders started calling them that and they adopted the name. Take a kind of perverse pride in it. They live out here on the Fringes and control the trade, what there is of it, between swamp and dryland. Raid both sides for women.” He glanced at Shadith, looked quickly away. “Don’t underestimate them. They’re dangerous. This is their Homeplace and they know it like you know your music, child. Every third plant in here is poisonous. They know which and how to use them. There are bottomless sinkholes scattered through the Fringes, stories say they herd trespassers and raiders into them, then stand round, drink, and watch the men struggle and go down, wager on how long before the sink eats them. There’s a species of carnivorous muddaubers with stings that could drop an ox; rumors say the Pariahs have tamed the things, can set them on anyone they take a notion to kill. And they share other, even less appetizing habits.” He laughed, a few harsh barks. “Which is a pun one would rather not explain.”

“Oh, lovely. And you brought us in here.”

“Yes, Shadow. Bad as they are, the Question is worse.”

“I see.”

“No. I don’t think you do. I hope you never learn, I

had a wife once, I had to watch them ... listen while they....” He looked down at his hands; they were shaking. He pressed them against his thighs, stared at them until the shaking stopped. “That doesn’t matter now. I thought the shikwakola, the tribes, or the Pariahs, they wouldn’t bother me or anyone I brought with me, we have a common enemy, the kanaweh and all such. And we have a bargain, my associates and the swamp folk, unstated but generally honored. We bring the Pari-ahs medical care and ... urn ... things they couldn’t otherwise get and they give us free passage and shelter when we’re pressed. One hadn’t quite realized how high a price the Nistam and Ayawit would set on your heads or how soon they’d get the word out. It looks like all bargains are off, for the moment anyway.”

“We’ve got some time. From what I heard, even if his lot don’t get us, he’s not going to give Kikun up or hurt him until he gets his price.”

“We have NO time, Shadow. As soon as that go-between opens his mouth, the Na-priests will have him and there’ll be an army of kanaweh heading for the Fringes. And the Pariahs will vanish into the swamp beyond anyone’s reach. Which means we get the Dancer back now or not at all.”

Shadith stirred. The Ciocan’s hand closed on her shoul-der, the pressure comforting. “And save our own necks,” she said.

“Yes. Along with heart, brain, and liver. The habit one mentioned, remember? Part of their belief system involves eating their enemies, those they can capture intact and unpoisoned. Absorbing their Hitsa, they call it. Hitsa is self-power, soul, and lifeforce combined. If they can’t sell us, they’ll eat us. They might even prefer that, you three have awesome Hitsa.”

“Sari”

“Yes.”

Rohant ran a thumbclaw along a mustache tail. “A couple of problems I can see. How do we get to them and how do we avoid spooking them?”

“We take the poleboats I told you about. You said you could use a pole.”

“Can.” He used a corner of the blanket to blot the—drip from his nose, sneezed suddenly into the wool, wiped his face again. “Dio! I hate this cold. Not without some noise. Especially when I don’t know the layout or where the hell I’m going.”

“I see. Shadow, that Talent of yours, can you provide a distraction so we can reach them without being spotted?”

“Oh, yes. But you’d better give me some idea what they’d do if the local life came swarming at them. I don’t want to scare them into killing Kikun and running.”

“They won’t, as long as they don’t see the Hand-behind. Which means we don’t give them time to think about it.” Asteplikota got to his feet. “We should wait till near dawn before we move, let them get settled to sleep. Anything to add, Ciocan? No? Good. Shadow, you took a little over an hour to find them and get back; did you run a straight line or turn a lot of bends? Will it take us longer poling?”

“Pretty convoluted. I don’t know. Depends on how fast you pole and where the channels are. At a guess, half an hour, not much longer.”

“I see. Get some sleep, both of you, one will wake you when it’s time.”

Chapter 12. Running to the rescue, then just running

The poleboats slid across the thick black water with the soft sound of silk clad thighs rubbing together. Standing in the assymetric rear and working the pole with a mini-mum of drip and sweat, resolutely ignoring the ache in his head and the red misery of his nose, Rohant went first (cats riding before him), using his tie with Sassa to guide him through the labyrinthine web of channels. Shadith couldn’t do both at the same time—take the expedition to the camp and organize the distraction—so she had to send Sassa ahead to mark the Pariah Camp for Rohant and give him the direction. She was in the

second boat, the one Asteplikota was poling, curled by his feet as she mindrode a monster slither. No mere hitching this, she had a full lock on the brain. It had taken her a while to learn how to manage the tentacles and the rest of the swimming behavior, but now that she had these mechanics snapped in place, she forced the beast to expend energy at a punishing rate, raced him through the twisting channels, through tangles of weed and tree roots, drove him across sandy shoals, until he finally reached the deeper water about the islet.

She let him cruise around it, snatching at fish and other swimmers, crunching them and swallowing them, while she used him as a base to seek out and draw toward the islet the distraction she was constructing. She found a nest of watervipers, about twenty poisonous wrigglers long as a man's arm with stubby vestigal legs at intervals along the flat bodies; she brought them writhing across a shallow stream of clear water at the small end of the teardrop islet and into the tangle of trees and brush around the sandy glade at the big end where the Pariahs had their camp; she held them in a knot while she kept hunting. She found a pod of juvenile slithers in their amphibian phase, prodded them from their mud nests and brought them into the grass outside the circle of firelight. She collected small rodents, furwings, flying lizards,, and a swarm of muddaubers, brought them all into the dark around the sleeping Pariah shikwakola. She withdrew a portion of her attention, opened her eyes. "Ready when you are."

"Rohant, stop a minute." Asteplikota held back until the Ciocan planted his pole, then eased up beside the first boat. He brushed a hand over his long blond hair; the fogheavy nightwind was teasing at it, blowing the strands into his eyes. "How close are we? Do you know?"

The Ciocan blotted his nose on the blanket he'd thrown over one shoulder, thought about the question. "Given the channel doesn't change, maybe five minutes off. Far as I can judge." He slapped at questing biters. "Shadow?"

"Mmh?"

"What's happening?"

She struggled to pull enough of herself back so she could think and speak coherently without losing her hold on the horde; when she answered him, she brought out the words in small units, sorting through the confus-ing clutter in her head from the dozens of sensory sys-tems she was tied into "Sleepin. Two watch. Itchy.

They know some thing wrong. Noises wrong. Small lives acting funny, I think. Want to take a chance?"

Rohant smothered a sneeze in the blanket. "Where's Kikun?"

"In middle. Stretched flat. Legs neck tied to two trees."

"Can you get a ring round him to keep them off?"

"Instead of attack?"

"Along with it. No use taking them and losing him."

She frowned. Could she do it? She'd been using Sassa as a prime viewpoint so she could see the whole camp and lay out her attack; at the same time she was trying to keep track of the other viewpoints, ruffling through them like cards she was shuffling, clamping down on all those furi-ous and rebellious brains, holding the horde in stasis until it was time to loose it on the Pariahs; she was rapidly finding out what her limits were and beginning to be frightened of what was happening inside her head. Once the attack started, though, she'd probably have more capacity available; the way her captives were churn-ing about, even the mildest of them raging to bite some-thing, she wouldn't have to do much prodding to turn them on the sleepers, especially when the Pariahs started hitting back. Trouble was, Rohant was all too right, there was no point in any of this if Kikun got skewered or poisoned. Her surrogates weren't going to worry about who they chewed on once they started to swarm; she had to set some kind of barrier around him that would *keep* them off. She reviewed her forces, made up her mind. "E-heh." she said finally. "Can do."

"Good. Pariahs could go for the hostage when the attack starts." He closed his eyes, leaned heavily on the pole. "Ante, you'd better stay with Shadow, she's going to be too busy to watch out for trouble. Shadow, fix on those sentries, the minute you see them getting really nervous or if they start moving toward Kikun, hit them with everything you've got."

She managed a few gasps of laughter, made a face at him. “Yeh papa.”

The Pariah stiffened, turned to face toward the boats he still couldn't see. Before he had a chance to move or shout, Shadith sent the swarm of muddaubers bulleting toward him, turning their rage at her for slaving them into a fury at the first target available; at the same time she sent the flying lizards diving at the second watcher. She brought the vipers crawling into the camp and wound them in a deadly ring about Kikun who lay bright-eyed and smiling, who mouthed the words , *Heyah, Shadow* into the face of the Queen viper rearing over him. She drove the juvenile slithers out of the grass and aimed them at the sleepers and they came squealing their fury, their stubby legs whirring, their claws tearing up gouts of sand, their rows of teeth clamping on, then sawing at head, limb, torso, whatever they first closed on; she brought the horde of rodents into the ring of firelight, sent them leaping at the Pariahs, biting everything they could get their teeth into. The rest of the beasts she'd collected she let fly or crawl as they would, she had enough to do without them.

Rohant drove the blunt bow into the islet, went leap-ing into the chaos; using Shadith's stunner, tapping it on/off in micro-bursts and careful to keep the stunbeam off the sublife (he didn't want to flatten Shadith through her surrogates), he dropped Pariah after Pariah as the men came out of sleep into confusion and terror. Less than a minute after he hit dry ground he stood in the middle of bodies, counting them. “Seven down, Shadow. Get this zoo out of here, will you?”

* * *

Rohant kicked the comset apart and dumped it in the mud with a grunt of satisfaction.

Asteplikota rested his knife on the rope he'd been sawing at. “That won't stop them.” He started cutting again; Kikun was nearly extinguished by a cocoon of ropes, all of them knotted and reknotted so he couldn't be simply unwound; it was going to take work and time to free him. “The moment the go-between opens his mouth, the Na-priests will start peeling his skin; they might not pin this islet, but they'll get the general area out of him and blanket it with sleds and searchers.”

Shadith came back from poking about the unconscious Pariahs. “It's not a guess anymore, hmm? They know we weren't in the sled when it blew.”

Asteplikota nodded. “If they didn't before, they do now.” He pulled the last of the ropes off Kikun's torso, ‘waited.

Kikun smiled amiably at him and lay without moving.

Sighing, Asteplikota started freeing the lacertine's legs. “We should get to the coast as fast as we can. The closer we are to the edge when the kanaweh swarm, the likelier we are to break loose. No one fools with the Kihcikistiliks.”

Shadith laughed. “I couldn't even say it.”

“The Islands in the East, if that's better.”

“If we murder your langue, forgive us. We had it thrust upon us rather abruptly with no say in how it was done.”

“One had wondered how you knew it.” He started peeling the ropes off Kikun's legs. “If you were dumped here as you said.”

“There was a bit more to it than I told you.”

“I see.” He got to his feet, pulling Kikun up with him. “There's no time for histories now, we've got to get moving. I'll lead since I'm the only one with an idea where to go. One had hoped to get a guide from the Pariahs. Things being as they are, that's out. Shadow, I want you in the boat with me with your harp ready to play.”

why.

“You three have to be The Three. Flaunt it! Loud and filled with color. We can't try sneaking along, we'd sim-ply invite attack. We can't fight the Pariahs, even with your weapons and your talents, my friends. We have to keep them away from us. We have to confuse them, set them arguing among themselves. It's the only way we'll get out of here alive.”

Rohant snorted, picked up the blanket he'd dropped in the attack, sneezed twice and wiped his streaming eyes. “Some demigod,” he said, “dripping with a cold.”

Kikun watched with half-closed eyes, projecting enigma and amusement.

Shadith frowned at him, irritated by that inappropriate insouciance. She ran a hand through her hair, pushing it into peaks, turned to Asteplikota. “Do all of you eat your enemies? Or should I say your victims?”

“No! Of course not. What do you mean?”

“If the Pariahs, the shikwakola, don’t believe like you, why should they care about your gods, demigods, what-ever they are?”

“Ah. I see. In the Five Nations, the practices differ according to caste or according to kind among the out-caste. Island or Main, God is one and his Servants are honored.”

“Aren’t you asking for trouble, then, playing games with your own beliefs—or don’t you believe?”

“Who’s to say one is playing games? More often than not the Avatar himself does not know what he is. She is. Oppalatin works as he will, he is not bound by the fallible logic of man.”

She gazed at him a moment, shook her head. “One thing I learned all the long years, you don’t argue a man’s religion. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

They slid through the winding channels, poling as quickly as they could to put distance between themselves and the islet, between themselves and the sunken boat, the hunk of metal that would shout its existence if the kanaweh had metal detectors on board their sleds. Shadith knelt before Asteplikota, as she had before, this time plucking tunes from her harp, singing a while, then playing again. It was an eerie feeling, performing for those unseen ears, *sensing* shikwakola all around her, gliding in parallel streams, *sensing* their fear, their confusion, the ebb and flow of their anger.

She was beginning to understand how Ginny was using her and the others. It was clear, too clear, clear enough to make her sick when she saw *it*. They didn’t need to do anything, they just had to exist. Everything happening down here was forcing them into the roles he’d planned for them. Everything. They couldn’t escape his manipulation—except by literally escaping, getting off this world.

Damn the man. I won't be his Typhoid Mary, I WILL NOT! How you going to stop it, Shadow? Look what's happening, Virgin Singer. We've got to get off this world and soon or we'll have done all the damage he wants, everything he wants from us. Pretty little petlings dancing to his jingeeetune, dipping our toesies ... ah no no, up to our assies in a ocean of shit. I am going to kill that monster. If I ever get my hands on his neck, I'll squeeze till his eyes pop out.

She sang Mad Mara’s Lament and put all her rage and sorrow into it and felt an answering anguish from the thinning darkness on either side of them. She wanted to cry out to those hidden listeners, *don’t believe it, it’s not true*, but she wasn’t about to offer herself as sacrificial victim. There didn’t seem to be any middle ground, if she wanted to live, she played the role, if not, she died and what good would dying do? Just get the others killed along with her. No doubt, they’d end as martyrs anyway and that could be the spark that set the world on fire.

Ahlallah, I wish I hadn't thought of that. Martyrs, oh gods, I KNOW that's on his pea-brain agenda. He's going to see the Gospah or the Nistam or both are blamed for killing us and watch the world ex-plode. Maybe you're wrong. Sar, I've got to be wrong. When we're out of this trap, if we get out of it, I'd better have a long talk with Aste about this; if anyone knows, he does.

The air shook and the brightening day turned suddenly dark as a vast blanket of sleds filled the sky over them, flying low enough to brush the fronds of the taller trees. Sassa came screaming down, landed on the bow of Rohant’s boat; he perched there hunched over, com-plaining at the noise and heat with querulous squawks and beak-clashes.

Cutter beams slashed through the foliage, churned the mud, boiled the water around them, bracketing them again and again, missing them each time though they were scalded by the steam from the suddenly heated water and slapped by severed fronds. Hastily, Shadith laid the harp flat on the pouches and

dropped to a crouch in the bottom of the boat. Fragmentation bombs dropped around them, missing them every time though she heard screams from the shikwakola who'd been following them, cries of rage, fear and pain. She was splattered by mud thrown up by the bombs, metal fragments went whining through the sides of both boats, inflicting a few small cuts, one ripped across her arm an inch below the pellet wound, another clipped a tuft of hair above her ear. She yelped and grabbed at her arm; a second later she heard a scream behind her and swung round.

Asteplikota clutched at the pole and screamed again, a cutter beam had sliced across the side of his head, re-moving scalp and hair and the tip of his ear, cutting off the end of his shoulder, she could see the bone glare white in the blackened flesh, she could smell charred hair and carbonized muscle. It wasn't a killing wound, but it was horrible and she shuddered at the pain that scraped her own mind raw as her Talent resonated to it. Cursing under her breath, she dug into her pouch, found her firstaid kit and crawled back to him. She set the kit down, twisted the pole from him as gently as she could and lowered him to the bottom of the boat. He screamed every time she touched him and moaned between the screams. Sweating and crying, she got him down, set a popper against his neck and squirted painkiller into an artery, then sprayed a temporary bandage over the burns and cuts. Asteplikota relaxed and closed his eyes. She eased him onto the pouches, took her roll of gauze and wound it about and about the wounds until they were a little better protected from contamination and unexpected jars.

The flits passed on, most of them. The worst was over here, though she could hear bombs and the hum of the cutters moving south away from them. She heard a rau-cous cry, looked back and saw the hawk powering into the air. Rohant was flattened out in the second boat like she was in this one, unhurt as far as she could tell, the cats beside him, nervous and upset but untouched. Kikun was standing, doing a peculiar shimmying dance. She stared, not understanding, then turned to gaze at the devastation around her. It seemed impossible they were all still alive. She twisted round and focused on Kikun again. His dance went on and on. Gouts of steam floated around him, the air shimmered as it would with heatwaves in a desert summer, but this was neither desert nor summer. His body wavered and attenuated, was solid flesh again, his edges melted into the air, were sharp and definite again, melted and were sharp....

Rohant said you were a god incarnate. I don't believe that, but you're something. Maybe it's Luck, maybe it's you. I don't know.

She sat up, rubbed at her eyes.

Looks like the Powers have decided there's no way they can land us, so the next best thing is ash us. And every other warmblood here in the Fringes. Gods, let's get out of here.

She grabbed the pole, levered herself onto her feet. "Rohant, you all right?"

He got up slowly, the cats growling and snapping at his legs as if they resented his moving. He was suffering from feedback, standing without moving, hands pressed to his eyes; he wasn't tied as closely to the cats as he was to the hawk, but there was enough linkage to drive him to the edge of his control. He lowered his hands, blinked, blinked again, then looked hazily about for the pole. When he found it, he bent with care as if he'd break if he moved too precipitously, caught hold of it and straight-ened up. Still saying nothing, he dug it into the mud of the bottom and stood waiting for her to start moving.

* * *

The next hours were nightmare. They worked mechanically through a slowly lessening silence as the Wetlands woke from the shock of the attack.

Kikun stopped dancing. He huddled between the cats, face pinched, eyes squeezed shut, saying nothing, seeing nothing, doing nothing.

Asteplikota lay on the pouches moaning. She didn't dare give him too much of a painkiller; the drugs she carried were calibrated to her body and that body wasn't born here or anywhere near the homeworld of—this off-shoot of the Cousin races. It worked on him, thank whatever for that, but every time she popped him, she was half afraid she was going to kill him.

After an hour of steady poling, she peeled out a stimtab and swallowed it. It hit her hard. Empty

stomach. But she had no appetite and was too afraid of a repeat attack to stop and rest and eat. And she had to get Asteplikota somewhere a local doctor could look at him. The coast, that's where he said to go, that's where she was going.

She could orient as well as Kikun was supposed to do, she never got lost when she knew where she was and where she wanted to go. She didn't know either now, but she had a line, Asteplikota's line. North and east. She held that line. North and east she went, as directly as she could.

The day developed stifling and muggy, dank and cold, an adjectival misery; she worked up a sweat as she worked the pole; the thick salt film lay in a sticky ooze over' all her body, the discomfort adding another small increment to her depression. The tangle of channels was overgrown and treacherous; time after time the channel she chose pinched out on her and she had to back up until she found a branch she could pass into and go round the blockage. The first time this happened, she mindrode Sassa for a while, but the canopy was too thick; the hawk couldn't find open channels from above the trees. Be-sides, she was too weary, she couldn't summon the con-centration to pole and ride at the same time; things got fuzzy on her very fast.

In one of those interminable backtracings she let too much time pass and the painpop she'd given Asteplikota wore off. He started screaming and twisting his body about as he tried blindly to get AWAY from the pain. Cursing and impatient, she fumbled through the kit for the popper. The stimtabs were making her hands shake, sometimes her whole body shook; she knew she ought to eat something, there were a few tubes of concentrate in with the rest, but she ignored them, she had the feeling she'd simply vomit the stuff up again, there was no point in wasting it. She fumbled the shot, but finally managed to hit the artery and Asteplikota settled back into his stupor. The popper was almost empty, something new to worry about.

Rohant was looking back, waiting for her. She got to her feet, took up the pole and waved. And they were off again.

A few sleds passed overhead; the kanaweh were grid-searching now, mopping up any life forms they'd missed on their first pass, but there were no more cutters, no more frag bombs around the boats. Kikun shriveled fur-ther, seemed to shrink beneath his skin; it hung in folds about his bones. What she'd suspected before, she was sure of now; he was expanding that curious "not-here" he could project, that made eyes slide off him and minds forget him the moment the eyes turned away. He was covering them and the cover worked.

* * *

Clouds gathered as the day wore on. Under the trees it was so dark it might have been midnight. Shadith peeled off the last stimtab, swallowed it, glanced at Asteplikota; his face was flushed with fever, hot and dry. She sighed and got to her feet, looked back at Rohant, sighed again and started poling. Her arms felt like mush, the shaking was worse. She dug the pole in and shoved, pulled it loose, set it again. On and on....

The trees grew smaller and sparser, there was more weed and reed. A heavy breeze lifted, licked against her face; there was no relief in it, breathing that air was like chewing leather, with about as much sustenance and flavor in it. Clouds of pinhead biters drifted aimlessly on the wind, settled on her, crawled about licking up the sweat. On and on....

She heard a croak behind her. Rohant. She planted her pole, looked back. He was crouching, tasting the water. He looked up. "Salt," he said. "The coast."

WATCHER 4

CELL 60

A child saw the Three. Nataminaho smiled at her and beckoned. Opalekis-Mimo laughed so infectiously she laughed, too. Nikamo-Oskinin played the kittkew so sweetly she clapped her hands and wept with pleasure. Time, the Singer sang, Pakoseo—Time is now. Then they were gone. The child ran to her mother and told her tale. Dozens of children in dozens of villages in west coast Nakiskwen saw and said the same.

Dressed in pilgrim green, with staffs and sandals and a foodpack of a minimum size, extended families on the western side of the continent laid down their tools, walked off their lobs and started east.

The Wik priests came hurrying after them, tried to convince them to return. The family elders listened as they walked, shook their their heads when the priests were finished and continued on the Pilgrim Road, staffs pounding on the dirt, prayerbeads clicking through their bent and horny fingers.

Afer a short time, an old woman began one of the ancient chants:

Milwakiwim Oppalatin, Blessings be on Oppalatin.

Her powerful, if ragged contralto rang out and drew a humming echo from her kin.
Milwakiwim Oppalatin.

CELL 59

Whooping and howling, the Kansi Riders (Plicik enforcers of the Landlaw) spurred their bull mos round and round the Maka landfolk who ignored them as best they could and kept moving South in stubborn silence, heading for the Pilgrim Road bisecting the Grass.

The Kansi cut at the walkers with their brine-soaked razor-tipped stockwhips, trying to drive them back behind the fences.

The landfolk kept walking, children in the middle, ignoring the whip cuts, ignoring the kicks and shoves from the mos, walking and singing, gazing straight before them as if they saw the Three striding there, leading them on their Pakoseo. Prayerbeads rolling thr their fingers, they kept walking South.

After another hour of futile threatening and harassment, each Kansi cut a walker from the crowd, threw him or her across the withers of his mo and rode off.

When the Kansi and their captives were no more than rapidly dimishing dustclouds, there was a collective moan of grief with punctuating cries of grief and loss, but not a single walker turned back.

lab
ough

CELL 1

The barrier island was a stretch of sand half a meter at its highest above the sea with a skim of gray-green, salt crusted brush and reeds plus a thorny tangle of the ubiquitous amtapishka vine. The boats were pushed up onto the sand on the landside of the island, tethered to the poles which were driven into the sand.

The ocean was a brilliant blue, like sapphire at once liquid and crystalline, restful despite its patterned restlessness. The sky was the same blue, but softer and more diffuse, as empty as the sea. A few cloud puffs intensified rather than diluted that emptiness.

Rohant lay stretched out on the sand, wrapped in one blanket with another rolled up for a pillow. He was asleep, snoring, a gaunt look lying uncomfortably on his broad face. Painfully reddened with flakes of skin peeling off It, his nose jutted like the beak of his hawk, his chin was a minor promontory.

Kikun sat at his feet, a small nub of a man, not sleeping, but huddled in on himself,

visibly plumping as if he drew sustenance from the sun's heat and the whip of the wind that blew onshore with enough force to tear the bushes loosed their roots hadn't gone down to bedrock.

Asteplikota lay in the boat, gauze laid loosely over his face to keep off the biters. He was not doing well. He was restless with fever despite the antibiotics Shadith finally took a chance on and fed him, knowing the odds were they'd kill him; they brought the fever down enough to prevent brain damage, but they weren't right enough to do more than ameliorate the infection. He was asleep, moaning in his sleep, but comfortable and warm with a big cat dozing on each side of him. The hawk perched on a thwart, tearing at the body of a small rodent.

Shadith stood looking out across the empty ocean, the wind blowing strongly against her, molding her torn and bloodied clothing against her body, teasing at hair matted into clumps and tangles. There were shadows under her eyes and furrows dug from her nose round the corners of a mouth too wide and too defined to match the childish contours of her face, a childishness that was rapidly melting under the stress of the flight; her cheeks were hollow, emphasizing the jut of her cheekbones. The delicate rondure of her child's limbs had gone hard and knobby. When she unfolded her arms, her hands shook.

As if she could see the EYE—though of course she could not, that was impossible, the direction of her gaze was chance—she scowled straight at him. "Ginbiryol Seyirshi, hear me. It's your game. If you want us on the board, get your ass in gear and send us some backup." She turned away from him and once more stood staring out to sea.

Ginbiryol Seyirshi was raging, but he didn't let it show. He controlled every nuance of his behavior. He was never caught napping, he was always ready to handle anything that came at him. He took immense pride in his imperturbability, it was an important part of his mystique, it was something he fought fiercely to protect. He could feel Puk the Lute watching him, Ajeri the Pilot *was* looking sideways at him, waiting for him to react to Shadith's Challenge.

He shook with hatred for that girl with her sneaking Talent, but he couldn't show it. If he railed against her, he called in question his own judgment—and his Luck. He chose to bring her here, it was his decision to let the Avatars run loose for a while. They were doing what he brought them here to do, generating rumor and stirring up the castes, setting the low against the high, and they were doing it very effectively. No one could deny that. At least five hundred Pariahs were dead or dying, the flits had left behind them a swath of destruction thirty km wide. And the Three had moved through that chaos as if they truly were gods, with witnesses in plenty to testify to it and spread word about it. Grace of that oddity who called himself Kikun. There Ginbiryol's luck had served him well. That drunken Dyslaerik Unmate who sold them the information had told the truth, hard as it was to believe. Ginbiryol had a moment's regret that he'd let Puk have the creature to play with before he'd squeezed every drop of data from him about this putative god incarnate, but that was unimportant at the moment; if he wanted more data, all he need do was reach out and take it. He decided all that mattered was Kikun's belief in this absurdity; his conviction would convince others without him doing anything. Especially if they wanted to believe.

Luck. The Lady had brought him everything in one throw of his net. Even though this girl was insolent and probably dangerous, she was quite satisfactory as Virgin God. If he didn't need her in the production, he'd have her as Penitent in a Praisesong none of them would forget; as it was he would have to make do with the end Ayawit had waiting for her. Luck, yes. Kikun was a demigod and the Ciocan with his tied-beasts was perfect for the Hunter. Gathering him up had given Ginbiryol more than a little satisfaction. It was a 'small earnest of the payment Family Voallts were going to make him for the insult they had put on him when they refused to deal with his agent. There was not a man, woman, or other alive who could say he had put the hurt on Ginbiryol Seyirshi. He did not allow that to happen. If it did happen, he erased it. The Ciocan had felt his hand al-ready, the rest of Family Voallts would be destroyed one by one when he found time to deal with them.

Calming himself by thinking of that and of the Ciocan's inevitable, unenviable end, he produced a smile, chirruped to the Pet and coaxed the simi to his lap. Stroking the round velvety head, he turned to Puk. "We must see that her end is a strong chastisement of her insolence."

Pukanuk Pousli looked wary. "Yes, sir."

He didn't elaborate. It irritated Ginbiryol that he didn't elaborate. He kept his eyes fixed on Puk the Lute, a silent inescapable demand for more. Behind the gaze, though, he relaxed a little, pleased, when he saw Puk's face begin to shine with sweat.

The Lute fidgeted. Finally he said, "You want I should get onto one of our men in KiscoMaskin's camp, say Shipayupal, and have him set up a coast search so he can find them?"

"It would have been more use if you'd alerted him the minute the search and slaughter began."

"Yes, sir. I missed that, I was inexcusably blind to possibilities."

The words were contrite, but Ginbiryol could read a cavil behind them: *You didn't think of it either.* It was becoming clear that Puk was going to need disciplining and soon. Perhaps even before this operation was completed. He made a note to set a personal, dedicated closeEYE on his Second and check it frequently. "Apol-ogies will not restore Asteplikota if he dies, Puk. If I told you once, I have said it a dozen times ..." he relished the fear he saw in his tame killer, the drop of sweat that collected at the end of Puk's nose and splatted onto the arms he'd folded across his ribs in an absurdly childish sketch of self-protection, "... I need Asteplikota alive and ambulatory. See that it is accomplished." He did not wait for Puk to answer him but turned to his scanning of the other cells.

Chapter 13. Still running. When do we get to stop?

A touch on her arm drew Shadith out of a restless, hag-ridden sleep. She pushed the blanket away and sat up, brushing the sand off the side of her face. Kikun squatted beside her, waiting for her to get herself together enough to notice him. "What is it this time?" she muttered. She plucked at her hair, grimaced at the knots and the greasy stickiness, smiled as Kikun passed over the comb he'd gotten from her pouch. "Intuition or foresight?"

"There's a sail on the horizon. It looks like you got through to Ginny and he's been pulling strings."

Shadith winced as she worked the comb into a serious tangle. She continued teasing at the knot while she thought over what he'd said. "Not more trouble from the Powers?"

He fluttered his fingers, an inadequate answer but obviously all she was going to get.

"Hmm. Aste?"

He blinked slowly, coming back from somewhere, wherever it was he went on these occasions of absence; small changes eddied across his fine-boned, angular face, but even with her Talent she had no idea what they meant. When he spoke, though, his words were prosaic enough.

"About the same. Still under, fever's no better no worse."

"Don't need to ask about Rohant, I can hear him snoring from here." She dragged impatiently at the comb, swore as it tore out a clump of hair. "I suppose I should take a look, find out who they are for sure."

"If you wish." He contrived to be suddenly more present. "Consider this also, they'll pass us by unless we let them know we're here."

"If we want them to know. All right, oh god, I hope they have a doctor onboard." She *reached* and settled into the hawk, got a firm hold on him and sent him winging out to sea. Riding him was even more of a problem this time because Rohant was still sleeping; though only marginally aware of her in the hawk, he had less control of his basic emotions; she shuddered under a blast of concentrated lust that shook her to her heels.

To the north of the wander of sandy barrier islands splayed along the curve of the Wetlands, an old three-master was tacking slowly south.

Leaving in place a thread of control to keep the bird circling over the ship, she dropped into the ship's cat, a lazy tom with one ear and a truncated tail, big enough and certainly tough enough to eat the average dog. He fought her with every nerve in him, nearly went into convulsions in his struggle to throw her off. The men working the ship around him ignored his cavorting; apparently they were used to his fits.

She subdued him and sent him prowling about the deck while she listened to the crew.

They weren't talking much; one of them, a boy, he couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen, had a pipe as long as his arm and was producing sounds that approximated music, a lively bit of noise that made the pulling and hauling easier.

Another lot of the misbegotten. I wouldn't want to meet a one of them in a dark alley. Bright alley either. Smugglers, I suppose, if they're not from... no ... no. Not on the side of the Powers, not them. All right, all right, who's in charge ... who signed you on, lazy fourfoot, you bloody old mangler?

She sent the cat scooting up a steep ladder onto a smaller deck that was built over a substructure of some kind. There were three locals standing in a loose group. One of them was a big sloppy man with a massive torso and long arms, a stained and raveled mustache and a nose that wandered a finger's width off center; he was scanning the coast through a crude spyglass.

"M'tika!" The shout came from the top of the midmast. She'd been thinking and reacting in interlingue having waked in that mindset, so for a moment it was just sounds she heard. "M'tika, Wa Tipli." Her mind shud-dered and clanged over to Awenakis as the watch yelled some more look-looks, more captain-captains, and went on: "That the bird, in't it? T' one you say look for. And in't it raat over us goin round and round like it knew who we was?" The cat twitched nervously as the hoarse voice came down through the bulging canvas, the whining shrouds.

The three men stared up at the circling hawk. The Tipli lifted the spyglass, focused it on the bird. "It a strange 'un, all raat. Have a look." He passed the glass over.

The second man was short and square; he'd a petulant pouty face with bulging eyes and a full red mouth. He snatched the glass, set it to his eye. After some fidgeting and focusing, he stared for a long moment at the bird then lowered the glass. "That's the one, for sure. It matches the description." His voice suited his body, it was high and whiny and dry enough to hurt an ordinary ear. "They must be around here somewhere, if they're still alive."

The third man was slight, neatly made, with a thin intelligent face and a pointed gray beard, the first chin hair she'd seen on a local. He, wore the neat twill jumpsuit and the bronze arm bands of a high caste doctor, Kisar at least. She sighed and felt a weight drop off her shoulders when she saw that. He looked up at the hawk but waved away the glass when the second man offered it to him. "The question is, where did it come from?" His voice was a pleasant rumble that sounded more suited to the burly shipmaster. "Lipatchin, ask your man if he got a line on it."

That gave Shadith an idea. She withdrew from the cat, let him go streaking off to hide in a coil of rope, took hold of Sassa and brought him swooping down the length of the ship, screaming as he passed. She took him in a last circle, then sent him darting toward the sandy islet. He wanted to land beside Rohant, but she wouldn't let him; she made him hover briefly over the islet, then sent him winging back to the ship. Once again he circled the topsails, flew to the islet, flew back.

The third time he reached the ship, the crew was launching a longboat. When the boat was in the water and the men in it saw him leave again, the boy played him a rollicking salute, then launched into a quickbeat as the sailors started rowing along the line Sassa'd given them.

Shadith let the hawk come where he wanted to be and went back to combing her hair. She glanced at Rohant who was awake and sitting up, watching her. "They're on their way," she said.

"What? Who?"

"Some locals. Part of Aste's lot. I think."

"Think? Dio!" Eyes glazed, each breath a wheezing rasp, shudders running through his big body, he got to his feet and went to stand looking out to sea, waiting for the longboat to appear, his hands clasped behind him, his fingers curled about her stunner.

Kikun eeled through the brush and squatted beside her; he yawned, glanced out at sea, played in the sand a minute, then slanted a look at her. "Aste is restless. He feels hotter to my hand."

Shadith moved her shoulders impatiently, unzipped a thighpocket and squeezed the comb into it. "I'm not going to give him any more of my stuff. God knows what it's doing to him, sure not me. There's a doctor on that ship. Let him handle the fever." She whizzed the zipper shut and got to her feet, "Anyway,

here they are.”

The four sailors beached the longboat and squatted by its prow, the boy stayed where he was, the short square man from the upper deck swung over the gunnel and came striding up the sand to stop in front of Rohant. He stared up at the Ciocan, looked past him at Shadith, then Kikun. “There should be another,” he said abruptly.

“You’re got a name? Who are you?” His voice an impatient growl, Rohant folded his arms across his chest and looked down his nose at the newcomer.

“I am Shipayupal. Where is the fourth one?”

Rohant thought that over another minute. Standing behind him and a few paces to the left, Shadith saw his body tense as he suppressed a cough. “Name him,” he rasped.

“What?”

“You heard.” The Ciocan’s voice was scraping bottom now, but he ignored that and pressed on. “You want to know what happened to him, give me a name.”

“Happened to him, what do you mean happened to him?”

No uayton

“Name first. Tells me what side you’re on, fool.” Shipayupal glared at Rohant, then he shrugged. “Astep-likota.”

“Wait here. Kikun, come with me.” Rohant swung round and strode off.

Shipayupal gazed tightlipped after them, then turn his eyes on Shadith. Her first impulse was to follow Rohant’s lead, to challenge him and make him take them on their terms not his. But the Ciocan was tired, sick and riding Dyslaera instinct, not using his brain all that much.

And playing Ginny’s game. But aren’t we all. Huh. “He’s looking at me. Wonder what he wants? I don’t think I like this local, I don’t care what side he’s on. He’s a handler, that’s all he is, tenlper boy working the edges, out for what he can get. Perfect soulmate for Ginny the Creep.

“Come over here, girl. Get in the boat.”

She tightened her lips, suddenly furious, logic and reason melting like a summer mist. “I’ll wait.”

“Don’t be foolish, we haven’t time for it. Wepi, Ahtay, put her in.”

She caught hold of Sassa, brought him diving and screaming past Shipayupal, talons ripping at his face, missing this time, but making the threat palpable; at the same time she brought out the darter. When the hawk was circling overhead again, she showed them the weapon. “I will not be handled. Don’t touch me.”

“You’d best do what she says.” Rohant’s cracking rumble came with an underpinning of soft snarls from Magimeez and Nagafog; he was standing in a gap in the brush, holding Asteplikota cradled like a baby in his arms, the black cats looming beside him, huge and omi-nous, creatures out of myth and nightmare; they showed their teeth and twitched their tails as he spoke; Kikun waited behind him, nearly extinguished under the pouches, her harpcase and their blanket rolls. “None of us are in a mood to take any chousing.”

Shapayupal scowled at Asteplikota. “What happened to him?”

Rohant cleared his throat, spat to-one side. “Cutter hit him. You got a doctor on that ship? We’ve done the best we could, but that isn’t much.”

“Yes. There is a doctor. We knew about the strafe and thought if you survived you might need tending.” Pale blue eyes flicked from Rohant to Shadith, slid over Kikun in an uneasy wince. “You are unharmed?”

“Luck of the toss.” Rohant whistled to the cats and marched • for the boat with them pacing on each side, heads turning, yellow eyes gleaming, red mouths open, showing the tearing fangs. The sailors scattered, scam-bling to put distance between them and the beasts. Eyes wide with a struggling mix of fear and delight, the piper boy stayed in the boat, backed up as far *as* he could from Rohant as the Ciocan settled Asteplikota carefully across two thwarts with the cats beneath him to support him where

the thwarts didn't.

Rohant straightened, ran his eyes over the nervous locals. "Get in, let's go. The painkiller's wearing off and he's going to need help soon. The cats are tame enough, they won't touch you long as I tell them not to." He looked over his shoulder at the boy. "You're not afraid, are you?"

The boy managed a wobbly grin, sweaty hands clutching the pipe as if it were a safety line.

Kikun grinned, his eyes gleaming copper in the brilliant sunlight. He dumped his load beside Shadith, climbed into the boat, and settled in the bottom beside Nagafog's head; he scratched behind the beast's ears, then began slapping his hand rhythmically on the nearest thwart, threading a whistle through the drumming, a cheery tune that the piper boy picked up, his sound uncertain at first, then strong.

Sheepishly, the sailors came back, laid hands on the boat to push it into the water, Shipayupal started toward them.

"Wait." Shadith caught his arm, stopped him. "There's not enough room for all of us and our gear in that boat. And no point in trying to overload it. Aste has to go now, no question of that. Answer's simple, they can send it back for us."

"Us?"

"Certainly. You don't expect me to wait here alone, do you? Or trust you to come back for me? Forget that. We wait together."

He opened his mouth to object, heard the beat of Sassa's wings, and changed his mind. With a shrug he waved the boat off, kicked together a pile of dry weed, and lowered himself to wait for its return.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

Leaning against the pile of pouches, Shadith thought about the questions as she fought off a weariness that turned her bones to water; her brief sleep had left her nearly as tired as when she laid down. She had no inclination to open her soul for Shipayupal; on the other hand, she didn't want to antagonize him any more than she had to. In her mind if not in her heart, she regretted using Sassa to intimidate him; she'd humiliated him in front of the others and he wasn't going to forget that. She definitely didn't need any more enemies; this was another time she'd let her mindset get warped by fear and anger. Cool she wasn't, and she kept paying for it. This body she'd acquired was a powerful drag on her mind when it came to crises. It reacted as its original owner had trained it; war was bred into the bone of its people, attack and destroy were the approved mode of action. She kept forgetting how intricately mind and brain were interwoven; for so long, so very long, she'd been a sketch of a person, mechanically reproduced inside an unliving matrix; now everything was new, her immediate reactions were raw, undirected by reason.

Ahlallah, what do I do now? I'd like to forget it and just sit here. Just sit and listen to the ocean tickle at the sand. Gods, if it weren't for Aste, I'd say run like hell for the city and crash the kanaweh headquarters, I'm sure the skipcom's there, where else would it be?

"We were kidnapped and dropped here," she said after a silence she knew was too long; her voice was flat, unconvincing, she couldn't dredge up the energy to make that worn list of half-truths and whole-lies sound believable. "We were picked up like stray cows and carted off," she said, and thought how blah it is. "I don't know why, all I know is I want to get back where I belong." Even that had no strength behind it, though it was the one fully true thing she said.

"Word is you claim to be Nikamo-Oskinin."

"Claim? I claim nothing. That's somebody else's stupid mistake."

"You're a singer?"

"I'm a student of music. From a half dozen other places. I don't belong here. How many times do I have to say it?" She closed her eyes, rubbed at her temples. Her head was aching; she felt sick and wondered if she was catching Rohant's cold.

"And the green one?"

"Green? He's more gray than green. I've known him ... what? three days. Ask him what he is."

"And the big man?"

“Same.” She got to her feet, stood staring out across the ocean. The ship was a faint waver of sail and spar against the pale clutter between sea and sky; she couldn’t see the longboat for a minute or so, then it heaved up and vanished again. About halfway there. She moved her shoulders, trying to shrug off the fatigue that dragged at her; she was tired of talking, she was tired of thinking. She pulled the harpcase over to her. She’d been too busy to worry before, but now she was anxious about the harp, what the gouts of steam and scalding water might have done to it.

Scowling as she felt small blisters like a bad case of measles, she ran her hands over the wood, then threw the latches and took out the harp. There were a few stains on the padding, she chewed her lip when she saw theta, turned anxiously to the instrument. There were traces of moisture on the dark, lustrous wood. She took the polishcloth from its niche and began wiping gently at the damp places, inspecting them, wiping again and again until the glow was back, deep and alive. She tightened the strings, tried each, listening for the tones and half-tones and undertones. When she was finished with that, she played one of her simpler homesongs, played until she broke a fingernail and had to stop. Sighing, she eased the strings, shut the harp away. It was time anyway, the boat was coming back.

As soon as they were onboard, the ship turned east and ran for the islands.

Chapter 14. Stuck in an eddy (Atehana)

About an hour before midnight the ship dropped anchor in a halfmoon bay carved out of the southern end of a small island.

A thin spray of stars glittered like ice crystals flung across the cloudless black sky, the moons were milky bright, one a hairline crescent near the eastern horizon, just rising, one almost overhead, a flattened half, and a third in the west, nearly full, beginning to drop below the mountainous spine of another, larger island some distance off. The air was chill with wisps of fog drifting across the dark water like the fitful exhalations of hypothalassan monsters.

Standing at the rail, waiting to go overside, Shadith was surprised by the look of the town spread along the horns of the bay, rising up the slope of the mountain behind, street lanterns of translucent shell hung on high poles, shining pale green pale amber on fogwet pavement. It was a larger and more complex settlement than she’d expected, her notions colored by the feudalism of the Main. Atehana, Lipatchin called this place. Atehana on the island Wakiso.

The Tipli Lipatchin decanted his passengers with obvious relief and upped anchor as if he’d put into a plague port.

A group of locals, mostly men, a small knot of women to one side, waited for the two boats on the central wharf; the Tipli had been on the bay with the island for the past two hours, exchanging cryptic clipped phrases with them, spaced at longish intervals. The aura of wariness and secrecy was thick enough to cut.

As the first longboat nudged against the piles and two of the rowers locked it steady with boathooks, the locals lowered a sling. Rohant and the doctor eased Asteplikota into it and steadied it as the men working the davits drew it up.

The boat Shadith was in swung up against a ladder and two of the rowers hooked it in place while she and Kikun got their gear together and hauled it up the ladder onto the wharf. She thought the cats were going to be a problem, but the moment she and Kikun were clear, Magimeez batted Nagafog out of her way, leaped from the boat, hit the ladder, crouched and sprang, flying onto the wharf; Nagafog landed beside her a moment later. They sat on their haunches grinning at Shadith. She grinned back, then strolled over to watch as a small group of the locals transferred Asteplikota to a stretcher on wheels and went running off with him. She backed up against Rohant. “We need to talk,” she muttered.

He touched her hair, his hands were hot and trembling. “I’m at the end of my string, Shadow.”

“All right, but I have this, feeling. We wait too long, we’re going to be so bogged down we’ll never get loose.”

A young woman with, fine blonde hair floating like fog about her face and shoulders broke from the small crowd of locals and came across to them, followed by two other women, both of them considerably older than she was.

She flickered a smile at Rohant and Kikun, then turned its full glow on Shadith and held out her hands. "Singer, one is ... I am Uiaras your servant, of the House of Judge Wakisoe-Matwesie. It's very late, you must be exhausted. Come, a bath and a meal and a bed and you'll feel more like you're alive."

The invitation was for her alone and she didn't like the idea of being drawn away from Rohant and Kikun.

Kikun touched her arm. "Go on, twiceborn. Tomorrow's soon enough to start again."

"Meet here?"

"Here it is."

A wave of warmth ran through her; this time she didn't bother wondering where it came from, she needed it too badly. "All right," she told the woman. "I must admit I could use a bath."

The Woman's Hostel was halfway up the mountain, a large dark bulk built from the same fieldstone that, cracked and set in concrete, paved the streets. Its fogwettered, precipitous roof glistened in the starlight, rounded slices of slate overlapped like the scales of a fish, punctuated by half a dozen chimneys putting out threads of fragrant smoke. Golden lamplight glowed through the intricate stone lace that filled the pointed windows ranked on both sides of an open, ogeed archway cut into the wallstone with a massive bronze door at the end, its patina shimmering greenish gold in the light of twin lanterns of shell and bronze.

Stone everywhere. Appears to me this place has more rock than trees. Come the winter, what you bet it's cold as a ottogyne's finger.

At the foot of the wide shallow steps leading to the entrance, Uiaras touched Shadith's arm. "Wait here a moment, it's late, they want you, but they'll want to make sure it is you." She smiled suddenly, the high-voltage grin that did a lot to convince Shadith to come with her. "Don't worry, I won't be long." She ran up the stairs and into the entranceway, punched a wide button beside the door. A hatch opened in the wall beside her and the shadow behind the grill murmured something. It was a woman's voice. Shadith couldn't make out the words.

She slid the strap of the harpcase off her shoulder and eased it to the pavement, then turned to the woman beside her, the one who carried her travel pouch, a short, square figure with coarse silver hair and an ugly-attractive, intelligent face. "Is it always this difficult?"

The woman looked startled, then smiled tentatively, her gray-blue eyes sinking into a nest of laugh-wrinkles. "Curfew," she said. "Uiaras," a wave of a small hand at the blonde woman arguing with the grill, "and we," another wave that took in herself and the silent woman beside her, "we generally do not stay there." She ran fingers over the bracelet on her left wrist, silver shaped into a broad band, inlaid with copper wire and turquoise beads, the design a bird form curved about a cat. When she saw Shadith looking at it, she said, "My marriage band." There was both pride and sadness in her voice, her face. "Do you know the custom? No? Ah well, no doubt you'd discover it soon enough. One wears, A! I keep forgetting, I ... I wear the band on my left arm because I am cast off; my liwa, he repudiated me for a younger woman, one ... I had no sons, you see, only daughters; I live here with my youngest daughter and her lover."

Shadith shifted uneasily from foot to foot, embarrassed by this unasked-for soul-baring.

The woman shook her head. "Don't waste your time on pity, Singer, I much prefer this life." Her eyes gleamed with laughing malice. "And with a little luck I'll see my exla skinned; he's the head of the Nistam's Guard. Such a lovely man he is, the charm of a rabid amskir with the intelligence of a gnat. The Pakoseo works for us; even if the other Nistams come against us afterward as they always do, we'll hold Wapaskwen long enough to make a sweep of the bloody landlords and their lackeys of which my exia is the chief. Word is you are Nikamo-Oskinin, the ninth incarnate."

"Don't believe everything you hear, especially non-sense like that."

“I don’t, you know. Nonsense?”

“My word on it.”

“But could you tell? No no, don’t bother answering. It doesn’t matter what you are, only what people think you are.”

Shadith opened her mouth to repudiate that, then closed it again. The woman was right, people would most likely believe what they wanted to believe, no matter what she tried to tell them. She sighed, shivered. Her clothing protected what it covered from the chill wind sliding down the mountain, but her ears and nose were losing all feeling; she glanced at Uiaras, then at the woman beside her.

Try again, old Shadow, if you can get one to buy it, maybe the word’ll spread.

“My name is Shadith; my people are dead, my guard-ian was sending me to University to study music when all this ..” running through the familiar litany with no more energy behind the words than she could find for them last time, she swept her hand in a looping gesture meant to take in the world and the events that brought her there, “... happened. Listen, my being here means nothing. It’s chance, that’s all. I have no connection with any of you or with this place. The others either.”

The woman patted her arm. “Yes, yes,” she said, mama soothing the hurt and angry child, slipping the child’s words into the internal wasteslot adults kept for such things. “One ... hah! habit, oh habit, sad habit. I am Kati Mola.”

Shadith blinked. “Mola? If I hear right, that means no one.”

“It’s the name my daughter took when she left her father’s home.” She smiled again, more easily this time, a smile that trembled on the edge of laughter. “Exploded away might be more apt, she is a passionate creature, my Uiaras, I never knew where she got it. When I ... left, I took that name myself as a matter of pride, you understand.”

Shadith glanced from Kati Mola to the younger woman in the entranceway slapping her hand on the ledge but keeping her voice too low for her words to reach them.

Family affair, huh? And trying to make me one of them. No way. Ahlahlah, I begin to see Lee’s prob-lem clearer, it’s so tempting to follow one’s pas-sions.... You could help, you know. You’ve seen these things a thousand times. Why not slip them a little advice, show them where they’re weak? Yeh, a thousand thousand times, enough to know if they don’t do it themselves it’s worthless. It’s their world, let them spend their own blood and sweat on it.

With thumps and creaking behind her as the gate warder opened the great door, Uiaras came running down the steps. “Come in, come. It’s, cold out here.”

* * *

The foyer opened into a huge common room, wood-paneled, hung with tapestries worked in rich earth col-ors, the forms in them reminding Shadith of the animal carvings in the treelodge where she woke ... what? three days ago, four? Seemed like a year.. Except for a few areas lit by shell-shaded oval bulbs putting out a brilliant white light where individuals were reading or working at needlepoint or embroidery, most of the light-ing came from oil lamps (bronze straps and plates of amber shell) that spread a rich golden shimmer over the room. There were thick soft rugs on a polished wood floor, plump tapestry pillows scattered about among low divans set up by smaller fireplaces of red brick that were spaced along the walls; in the center of the room there was a round basin of red brick with a crackling fire in it, an inverted funnel over it to catch the smoke and lead it out. There were women in small groups and girls (young but not prepubescent, so they might be considered tech-nically adult in this culture), sitting on the cushions, stretched out on the divans; they wore long robes in dark jewel colors with bands of embroidery about the hems, neck and sleeve edges.

Polite and disciplined inside the boundaries of their culture and courtesy, the women didn’t stare at Shadith as she stood in the doorway, but glanced at her, glanced away again, eyes flickering like bi-colored leaves flipping in the wind, turning and turning as they went on with their conversations, their voices a whispering like the leaves of the whisper trees; the air was so thick with

curiosity-fear-suppressed anger-hope-awe and lesser emotions that she found it difficult to breathe. She turned to Uiaras. "You said something about a bath?"

Uiaras laughed, clapped her hands. "Sitwa, the Singer NEEDS a bath."

Having been given permission by this to exercise their curiosity, the women and girls came swarming round Shadith, hanging back just long enough to let the house-mother greet her, a tall woman with a stern ascetic face that changed completely when she smiled and a black mane liberally streaked with gray and white that fell in crimped undulations down past her waist. "Welcome, Singer, we had hoped you would come to us. Leave your things here if you will, the water's hot and waiting."

The bath room was fragrant and steamy, tiled over floor, walls, ceiling, the bath a tiled pool large enough for swimming races. The women stripped off their robes and fell into the steaming water with her, splashing and laughing, treating her like a baby, soaping her lavishly, stroking the hawk outline acid-burned into her cheek, asking a thousand questions about it, never pausing for an answer; they shampooed her hair, exclaiming at its soft springy texture, they stroked her skin wondering at its warm brown, several shades darker than the darkest of them. They wanted to know how old she was, where she came from, what her family was, why she'd come to Kiskai. They clucked and cried out over the sad tale of her abduction, hugged her and told her she was welcome, they'd take care of her. They were curious about Rohant, they wanted to know if he was her lover or what. They were both fascinated and repelled by Kikun, what was he? where did he come from? What kind of world could birth such an oddity? They hustled her from the water, ran her under a warm shower, towed her vigorously and enveloped her in a loose robe of a dark amber velvet with olive and emerald embroidery. Then they took her off to a meal of thick hot soup, fresh rolls, and the local tea.

Shadith inspected the fingernail she'd glued on to replace the broken one, then drew her hand in a sweep along the strings. "Help me with this," she said/sang. "When I play so ..." she demonstrated, "... clap your hands with me, thus and thus. Ah ... yes yes, that's the way, thus and thus." She sang:

*Happiness came by me again
(clap your hands, oh yes oh yes)
Yesterday
(clap your hands, my dears)
He wouldn't stay
I wrapped him in my arms
Displayed my charms
Like smoke he slipped away.*

She played a lively tune, brought them onto their feet swaying and clapping a counter-rhythm, then calmed them down and sang:

*Sorrow came by me again
(clap your hands, oh softly softly)
And stayed awhile
(clap your hands, my dears)
To caress and beguile
Bittersweet
Is better neat
And tastier
Than honey
I would not let him go But he faded so
Like smoke he blew away.*

They sang for her when her song was done, then danced with her while some played flute and some

played drums and one plucked strings on a round-bellied gourd.

Time passed unnoticed, until it was very late indeed and they fell into bed pleased with themselves and each other and slept away the remnant of the night.

She woke with a thick head, a throat someone had used a grater on, a burning cut on her palm from the fake fingernail she'd forgotten, to take off last night—and a lazy good feeling that rolled like warm water back and forth along her body.

She yawned and stretched and the silence began to seep in on her; the more she thought about it, the emptier the building felt. Her leg twitched and began to itch, she curled round under the quilts and scratched at the side of her calf, sighing, with pleasure at the relief. The skin between her shoulder blades began to itch. With an explosion of impatience she flung the quilts aside and rolled out onto her feet.

Someone had washed and ironed her underclothing, laid it out on a chair; the same someone had sponged off her shirt and trousers and hung them over a hook screwed into the door; her boots had been polished until they gleamed and were standing by the foot of the bed, looking better than they had in years. On a table beside the bed there was a tray with a pot on it swathed in a towel, an overturned cup and a plate with a warmer lid over it.

She dressed quickly, ate a little, then left the room.

A girl was mopping the hall outside, swinging the mop in damp sweeps that barely moistened the flags, elbows flying, narrow body working with explosive energy to finish a job she detested, her distaste so evident it was almost a separate thing walking beside her. After a moment's effort Shadith dredged up her name. "Hasski," she called. "The tray, what shall I do about it?"

The girl halted her furious progress, looked back at Shadith. "Leave it. I'll *take* it down when I'm finished with this."

"I'll do it if you point me in the right direction."

"Just leave *it*." Hasski pushed impatiently at hair straggling into her eyes. "I don't have time to fool with you, I'm due at work like now." She snapped her head around and went back to her mopping.

Shadith raised her brows; she leaned against the jamb and watched thoughtfully as Hasski mopped her way round the corner.

Mood's a bit different come the morning, it seems. Work? She can't be more than fourteen, fifteen. What was it Aste said? The Islanders tolerate no one who cannot earn his way either with a skill or as a weapon against the Priests and the Pliciks. Ever. children, it seems. Wonder if they know about unions, maybe I should drop a hint. Na, keep your nose out of this, Shadow, you're not going to be here long enough to spit on the floor. If you're lucky. Children, though. Maybe they're in school. Early for school, isn't it? Not that I know much about schools, don't want to know, either. Hmm. Let's get out of here and see if we can find old Lion or Kikun.

It was earlier than she'd thought, the sun barely clear of the horizon, wispy patches of mist lingering in the shadows, damp glittering on every surface, an erratic breeze blowing from an icebox somewhere, licking at her ears and fingers. She hesitated on the steps, decided she might as well trundle on down to the harbor and wait for the others to show up.

Though this was the heart of the town, the street and the structures along it seemed as empty as the Hostel, as if everyone that lived there had poured forth with the rising of the sun and been swept away. Her Talent confirmed what her ears and eyes told her. No one there. Like Hasski said, work. What work? . Who knows. She began walking downhill, the heels of her boots loud on the paving.

Several large buildings had an official look; their doors (with totem forms in circular cartouches carved in deep relief) were closed and shades were pulled across the windows. The other structures were small rowhouses each sharing a common wall with the next, all of them turning a blind blank face to the street, one single window in each facade, round and set with stained glass and lead canes; it was opaque and tarry, like a mole on the brow of the house. The doors were painted in bright colors with a vertical row of black glyphs along the left side, announcing the family lines of those residing behind that

door. If there were gardens or outside living areas, they were around back. There were no shops, no sign of a produce or fish market, not here. Kiskai had motorized vehicles of all sorts, as well as lift sleds and other fliers. No traffic on this street—though she could hear motors grinding in the distance and subdued noises of city living that came to her like sounds in a dream.

Halfway down she heard a child yell, then children's laughter, then silence. At least they weren't all working. She thought about that, shook her head. Maybe so maybe not.

This walk was a paradigm of her experience so far on Kiskai. Outside looking in, with never a clue to what was really happening. Despite the wide variety of her experience with almost-alien cultures, apparent similarities were still traps, and unless you were very careful indeed, it was so easy to misread everything. What you thought was happening, wasn't. In an odd way, it was easier to deal with complete strangeness.

She continued along her paradigm, nervously amused at the conceit but increasingly unhappy, cold inside and out. Alone. She didn't like being alone. When Ginny left her alone all that time, she walked out on him, herself, everything. She tucked her hands into her armpits in search of warmth. It was a large town, there must be ten, twenty thousand people here. Where were they?

When she reached the wharves and plunged into the noisy swirl of life there, she sighed with relief. There were three ships being on and off loaded, wharfmen hauling crates and barrels and bales, exchanging incomprehensible comments on what she guessed was a game of some kind, talking in a local slang she hadn't a clue about, seabirds keening, cats squawling, assorted rodents hissing and shrieking, thuds and creaks from the ships and warehouses, intermittent roars from the crane motors and a crackle-sputter from small motorized flats darting about like startled waterbeetles. There were metal barrels with fires built in them, several portable cookshops with hot drinks and fried whatever adding their lot to the tapestry of smells, spilled spices, pungent woods, num-ber-less, nameless THINGS redolent of mystery and might-have-been. It was all lively and loud and built layer on layer atop the generic effluvium of salt sea shores.

She threaded through the anttrails of the lading crews, stopping and starting, a dance where she was doing all the work while her oblivious—partners went their way unimpeded and unconcerned. When she reached an empty wharf, she stopped to look around.

An old man sat there on a sacking pillow beside a pile of netting that was discolored and desiccated as a heap of dead leaves after three years rotting. His face was bristly with a two-day crop of stubble; he had a stained salt-and-pepper mustache and straggly gray eyebrows, faded eyes of an indeterminate color somewhere between watery urine and weak tea. His coarse yellowish-gray hair was braided into a club that hung low enough to bump against his withered buttocks whenever he moved his shoulders. His legs would have been crossed at the ankle if he'd had ankles; one leg was gone below the knee, the other was missing a foot. A pair of shears, a ball of cord, and a shuttle lay on the planks beside him. As she walked toward him, he was pulling a hank of netting into his lap, inspecting it for holes, breaks, and frayed patches. He came across a ragged tear, took up the shears, cut away broken ends, then began the tedious process of mending the hole. He didn't seem to be working especially quickly, but he was cutting loose and pulling more net past before she reached him.

She dropped onto the wharf beside him, sat with her legs dangling over the edge.

He gave her one quick morose scan, then went back to staring out the mouth of the harbor, his bony hands working on their own with no prompting from him.

A seabird dropped like a stone, plunged beneath the surface, came up with a fish caught sideways in its beak. It paddled lazily on the small, subdued waves until it was in the lee of the wharf, then it tossed the fish up, opened wide to catch it as it fell. And squawked with rage as another of its kind came swooping by, stole the fish, and went flying off with it. Shadith laughed, the sound surprised out of her. She got a hooded look from the old man, a derisive twitch of his mustache that reminded her briefly of Rohant before he darted the kanaweh. The local said nothing, just sent a gob of spittle arching into the water.

Shadith scratched at her chin; old goat wasn't over-awed by her godhood, not him; she was just

some nosy foreigner. Sweet sweet xenophobia, almost made her feel at home, running into that again. “Town uphill looks like someone pulled the plug; where’d everybody get to?”

“Don’t they work where you come from?” His voice was rusty, as if he spoke at most two three words a week; his hands continued their steady drive, servo-mechanisms with enough internal memory they didn’t need help from the mainbrain.

“Now and then they did a bit,” she said, “now and then. A bit here, a bit there.”

His mustache twitched.

Now that was almost a smile, bet it herniated his whole face. Should I push it? Na. Rohant old lion, get your butt down here, hanh?

She sat watching the fisherbirds soar and drop into the littered water, sometimes after fish, sometimes after bits of garbage bobbing on the low waves. From the scum marks on the piles the tide was a handspan below high and dropping.

With three moons to mess things up, they must get different tides every day, the local ephemeris 71 be the size of an encyclopedia. No wonder we came at a creep the last part of the trip. One thing about being reared in a desert, you don’t get a feel for things like tides. Talking about deserts and people brought up in them—crawl out of bed, you lazy cat, I’m tired of being kicked about, it’s time we started taking hold.

A rusty, grating noise broke her from her thoughts, old man clearing his throat; she looked around. He set the shears down, let his hands rest on the net, still for once, as he fixed a malevolent glare on her. “Word is you workin t’night, singin on the comnet.”

That was the first Shadith had heard of it, could have been something Rohant worked out....

Without a word to me. Tsoukbaraim, I get my hands on him, nil rip those dreadlocks out one by one. Teach him to take advantage like that. No fool sells me, but this fool herself. Ahlahlah.

She clicked her tongue, shook her head.

I suppose it could be the locals assuming things. We’ll see ... we’ll see..

She blinked at the old man. “Sing for my supper, hmm?”

“Nought’s free, Wanish.” He dropped his eyes to the net, began working on the hole. “You and yours, you pay goin rates like eveh’one else.” He said it with consid-erable verve and she knew she’d been wrong. He didn’t question what she was supposed to be, he simply saw all authority types as outside himself, battenning on him and his like leeches, with privileges he’d never have and they hadn’t earned. Seeing her forced to work for her perks was something he contemplated with a *vast* surprise and a vaster satisfaction. If there were an appreciable number like him, Asteplikota’s rebellion wasn’t going to move like he thought it would.

Idiot woman! this place may be revolting but it’s not where the revolution’s stirring. Hmm! if the lameness of a pun’s any measure, I’m about as low as you can get.

She swung her feet and stared out across the water, inventing maledictions for Ginny in half a dozen langues and trying to rhyme them inside and across those langues. She didn’t want to think about what the songfest meant or why she was being squeezed into it, she didn’t want to think about Ginny up there watching everything, jerking their strings, worse than that creep guard, she didn’t want to think about him looking at her whenever he wanted to, whatever she was doing.

Sometime later there was a change in the noise on the working wharves; she twisted around to see what was happening.

Looming head and shoulders over the smaller locals, cats pacing beside him, Rohant came striding toward her.

She pulled her legs up, got to her feet. “Bout time,” she said.

He blew his nose into a handkerchief like a small tablecloth, tucked it over his belt, and glanced past her at the ancient. “Come on,” he said. “Out there on the horn, I think.” He pointed toward a pile of black rocks near the mouth of the harbor. “No ears and some sort of lookout, I can see the railings.”

“Yeh, I got a thing or two to say.”

He flared his nostrils. “Rat been telling tales?”

“So it WAS you sold me.”

With Dyslaera courtesy keeping his teeth well covered, he grinned at her and ran the tip of his forefinger claw down her cheek, touching her so delicately all she felt was a faint tickle. “If someone had to play the fool, better you than me.”

“Shithead.”

“Make that mister shithead, sir, business agent.”

“I’ll do that. Soon’s it rains up.”

Cats pacing majestically behind them, they strolled to the end of the wharves, turned onto a flagged pathway and followed it to the lookout.

* * *

Shadith hitched a hip on the top rail. “Well?”

Rohant stepped over Nagafog and leaned on the rail beside her. “It was strongly suggested we contrive some way of paying transport and lodging with a hint they’d throw us back if we jibbed.”

“Poor little naif, browbeaten by the local grubbers, I don’t believe.”

“Mebbe so mebbe so, thing is, this is a big enough deal there’ll be Islander ’yips flying in.”

^{“Flying}

“What I like about you, kitcat, don’t need to draw you diagrams.”

“Flat out?” It wasn’t really a question, merely a probe to confirm Rohant was thinking what she was. She chewed on a hangnail and scowled at the caked scum and decay-ing seaweed that marked the highpoint of the tides. It seemed obvious to her that the only chance they had was grabbing the fastest flutter they could find and making a run for the ... what was it? the Kasta? whatever, and brute-forcing it, shooting their way in and rummaging for the skipcom. If she’d learned anything at all from her dealings with Ginny, it was that finessing was worse than futile. Everything they’d tried so far got them wound tighter and tighter in the web.

“We have a choice?” Rohant used the toe of his boot to massage Nagafog’s ribs; the big male opened his mouth, let his tongue hang, and purred like a magnified kitten. Jealous, Magimeez came to her feet and stood rubbing her head against the Ciocan’s leg.

“None I see. But it’s so clumsy, so dumb.” She wrin-kled her nose. “Embarrassing even, devolving to primi-tive like this.”

“Gets your back up, you can sit here and moan about grace.”

“All I can see to moan about is it probably won’t work. How you rate the chances?”

“Between null and nil.”

“We see eye to eye on that.” She flung her head back and glared into the cloudly blue arching over them. “To EYE to EYE to EYE.” She shivered, hugged her arms across her breasts. “Where’s Kikun?”

“Sleeping.”

“Swamp thing took it out of him.”

M_h

“So when’s this singsing?”

“Short while after sundown, they’ve set aside an hour for us to fill, you mainly.” He ran his boot toe along Nagafog’s ribs, looked slyly round at Shadith. “There’s a reception afterward. Touchy-feely for the ’yips. At least that’s what I gathered.”

She made a face at the sky, slid from the rail and brushed the dust off her behind. “Assuming Ginny doesn’t decide to ground us, Kikun fades and acquires a flier while we’re dancing our jig?”

“Nay. Assuming nothing. They try to stop us, we go through them.”

“Them?”

“Whoever.”

Shadith shivered. “I hate this.”

“Don’t we all.” He dropped his hand on her shoulder, squeezed. “We do what we have to, Shadow.”

“That make it better? Never mind. What happens the rest of the day?”

“You get a look at the broadcasting studio, then you get to figure out the program, then you get to rehearse.”

“I get? Hanh! You’re in this, too.”

“Me?” He looked uneasily at her. “I run a business, not a dance troupe and I couldn’t carry a tune if you wrapped it up and handed it to me.”

She ran ahead a few steps, turned and danced back-ward, examining with exaggerated appreciation his big body and noble head. “Maybe not, but ahhh my dear, oooh my friend, what grand scenery you’ll make.”

“Hross-lan.” He grabbed for her, missed as she skipped back, giggling. “Scenery, my foot.” Scrambling after her, he kicked into one of the flags, nearly fell over, but righted himself before he landed on his face.

She giggled again, prudently widened the space between them. “Foot, foot, talking of foot. Foot in mouth disease, foot in ... uh!” She took another step back, fell over Magimeez who’d slipped around her and crouched on the flags, landed on her behind and temporarily knocked the wind out of herself.

Rohant scooped her up, threw her over his shoulder and strode off down the path, ignoring the fists beating on his back. When he reached the first wharf, he set her down. “Behave yourself, kitcat.”

She balanced a minute between annoyance and amusement, then opted for laughter. “Just you wait, Ro, just you wait...” She inspected him, noted the sudden apprehension on his broad face and laughed again. “Come on, let’s go inspect that damn studio.”

WATCHER 5

CELL 62

The woman sitting at the sewing machine glanced up from her work, gaped at something across the dick-locking room. The worker next to her noticed the lessened noise, snatched a look, then began staring on her own. The infection spread. Then the first woman got up and walked out, leaving her machine and her work without a word, ignoring the shouts of the overseer. With the same intensity of purpose, the nineteen other women got to their feet and walked out.

CELL 63

The Nakiskwen Gospah scowled at the screens that took transmissions from his Na-priests and the kanaweh sleds they rode by courtesy of the Nistam who might be a brainless idiot but who had the survival instincts of a wolverine.

The roads were freckled with walkers, heading north, heading south, all of them bound for the Pilgrim Way.

He turned to the Na-priest standing beside him, black vizard pushed back, the exposed face more of a mask than the mask itself. “One thought one had kept the rumors out,” he said, his meager features twisted into a scowl.

The Na-priest shrugged. “One has. One has canvassed the Confessors and the Wik priests. No whispers. None. Every Wik in the country is clean. Someone would have heard something about the tattlers if that is how word got through about the Avatars.”

“If they are Avatars and not a fraud dreamed up to catch us napping. What news from your sources in Kwamitaskwen? One wouldn’t put anything past that old buzzard.”

“Nothing there. He’s got the same problems at a slightly less advanced stage, seems to be a factor of distance from the Mistiko Otcha Cicip.”

There was a crack of laughter from the Gospah, then a series of snorts. “Same problems,

eh? That does bear thinking about. Oh yes, it does.”

CELL 52

The Gospah of Kwamitaskwen listened to the whining complaints from the largest of the Plicik landlords, concealing his extreme dislike of the man with an ease born of long practice.

“... what’s one going to do with one’s stock, huh? huh? Tell one that, huh? huh? They walk out on one, they don’t need to expect one is going to take them back, one two three just like that, compensation, there has to be compensation.”

The Kwamitaskwen Gospah tented his hands and smiled blandly at the Plicik thickhead. “One is sure one can arrange for your neighbors to take them in.” He ignored the sudden dismay on the oaf’s face as he visioned the loss of all his Maka serfs and how much it would cost him to replace them. “One needn’t bother oneself about this small Inconvenience. As for compensation, well, it is the Pakoseo Year, so proclaimed from the Heart of the World and Landlaws are suspended for the duration. Ah ... one’s memory becomes more impossible every, day, but one seems to recall one has not received your assessment yet. No problem one is sure. Obviously your accountant was among those who left.”

CELL 1

The room was huge with massive beams in a complicated criss-crossing web of polished wood and broad tapestries on the walls that absorbed the sound from the bright throng circulating slowly about conversation knots like antibodies in an arterial flow. And in the middle of all that brightness and glitter, the small drab form of the Singer. And the larger but still drab form of the Ciocan, the two cats beside him, restless and ill-tempered enough to back off all but the most determined. Kikun was nowhere in sight.

CELL 2

Only one moon of the three was up, Sisipin almost full and not quite at zenith yet. The night was bright with him, the few puffs of cloud shimmering like mother-of-pears. Beside the Great Hall there was a terrace blasted out of the mountain; it was littered with ground vehicles and the sleek closed flits of the visiting elite. There were no guards; no one in Atehana would dare trespass or pilfer up here.

Kikun was a shadow and sometimes less than a shadow, even to the snooping EYE; there were times even the EYE lost him. He wove among the flits, putting a hand on one, then another and another and so on until he chose the one that pleased him; he tried a hatch, opened it with no difficulty and slid inside. He was out again almost immediately, running downhill to the center of the town.

He turned into a small deserted public garden where he’d cached their gear late that afternoon, all but the harpcase. He gathered it up, started trotting back to the terrace and the chosen flit.

Pukanuk Pousli paced restlessly back and forth along the width of the Bridge. He was bored with inaction; the ground agents became more redundant as each day passed, he had little part in the acquisition and the editing of these scenes and less interest in them. He stopped before the central cells and scowled at Kikun laboring up the mountain under his load of luggage. “How long you goin to let ‘em run ... sir?” The last word lagged perceptibly behind the rest.

Ginbiryol Seyrshi pretended to ignore this minor snip-ing. He could have plotted the growth of the Lute’s insolence point by point, almost used it as a calendar to mark the stages of an operation. Once the endgame began, Puk usually came to heel like any hunting dog at the prospect of action, but there was a serious question in Ginbiryol’s mind whether the pattern would repeat this time. And a fear stirring in him that Luck had turned on him, that the Three he had assembled were something more than they seemed; Asteplikota and that woman had said it, Avatars seldom knew what they were. His mind told him that was nonsense, but a coldness spread through him every time he looked at Cell 1 and its neighbors.

Having dealt with that fear by once again refusing to acknowledge its validity, he sat watching the eddies of the party and Kikun's maneuvers and chewing over what he should do. Shadith. She was a focus of this ... this unpredictability, this growing sense of disaster just ahead. He loathed having to abort large sections of a schema and losing much of the nuance he'd been cultivating, but—this aspect of his plan had been going sour from the moment that girl showed up. He was approaching the point where the danger she represented would outweigh her usefulness; in fact, that moment might be now. He lay back in the chair, closed his eyes. He was not accus-tomed to so much vacillation; ordinarily he saw the right path like a red thread through the weave of events and acted on it without doubt or waffling. Now ... it was like fighting through a polluted fog, nothing to tell him where to go or what lay ahead of him.

"Let them take the flit. Yes, let them," he said, his placidity as false as the Avatars. False. Yes. He was sure of that suddenly, they were not gods in disguise come to call him to account; his real trouble was that it had been too long since the last Praisesong, he needed the cathar-sis more than he'd realized. And it would give him the chance to milk some of the piss out of Puk. He smiled and stroked the silky head of the simi as his course of action came clear in his head. "They have done what we brought them for. Rumor will take care of the rest. Too bad though, I would have liked to see them burn. Puk, take the lander. As soon as they are over deep water, you can have your fun with them—as long as you remove all evidence of what happened to them. A little mystery will stir up the animals nicely; we can use the disappear-ance to indict the Wapaskwen Nistam and increase the intensity of the hatred and rage in the rebels and the lesser castes. Go now. You need to be ready when they move. We will let you know the moment the flit lifts off."

Ginbiryol sat where he was for several minutes after Pukanunk Pousli left, then he grunted and straightened up. "Ajeri tisz, get onto Makwahkik and let him know there might—stress might—be an attack on the Kasta late this night or sometime tomorrow night."

Ajeri Kilavez frowned at him. "You think they're re-ally going to get past Puk? He's hot for them, specially that girl. He's got a thing for her, you know that, Ginny. You know what he's like on a blood trail."

"It might be enlightening, Ajeri tisz, to rerun the recording of their progress across that swamp. There is a synergy about that grouping that I find ... interesting. And it seems to be growing more powerful and more directed as the days pass. That is why I have altered my schema. You know how much I dislike altering my sche-mata, Ajeri tisz."

"Yeh, I know. Right. Anything else you want me to tell the Makh Hen, or just what you said."

"Keep it simple, Ajeri tisz. He is a subtle man in his way, a greedy man, he will try to milk all he can from you."

"I hear. Simple it is."

Chapter 15. Maneuverings

The lamplight melted Kiskomaskin's hair to white-gold, played lover's tricks on his mobile minstrel's face. He was taller than Asteplikota, younger, leaner, but there was the blood likeness there, visible only at certain an-gles and in certain configurations, strongest when she least expected it. "How is he?" she said. "I was worried about him."

"Well enough. He's tired, of course, but there's no infection and he's healing nicely." He laid his hand lightly on her shoulder, it was warm and gentle and meant to establish a subtle dominance.

She moved off a step and he didn't pursue that line any longer. His instincts worked subliminally but very efficiently. "I'm glad," she said. "Has he talked to you?"

"Only a few words, mostly family matters." His eyes were fixed on her face, he was smiling slightly, going after her with hypnotic intensity. It seemed to her he needed adoration like other men needed air and he was very practiced at extracting it, especially from women. "Tried to kill you, Aste said. Kanaweh."

"They did their best."

During the first half hour of this cattletrot the yips imported and local had stared, then crowded about her and Rohant and Kikun (though they tended to shy away from the lacertine after their first gush of welcome), but the moment Kiscomaskin and his entourage came in, they backed off and left a polite space around him. He spent a few words on Kikun, then aimed himself at Shadith, his entourage following him though, like the others at the party, they kept their distance as they listened while he courted her, adding their bit to the pressure on her until she couldn't breathe without suck-ing him in. His questioning was much the same as that last night in the Hostel: *Who are you, where'd you come from, what do you think of our world (aside from those bastards trying to kill you), will you help us, will you listen to me explain ...* the same thing but different, nothing of the women's spontaneity, no interest in her beyond what she could do for him, no laughter or warmth in the man, not below the surface glitter, not like Asteplikota, too much anger, too much drive. It was hammering at her, made her increasingly uncomfortable. She couldn't shut him out...

She must have gone pale because he, touched her shoulder again, then strolled away to talk—to Rohant, unde-terred by the big cats flanking the Qom, eyeing with lazy insolence anyone who came near.

One of the men in the entourage looked up as he passed her, met her eyes. A small man, dark, with a bony sardonic face. A familiar face and so it should be, Aleytys spent a year in and out of his bed when she was still looking for her mother and Shadith was still trapped in the diadem, a concatenation of forcelines improbably alive.

Arel the Smuggler at it again. He won't be selling the kind of arms those types want, not him, everything else though, whatever the hopeful rebel needs. Hmm! Free to go, in and out, ferret down a hole, nose about, scat when he's finished. I wonder ... No! I go near him, any of us try it .. no! I imagine he still counts on his talent for sliding to stay loose, there'll be nothing on his ship hot enough' to light a match. It's fast, but Ginny's got the high ground, and the firepower. Gods, yes, and the fire power. Tsoukbaraim! it'd be so good to pile in and run for it. I didn't run before when I had a chance, maybe not much of a chance, but something ... it was probably a mistake, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know....

Joran followed a pace behind as always, pointed ears twitching, quietly lethal, not liking this crowd much, but he never did like crowds.

Joran. Fascinating to be a fly on the wall if he ever went after Puk the Lute. I'd bet the house on that old killer. Puk wouldn't know what hit him.

She'd come across Arel and Joran again when she was in her own body, the time on Avosing while she was there hunting for Grey. They were nose to nose for a few minutes at the Smuggler's Market in Keama Dusta, Arel, Joran and her, but neither of the men should have reason to remember her ... she rubbed at the hawk outline burned into her cheek ... out there for everyone to see ... and remember ... a lot of people have odd marks on them, she was just another customer passing by....

Unless he got hold of some rumors about what hap-pened later ... plenty of talk about, me and Linfyar and the dreamsongs. And Aleytys....

Sar! the man did recognize her, he was going to stop.

Hastily she gave him a warn-off, a flutter of the fingers as she slid a zipper open an inch and drew it shut again.

Did he get it? Riiight, way to go, little man. And so he should, seeing it's him who taught these signs to Lee and me—though he sure didn't know about me those days, I wasn't very visible on the scene ... gods, not like now, not when I need a little invisibil-ity. He wouldn't break his schedule for her, but he was REALLY hooked on Aleytys. Aren't they all, the men littering her backtrail. Grey, Swar.... Come on, Shadow, no time for that. If I play this right ... screw Ginnyl I foxed that creep guard, ru fox him, too. Right. He's signing now.

What? Ah. What trou-ble? Gotcha, A.R.E.L. Yeh, I know your name. Trouble (big). Mean. Me (a) focus. Keep off. Dan-ger. EYE watching) everything. Stomp (you) like a roach.

Despite the wine glass she was still holding, her fingers moved with growing fluency in the abbreviated signs that seemed little more than the ordinary twitches and fiddles of someone bored or nervous. Slippery little man that he was, Arel stood chatting casually with Joran, eyes flick-ing at her and away, fingers acknowledging her signals, spelling back to her what she spelled for him.

A.L.E.Y.T.Y.S. (to her) Get word. S.H.A.D.O.W. Here. Need help. Hurry. Watch (out) for G.LN.N.Y. S.E.Y.LR.S.H.I. Got (the word)? Good. You help(?) No no no. Stay clear(!!!) Get out fast. Quiet. Fast(!) Quiet(!)

He ambled off, Joran falling into his usual half-pace behind, the two men merging without fuss into the crowd gathered about Kiscomaskin and the Ciocan.

She gulped down the last of the wine in her glass and glanced around. No one was interested in her at the moment; some of the locals were clumped in small groups or moving into new ones, involved in the politics of sex or power, the others were gathered about Rohant and Kiscomaskin, sucking in the exchange between the two men. She listened a moment, smiled. From the sound of his growl, Rohant was growing impatient, liking the pres-sure Kiscomaskin was putting on him about as little as she had. And he was getting more of it.

The leader of the band. Rah! Adult male, more or less like the locals, not some freak like Kikun or a child like me. Where is Kikun? Hope he hasn't run into trouble out there. Tsoukbaraim! More touchy-feelies coming _at me. We got to get out of here before I lose it and say some things I'd be better keeping to myself.

Shadith moved about the Hall, talking, nodding, smil-ing until her face hurt, drinking too much of the local amtapishka wine which was delicate in flavor but decep-tive in potency, eating fingerfoods until she was stuffed and sticky. And in a rage at having to satisfy the curiosity of idiots while her need to get away grew more and more urgent.

Jauza xenophobes, boot the stinking bigot assholes into orbit, what do I care, let Ginny screw them all. You're drunk, Shadow. Damn right, I'm drunk and I'm bored and I hate this place and never was a vip worth the powder to blow the arrogant jauz to hell. Maybe even Lee when she's being bitch-one. Some-times I can't stand her, much as I love her. Weeping mama, delicate plant, wringing her dainty hands over what she won't stay and help fix, tchah! Every vip in the Islands has to be here, looking us over, I sup-pose, seeing if we're what we claim to be. Never mind we didn't want to come here in the first place. Working our butts off to get the hell away before some jauzo dickhead gets us killed. Sar! I wouldn't be surprised if they'd like us to be so bent we can eat dinner off the soles of our feet. Gets iffy playing with gods. Anything to do the dirty on the Main. Play kissyface with a Wetlands slither if he'd shit on the Nistam's foot. Even the priests, look at him, holy Gospah and his handy torturers in their neat little masks. About as holy as a pigturd ... huh! I should apologize to pigs. Look at him, laying down the law to poor old Rohant. Old lion showing his fangs. Bite the bastard, why don't you! And we're only second billing at this party. Our spellcasting rebel, he's the one that's really IT, ohhh yehhh. Golden man playing the prince. I like your brother, you can go to hell, clown. Na, not clown, that's insulting little lizard over there. At least he's REAL. Not you, pretty boy. Hollow man, full of hollow sounds, all of them echoing ME ME ME. Gods, I think I'm going to be sick, where's that what did they call it? Convenience. Better find it before I decorate the floor with some used hordoves.

She came back still shaky but feeling more alive. The body she'd claimed was better than most and it was young enough to recover quickly when abused—which she'd been doing a good job of just now.

Kikun was waiting for her, leaning against the wall looking tired and unhappy, the harpcase by his feet. She stood beside him a moment. The Hall stank of aging perfumes and sweaty bodies, lampoil and woodsmoke, alcohol and spicy food that had been sitting around too long; it boomed and twittered with the sound of voices, the idle tootling and tunking from the flute-and-drum band up in the gallery. "Let's do it," she said.

Kikun straightened, slid the strap over his shoulder. "Wait for you outside."

"Right." Pasting a smile on her face, she plunged into the fug.

Rohant stood by the door surrounded (not too close—the big cats were on their feet, tails switching, snarling whenever they felt crowded) by a herd of flirty matrons, his ears drawn back flat against his head under the as-sault from cascades of silvery giggles. Most of the Judges and the other male 'yips were at the other end of the Hall, gathered about Kiscomaskin, preening while he courted them as assiduously as he had Shadith. She el-bowed her way to Rohant's side, tapped Magimeez on the nose, touched the Ciocan's arm. "Ciocan Rohant," she said firmly, "I NEED some fresh air. Come walk with me." She turned her plastic smile on the women. "You will excuse us a few minutes, I'm sure."

* * *

The cool saltcrisp night was like ointment on a burn; she stopped on the steps and sucked in a long breath—which was a mistake because the alcohol hit her hard. She swayed and giggled, forgot about Ginny listening and tried to tell them about Arel and the message, but her tongue got so twisted between competing langues all she got out was nonsense.

Rohant snorted with disgust, scooped her up, and went trotting off after Kikun, Magimeez and Nagafog frisking beside him, happy to be out of that oppressive crowd. Sassa came swooping down from a perch high on the facade, screeched a greeting to his tie-Rohant and went sweeping away in wide loops, gaining height with each turn.

The terrace was filled with soft sounds that merged into a pillowy quiet lying heavily over the crouched beetle-forms of the flits and the smaller groundcars. Several somethings with wings flew by overhead, driven into panic by the presence of the raptor; a small rodent with large round ears scuttled from under a groundcar as they moved past it. Shadith started giggling again. Rohant growled, clamped a hand over her mouth and walked faster. "Eh, Kikun. Drivers? Guards?"

"In there." He jabbed his thumb at the building be-hind them. "There's a room set aside for them. Easy goes round here." He started off, heading toward a large flit at the edge of the terrace. "I loaded the gear in that one over there, the black and silver job."

Rohant grunted, stopped walking and glared at the sky.

Kikun looked back. "What?"

Rohant shifted his grip on Shadith; her breathing had slowed, steadied, she wasn't quite asleep, but not far from it. "I'm thinking him up there, he wants us to get out, he could've stomped on this an hour ago."

"You want to go back in?"

"Na." He looked down at Shadith. "She said it, slam ahead hard and see if the momentum will carry us. Get the door open, let's hit the road."

WATCHER 6

CELL 1

The flit lifted without fuss. In the cabin Shadith was stretched out on a padded bench, snoring a little. She lay belly down, her face turned to one side, flushed and puffy. One arm had flopped down, the back of her hand pressed into the harsh pile of the khaki carpet covering the floor. Kikun sat on the floor, watching her.

Rohant turned the flit directly west, increased speed to maximum and clicked on the otto:P. He started rummaging through the abdits around the pilot's chair, grunted with satisfaction as he came up with a book of maps. "Kikun...." He looked around. "Let her sleep it off, she'll be all right."

Kikun jerked his right hand in an impatient gesture. "She is very troubled. There are things I don't understand about her."

"Dio! Kikun, there's an encyclopedia I don't understand about either of you. Come round here. I want you to do some dowsing for me."

Vaguely uneasy, disturbed as much by his uncertainty as by what he was seeing, Ginbiryol Seyirshi watched the flit lift off. He turned to Ajeri Kilavez. "Do you have an answer from Makwahkik yet?"

She wrinkled her nose, waggled a finger at one of the cells. "Look there, you can see he's still down with the go-between, trying to wring more information out of him. Stupid. They got all the yobba hours ago. I could try going through that Na-priest Puk's running, if you don't mind uncovering an asset."

For something as unlikely as that flit getting away from Puk is what you mean, Ginbiryol thought. You are get-ting uppity also, Ajeri my sweet. I shall have to do something about that. Though perhaps you are right this time. No. That girl changed in the middle somewhere and it was not the wine that did it. Something happened. Something unobtrusive that I missed but she did not. Clever child. Too clever to trust. I had better run that recording again, tight focus on her face. Take care of this business first. Decide and forget. For the moment. "We will let it rest for the moment. Makwahkik is not a stupid man. He should soon realize the futility of questioning that fool for data he has not got. As soon as he returns to his quarters, make sure he receives the warning. You have alerted Puk?"

"Yeh, soon's the flit was off the ground. I'll feed in course data once they've settled on their line, shouldn't be long now."

"Yes. You sent an EYE with Puk?"

"Certainly, sir. I was sure you'd want to see the attack and the outcome. Its send is coming into 2; long as the Avatars are together, we can spare one channel."

"Yes. Good. I will be at the workstation for some time, I do not know precisely how long. When the attack seems imminent, Ajeri tisz, call me."

"Certainly, sir."

The simi chattered in annoyance as Ginbiryol set him aside, but settled to a mutter-filled brooding as his mas-ter ignored him and moved with ponderous dignity across the Bridge.

Ginbiryol scanned the recordings of the party. Over-view first, marking the movements of the Three, hunting for anyone who seemed to be paying peculiar attention to the Avatars. Nothing. Much gush and maneuver to get near the girl or the Dyslaeror, but nothing worth a sec-ond thought. He reran the record, focusing on the girl, paying special attention to her moments with Kiscomaskin. She didn't like him. Might even call her hostile. That surprised Ginbiryol—and disturbed him. He was seldom so wrong about people's reactions. This mistake might be dangerous, might mean there was a flaw in his plans. A flaw that should be corrected when Puk was finished with the Avatars, but—not necessarily.

He ran the section with Kiscomaskin again but found nothing to justify his unease; he fast forwarded past the section where she was standing by herself, followed her on her ramble around the room....

"Ginny." Ajeri's voice broke through his concentra-tion, acerbic, impatient. "Puk has the flit in view."

He frowned at Shadith's small drab figure as she started to sway, the wine taking hold, turned the frown on Ajeri. He disliked being interrupted and he objected to the tone of her voice, but he touched off the replay without comment and returned to the Captain's Chair.

CELL 1

The flit was speeding along a few meters above the water. Inside, Shadith was still asleep, turned on her side now, her knees drawn up, one hand tucked under her cheek; she was flushed and rosy and locked about ten. Kikun was kneeling beside her, frowning at her, stroking her delicately with his fingertips, inspecting them as if they could provide some answers to what confused him about the girl.

Rohant was stretched out with the pilot chair tilted almost flat; his feet were on the console and he was dozing, a muscle jumping by his mouth, the tips of his ears twitching. Sassa was perched on the arm-of the co chair, dozing. The cats were on the floor beside

Kikun, curled up together, also asleep.

Kikun looked up, startled; he'd been subliminally aware of the follower, but too focused on Shadith to let his awareness surface. Now the danger was too near to ignore. He slapped Shadith's face, shook her. When she sat up, muttering and blinking, he left her and scooted over to Rohant, shook him. "Ciocan, wake up. Trouble."

Rohant woke fast, his feet swung down, the chair snapped straight, his hands came down on the console and the screen lit up. He saw the lander driving toward them. "Ginny?"

"So-so."

"Dio!" Rohant dropped the flit until white-capped swells were slapping against its base, at the same time wrenching it around until it was for a moment racing toward the lander.

A breath later, he flung the groaning flit to one side, dropping until he kicked up a cocktail of white spray, another breath he jerked the flit up and through another turn, then another and another. While the Ciocan satisfied his need to keep fighting though even he knew it was futile, Kikun scrambled back to Shadith, began a shuddering dance....

CELL 2

Puk watched the dark bug skim along the waves, the image breaking up again and again and seeming to merge with the heaving black water, though it wasn't supposed to do that, there was nothing in the visi-system that would initiate such interference.

He worked over the sensorboards for several minutes, trying to clear up the trouble, but he stopped fiddling when the flit passed the inner ring of the firing range; he wanted them as close as he could get them, he wanted to taste that death. He

knew Ginny was recording it and him, he was greedy for that, he wanted to exhibit his lust and its satisfaction. He'd done this before, performed for Ginny's productions, but this was the first time he'd got a part in a major effort, a Limited Edition. He began arming his rats and shrikes, cursing as he fought to lock them onto a target that was proving as illusive as something in a dream. He glared at the screen; the flit was in shards, the readings were flickering as if the mass of the object was shifting aimlessly about. Since he didn't have the actual center available, he set his point-of-aim on the computed masscenter, bared his teeth in a feral grin, and tripped the trigger on the firing jack.

As Cell 1 blanked, Ginbiryol Seyirshi smiled and folded his hands over his stomach. The missiles had ashed the EYEs set on the Avatars along with their flit. In Cell 2, Pukanunk Pousli was leaning forward tensely, scanning the screen, his fingers playing over the console as he used every sensor available to him to sweep the surface of the sea and the air around him. When he found nothing, not *even* debris from the flit, he relaxed. "Gotcha," he said, excited triumph shrilling his voice.

Ginbiryol shifted in his Chair. "Ajeri, have you reached Makwahkik yet?"

"I was about to before Puk did his pounce. You want me to cancel?"

Ginbiryol got to his feet, stood a moment frowning at the gray emptiness of Cell 1. "No," he said finally. "Tell him what I said to tell him. Just in case that ..." he pointed at the Cell, "... is not as final as it seems. If necessary we can prod one of our assets into organizing an attack. I think it would be as well to stir things up to a degree, Makwahkik has become too complacent, he has been ignoring our interests."

Ginbiryol followed Shadith's progress about the Hall as she drank glass after glass of the wine and had increasing difficulty maintaining a facade of courtesy as she dealt with the locals. When she found a moment's respite half hidden by a fold of tapestry, he halted the run and played the sequence over in his mind. I made a mistake, he thought. Whatever it was happened after KiscoMaskin left her.

He ran back to the beginning and brought up the image until her face filled the screen, slowed the play until he could see every twitch magnified. Second by second he examined the slow shift of her expressions. He saw nothing to interest him ... nothing ... nothing... then a slight darkening of her eyes as her pupils widened, then a tightening of the muscles in her face, a change so slight he would have missed it except for the exaggeration of slowtime. He cycled through that section until her face loosened up and her gaze went vague again, shifted to the beginning of that section, took a light pencil and marked what he considered significant changes.

He thought a minute, then slid the POV around until he was viewing the scene from behind her shoulder and started the run as Kiscomaskin walked off. The mark from the light pencil flared. He froze the scene and found himself looking into the eyes of a small dark man, saw the pupils dilate. Recognition quickly suppressed. Ginbiryol cycled back to the point when Kiscomaskin touched the girl's shoulder, smiled at her and moved off, followed by his entourage; the man seemed to be one of those. He stopped the play, went back to the point where Kiscomaskin came in. Yes, he thought, there he is. I do not know him, I have not seen him before. Local? I doubt it. Offworlder. Smuggler? Probably. And he knows the girl. That could be trouble. He let the recording run until he was back to the moment when the man's eyes met the girl's, then froze the scene and drew a circle about the offworlder's face. He tied into MEMORY and started a search.

While it was running, he turned to the Pilot. Ajeri Kilavez was watching him, one leg crossed over the other, her foot bouncing with impatience. "Come here," he said. When she was beside him, he tapped the screen. "Do you know this man?"

"No."

"He knew the girl."

"So? What's the point?"

"Look at him. An obvious offworlder. Have you forgotten who her friends are? If she managed to get a message to him, do you understand what that means?"

"Yes. Did she?"

"I do not know yet. Wake Number One and call him up here. That first, then get EYES to Kiscomaskin's base, set up a grid, search the area. If you do it properly, you should find a Lander or perhaps a small starship. Destroy it as soon as you locate it. When you have a moment, call Puk back, tell him to get here fast."

"Yes, sir."

"Questions?"

"You want a rush job, like get it done an hour ago?"

"Yes."

After she left, he sat with his hands one on top the other, resting on his slight paunch, waiting patiently for the search to finish.

The screen flickered, information began to scroll past.

Arel, Vejtar y Kleftis age: approx 73, ananile stablized 35+

ht: 167.6 cm weight: 61 kg idf mks: mole, left buttock upper quadrant; lash cuts, back, left, upper quadrant, right an-kle, back of left knee; small toe missing, right foot; lobe missing right ear; small scars (shig bites) lower abdomen, left side of face; burn scars, right arm, back of right hand.

Homeworld: Lyeta Kayets, Kalakoristeh system

Smuggler, small time, will deal in weapons but only certified antiques and lowpower pellet shooters; no energy weapons or highXP, nothing nuclear; prefers perfumes, gems, rare substances; has dealt in ananiles (very cautiously) and pseudo ananiles; will take on just about anything portable that he thinks has value.

No convictions

Deported as persnongrat:

Supigger worlds (came close to a term at contract labor but through judicious bribery slipped clear)

Kat'yevla combine (threats of castration, came to nothing, no information as to why that particular punishment was proposed)

First entry: Irsud

(qv Ffynch Company records, re failure. to capture or stop penetration into Ffynch Co space)

Penultimate entry: Avosing

(qv free trader grapevine re Ajin rebellion)

Ultimate entry: Kiskai
(qv current recordings)

Ginbiryol contemplated the data before him. Shadith was too young and too unimportant to have made an impression on the universe, so there was no point in searching for a direct connection between her and Arel. He rubbed at his nose. Yes, he thought. Why not. "Is there any link between Arel and the Hunter Aleytys?"

The screen flickered, cleared, filled.

Irsud: *qv* Ffynch Co reports. Acc'd to Fynch Rep: the woman Aleytys (not yet Hunter) pres-ent at funeral pyre Nayid Old Queen. Disappeared later. Subsequent disruption among ruling Nayids and shutdown of Ffynch Post likely connected to that de-parture. Enforcer report: Arel spotted leaving. Stingship sent in pursuit. Van-ished. Probably destroyed. Means of de-struction unknown. Smuggler untouched. Suggestion: Arel took the woman offplanet.

Maeve: *qv* Wei-Chu-Hsien reports, re Chu Man-hanu scandal, Arel briefly mentioned, noted as involved in subversion of W-C-H monopoly of maranhedd trade. Aleytys reported onworld after Arel's departure, involved with lorAls against Company. First contact Hunters Inc, hired thereafter.

Avosing: *qv* Freetrader report to Guild MEMORY re abortive Ajin rebellion.

Arel reported present at Smuggler's mar-ket, Keama Dusta at a time roughly co-inciding with presence of Aleytys on Avosing. Her purpose there and activi-ties unknown to freetraders. i ncal s close-mouthed with outsiders. Contact possible but not verifiable.

Ginbiryol scowled, blanked the screen. He sat tapping his fingers on the chairarm. Slippery. No convictions, only one close call registered. If he gets off the ground, he will be hard to find and harder to catch. He brought up the record of the party, recentered it on Arel.

"Sir."

"Ah, Raqab. Do you know that man?"

Raqab (Number One) inspected the face, shook his head. "No, sir."

"You remember this one, of course." He split the screen and pulled up Shadith's image.

"Yes, sir. Her I remember."

"I understand you know several systems of hand signs."

"Hand and body, sir."

"I want you to watch these two persons and tell me if they are signing and if so, what they are saying."

"What is his profession, sir? That might help."

"Smuggler."

"The systems I know are mostly military, sir."

"I understand. Do what you can." Ginbiryol fiddled a moment, arranged an alternation of frontal images of Shadith and the smuggler, then sat back and waited for Raqab to evaluate and respond.

"There, sir. See that flutter of the girl's fingers as she plays with the zipper? That's a warn-off, universal. His signs—I can't read 'em, might's well forget showing him. Probably he just wants to know what she's talking about. Ah, there, she's spelling something', I think ... ah ... I can make a guess, there's enough similarity to FLUSN basic ... A.R.E.L. Does that make sense? Something, something, has a feeling of more warning, but I can't read it. More spelling. A.L.E.Y.T.Y.S. something S.H.A.D.O.W. something G.I.N.N.Y. S.E.Y.I.R.S.H.I. something, a strong warning, I think, telling him to get away from her fast. That's about it."

"Yes. Well ... thank you, Raqab, you may return to your quarters. There will be a bonus added to your stipend to show my appreciation for your efforts."

"Thank you, sir."

Ginbiryol waited until he'd left, then he cleared the station and walked slowly back to watch Ajeri

Kilavez at work. She'd wiped half a dozen cells and was using these to organize the search pattern. "Anything yet?"

"Early days, Ginny, barely got the EYEgrid in place."

"Finding that ship has become extremely urgent."

"Why don't I send Puk over there? The lander's got the firepower to take out a considerably bigger ship than that smuggler's pram is like to be. And he could do a backup spiral, the grid's coarse, not enough EYES to make it finer, even if I ship out the nearest from the Main, they'd get there too late to be useful."

"Yes. Do that. Tell him the smuggler is carrying a message from that girl to the Hunter and has the clout to reach her without wasting time. It seems he is an old friend of hers."

"We're in a nest of them, looks like."

"Yes. It will not be necessary to abort the project if he does slip through the grid, she cannot possibly arrive in less than three months, it will all be over by then. When you get finished there, start the assessment for planting the Banger. When we go, we leave a cinder, let her deal with that if she can."

Chapter 16. How come we're still alive?

Shadith woke in a chill, rolling, yawning darkness.

Fighting back the vomit that rose in her throat, she groped about; by accident or the planning of the de-signer, one hand bumped a button and a light came on behind her head, pale, whitish gray. She was in a narrow tube with rounded ends like a gel capsule. The uncomfortable hardness pressing on her legs was her harpcase, the lump that prevented her knees from straightening was her travelpouch.-She squeezed her eyes shut.

Memory came in fragments:

Kikun shaking her out of a sodden, dream-ridden sleep, at first it seemed just more nightmare when he told her they were about to die....

Kikun dancing....

Rohant diving toward her, scooping her up, throw-ing her into ... aid an escape capsule, her head banging on something, hard.... That's it. Out lights and slide.

Escape capsule?

She fumbled around, found a tube marked WATER, pulled it from its clip and sucked in a mouthful of stale, lukewarm liquid. Her throat felt better immediately, but her stomach cramped and she had to swallow fast to keep her dinner down.

Ginny! Must have decided we were too much trouble for whatever benefit he got from us. Sent Puk to erase the mistake, sar! the Lute must have enjoyed that. He's wanted to do me since the first time he laid hands on me. So why am I still alive? Only one answer to that. Kikun. Clowndancer god. He saves us one more time and I'm going to join his congrega-tion. Did he get out, too? Rohant? The cats? Well, don't lay about biting your nails, Shadow, have a look and see.

After another cautious sip at the watertube, she closed her eyes and reached.

Seabird. Like those she watched in Atehana Bay. Out past his usual round. He was gliding in wide circles, shifting from thermal to thermal, the joy of flight perme-ating mind and body. She settled in him, enjoyed the flight for a few moments, then took hard control of his brain and scanned the water. Her capsule was a bright yellow pill riding on the glittering blue swells. Alone. Being blown along by a strong wind away from the faint line of red that marked the horizon.

Blown west. Dawn at my back. Don't see land either way. Just a bunch of clouds. How far

out are we?

She sent the seabird spiraling higher, then drove it toward the dawnline.

Two capsules bobbed close together. When the bird flew over them, Shadith tasted at them.

The Cats, mad as hell, both of them, I'd hate to be the one opens those capsules. Hmm, means I'm head-ing the right way. I think.

The bird was growing restive. She tightened her hold and sent him on.

Still no sign of land. Long way to swim. Ah! That's a relief.

Two more capsules floated between adjacent swells. She *tasted at* the nearest and smiled. Kikun. Unmistak-able. In good health, as far as she could judge. She blinked.

And Sassa. He's got Sassa in there with him, poor damn bird, must be going woowoo shut up like that. No. Ah well, I suppose that's Kikun, too. Rohant in the next. Irritated and bored. Aren't we all. Are not we all. First thing. Get together. All right, fishbreath, go where you want and don't I wish I was you.

She lay back and closed her eyes; her throat was still a disaster, her head was throbbing and her energy level was so low even dying was too much of an effort to contemplate at that moment.

I suppose I should eat something. These things are bound to have emergency rations. Tubes of glop. Gah.

After a few minutes of poking around, she found a cache of hipropaste, tubes labeled in interlingue, part of the stores the locals acquired when they bought the flit from some freetrader, gods only knew when.

She squirted the grayish paste into her mouth, hastily washed it down with gulps of water; it was worse than anything anyone had told her. Maybe it was the sensory equipment of this body that made the stuff so foul, maybe the gunk was turning rancid. Whichever was the case, though, it did its work, settled her stomach (more than a little improbably) and cleared her head. She shud-dered, gulped some more water and started *searching* for a seabeast large enough and with the necessary confor-mation to act as a pushboat.

Sar! this is getting to be booorrrring. Get 'em up, ride 'em ow, cowboy, or should I say cowgirl? Get your nose up, whale, and SHOVE! Funny looking whale. A double dozen legs and a grin like a buzzsaw. Slither's big brother and I do mean BIG. Nudge me along. Not like that, dammit! The way Pm collecting bruises I could set up as the tattooed lady any fair. Ease off. Ease off. That's it. Almost there. Easy now, eeeeasy ... ouch! Damn. Blessings be, noth-ing's broke, not even me. Poor old Nagafog, he's in a mood to chew nails. Can't say I blame him, knocked about like this all the time and shut in some subrate cousin to a tin can. Now how do I work this? Line up the pills ... hey, the thing's smarter than I thought. And it likes this game. That's right, baby, pit-a-pat us along. Eeeeasy, these pills got breakable innards. That's right, one two three,—straight ahead, that's a lovely little sea monster. Pit-a-pat, gently gently and on we go. Sing a song of silliness, pocket full of peas, four and twenty tentacles awhippin up the seas ... heyyyy, baby, talk about whipping along, we're smoking it up. Making the algae cry uncle. Gods! I'm getting seasick. This is NO way to work off a hangover. Why oh why did I drink all that amtapishka squeezing? Uh-oh, we're getting close. What do I want to do now? This is working fine ... thing is, can the toothfarm out there handle five? These cap-sules must be putting out some kind of beep. We could sit and wait for someone to pick us up. I don't want to sit about waiting, I'm tired of playing clever and looking so hard ten steps ahead I don't see the hole in front of me. Let's do it. There's some kind of land straight west, if we go far enough. All right, my little motive power, line up the pretty yellow pills and shove.

It was not a comfortable ride; the seabest played with the capsules as he pushed them along, tapping and turn-ing them until Shadith felt like a pea in a rattle. At times she thought of calling it off before the lot of them were battered into mush, but she didn't. The sea was shallow-ing. The land HAD to be getting closer.

What's that? Beastie's getting nervous. What?

There was a dull throb growing louder and louder, a pulsing in the water she heard through the Swimmer's ear patches, a noise that made the beast twitch all over.

Surf? Reefs? Hold on, li'l monster. A bit farther and maybe we can break out and swim to shore....

The beast screamed suddenly, she felt the swell and scrape of the shout in her own throat; he fought her hold and because she'd been driving him lightly, just a touch now and then to keep him moving, he broke free and began swimming frantically for deeper water.

Shadith let him go. She didn't understand his panic, but she felt its power through the link that joined them and knew she'd better look round for what touched it off.

When she *reached*, she found sweeping spirals of sea-birds filling the skies.

That many birds, they wouldn't be more than a kilometer or two offshore, would they? Ahlahlah, I wish I knew more about the sea....

She slid into one of the larger birds and scanned the water around the capsules.

Tsoukbaraiml Not surf. Steamer? Something's pump-ing smoke out that funnel. A warship of some kind. Bow could slice onions and look at those cannons! Coming like its tail's on fire. Sari Might as well be yelling Get out of my way, I'll stomp you if you don't. No wonder old toothface split. And what you bet it's coming for us? Yeh. It's slowing. Stopping. Didn't know you could stop in the middle of the ocean like that.

The capsule split around her.

Hands were reaching in, pulling her out, pulling out the harpcase and her travelpouch. The wind was very cold and the sudden brightness of the morning sun was like broken glass. Her legs were shaky and her knees kept threatening to unhinge so she was grateful for the arms that held her up, though she didn't much like the avid curiosity in the faces of the young navas pressing about her. She blinked and pushed away—and saw they were about to open Nagafog's capsule. Even without trying she could feel his rage and bloody intent. "Wait," she cried, or thought she did. The word was a croak and dropped like a stone. Impatiently she pushed at the hands that reached for her again and half-ran, half-fell across the short stretch of deck to the capsule that was already beginning to crack open. She wasn't worried about the navas, he might bloody one or two of them, but she knew only too well he'd be shot before he had a chance to get a good massacre started and she couldn't see any reason for wasting a creature only doing what his nature demanded. Besides, she was a lot fonder of him than she was of this world or its people. Hoping they'd hesitate to shoot a girlchild, she flung herself in front of the big cat and *froze him as he* shoved his head and forelegs through the gap.

"Don't open any more of them until I have him calm,"

she screamed; this time she was loud enough to be heard.

As she worked with Nagafog, rubbing at his head, strok-ing under his chin, touching all his peacepoints, she heard the shouted order to keep away (from someone with a loud voice and the arrogance of command), then she heard muted mutters, the scrape of feet on the metal deck. "That's a good li'l ki-cat," she murmured, "good baby. I know, I know, stuck in the dark and banged around like that, goooood cat, pretty cat, looove the cat, Nagaaa Fogegee, Nagee, good cat, let those little mus-cles go loose, that's it, goooood cat..." She laughed as she felt the tension flow out of him and heard a basso purr break loose. "All right, baby, you sit there and enjoy and I'll unpack Magi for you."

She got, to her feet, looked calmly around until she spotted the Pihtipli (Captain of a Steamship)

leaning over rails about a platform of sorts that was the flat roof of a flit cradle; she smiled at him, knowing he thought he was safe up there from her and the cats.

Fool. Nagafog can jump twice that from a standing start and will if you give me cause.

She turned her back on him and located Magimeez. Pointing to the capsule, she said, “That one next, open it and give me room to work. Then you can open the others, there’s no problem with them.”

Sassa stood on the deck, shaking himself, flexing his wings, then he screamed his anger and delight and launched himself into the wind, cold wet wind that fought him until he won control of it and soared free.

Kikun leaned against Shadith, shrunken and shivering, his skin a nubbly green-gray rag hanging lank on his bones; once again he’d half destroyed himself to save them, this time from Puk’s malice and his missiles. Magimeez and Nagafog were stretched out on the deck beside the Ciocan, making their muscles ripple and switching their tails, pleased with the attention they were getting. Rohant was ignoring everyone with gloomy intensity, working the knots out of his muscles and his temper.

They were surrounded by AWE, battered by AWE. Rohant might pretend to ignore it, but he felt it. Kikun fed on it, used it to plump himself out again—which disturbed Shadith despite her fondness for the little man and all she owed him. She fought the smother and heard, dimly, the Pihtatipli yelling orders to his men.

After this is over I’d better get Lee to show me how to block inflow or I’m going to burn out. This Reading thing keeps getting stronger on me.

She rubbed at her eyes, shivered, moved closer to Rohant, using him and the cats to shield her from the emotional battering.

Watching the Three every spare moment, the navas shut down the beepers and dropped the capsules over-side, cracked open so they’d sink to the bottom and stay there.

Shadith watched them go with considerable satisfac-tion. Puk thought they were dead or he wouldn’t have gone off and left them. If he asked the EYES, maybe even Ginny thought they were dead. She sighed. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t last long. The Pihtatipli’s ambi-tion was skunk strong; the minute he hit shore, half the world would know what he fished from the sea.

Aina’iril. Seems like we’ve spent a year trying to get there, and now I’d rather not go. Wonder if Arel got off all right? Should I tell the others about him? No. He’s the Jack up my sleeve, my Wildcard. Definitely we should go for the skipcom, best to have two shots, make sure one gets through.

“Hunter.” The Pihtatipli was leaning over the rail again, looking eager.

The Ciocan stared back. “What?”

“Will you come below? You will be more comfortable.” Shadith sniffed, pulled her mouth down.

Almost wagging his tail, and so he should, how he’s planning to use us. Come on, Ro, give him an answer, I’m freezing my ass off out here.

As soon as the Three were settled in the Tipli’s Quar—

ters (the Pihtatipli hovering hospitably, leaving the run-ning of the ship to his Second), the engines were brought up and the destroyer began racing for the harbor at Aina’iril.

WATCHER 7

The cluster of Cells focused on the Pilgrim Road were filling up with hordes of people as if the countries along the Road were draining into it. Ginbiryol Seyirshi scanned them repeatedly, tightening the focus onto individual eccentricities of the pilgrims, rejecting all but a few of the images, blending the remnant into a collage to heighten the feel of a swarm building toward an immensity power-ful enough to eat the land.

Rebel activity in Nakiskwen (west coast), Kwamitas-kwen (central plains), Kwamaskwen (north plains) and Swamiskwen (south coast) dipped to nothing as the population decreased to a skeleton of skeptics and thieves (public and private); in Wapaskwen (east coast) where the Mistiko Otcha Cicip was, where everyone was going, the rebels were growing more frantic, more disorganized—more violent. Ginbiryol clucked with satisfaction as he tasted and took scene after scene of burning and bombing, of streetfights and stoning, of kanaweh and kipaos killing and being killed, of Na-priests on the Question floor doing torture by the numbers because there was too much work for personal attention; what had been art was now mechanical process. The Pliciks drew in on them—

selves, retreated behind armed guards, bars, and a hardening resistance to change.

Ginbiryol labored steadily at his assemblage until he heard an exclamation from Ajeri Kilavez. He looked up. “What is it, Jeri tisz?”

“Smuggler’s pram. He’s offworld and scooting for the Limit, Puk’s on his tail, no chance of catching that pram, but he might get a missile off in time ... yes, there it goes. Missed! Shit.”

“Language, Ajeri tiszteh. Continue, please.”

“Puk’s after him ... more missiles ... the pram must have a slide shield, it’s slipp’rier than a bead of mercury ... Puk’s dropping behind fast, I’ve never seen anything go like that slublight, ‘specially that size ... Puk’s still trying, but he hasn’t got a hope ... you want me to keep on?”

“No. Call him back, there is no point in continuing this. Have you begun the Crust assessment yet?”

“The kephalos is working on that now ...” she touched a sensor, scanned the readout, “it’ll be finished in approximately twenty minutes. You want a preliminary, or shall I call you?”

“Call me.” He went back to his editing, dumping and saving, cutting and juxtaposing, focusing down or expanding to wideshots.

CELL 44

Children with Pakoseo ribbons tied in their hair clapped hands in a circle dance about other children who were swinging folded paper birds from strings tied to long slicks; they shouted the Nataminaho Song, the Hunter singing to the birds and beasts:

He is coming, Nataminaho the Hunter is coming, run before him for he will take you to feed the People.

Around them the marching adults smiled indulgently but stopped them after a short while so they wouldn’t exhaust themselves and have to be piled on the supply wagons in order to keep up with their families in that grueling, all day, day on day on day march.

CELL 45

Fires dotted the Plain from horizon to horizon along the Pilgrim Road, north and south, east and west.

Ghostdancers in black and white paint came out of the dark and danced their secret, subversive, and very sacred mime tales. They danced to ancient music, music that belonged to them alone, that was never heard outside the secret societies except on the Pakoseo trek, music that was forbidden by the Gospahs and lightside priests of all degrees, music that brought the singer, musician, or dancer instantly to the Question if he was discovered. The list was endless, that name roll of ghostdancers forced to deny and abandon their rites, their dances, their music; whole families seemed to lose ancient, hidden traditions, but the patterns survived, the music lived, the dances were performed and passed on, generation to generation. And every Pakoseo had its ghostdancers, as if the earth herself spawned them in swarms too vast to count.

CELL 46

Tagwit priests stirred the vast cauldrons of beans and soup, starting new pots as soon as one was emptied. Day on day on day, dishing out bowls of food to the horde marching past, a meal three months long without interruption. More supplies came in every day, meat animals from the Plicik ranches, beans and rice from the Collective Farms, the Pakoseo

assessment given freely by some and grudgingly by others. Soup and beans, beans and soup, steam curling up from the cauldrons, odor of sanctity, pleasing in the nostrils of Oppalatin.

CELL 21

Grumbling under his breath, the kana climbed into the flit. "This is gettin to be like work, Weeshk, we might's well be fuckin plainboys chasin fuckin bos out 'n the fuckin Grass."

"Shut up, Wakso, you worsen a sore toe. Sit down and strap up. We got a job to do, might's well get at it." Kaweesk waited until his sour grumbling partner was settled, then he thumbed the starter...

The flit exploded, molten metal and metal shards slammed into other flits garaged at the Kasta, they began to burn, fuel caught, there were more explosions, alarms were clanging, there was confusion, panic, that gradually devolved to order as a few effective leaders appeared.

When the fire was out, two men stood by the twisted sooty rail of a walkway. "Bomb," one said. "At a first guess, one would say packed with thermit."

The second man was in such a rage he was trembling. He slapped his left hand against his leg, again and again and again, a dreary monotonous slap slap slap that he didn't realize he-was doing. After a long tense silence, he said, "Them!"

"Not much doubt of that. In here, too. Looks like we've got rats in the walls. Who was it in the flit?"

"One doesn't know, it doesn't matter. A brace of scuts on street patrol, no one important." He grabbed the rail with both hands, shook it. "May their souls rot in hell's cellar. It's deliberate provocation, no question. And they're going to get what they asked for. Come on. One has to report to the Math Hen. How long before one has your assessment of the debris?"

CELL 30

Shadows flickered from house to house; night in the Maka quarter was busier than a broken anthill. Flits whined overhead, stabbing searchlights into the murk, missing with an impatient inevitability everything they were trying to find. Squads of kipaos marched with equally ineffectual arrogance through the potholed, twisting streets of the Quarter, shining the beams of their hand lumens into the sidestreets, blind alleys, the barred windows, and the recessed doorways of the crumbling structures that passed as houses in this part of the sprawling city; they were terrified, sweating with it and stinking, despite their armor and their weapons and the poverty of the people they were hunting. The smells, the shadows that moved in the corners of their eyes but vanished when they swung round to confront them, the miasma of rage and hatred that stirred like smoke in the rancid air, all this spooked them more and more; several times a number of the younger recruits shot holes out of the air or blew up piles of garbage. They were growled at, warned of punishment detail when they got back to barracks; it didn't help, their immediate fear was too great.

CELL 19

In the village three bodies were laid on improvised biers before the village Wikhouse, the Mehewik, a boy and two girls, none older than seven. The Wik priest stood on the steps of the Mehewik and spread his hands in helpless grief. He could not meet the accusing eyes of the Maka, nor could he blame them, whatever happened. He'd pushed for a probe into the deaths, pulling every string he could get his hands on though he was warned off, told he would be severely disciplined if he persisted; he even tried to reach the Wapaskwen Gospah, but all that brought him was a visit by a triad of Na-priests and an order from the Gospah to cease and desist if he wanted to retain his seat; if he refused he would be declared contumacious and brought to Aina'iril for re-education at the hands of the Question. He was from a relatively poor but unusually gifted Kiser family and was deeply devoted to the service of Oppalatin and to the Poor Ones beloved of God, the Make working the soil who were His Own Children. The Wik priest looked at the dead children and their kin and was bitterly angry at the hierarchy, at the greed and the maneuvering for influence and power, the corruption of

those who should have cared for these Little Ones. He sighed and stared down into his open hands, then quietly took off his cassock, stood there shivering in his underwear. "Wait," he said. He tossed the cassock into the dirt beside the steps and went inside. When he came out, he had on the trousers and sweater he wore when he worked in the garden. He left the door open behind him and came down the steps to join the men. "I'll bring him out to you," he said. "What you do, do it quickly and without unnecessary pain; he is a beast, not a man. Give him the swift death of a beast."

They went silently to the ělspisaco, but the man they sought was not there and no one would say where he had gone.

CELL 1

CELL 4

The thin wiry man sat at a kidney shaped table, scanning papers with a nervous rapidity, jotting a few words on a pad with each; when one padsheet was filled, he tore it off and spiked it. Brilliant morning sunlight streamed through the wall of windows to his left, touched his face with an innocent, unintended cruelty, exaggerating the hunger in it, the neediness that was the outward aspect of his ambition, the coldness and amorality in the man.

A soft chime broke the gently rustling silence. The man scowled, thumbed a button down. "Yes?"

The Aide's voice was a calm drawl, baritone verging on bass; he had perhaps been chosen as much for the quality of that voice as for his administrative skills.

"Piskwakan from the Port asks to speak to you, Makwahkik Sa-pe. He will not say why, save that it is very important and something you have expressed strong interest in recently. Will you speak to him?"

Makwahkik drummed his nails on the desk. "Tell him scramble, put him on."

"Makwahkik Sa-pe, we have them, we have the Avatars." The scrambler turned Piskwakan's voice scratchy and shrill, but the words came through clear enough to turn the listener's face weasel-hungry.

"How?"

A moment's silence as the Port-Director got his facts in order, Makwahldk was an impatient man. "Just after dawn the SD picked up a distress call, coming from out toward the Islands, emergency beepers on a clutch of escape capsules. The Kiyakipao on duty had instructions to whistle me up if something like that happened. Was a tip from a local mouth, he said something important was coming at us, he's a straight mouth,, gives us good whistles. Bit, he said, maybe even Kiscomaskin or his bro. Was a destroyer in port, ordered it out to collect the capsules, bring 'em back softly, softly. Something peculiar. The capsules were all over first, then they were in one lump, bumping together, then they started moving shoreside. Pihtatipli brought back tracings to verify this, also photos of the capsules, standard types with no motive power. Also photos of the Avatars and the beasts. One collected all those, prints and films both. One will send them with the Avatars. There is ... um, ... a complication. The Pihtatipli's an ambitious man. And a brainless twerp. But a twerp with powerful connections, they bought his commission, otherwise he wouldna got near a ship. He's swore to keep his mouth shut, but he'll spill the whole with his first bottle of 'pishka squeeze. One wouldn't waste your time, except he's not just a Plicik, he's some sort of eighth cousin to the Nistam. Out of one's league. You want, one will order him to patrol the swamp; trouble is he makes one corn call and one gets one's butt kicked and he gets the order quashed. One has been able to muzzle him for the moment, but he's getting impatient. So over to you, friend. You want to fetch this lot or shall one shove them into a flit and ferry them over to the Kasta?"

"Send them. What about the destroyer's crew?"

"They've seen the Avatars and they know damn well what they were looking at. One can shut them up onboard the ship for twenty-eight hours, no more. Even then there'll be rumors leaking off before a third of that time has passed. This is a Port, Makwahkik Sa-Pe, you know what that means."

"Right. Give one six hours, you can manage that. This is good work, Piskwakan Sa-Ke. One owes you and one won't forget. Oppla's Boon, friend." Makwahkik clicked off the corn,

went back to drumming on the desk. After a few minutes of this, he toggled the speaker.

“Nahwac, arrange highsecurity quarters for three; there'll be a flit arriving in the next ten minutes, have it put down in the Whisper Court, clear out that part of the Kasta, I want no one looking out those windows. Have them brought to me as soon as they're in. I'll be here if you need me before then.”

Ajeri Kilavaz swore. She listened a moment longer, then called out: “Ginny, get over here. The shit is hitting the fan, and we could end up covered in it.” Ginbiryol Seyirshi frowned at her but said nothing. He crossed the Bridge and stood beside her, watching the screen. “What is he talking about.. Then I was right. It was not as simple as it seemed it would be. Does Puk know?” Ajeri Kilavez shook her head. “He won't answer COM. I expect he will follow the smuggler all the way to Teegah's Limit, keep trying for him. You know Puk, how stubborn he can get.”

“Yes.”

“How did they manage it, Ginny? That flit had the defenses of a newhatched gnat, there's no way it could shrug off a seekershrike.”

“It is my feeling that Puk was shooting at ghosts; if he hit the flit at all, it was empty by then with the escape capsules registering as fish if they registered at all. Re-member the swamp, Ajeri tisz. That lizardman has some dangerous Talents. The assessment?”

“Ready. There's a Rift in the ocean floor about a thousand kilometers off the East Coast, same latitude as Aina'iril. The mantle is thinnest there, drop the Banger in that and good-bye Kiskai. You want me to lay the egg, Ginny?”

“No. I do not want to take chances with it, there are too many Luck strands weaving down there. We will prime and lay it just before we leave. I would like to have a record of the event, but I think better not.”

“You got it, sir. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment, Jeri. We will watch and wait”

Chapter 17. Aina'iril at last

It was a big room, filled with light, light from the ceiling strips, light pouring through the ceiling-to-floor windows at one end; it was meant to express the power and importance of the man behind the broad table—the Nish'mokkipsao Makwahkik, head of the Secret Police—and it did. The side opposite the windows broke open into a smallish alcove where the shadows not permitted in the main room almost but not quite obscured the art deco bulk of a skipcom. Shadith saw it seconds after she stepped through the door, touched Rohant's arm. He saw it, met her eyes, one brow raised.

“Why not,” she murmured. “Room's mine, that's yours.”

“When?”

They were being hustled closer to the table, Kikun quiet behind them, the cats left in the anteroom with Sassa. The Pihtatipli kept trying to push past them to get to the Nish'mok, but the quiet Aide kept a firm grip on his arm and held him in place by the door. The squad of guards spread into twin horns on either side; they looked alert enough, they had to, the Nish'mok was their ulti-mate boss, but they weren't really expecting the Three to act up or cause problems for them; Kikun, Rohant, and Shadith had carefully cultivated a mild bewilderment that engendered a cozy degree of carelessness in their escort.

“On three,” she said. “One.” She moved away from him, drawing a pace ahead of the guards, looking around, playing the child again with a childish eagerness that disarmed those guards and even the Nish'mok. Her smile widened into a grin as she saw that. “Two.” She moved faster, reached the table several paces ahead of the rest. “Three.” She sprang at the table, slapped her hands down, wheeled over it, landing a solid kick on the chest of the Nish'mok, knocking him back before he could reach the alarm sensors of any weapons if he had them there. She hit the carpet and came onto her feet with the darter in her hand, took out the one guard who reacted quickly enough to get his gun up, pressed the business end of the darter into the Nish'mok's nape as the swivel chair rebounded from the wall and he caught at the table to stop its gyrations. “Don't! move a hair or you're dead! Look at the guard and you'll see what I

mean.”

On the count of three, Rohant charged for the alcove, scattering guards like gamepins. By the time Shadith was making her speech, he was at the console, bringing the skipcom online.

When Shadith vaulted across the table, Kikun slipped to the door and had it open before anyone noticed him. He whistled softly; the cats came bounding in and trotted over to Rohant; they settled by the arch like totem beast-wards, huge and beautiful and deadly, speaking beyond the physical to ancient archetypes in the Kiskaid psyche, pulling the guard’s eyes irresistibly to them, commanding the Pihatipli’s attention. Even the Aide lost his calm and stared.—

Still mostly unnoticed, Kikun relieved a guard of his sidearm and stationed himself at the door.

The action had taken less than a minute, going as smoothly as if they’d spent hours rehearsing it.

The Nish’mok sat quite still; he was more angry than afraid, but above all else, he was controlled. Shadith could feel him plotting; she didn’t mind that, it would most likely keep him occupied long enough for the Ciocan to get the message out.

Rohant stepped to the arch. “Shadow, the corn’s blocked, I think I can get through, but it’d be quicker if I had the access codes.” He folded his arms, stood with his eyes fixed on the Nish’mok. “Want me to do some arm twisting?”

Shadith tapped the nose of the darter against the back of the Nish’mok’s neck. “Tell the man, oinkoid. Won’t mess up your arrangements, it’s private business we’re into.”

He stared at the door, muscles knotting along his jaw. When he spoke, his voice was harsh, flat. “One of my kanaweh is dead.”

“Too bad. He would’ve killed me if I let him. Look, let’s get this over with. You think I don’t know what you’re doing? Keep your hands on the table, buuk. Longer you hold us here, the bigger the chance we trip over our own feet. Right? Never mind, I don’t need an answer to that. And my leonine friend over there, he doesn’t NEED the password, he can get round your blocks sooner’n you think. They won’t be complicated, will they. Just some-thing to keep the unauthorized offline. And not many of those reach this far, right? Ro, better get at it, you might even break through before I have to shoot someone. Uh-huh. You heard me, Primo Pig. Pig? Oh, merely something I picked up in my researches, ancient epithet. You get the gist, I’m sure. Another item for your consid-eration, the darts in this weapon don’t have to hit any-place special; they explode, but it’s the poison that kills.

You saw how fast your kana died. It’s painless, almost merciful you might say, certainly compared to your meth-ods, what I’ve heard of them. Tell you what, I’ll let you pick my next target. I’m going to shoot one after another until you give Ro the word. Which one’s it going to be?”

The man sat rigidly silent. Abruptly, she saw it wasn’t going to work. To answer her would be to diminish himself in front of witnesses and he wouldn’t do it for a threat, she was going to have to dart someone....

No, Shadow, be honest, KILL someone. Damn. There’s no way I can justify.... Stupid, stupid, stupid, painting myself into a corner like this. Well, keep on keeping on. If I have to back down, I back down. No point in anticipating the debacle, though. We’ll see what we see. Maybe the bastard’ll buy it.

“No preference? Well, looks like eeny meeny miney mo and phut to you.” She stepped back from the Nish’mok, keeping the darter steady on him while she let her gaze drift around the room, lingering briefly on one then another of the locals, her eyes as shallow and emo-tionless as those of the cats, pretending to herself as well as to the locals that she actually would shoot one of them if she had to.

Magimeez yawned, stretched out, over three meters of live black power; she left the arch and strolled among the guards, nosing at them, pawing at them claws out, growl-ing deep in her throat; as she circled the room, the tension in the air thickened until it was almost unbearable.

There was a stir at the back, close to Kikun. The Aide came smoothly through the arc of guards, hands out and empty; he stopped a few paces from the table. “There’s no point in this,” he said. “Hunter.”

“Nahwac.” Ignoring or forgetting Shadith, the Nish’mok leaned tensely forward, his hands flattened

on the table top. “No.”

“Yes, Nish’mok. I repeat, there is no point in putting more lives at risk for so little. Hunter.”

Rohant stepped into the arch. “What is it?”

Nahwac glanced nervously at Makwahkik, straightened his shoulders, his mind made up. “Silitipisim. That will open channels out.”

“Thanks.” He ducked back, got busy with the sensorpad.

The Aide looked past the Nish’mok. “Singer, you have • what you want, put the weapon away.”

“When the Ciocan is finished, then, well, we’ll talk about it.”

In the alcove, Rohant had switched to Dyslaer and was talking rapidly to someone, apparently one of his family, Shadith could hear the satisfaction in his voice though she couldn’t understand the words.

The Aide listened, frowning, confused, his calm eroding with every minute that ticked past. He’d tried to take on himself an action that the Nish’mok would not, could not entertain; it was his duty and his pleasure to facilitate for Mikwahkik, he’d done it so often and so well that his move was as close to automatic as a reasoned act could be, but now he was beginning to think he’d misread the situation. For all he knew, Rohant might be calling death onto Kiskai, or if not on Kiskai, on them—revenge for his kidnapping, his capture, or their previous attempts to kill him. Shadith didn’t need her Talent to read his un-easiness, she could see it in the shift of his eyes, their flick flick flick from the arch to the Nish’mok and back as the incomprehensible conversation in the alcove continued.

The spitting growl of the Dyslaer stopped abruptly and the whine of the skipcom cut off. Rohant came to the arch. “That’s...”

There was a crashing noise, a stink—an agony in her shoulder. Then nothing.

WATCHER 8

CELL 1

Irritated, Ginbiryol Seyirshi frowned at the blank prime cell, then shifted to 4 as the girl sprang across the table. He sucked at his teeth and cuddled the Pet as he watched her take command of the room, watched Rohant race for the alcove and the skipcom. I knew better, he thought, I knew it was fatal to break the schema, but I panicked, yes, that is the truth naked. And there they are, carried will-they nill-they directly to that corn.

Luck was taking his hide off inch by inch and he was not enjoying the process; when Puk got back he would have to stop putting off the Praisesong. Too involved, he thought. I am neglecting the Lady. She punishes neglect, oh yes. A quick sidelong at the Pilot. Yes., Soon. For more than one reason. “Ajeri tiszteh, you had best find another three EYEs and sensitize them to our Avatars. It looks like they will be with us for a while.”

“All the EYEs are deployed, Ginny. I don’t have to tell you, a world’s a big place, even a world like this with just one major landmass. You got any preference where I lift them?”

Stroking the head of the simi, he considered the ques-tion. “Take three from Iril’s streetscene Bank, use those. Replace them as soon as you can by shifting EYEs off the Pilgrim Road. It has settled to a rather placid mass; there is little useful in that march and a lot that is tedious. Start with the westernmost EYEs, shift them east, thin out the ones on the Road, move them closer, cluster them in Wapaskwen. You need not rush unduly, Ajeri tiszteh, we should have another two months before the Culmination.” He stopped talking, stared at Cell 4 as chaos broke out in Makwahkik’s office.

CELL 4

Rohant shut down the sldpcom and came to the arch. “That’s....”

The crack of a pellet gun—Shadith blown back against the wall, failing in a sprawl behind the table.

Rohant roared and charged at the muzzle flash and the Pihtatipli who was yelling and laughing and waving the antique he wore at his belt (a large bore muzzle-loader considerably older than he was), full of himself for doing what the Nish'mok and his array of guards couldn't manage to accomplish.

There was a shriek from Kikun that soared into the supersonic, then the lacertine blew the top off the Pihtatipli's skull with the pistol he'd taken from the kana guard.

Rohant roared again, satisfaction and commendation saturating the sound. He swung round, heading for Shadith, but pulled up at a bellowed command from the Nish'mok. The Kiskaid had scooped up the darter when Shadith dropped it and now was swinging it between him and the cats.

"Stand back and call off your beasts, or one will kill them, then you."

Rohant whistled Magimeez and Nagafog to him and stood with a hand on each head. "Let me look at her. Is she dead?"

Makwahkik ignored him. "Nahwac, take the gun from the Dancer. The rest of you get out of here and keep your mouths shut or one will have you playing heretic for trainee Na-priests. Back off, Hunter, I mean it. You come a step closer and you're dead as that fool."

Far more aware than anyone else in the room, even his Aide, how much the death of that idiot Plicik was going to complicate all their lives, he watched the kanaweh file out; he didn't expect his reputation or his threats to keep them silent long, they had to disappear. One more count to set against those interfering offworlders.

He scowled the Hunter to silence and stood watching the girl bleed until he heard the door to the outer office close, then he transferred his scowl to the corpse leaking brain and blood onto his rug. "If there ever was an unused organ," he said. "Nahwac, get an emergency team up here, the girl's alive. Her shoulder's a mess, but it's nothing serious. You have the names of those guards?"

"Yes, sir. You want one to send Cipapil and his crew to deal with them?"

"Yes. Scrub the flakes and dump that ..." he jabbed a forefinger at the dead Plicik, "in the eel

vats. Get onto Piskwakan, tell him ... you know what to tell him. The medics, make it Doctor Meskew and his mutes. Tell him to bring a bodybag for the kana; one wants a reading on the poison if he can manage it. One doesn't expect miracles, chances are it's something organic and impossibly complicated. Besides being offworld muck. The girl goes to the infirmary in this building. If she has medications in her gear, tell Meskew and his to try them first. Oppalatin only knows what her internal workings are like; she looks normal enough, but make sure Meskew knows better than to take that as given. I want a noleak seal on that room, a round-the-clock watch on her, make sure the guards know one will have them hung from their foreskins if half a whisper slips out. Get hold of Ocipahweh, one doesn't care what he's busy with. One wants him for them," jab of his finger at Rohant and Kikun, "have him and his men take them to the quarters you, got ready for them. Signal through when Meskew gets here, the door's going to be locked and barred until this mess is cleaned up."

"Yes sir. If Ocipahweh is Outcity? One seems to remember he went into the Wetlands two days ago."

"You're right, one had forgotten. Call him in, he should be here within the hour. Meantime, hmmm, when you get a minute, take them over yourself with a squad of kanaweh. Take men you can trust ..." a tight, sour twitch of his mouth, "or men we won't miss."

"Hmm. Ajeri tisz, have you got through to Puk yet?"

"No, but he's on his way back. Better have the tranx ready, he's going to be in one of his things."

"See to it. When he is capable of reasoned discourse, bring him here."

"May take a while."

"We have time. There is no hurry now. The Avatars have seen to that."

"Ginny ..."

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

Ginbiryol watched the fourth cell a few moments longer, grunted as the medics carried Shadith out

and the Aide led Rohant and his beasts and Kikun away, then he went back to his scan of the developing scenes in the other Cells.

Chapter 18. Squeezing

The voice of a gnat burring in her ear, Shadith drifted up out of a drug haze, blinked her eyes open and stared into the face of a stranger. “Who...” The word was a breathy croak barely loud enough to break through the hum of the airconditioning.

“One is the Gospah Ayawit, child.” He tried to brush the hair from her sweaty forehead, but she jerked away from his hand though she paid for it with a swimmy half-faint. When her vision cleared, she saw the affronted look on his face, saw that he was contemplating forcing his touch on her. And she saw the moment when he changed his mind. He folded his hands across the bright beadwork panels on the front of his black robe and bent over her, dark and ominous and more frightening than she liked to admit. “What is your name?” he said. He had a rich rotund voice that dripped over her like melted butter and that was frightening also.

She shivered, closed her eyes.

Here we go again. Do I tell the tale? Or do I say hell with it? Ahlahlah, I fell like shit fried. What hap-pened anyway? I was shot, I think, I remember the sound of it ... the pain ... Gospah, gods, Aste said ... Question ... I can't stand....

The pain came back as the painkillers wore off. Her stomach turned over and waves of weakness muddled her head.

What are they giving me? What kind of muck....

Under the sheet she closed her hands into fists. “Shadith,” she said wearily.

“What are you?”

“Nothing to you.” She opened her eyes a moment, let them droop shut again.

“Why did you come?”

“You think I want to be here?” She lay silent a mo-pent, then went into the tired litany she’d produced so many times before, speaking in a muttering whisper, tell-ing herself she didn’t care if he heard her or not, what could he do to her ... she knew all too well what he could do, but she didn’t want to think about that. Her Talent floated around her, amoebic and restless, without direction; it passed over him, tasted him, she had no sense he believed anything he heard, but she kept on until she finished.

“Why do you claim to be an Avatar?”

“I don’t,” she said and turned her head restlessly back and forth on the pillow, they never changed the ques-tions, not even their order. The pain was getting worse, a pneumatic drill working on her shoulder. She was hot, sweaty, the sheet was wet with it, clinging to her, she wanted to push it off, but she couldn’t seem to get it loose....

Someone came in the room, took that fool away who was trying to dig answers out of her she didn’t have. That vulture, that picker over of bleeding souls, that iron maiden made flesh compressing thought to fit a rigid mold.... Someone else eased the sheet off her, bathed the sweat from her face and shoulders and smoothed a damp cloth down her arms. She felt a prick in her arm, a burning that spread upward from her elbow, then the pain was a bubble floating away away from her as she dropped deeper and deeper into a rocking blackness....

She slept, ate, slept, woke again with someone stand-ing over her, the Nish’mok Makwahkik this time. She closed her eyes, she didn’t want to see him.

He wanted to know everything about her and Rohant and Kikun, about the explosion of the flit, about how they escaped the harrowing of the swamp, about Astep-likota, about Kiscomaskin, about the Islands, why and how they ended up in the capsules—he threw question after question at her, prypicks meant to dig out specific nuggets of data. She said nothing, just lay with her eyes closed, wondering when

the painkiller would wear off this time and if the nurses or doctors or whatever they were would throw him out, too. He waited for a beat between questions to give her a chance to answer, then went on with his one-sided inquisition until he finished his list and stood silent beside the bed. The silence lasted for several minutes. Keeping her eyes closed was hard, but she did it. "I see," he said finally. "Think about it. I'll be back."

She thought about it and lay in a cold sweat until one of the young nurses came to give her a bedbath.

Helping Asteplikota had drained her medikit so she was dependent on local drugs and half the time the treatment seemed to make her sicker than the wound.

Fever seized hold of her, sleeping and waking.

She dreamed.

Pain. Strangeness. Sliding into Kikun's head, look-ing out through the lacertine's eyes. In the night-mare, it seemed at once ordinary and terrifying that she was there. Pain. Locals were beating him/her, shouting questions—but they didn't stop for answers, they didn't really want answers, the questions were only an excuse to continue tormenting Kikun, the hate and fear in that small cell were smothering, the stench of them almost lethal ... snake, they shouted at him, slimeviper ... in the nightmare she knew that Kiskaid's had a deep aversion to snakes; Kikun wasn't really, but he was close enough to wake that race horror and unleash a pitiless cruelty born of xenophobia and fear. In the nightmare she knew they were torturing him not for what he knew but for what he was....

In her delirium she cursed and cried out, flung herself about, several times reopening the wound and bringing on new and more dangerous bouts of fever.

She felt the nurses trying to hold her down and fought them, cursing them as torturers in half a dozen languages because she was Kikun fighting his tormenters, crying curses on their heads; it was the only weapon he had.

She babbled.

The nurses heard enough to make fearful, wondering guesses at the tie between her and the other Avatars and what this tie was doing to her.

Meskew came and listened. He had them time the crises and he checked those times against ICikun's torture sessions.

Kikun was left alone after that.

Very much alone.

Locked in a cell and fed like a beast.

Rohant was left alone, too. The kana screwworms had tried their tricks on him, less the miasmatic hate and fear. He simply glared at them and went nincsothran, drop-ping into a trance-state where he could see and hear, move and tend to his body's needs, but felt nothing, either physically or emotionally. The Dyslaera had a far bloodier history and pre-history than the Kiskaid's could even imagine or attempt, despite the efforts of the Na-priests and the Nish'mok's own torturers; that trap-response was a survival trait selected for over aeons of ambush and feud. After viewing flakes of Question sessions, Makwahkik conceded defeat. There was no point in beating on an insensible, unresponsive block' of flesh.

Days passed. Weeks. It was like inskip joumeytime, everything else on hold, with the locals waiting for her to regain her strength so they could beat it out of her again—not much of an incentive to recover, but her body was young and strong and when her will faltered, her flesh prevailed.

She regained the weight burned off her by the fever, the wound closed over and pain retreated until she no longer needed the local painkillers; she was happy to dispense with these because they nauseated her and ad-dled her head until she couldn't stand straight and twitched all over her face and lost the feeling in her toes and fingers.

The Gospah Ayawit didn't come back. She didn't miss him, but she worried about his absence whenever she thought about it.

The Nish'mok Makwahkik didn't come back. She worried about this a lot more.

She was confined to the single room; when she was able to get out of bed and allowed to walk around, all she could do was pace from wall to wall. She couldn't even look out; there was a window, but the glass in it was acidwashed and as good as a wall at keeping her from seeing what lay beyond it. She was bored, bored, BORED. They wouldn't bring her harp. It was too heavy, bound to put an unnecessary strain on newly knit flesh, and besides, wouldn't it press so painfully against the wound she couldn't use it anyway?

Late on the night when she was given the bad news about the harp, the youngest of her nurses slipped through the door; Shadith looked up from the tedious, turgid theology text which was all she had to read. "Wayan?"

"Singer, the Nato'isk said you had to turn off the light and sleep."

Shadith looked at the page she'd been working at, sighed, and shut the book. "No great loss. Any chance for some hot cider? If you're thinking about feeding me a sleeping pill, forget it."

"The Nato'isk said you had to take it, Singer." Wayan sighed, she went through this every night and was obviously getting tired of it.

Shadith grimaced and gave in once again. The head nurse had the personality of a truncheon and less than half the charm; that warhorse was quite capable of sitting on her head and ramming the thing down her throat with a steel rod.

Once again Wayan brought her a glass of water and gave her the pill; once again, Shadith tucked the capsule under her tongue and let the water slide down her throat. She was reasonably sure the little To'isk had no illusions about the pill actually following the water, but the girl was careful not to ask unnecessary questions and when she took the glass away, she was tactful enough to turn her back.

Her sandal soles squeaking softly on the composition floor, Wayan hurried to the door, opened it a crack and stuck her head through. For several minutes she spoke to the guard outside; from the tone of her voice, she was coaxing him to do something. As Shadith listened to them murmuring at each other, she tucked the pill into the cache she'd contrived in the side of the mattress, lay back, and wondered what the hell was going on.

Wayan reached through the opening, brought in a black, bulb-ended case. Smiling triumphantly she carried this like a victory prize to Shadith and set it on the quilt beside her. Brown doe-eyes shining with a private laugh-ter, she patted the belly of the case. "When he was about my age, my oldest-but-one brother thought he was going to be an ilili-nikasoh and sing his way to fame and for-tune," she giggled and began undoing the latches, "but it got to be too much like work so he went to the Kasta-kana instead." She lifted from its frayed green velvet bed a delicate lutelike instrument and set it on Shadith's stomach. "None of the rest of us has any gift for music, so I thought why not? This kitskew isn't heavy and you won't hurt your shoulder, it sits in the lap when it's played."

Shadith pushed up, touched the wood, then the strings; it was a lovely, graceful instrument, if not a work of art, at least one of high craft. "It's beautiful," she breathed. "I can't take this, Wayan. It must have cost an arm and a leg."

Wayan wrinkled her nose, primmed her mouth. "Wa-weh! What it cost. Helli was a pretty boy and bouncing in and out of Plicik houses from the day his hair was cut for a man. He had the kitskew off some hag he bedded for what he could tease out of her, he called it Kishi and kissed its backside when he told me. Better you have it, Singer, you're right, it's a nice thing and doesn't deserve the smell of its getting. Use it and make it sweet again."

She glanced round at the door, twisted her face into a comical scowl. "But if you please, dear patient, not till the morning, or the Nato'isk will have my hide." She put the kitskew back in its case, clicked the latches home, and set it on the floor beside the bed. With a quick, conspiratorial smile she straightened her starched robe, adjusted the folds of her white service shawl and went scurrying out. A moment later, she stuck her head back in. "And shut off the light, remember?"

Shadith stared after Wayan; she could feel her jaw dropping. It was rather like being nipped by a nursing lamb; you know the thing has teeth, but it's so soft and cuddly and guileless you don't expect it to use them. She'd been wholly preoccupied with herself; she hadn't thought of the people tending her as people at all. Just shadows. Adjuncts. Rushing around, doing things for her. She searched through the sheets for the bell cord, found the light switch and shut off the lamp, then wrig-gled around until she was stretched out on her back staring up into the dark. There was a lot to think about. The hiatus was bound to end. Tomorrow, the next day ... soon. And then they'd all be catapulted back into Ginny's web.

Eighty-three days, Spotchals to here. What'd old warhorse say this morning? I should stop malingering. Thirty plus three days is long enough to lie around getting waited on hand and foot? Thirty some days ... well, it's one way of killing time. Hunhi If you don't get killed yourself. Don't try it again, old Shadow, the next fool might be a better shot. Fifty days to go ... maybe less—I wonder how high Lee can crank that ship up if she's in a hurry to get somewhere? Vryhh ships are the fastest around, nothing can catch them. Somewhat lacking in hard data, that. Let's hope ... let's hope she can ... cut it ... seriously cut it ... down....

She yawned, sleep stealing over her despite her plans to get her immediate future better organized. Still weak from the wound and the fever, she slipped from her drowse into a deep, dreamless sleep.

In the morning she began experimenting with the kitskew, running simple scales and listening to the tun-ing. She tried remembering and picking out some of the songs the women sang that night in the Hostel until one of the morning nurses rushed in and stopped her; it took Shadith some time to find out why, then she shook her head, ruefully amused by her own stupidity. Rebel songs naturally wouldn't go down well, not here. She went back to her own collection, retuning the kitskew to her needs. It had a rich singing tone, with interesting over-tones from the secondary strings and was close kin to many of the stringed instruments she'd mastered in her original body. Getting used to this one with these fingers was harder than she expected and frustrating.

Ahlallah, a babbling baby could do better, my fin-gers feel like sticks. Chording, sari Come on, Shadow, you can pat your head and rub your belly with the best of 'em. It's like learning to swim, some idiot throws you in the ocean and it all comes back. Damn, there goes another fingernail. I want my gear. You think they going to give it to you, naaaa. I swear, I'm going to boot Ginny's behind here to Wolff, give me half a chance.

The next evening Wayan sneaked Shadith's kit to her and helped her glue on the false nails, then she teased the guard into leaving the door open and the nightstaff in the infirmary gathered round for a sing. They taught her Pakoseo songs and love songs and joke songs; guards and all, they sang until they were hoarse and her hands were sore with playing.

That night Shadith slept ferociously well; most of the pain was gone, her energy was returning and, altogether, she just felt good.

The Nish'mok's office was suffused with pearly gray morning light from the northlooking window-wall. A few raindrops slid down the glass, blown at a slant by a healthy wind that made the air inside seem stale and oppressive. Wondering why she was here and what was going to happen, Shadith stood gazing across the crowded, busy bay, white sails bellied out and poufs of black smoke from the steamers, gray water whipped to froth. The city swept in a broad arc along the shoreline, rising to a rocky for on the north horn and the immense pile of stone, wood and tile riding its crest. The Nistam's little cottage. I am Colossus bestride the world, see me and tremble. She made a face at it (scandalizing the guards ranged along the hinderwall), then strolled to the three backless armchairs lined up in front of the table and settled herself in the middle one.

Rohant stalked into the office. He ignored the guards, nodded at Shadith, dropped onto the chair beside hers and sat clicking his claws on the arms and glowering at the table.

Kikun came in surrounded by more kanaweh, officious scowling Kiskaidis who prodded him and jerked him about until they got him to the third chair and dumped him in it. Shadith chewed her lip, feeling more helpless right then than she had when she was shut in that miserable cell onboard Ginny's ship. Anything she did would make things worse.

His painfully repressed fury giving his chest an un-healthy rale, Kikun got to his feet and moved around behind Shadith; he stood there, leaning against her, his hands on her shoulders. Needing her. Her eyes misted, she reached up, touched his fingers. "All right?"

"All right now." He took warmth from her and his breathing quieted, she could feel him gathering himself, smoothing out the jags and getting ready for whatever was coming. She wasn't all that ready herself, the only thing she knew was whatever they wanted she wasn't going to do it. Gently stroking Kikun's fingers, she turned to Rohant.

"Fifty days to go," she said. "About Think we can make it?"

Rohant shrugged. "Can't change it, so we live with it."

"Maybe we can find another smuggler."

He swung round, his eyes narrowing. "Another?"

"At the cattletrot." She sighed: Read this(?) "Someone you knew?" He sighed: So-so, go slow. "Not to say knew." She signed: Told(him) pass (the)

word. "Just a face I'd seen before."

"Why keep it to yourself?" He signed: Why (be-fore)(not)sign(?) "I've got credit, you've got credit, we might have bought passage."

"Maybe you've an urge to suicide, I haven't." She signed: Because I did(not)think of it, why did(not) you(?)

"That why we got blown out of the water?" He signed: Mea culpa. Head bowed(and)bloody. "Never mind. Ex-plains why Miralys already knew who when where. I was going to ask you about that."

"Doesn't short the time any. We still have to stay alive till they get here." She signed: G know(s). For sure. We (now)dangerous.

"Just have to keep twisting." He signed: Tell mudfeet? "Locals mention what they mean to do with us?" She signed: No(!)

"No, but I doubt if this lot is any different from the other." He signed: Why(?)

"At least the other side didn't shoot me." She signed: What point(?) Some (have to be)(G(his))men. (Al-ready)know. Will(not)help. Some not. Can(not)help.

"There is that." He signed: Gotcha. "It doesn't count for much, it's this side that's got us. How you feeling?"

"Like I'll be glad to get back where the treatment isn't worse than the trauma. I itch. And I can't play my harp yet."

"If you've got the energy to paitzher like that, I'm going to stop worrying about you."

"Hah."

As if on cue Makwahkik came in, exuding energy like a shorting dynamo, dynamotor on feet no wheels. He dropped into the swivelchair behind the table, glanced briskly from one to the other, settled on Shadith. "You're looking better than the last time I saw you, Singer. One hopes the search this time was more thorough and you've had your teeth pulled. My kanaweh shoot straighter than that fool one reminds you we've both forgotten." He raised a brow.

Thinking of the crystal blade disguised as a welt in her boot, Shadith smiled noncommittally; they'd missed that, though her armory was gone when they returned the remainder of her gear (except for the harp) a few hours ago. She considered his words and his attitude and won-dered what the man thought he was about. Whatever, it didn't mean anything to her. Let him talk. Let him see where it got him. Nowheresville and Nevemeverland.

He had light brown eyes with flecks of orange in them, marmalade eyes. He pinned her with them, measuring her unspoken hostility with the ease of long experience, then he turned to Rohant. "Hunter, one is certain you were aware of listeners. Fifty days you have before your friends? family? come for you. You've made it obvious that one cannot use you for information, so you've no value that way. A kana is

dead. The girl killed him, you others are complicitous. The judgment is death by the strangler's cord." He waited for a response; when he got none, he went on. "It is possible—though one believes not likely—that you really are Avatars of the Three. Yes, one knows you've denied it, but that means nothing, less than nothing." He smiled, though he shouldn't have bothered, it didn't improve his face any. "There's plenty of historical precedent to suggest you wouldn't know if you were." He moved his hand as if he were brushing away what he'd just said. "And the truth is, it doesn't matter what the truth is, only what people think it is. And they think you are the Three. Rumor of you has spread through-out the Five Nations, so there's value in you after all. If you consent to play the Game with us. It's that or the Cord."

Rohant folded his arms across his chest, his dreadlocks bushed out in threat-response, the papillae of his scalp erecting like gooseflesh on an icy day; his eyes narrowed and brightened as the pupils shrank until his stare became hot gold. "Bluff," he said. "Maybe you can throw a fool to the eels without consequences, you can't do us without joining us."

"Perhaps not now, but the march to the Holy Ground is less than four weeks off. Ten days on the Pilgrim Road, three more of ceremony and rite until the Culmination. Count the days, Hunter. Less than fifty, yes?"

"So?"

"The Pakoseo Year ends with the Culmination. After that your value is nil. After that, who cares what happens to you. Do you understand what one is saying?"

Rohant bared his tearing teeth in a broad grin. "So we take our chances. The Wheel turns."

The Nish'mok nodded. "One expected that." Gelid marmalade eyes moved over Shadith, touched Kikun, moved back to her. "Do you concur? Does the Hunter speak for you, Dancer? Singer?"

Kikun hissed, laughed as he saw the Kiscaid flinch. Shadith stared back at the Nish'mok, her mouth set in a stubborn line.

"I see." He swung the chair around, flicked a switch on the corn. "Nahwac, time is." He swiveled back and stood. "It is apparent one must give you further reason for acquiescence. Come."

They emerged from the empty door-lined corridors into the whip of a wind heavy with rain and the salt tang from the sea. They were on a covered walkway that circled three stories above a barren stony court, a pit without shelter from rain or sun or anything else the weather provided. The Nish'mok waved the guards back, pointed at an arcaded overlook. "Stand there, the three of you. Watch."

Down in the pit a door opened. In groups of two, three, five, prodded by unseen kanaweh, a number of locals, men, women, children, came blinking into the watery daylight like revenants from a graveyard—which they might as well have been. Hostages or rebels, whatever they were, what life was left to them was most probably going to be short and painful.

One of the last arrivals was a youngish woman with a kitkew tied to her back. Her legs were cut off at mid-thigh, she had a black patch over one eye and wild black hair twisted into dreadlocks much like Rohant's. A guard more impatient than the rest booted her out of the doorway, then stood watching as she crawled along on stumps and elbows till she reached the north end of the pit-court where there was fractionally more shelter from the rain.

Several young boys separated from the rest and crossed to the woman, moving with a peculiar sliding, sidling gait—prepubescent, thin and ragged, archetypal street urchins. "Miowee." It was almost a song one boy made of her name. The sound came lightly to the listeners despite the wind, clear and sharp, even amplified a little. "Sing for us, Miowee."

About a third of the adults seemed horrified by this turn; they walked away and clustered in a tight knot at the far end of the court. The rest gathered into a ragged arc about the woman, squatting patiently, waiting for her to begin. It probably would have been more politic if she'd refused them, more prudent to keep quiet and refrain from baiting her captors, but even three stories above her, Shadith could see that she was a woman for whom prudence would always be a second choice.

Miowee looked up at Makwahkik and laughed, an unrepentant, irrepressible sound that mocked him and all he represented. Swinging the kitskew around, she bent over it a moment, tuning it, then she swept

a cord and threw back her head, fixing her eyes on the watchers above, challenging them to do their worst. She played a complicated effervescent tune that settled quickly to simplicity, the pit acting like a gigantic sound horn.

Forgetting anger in delight, Shadith clutched the rail and leaned into the sound as far as she dared, shivered with pleasure as the streetsinger's rough contralto filled the horn. "Fire in the streets," Miowee sang:

*There's fire in the streets
The streets fill with dead children
Children fight your killers with stones
Stones and bones build our revolution
Revolution burns in our blood
Our blood rises in a drowning tide
The tide sweeps away the murderers of our souls
Our souls burn with Oppla's fire...*

Miowee interrupted the chainsong for a passionate ca-denza on the kitskew, singing vowel sounds around and through the voice of the instrument, an endless outflow of pain and anguish with an edge of fury. Shadith vibrated to the anger and the artistry, felt an answering passion rise in her. She sang softly with the singer below, not trying to compete with her, following her lead, then stopped to listen as Miowee reclaimed the chain:

*There's fire in the streets
The streets rise against the thieves of our strength
Our strength fuels the revolution
Revolution builds in our hands
Our hands reach out and take hold of life
The life your stranglers steal
We steal back with steel and stones
Stones and children's bones fuel our fury
Our fury rages through the streets
The streets burn with holy fire*

Once again Miowee let the chain slide; she played and crooned, fantasies of pluck and strum, of soaring word-less song that was attack and assertion of her self and cause—and Shadith opened her throat and sang with her, wordless wondrous play and passion, her soprano lifting up and up, echoing, mirroring, plaiting distant harmonies ... until Miowee stopped the interplay, stilled the strings with a sudden, powerful dissonance. After a beat of silence, she took up the chain...

*There's fire in the palaces and factories
The factories fill with the stilled breath of dead men
Dead men rise and cry out for retribution
Retribution rides the winds of revolution
Revolution burns with holy fire
There's fire in the streets...*

"Enough!" Amplified and colder than the rain, the Nish'mok's shout drowned instrument and voice both.

Shadith swung round, furious at the interruption; she opened her mouth to excoriate him—and a laugh was startled out of her as Miowee complied but got in a small dig, a slide down a string, a clown's pratfall in sound.

Makwahkik ignored both of them. “You at the far end, stand with your backs against the wall, the rest of you join the singer. Quickly.” The handheld bullhorn filled the space without effort. He wasn’t shouting any more. He didn’t need to. “Kimeesit.”

A kana stepped through the door, touched his chest and bowed, a lean, gray-haired man taller than most. “Move them.”

The man bowed again and stepped back inside.

The next several minutes were noisy confusion and deliberate brutality, the meanness of the kanaweh gnaw-ing at Shadith all the more because it was so unneces-sary, these people were starvling skeletons with barely enough energy to stand; only the boys were offering any resistance and even that was passive rather than active—they clustered around Miowee, taking on their own bod-ies the shoves and kicks that were aimed at her, the cuts from the limber, slitted canes.

When the confusion was sorted out, around a dozen prisoners were pressed against the southwall, the rest (about twice the number) were regimented in three rows back against the northwall; eight kanaweh were arranged in a line across the middle, four facing south, four north. Kimeesit stood in the doorway looking up.

Makwahkik held up four fingers, then pointed south. He clapped his hands.

The sound made Shadith jump, then gasp; the crack of the pellet guns came amplified and echoing up the pit. Four prisoners fell.

“One has learned your lesson, Singer,” Makwahkik said. “Tomorrow it will be eight.” He clapped his hands again and the kanaweh began herding the prisoners out of the pit. “The next day ten. You can stop it any time.”

WATCHER 9

CELL 3	CELL 2	CELL 1
“One Sing “Tom He c the	“One Sing “Tom He c the	“One has learned your lesson, Singer,” Makwahkik said. “Tomorrow it will be eight.” He clapped his hands again and the kanaweh began herding the

Ginbiryol Seyirshi stroked the simi and smiled with contentment as the scene played out. He was almost regretting the need to ash the world. This was better. Much better. Experience counted, after all. Yes. Mak-wahkik was handling her very well indeed. And I was right about that streetsinger, she will be more important than ever if I read him correctly. We Praise again this night. Yes. Yesss.

He turned his head. Ajeri Kilavez was playing with her sensorpad, readjusting the EYE transmissions. “I am aware, Ajeri tisz, how difficult it was to shift the EYEs, all those EYEs, without losing important scenes. Good work, Pilot.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He cleared his throat. “Puk is?”

“I think we can untie him tomorrow.”

“Not tonight?”

“Better not.”

“Hmm.” Ginbiryol swallowed his disappointment with-out much difficulty, it was the tiniest of flaws in his vast and increasing happiness. He went back to studying the Cells, one hand stroking the simi, the other moving over the test:transfer sensors of the pathecorder outlet.

Chapter 19. Somehow, someway, I'm going to get out of this

The room was a cube, covered floor, ceiling, walls with institutional gray enamel, so many layers of paint the thickness was tangible like an ancient dirty hide pulled over the stone. The entrance was a rectangle of gray-painted steel with a slot waist-high for mealtrays and a head-high covered grill for looking in at whoever occupied the room; a second door led into a smaller room with a toilet and shower, washbasin, and mirror. A three-layer bunk bed was shoved into the corner opposite that door. There were two battered wooden chairs pushed against a wall, a table and an hassock out in the middle of the floor. In a futile attempt to liven what was essentially a prison cell, some hopeful soul had brought in rugs with geometric patterns in bright primary colors and scattered them about and had tucked matching coverlets over the bunk beds. There was no window, air and light came through a grill up where the walls met the ceiling.

Shadith pulled a hand across her mouth, looked at it, then at Miowee. "Don't be more stupid than you have to. Killing yourself won't change anything. He'll just bring another lot in here and hold them over our heads."

"So I should let you corrupt me when he couldn't?"

"Corrupt? Sar! Look, dead, you're dead, he goes on. That seem like a good trade?"

"Dead he can't use me. Dead he can't suck me into his rot."

"If you're set on it, take him with you. At least it wouldn't be a total wipe."

Miowee stared at her, laughed. "You're something else, you really are."

"Well, it's not my world." She frowned, glanced at the ceiling, not seeing the stains crawling over the gray paint, seeing Ginny's Bridge instead. She twitched her shoulders, folded her arms across her chest, hugging herself. "And it won't be yours much longer," she burst out. "Any of yours, not even him."

"What?" Miowee lifted the patch, wiped at the scarred socket beneath it. She fitted it back, dropped her hand to her lap. "What you 'on about, girl?"

Second thoughts chased each other round and round in Shadith's head, she suspected Makwahkik had arranged to overhear whatever passed between her and Miowee and she wasn't happy about whispering her secrets in that yellow-eyed jakal's ear. "I wonder if weasel-face is listening now?" She snorted. It seemed suddenly hilarious that there might be another nose snooping into her business.

Concentric shells of panting voyeurs with old Shadow sitting mouse in the middle.

Miowee sniffed, wriggled backward on the lowest bunk until she was leaning against the wall. "Someone out there listening, or electronics? And anyway, what's it matter?"

"Hmm." Shadith dropped onto the hassock, sat with one foot tucked under her thigh. After a minute, she smiled. "Serve him right if he is."

"This conversation stopped making sense 'bout three or four sentences back."

"That's because I've left things out."

"So put them in."

"Why not. There's a thing with a clutch of names, Planetbuster, Worldbanger, maybe just Buster or Banger, Nutcracker, Eggpeeler, you get the idea, right? Right. Part bomb, part ... something else—very else. Weird. Anyway, it goes boom and instead of a world, you've got rubble."

"You telling me the Mahk Hen has one of those?"

"Na, and he wouldn't use it if he did. He's not terminally stupid, just corrupt—to use your favorite word." She scratched at her knee, shook her head as Miowee twisted her face into a comic grimace. "All right, all light, I'll stop wuffing. I've lied so much I doubt if I can ever remember the truth, but here goes. This is a play. A drama. All you Kiskaid's are actors in it, you turn and twist for the amusement of an audience you'll never see, your lives and your deaths, every emotion you feel, every joy, every agony ..." slapping her hand on her knee she counted out the words, "... all your pains and pleasures, all of it is being recorded for clots with too much money and a dearth of brain cells, slimy little perverts who get off on other's people's pain and torment." She drew her mouth down, shook her head. "Sorry about that

lurid bit, call it lack of editing.” She sighed, shook her head again as she saw Miowee’s face go blank with rejection. “Listen, don’t turn me off yet. We were brought here, my friends and I, to make your passions more intense and your suffering worse. Not by our choice, believe me on that if nothing else. The Director of this drama did all the deciding, he reached out and took us and dumped us here. We weren’t supposed to know what was happening or why, but he slipped up there. I’ll explain later, if you really want to know. You can see why he lighted on the Ciocan and his beasts, impressive, yes? And the way you Kiskaidis feel about reptiles had to play some part in why he chose ICikun for the Dancer. Me, I’m a music student. With baaad luck.” She reached inside her shirt and rubbed carefully around the wound, it helped the itch a little.

“You expect me to accept this, this fantasy?”

“Expect? Accept what you want. Believe what you want. Maybe I’m lying, though what the point would be, I don’t know. It’s up to you if you want to play the fool. If not, open your ears. Asteplikota told me about the plague that started all this, how it popped up out of nowhere and vanished into nowhere. He did it, him sitting up there now watching us.” She jerked a thumb at the ceiling. “Ginbiryol Seyirshi. Ginny the Creep in his perambulating, poison machine. It was him planted plague on you. Yeh. He wanted a Pakoseo Year and that was the fastest and surest way to get it. Oh, it’s just a guess, I admit that, but if I were you, I wouldn’t bet against it.”

Miowee shook her head. “I don’t believe it. Do you know how many people died?”

“Not his people. Besides, that’s what he wants, people dying, he feeds on that dying, sucks up the agony to pleasure his customers.”

“I ... look, if it was for power or revenge, maybe ... but for a picture show?”

“I was told his picture shows bring him ... mmm, consider the worth of everthing produced on this world for ... say five years since you don’t have a lot of hi-tech here, then multiply that by a thousand.” Shadith spread her hands. “Got it? No? Don’t blame you, it’s one of those numbers that’s too big to make sense.”

“Shows? How many has he...”

“I don’t know.”

“I thought the Nistam was a monster, but...”

“Yeh. And talking about the Nistam, I have no doubt at all that Ginny’s stuck his thumb in your rebellion and he’s still beavering away on both sides to make the hate come stronger and the fighting worse. He buys men and women, you know, he uses people like he’s using us, tricking them into doing what he wants.” Agitated and uncertain, she pushed her hands back and forth along her thighs, her palms catching on the zippers; she didn’t want to say the rest of it, but she was sick of lying. “We got word out to our families, we had to, you know, we used your high Hoofta’s own skipcom, they’re coming for us ...” she laced her fingers and squeezed palm against palm, “they’re a long way off, eighty-three days altogether, though it’s less than fifty now, they’ll have started as soon as they heard ... the thing is, my people ... Ginny’s afraid of them ... I’m afraid ... because of us ... as soon as he gets the pictures he wants ... boom! Good-bye evidence. Which means good-bye Kiskai.” She forced a smile. “Makes it rather silly to play at suicide, don’t you think?”

“That the point of this ... this ... whatever it is?”

“No point, really. I just got tired of playing games. There’s still room for maneuvering, it’s pretty damn hope-less, but, well, to be honest, the only times I’ve contemplated suiciding myself is when I’m petrified with boredom and the one thing you can say about this mess, it’s not boring.”

Miowee stared at Shadith for several minutes, then switched round on her stomach and wriggled to the edge of the bunk so she could see the grill. “He’s watching us? Now? Through that maybe?”

“Through that? Not him. Weasel-face maybe, not him, he doesn’t work that crude. Probably is watching, I’m one of his catalyst points, his stars, you might say. That’s a guess, there’s no way I can be sure.”

“Why not? You seem to know everything else.”

“I’ve a Talent, not omniscience. You can’t see or detect EYEs, that’s the point of them.”

“What Talent?”

“Not mindreading.” She turned her head, tilted it back. “You hear that, Jakal? You can relax now. Your secrets are safe.”

“I see.”

“You Kiskaidas say that a lot.”

The door clanged open, two kanaweh came in, sepa-rated and stood on either side of it with weapons drawn. Miowee snickered.

They ignored her, though there was a brassy tinge to their ears, and waited with punctilious rigidity for who-ever it was they were escorting to appear in the doorway.

Shadith was not greatly surprised to see Makwahkik walk in. She sat where she was, her mood turning pecu-liar on her, a swimmy feeling like she had in the first days after she was shot; her emotions had been yanked around so much recently, it was as if she’d been put in a wringer and squeezed dry. She was surprised when he pulled a chair out from the wall and sat down, she’d expected to be hauled off and questioned about the Banger.

“I want to make some things quite clear,” he said. “Do you hear me?”

She blinked at him, shrugged.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“The woman there will go with you at all times; you will not be touched, whatever you do. Any punishment you earn, she gets, so think hard. Singer, before you act ...” he paused for emphasis, then went on, “and speak.

I’m telling you now, say nothing to disturb the people training you. And I don’t want quibbling about what I mean by disturbed, I’m sure you’re quite aware what subjects should be avoided. Do you hear me?”

“There’s a cycle of twenty-seven songs you’ll have to learn within the next two weeks. That instrument of yours isn’t suitable, we’ll provide one, the Paleka Kitskew.” His streaky eyes flicked to Miowee at the squeak startled out of her, shifted back to Shadith. “The Gospah Ayawit has consented to its use. It’s a stringed instrument like the one you were given in the infirmary, only bigger. I’ve been told the fingerings aren’t complicated and shouldn’t present any great problems to a musician of your abil-ity.” Once again he turned to Miowee. “You know the songs, you’ll play with the Singer, rehearse her until she does them properly.” He examined the streetsinger’s fro-zen face, bared his teeth in a grin as much a threat as any of the Ciocan’s, though he lacked the Dyslaeror’s tearing fangs. “You have a daughter. Yes. We found her. You didn’t expect that, did you? No. But what’s a little be-trayal beside your treachery, traitor? The Singer’s mis-deeds will be punished on your flesh, yours will be punished on your daughter’s.” He reached up his left sleeve, withdrew a flat photo, took it by a corner, and skimmed it at Miowee.

She caught it, sat gazing down at it, her face expres-sionless. Shadtih got to her feet and went to look over the streetsinger’s shoulder at the picture. The daughter was a pretty child, seven, perhaps eight, with her moth-er’s coarse black hair and intensely blue eyes; the way she was scowling from the print, she also shared her mother’s temperament. Shadith could see almost nothing of the room the child was in, it was a featureless out-of-focus blur. Deliberately so, she thought. Though she knew Miowee wouldn’t welcome her sympathy, she closed her hand on the singer’s shoulder, just to let her know she was there if she was needed. She looked up, met Makwahkik’s streaky gaze.

Oh, you miserable buuk! You and Ginny deserve each other, If there’s ANY way I can make you hurt, I’ll leap at it.

The Nish’mok got to his feet. “Exquisite little crea-ture, hard to believe she’s yours. It’d be a sad thing to scar that delicate skin. Perhaps we wouldn’t have to, I know a certain person here in Iril who’d find her en-chanting. For a while, at least.” When he reached the door, he turned. “Singer, your training begins this day, the first hour after noon. The two of you will be escorted to the Kisa Misthakan where you’ll be measured for your robes, then taken to the Choirmaster and the Paleka Kitskew. Be diligent, Singer, or your companion will suffer for it.”

“I want my harp.”

“I don’t like the tone of your voice, Singer. Must I already have your surrogate punished?”

“Don’t be a bigger fool than you were born to be. Push me too hard and I say hell with it, find yourself another Avatar.”

“Push me too hard and I might.”

Shadith shrugged. “My pleasure. I hereby resign.”

“C_{ipapi} U,

“Yes, Makwahkik Sa-pe.” A slight man with dead eyes moved around the Nish’mok and crossed to Shadith; he put his gun to her head and waited for the order to shoot.

“There’s only one way to resign, Singer. Say the word and the thing is done.”

“I’ve a feeling I’d make one hell of a mess out of your plans if I said yes; wouldn’t do my plans much good either ... hnuun ... alive is marginally better than dead. I’ll be polite in public, in private’s another thing al-together. That enough?”

“Now that you’ve got that out of you, shall we proceed?”

“My harp.”

“No. I don’t want you wasting your time with it.”

“I won’t waste time with it, but I want it.”

“I’ll consider it. After today’s session is finished. Be diligent, Singer and you’ll get your reward.”

WATCHER 10

CELL 4

Jotting angry impatient notes on his scratch pad, Makwahkik listened to the tiny insect voices, his face growing grimmer and grimmer.

... a play. A drama. All you Kiskaidis
... turn and twist for the amusement of an audience you'll never see ...

... Asteplikota told me about the plague
... he did it, him sitting up there now
... it was him planted plague on you ...

... Ginny's stuck his thumb in your rebellion and he's still beavering away on both sides

...

... Ginny's afraid of them ... I'm afraid
... because of us ... as soon as he gets the pictures he wants .. boom! .. Good-bye
Kiskal

Makwahkik stopped the playback, slapped down the intercom toggle.

“Nahwac, get Cipapll here, then I want to see Kinanipli, I don’t care what the bastard’s doing.”

Grim as Makwahkik, Ginbiryol Seyrishi watched the scene play out, then he dumped the contents of Cells 1 and 4 in the throwaway, making sure no hint of those events were left in the showstock. It was as well both Puk and Ajeri were still resting after the Praisesong, though they would have to know something about this debacle soon enough. That girl, that cursed girl, she was a bomb that kept exploding. The Makh Hen was going rabid; he was beyond their control now. There comes a point when bribes can’t buy. And Kinanipli was apt to spend the scant remainder of his life on a kana interrogation table. Fortunately they didn’t need him any longer; still, he was one of Puk’s lot, his key agent in Aina’iril, and when the Lute found out about his loss, the situation onboard was going to be very shaky indeed.

Ginbiryol settled back in his chair and sat stroking his jaw. After a short spell of brooding, he freed

up a section of screen, keyed in the closeEYE sensed to Pukanuk Pousli. The Lute was curled into a fetal knot, sweating and snoring, his face puffed from his exertions in the Praisesong; otherwise he was more or less intact, thanks to the ministrations of the O:doc. “Yes.” Ginbiryol tapped a code into the pad and watched with satisfaction as a tranx web coiled about the sleeper. “Better he sleeps for the next several weeks.”

Chapter 20: Scrambling and scratching

Sassa circled above the city, seeking out and riding the thermals that rose from the barricade fires, slipping side-ways to avoid the prowling kana flits and the streetlights with their straying pellets and catapulted stones. It was the gray, clear firstlight of morning and even the fires were tired, though the fighters didn't seem to be, the clashes went on and on, breaking off and starting again or shifting from one winding alley to another, from one decaying structure to another.

For a short while longer he flew for the pleasure of soaring, then he began to get nervous at the length of his absence from Rohant and swung out across the bay. He was a curious mix of raptor lines, a construct rather than a hybrid; Shadith thought of him as hawk mostly because he looked like one of the larger buteos, but his capacities were much more extensive than the natural strains. He'd take ground targets and birds in flight, but preferred fish when he could get it; he liked savannahs for hunting and rocky shorelines for breeding, but he'd tolerate heavy forests and take prey from treelimits if he had to. This morning he was after fish and he got one on his second stoop; with it flapping in his talons, he flew back to the perch he'd established on the roof above the cell where Rohant was.

Shadith sat up, blinked. The hate and rage she'd picked up through Sassa lingered like a foul taste. Ginny might have sparked the overt rebellion, but the explosion must have been building for years, even generations. This boil was going to be a bloody mess when it broke open. She shivered, started to lie down again and pull the quilts over her, but her bladder felt like a balloon so she dragged herself over the edge, went down the ladder, and trotted into the bathroom.

When she finished her business and stood, she saw the smear of blood on the seat and swore fervently. “Of all the things I didn't need ...” She washed off the seat and went into the bedroom to fetch a tampon and another of the sleeping shifts the infirmary had sent along with her gear; the one she had on was a mess. Her body'd been telling her for days she was due, her breasts were sore and there was a dull floating ache around tile base of her stomach, but she'd been too distracted to notice these signs. So many things happening, wrong body-weight (not much difference in the gravity but enough to throw her reactions off), days the wrong length, getting shot and drugged and fever ridden, no wonder she'd lost track of her cycle.

She rinsed out the bloody shift and hung it from a hook, then stepped into the shower and let the hot water beat on her back, breathing in the steam that rose around her, reveling in the warmth—until the water turned tepid and ended her brief heat orgy.

When she came back, Miowee was awake, watching her from the lowest bunk.

Shadith hesitated; she'd provoked scathing comment when she'd lifted Miowee onto the bunk without waiting to be asked for her help; the streetsinger was touchy about doing for herself. “Use a hand?” she said finally, nodding at the bathroom.

“No. Later, maybe.” Miowee frowned. “You're an oddity, you really are, I can't make you out. Sometimes you're a child, sometimes you act like you're older than time. How old are you?”

“Consider me an old soul. Um. I just thought of some-thing. Some cultures like yours, a menstruating woman is unclean, taboo, supposed to sit in her house and hide till it's over.”

Miowee smiled. “Wa-hyeh, there're some touches of that about, in the fervent and the male like our high and holy Gospah. You going to tell him?”

“Unfortunately it rather proclaims itself, first two days, I gush like someone stuck a pin in me. Have to change tampons every hour on the hour. Blasted nuisance, times like this.”

“Even you starpeople with all your klem?”

“Klem? I don’t think I know that word.”

“Maka word, street talk. Take what you call hi-tech, mash that in with all the things you know we don’t.”

“Ah. Yes. There’re drugs that’ll suppress the cycle. I don’t fool with them, don’t want to mess myself up case I want to have kids later. I don’t know if I do or not, but it’s a bit soon to be foreclosing options. My body’s six-teen standard, somewhere round that anyway, I couldn’t say exactly, time gets royally • twisted traveling ‘tween worlds, you never know exactly when you are even if you do know where.”

“De-ah, de-ah.” Miowee pulled herself up, grinned at Shadith. “What a wise child it is.”

“De-ah, de-ah, what a crock.” Shadith yawned, stretched. “Well, well, maybe it’s not so bad after all, buys us more ‘mr. Weasel-face can’t blame me for this delay.”

“That’s what you think.”

“Naaa. Even he must know the blood comes when it comes.”

Miowee laughed, then shook her head. “There are drugs on this world too, Shadow. Drugs that can dry you up faster than a summer drought. And he’ll use them if he takes a notion to. You have no say in it.”

“I’m not local flesh, Miowee. He might find himself with a corpse on his hands if he gets too busy. I swear, some of the things they shoved into me when I was shot came closer to killing me than that pellet did. They had to pump my stomach twice and restart my heart at least once. The good Doctor Meskew was a lot more careful after the heart thing.”

“And the Nish’mok knows about that?”

“Oh, yes; that slimebag doctor was sweating rivers when I opened my eyes after my heart quit. Weasel-face was standing behind him looking like he could chew nails.”

“Then you’re right, you’ve bought some time. You can’t go to the Chambers while you’re in blood. Oppla’s teeth, that’d be a sight, Ay-no-wit would have a stroke on the spot, they’d have to reconsecrate the whole damn place, himself included. Sheeht Talk about your evil omens.” She laughed until she started coughing. Shadith pounded her on the back, then brought her a glass of water. Her giggles finally trailed off into bubbles in the water.

Once again Shadith hesitated, but she was tied in knots as long as the Nish’mok had that child. She had to try prying her loose. Once that was done, she could see about breaking out of here. The thing now was to get this across to Miowee without the listeners knowing what she was after.

She thought a minute, then dug out her notebook, brought it to the bunk. “Look, you can’t sleep, I can’t sleep, might as well not waste this time.” She knelt beside Miowee and flattened the notebook on the covers. “Do you think this might make a song? Min mudda aksira ana ajuana ana a’ishashana ana asukninana. That’s how it sounds, what it means ... come along here, what would be the best way of saying this in Kiskaidish?” She scribbled at the page for a short time. “Look here. This is what it means ...” She pretended to read what she’d written: “A short time ago I was hungry, I was thirsty, I burned with fever.”

Miowee looked astounded, then gasped as she under-stood what was happening. She wriggled around and crawled along the mattress until she was hunched over the notebook. She read what Shadith had actually written:

My Talent—mindriding beasts—seeing, hearing, feel-ing what they see, hear, feel. It will take time but I think I can find your daughter—if she’s anywhere in the city—would that help?—could you get her away?

Her voice steady, her face expressionless, Miowee said, “I like the way it sounds in the original, you could use that as a refrain of sorts; it’s meant to be a love song?”

“Yes. The rhythm though, the two langues are very different ... I don’t know....”

Miowee took the stylus, wrote:

Yes. Yes. Yes. I can. I will. Don’t ask how. Not even you. If you are playing games with me, I will strangle you. Or something. Somehow. How long?

“If you can shorten the phrase,” she said, “Break it into different repeats. Like this maybe.” She wrote more, read aloud:

Min mudda aksira
My saklimo-heh strayed from me
A short time ago, an eternity
Min Mudda aksira ana ajuana
My saklimo-heh sets my soul on fire
I thirst for him, I perish from desire

Shadith took the notebook. “I see. Yes, it can be done that way and the phrases would still make sense. But wouldn’t the repetition get terribly monotonous? Or ... I just had a thought, why not exaggerate that monotony?”

She wrote:

No games—don’t know how long—depends where she is and how much beastlife there is about—need eyes to look through—can move from mind to mind—can’t linger long without base—or see without actual physical eyes—if don’t find her before mens. over, be limited to sleeptime search—take lots longer. With luck, could be tomorrow—without, who knows?—want something for this—help to hide—if manage to get away—till rescue. Three of us.

She wrote more, read aloud:

Min mudda aksira-o
A short time ago
Min mudda aksira-i
My saklimo-heh strayed from me
A short while ago, an eternity
Min mudda aksira-o
A little week ago
Min ana ajuananee
Thirst consum-ed me
Min ana a’ishashana aree a’rire
My saklimo-heh set my soul on fire
I thirst for him, I perish from desire

Miowee looked up, smiling, made the Kiskaidish formal-sign for agreement (a pressing of the palms together, a dip of the head), then she reread the last lines. “No, no, Shadow, you’ve gone over the edge, it just doesn’t work.” She yawned. “I’m tired, even if we’re not going to be working today, let’s get some sleep.” She pushed the notebook at Shadith. “I think you need to change again. You’re showing through that shift.”

“Ahhh! What it is to be a woman.” Shadith grinned at Miowee, gave her a thumbs-up and took the notebook into the bathroom where she shredded the pages and flushed them away.

Seven days later seven women came for Shadith, gray-haired matrons dressed in heavy black robes, black gloves, black veils thrown over their heads and held in place by a crown of jayshi antlers, the ends fluttering about their knees. They circled her, singing a dirgelike chant, closed in on her and stripped her. They whipped her with soft wool straps the color of fresh blood, a ceremonial scourging. They wrapped her in a bright red blanket, pulled over her head a white jayshi skin painted with sacred patterns and deeply fringed, the fringes splitting over her arms and hanging to mid thigh in front and back. They spun her round and round, then took her from the room. Seven prepubescent girls lifted the kitskew from its

case and carried it after the matrons. Seven unmarried maid-ens wearing long yellow cloths wound about their breasts and loins brought in buckets of purified water and began scrubbing every inch of the cell.

The matrons took Shadith to the Kisa Mishthakan and drove her at a trot around the outside of the Great Wall, scourging her as she ran with the red wool straps.

Wearing only thick black blindfolds and black loin-cloths, two Kam priests swung open the postern gate and stood with their backs to the opening, their faces to the wall, as the matrons led Shadith inside the Purification Court.

At the far end of the octagonal court a large wooden tub steamed gently into the brilliant morning air. The matrons stripped Shadith again, bathed her, stood her on the blanket and anointed skin and hair with perfumed oils, then one of them took black and white paints and soft wood sticks and drew geometric patterns on her face and on her arms and down along her body to her feet. Another unfolded a shift, its fine white cloth billowing in the wind. Three drew it over her head and tied the laces that snugged the bodice against her slight form while the loose skirt fluttered about her legs, brushed against her bare and painted feet. In silence with the others silently following behind, two matrons took her wrists and led her from the court into a lightless maze—she could hear bare feet pattering, hands sliding against stone, siss, siss, the women around her breathing in unison.

This whole thing was beginning to have an odd effect on Shadith. Ancient and rational, of a species able to manipulate such things, fully aware of the way these rituals develop and the reasons behind them, yet she was catching awe and wonder from the women and the girls—perhaps it was the impact of their deep belief in what they were doing, perhaps some sense of the antiquity of this rite. It made her uncomfortable, that feeling, yet **it** was close to irresistible because there was a part of her that NEEDED to belong to something which would reach out and enfold her. She was lonely; she hadn't let herself think about that, but it was part of her fear of University, of being alone on a whole world with no one who knew her history, no one she could talk to without holding back ... she tried to shake off the malaise, but it ate deeper and deeper into her ... made her all too suscep-tible to the power of the rite....

A door boomed open ahead, with the sound of the crashing of thunder, more thunder came, the beat of huge drums, their boom-doom vibrating in the bone.

The matrons brought Shadith into an immense hall, three stories tall, galleries rising rank on rank along the sides, sunbeams slanting into torchlight from twin rows of clerestory windows while incense drifted lazily down from silver censers dangling on silver chains bolted to the ceiling beams. Na-priests in black leather and black wool stood shoulder to shoulder, silent and ominous, filling the lowest gallery, five hundred of them, staring down at her. Above them the second gallery was crowded with Kisar judges and scholars, the wealthiest of the Kawa merchants. Women—Kisar, Kawa, and Plicik—each in their own sections, filled the third gallery. On the floor, Plicik males like beaded peacocks stared with easy arro-gance at Shadith and her retinue.

The matrons brought her to the foot of the curved shallow-stepped stair to the altar stage with its Chair of the Gospah and above that the Totem of Oppalatin—an immense maskin carved from some dark tight-grained wood, rearing on his hind legs, reaching out with silver claws extruded and gleaming, as if to at once embrace and threaten the accembled believers. The women backed away from her and lay on the crimson carpet, their faces pressed to the wool, their arms outstretched. The girl-children with the kitskew came timidly forward, placed it on the lowest step, then backed away and dropped flat behind the matrons.

The Gospah Ayawit stood beside his Chair, a massive backless banc with the form in abstract of a maskin crouching, carved from the same wood as the Totem. He beat his staff on a wooden soundboard beside his feet, “Opplatin Awashoneeotehiya’asewacikapiyah,” he intoned in the liquid heart-rhythm of the ancient langue. “Oppla’s bounty blessings be. Well done, Omisa, Otanisan. De-part now, your work is complete.” He brought the staff down again, stood waiting while the matrons and the girls got to their feet and backed out, spines arched, heads bowed over hands pressed together, fingers up. When they were gone, he stood smiling benignly down at Shadith. “Prepare, O Nikamo-Oskinin, prepare.” A third time he set the board booming. “Ni-tahwaikis.”

A flute and a pair of basenote Longhorns joined the drums. The Sound filled the chamber, beating

with her heart, throbbing in her brain. She relaxed and let it take her, swimming in the seething, complex stew of emotion in that great chamber, emotion as strong for her as the sound.

A masked figure danced through long, velvet, beaded drapes at the left of the altar, an androgynous figure with grasses and cornhusks knotted into a rustling robe and wooden plaques linked to form scapulars before and behind; it held a black and white blanket, swinging it up and around as it came toward Shadith. She dropped to her knees as she'd been exhaustively instructed, the blanket dropped over her, concealing her completely.

"Tahnokipo Waposh." Boom-boom went the sounding board.

A second figure danced out....

The ceremony went on and on, the tension lessening, rebuilding, lessening, building to a higher plateau, the drums throbbing, seizing control of every heart in that sounding chamber, bringing them into unison, seizing control of the breath until there was a single creature breathing, the cynical and the unbelieving there for status and curiosity caught with the others in the powerful impulse of the rite....

Shadith wrinkled her nose at the door, set her back against the steel and grinned to Miowee. "I'm holy again."

"Wahhh-weh." Miowee plucked a tinkly tune from the kitskew. "Do I bow, do I slap my brow on the slates you consecrate?"

"Yes, you bow, come now, kowtow." She whirled dizzily about the room, tripped over the hassock and went skidding on a rug until she slammed against the bunk, folded in the middle and collapsed on the husker mattress.

"Grace incarnate." Miowee played another phrase of the jokesong. "You finished?"

Shadith rubbed at the sore spot where her head had cracked against the bunkframe. "Looks like. You know, it's funny, I thought the Gospah would have his nose out of joint at this messy hangup. Female thing."

"Why? Wikpriest on up, they have to deal with bodies all the time, there's a rite for everything from spitting to shifting." Miowee shrugged, picked another tune, it was the one they'd been working on to camouflage their conversations, now it was the question she couldn't ask.

Shadith groaned and got to her feet. "After all that, I'm hungry enough to eat a Slither raw. And tired! Wake me when the food arrives." She shook her head (an unspoken answer to the unasked question), climbed the ladder and slipped into the top bunk.

For the past week she'd been methodically ransacking the Kasta, searching for the child; she'd been sure Makwahkik was keeping her close at hand in case he needed to beat on Miowee. Needed was an ambiguous word and an apt one, because Miowee opened wounds in him that he refused to acknowledge yet suffered from. What she was, what she said, what she did, all of it was a scathing condemnation of everything he'd given his life to. His trouble was he wasn't stupid, so she reached through his defenses and showed him to himself and he didn't like what he saw. He NEEDED to crush her, to destroy her independence, her integrity, to force her to acknowledge his rightness, his worth.

With their question tables and surgical theaters, their prisoners mutilated in mind and body, the cellars made her weep and swear and churn with nausea, but she kept looking. No child. After she finished that part of the search, she lay a long time staring into the dark, trying to forget what she'd seen.

Ground level had a kilometer-squared of floorspace; it was a maze of offices and kana sleeping quarters and kitchens and a kana cafeteria with separate officer dining halls and preliminary interrogation units and cells and cells and cells (Miowee had lived there over two months before Makwahkik's demonstration) and prisoner chap-els and kana chapels and detention suites and a repair facility for the kana flits and assorted storerooms, plus a scatter of anonymous nooks and crannies. Even late at night there were kana scribes working there, kana tortur-ers hauling prisoners to the question tables, kana guards coming in and out, bringing back wounded and dead kanaweh from the stone and fire fights in the city, bring-ing in battered and wounded prisoners, along with what-ever dead Makas and Tanaks they

could lay their hands on so they could identify them and haul in their families to suffer for their misdeeds. It took five days to search that level and even then she wasn't sure she'd nosed out all of it. No sign of the child anywhere.

Second level held the infirmary, larger and more elaborate offices, meeting chambers, record rooms, computers, corn banks, guest suites for visiting kana officers, more kitchens and washrooms, an armory (light arms), the flit garage, a fuel dump, a number of anonymous nooks and crannies, but not so many as below. She finished that level the night before the rite was scheduled. No child.

She lay on the bunk and wondered if her assumptions were correct, but that was only a bit of foreplay before she plunged into the exhausting search. Unless she was entirely mistaken in everything she thought she knew about him, Makwahkik simply couldn't let the child go far from his hand. She closed her eyes, found a prowling cat, and slid into him. There were cats everywhere, cats were Makwahkik's clan totem and untouchable; besides this, they earned a welcome because they kept down the vermin attracted by the muck in the cellars, the food in the kitchens; they paced through the halls, trotted through the maze of heating ducts with the arrogance of ownership, slept on top of cabinets, on desks and in chairs with the clerks and others shooing them without thought when they were in the way; they went where they wanted when they wanted without being much noticed. And they served Shadith as well as they did Makwahkik and the kanaweh.

Third level held Makwahkik's office, the high chapel of the Kana (used for funerals and graduation rites and other Kana ceremonies), the Nish'mok's personal flit storage and repair shop, quarters for his bodyguards, for his Aide Nahwac, reception rooms of varied stages of grandeur, assorted high security suites like the one where she was now, where Rohant and Kikun were living, another armory, communication rooms that were busy day and night, busy now as she sent the cat trotting through them. This floor being much less extensive than the two below, she pushed on so she could finish with it before her lessons started again.

"Food, Shadow, food." A clatter of metal against china. Shadith released the cat and dropped back into herself. "Yeh," she muttered and fought the dizziness that came from prolonged riding. Levering herself up, she looked over the edge of the bunk. "Ah."

Miowee was sitting at the table, pouring herself a cup of the local tea. "Any interesting dreams?"

"Fraid not." She swung down and seated herself across from the streetsinger. "Maybe later. This so-called meal could bring on a few." She made a face at the soup and salad and single paper-thin slice of dry toast. "This is all? After what I had to do this morning?"

"Be glad Ay-no-wit hasn't decided you should fast for the duration."

"Hunh! Tell you something, I don't deal well with being ordered about."

"Eat your soup while it's still warm."

"Yes, mama-not." She sighed and picked up the toast. "So. What is this Culmination thing? When I asked the Gospah, he soured up his face like I spat in his wine."

Miowee took a long drink of tea, sat the cup down with an exaggerated care. "Why bother? It's just a collection of rituals, you'll learn, they have to teach you the songs."

"Uhhh-huh! Tell me."

"How should I know anything? I'm Maka, they barely teach us to read."

"You're Maka like I'm Ay-no-wit's twin sister."

"My mother was. It's the truth, Shadow."

"And your father?"

"Why should I tell you that?"

"No reason. Doesn't matter, anyway I could probably guess a lot of it. You're good as someone else I know at avoiding answers. And you're making me more nervous by the minute. What hellish little surprise has the Gospah got waiting for us?"

"You're a nice child, Shadow, there's heart to you. I don't know what your home is like; being it produced you, it must be a pretty good place to live."

"Why do I get the feeling that's a eulogy over my corpse? Come on, Mee, you're not my mama,

curb those hormones, huh? What I don't know could hurt the hell out of me."

"Know. That's the problem. I don't KNOW anything. Just rumors. Stories. Last Pakoseo Year was a long time ago, no one remembers it. My grandmother wasn't even born yet." She pushed at her hair, made a face at Shadith. "All right, all right. Calm down, will you. And eat while I'm doing this or I stop right now." She waited until Shadith started spooning up the soup, sighed, and started talking again. "Story is there are always Avatars, some-times more than one set of them. There's holy dances and holy songs and at the Culmination there's the Sacrifice."

"To coin a phrase, I see." Shadith broke the toast in half, sat holding the smaller bit. "That's how the Gospah keeps his grip on things, right?"

"You got it."

"Come on, come on, give." She popped the toast in her mouth, rubbed her thumbs rapidly across her bunched fingers. "The whole thing," she said thickly, "not just a hint."

"The Avatars return to Oppalatin."

"Aaah! Details, woman. How?"

"Remember, you asked. The story goes there's a mock battle, not so mock where you're concerned, you three. You're tied to stakes and the stakes are piled round with oil-soaked wood. There's singing and music and someone cries out that you go willingly to the Father of All. And they light the fire. And when it's over, they gather the ashes and take them up in a flit and drop them over the heads of the Pilgrims and everyone goes home, edified and sanctified."

"Oh, yes. We'll see about that." Shadith drained her cup, pushed the chair back. "I'll sleep on it a while, see if I can come up with something."

Late that night, hours past midnight, she found Miowee's daughter lying curled up on a mat at the foot of Makwahkik's bed.

WATCHER 11

CELL 9

Asteplikota opened and shut his hand, pressing and releasing, pressing and releasing the padded spring his therapist had given him so he could build up muscle to replace that sliced away by the cutter beam. "I don't know," he said and looked curiously at his brother. "I don't fully understand them, I never did. You want a guess, they were trying to get home. Medd. Not selling out to the Nistam."

Kiscomaskin vaulted onto the stone balustrade that went round the terrace at the back of the merchant's house where they were staying for the moment, ignoring the chasm at his right hand as he walked along the lichened stone with careless ease; showing off was one of several childhood habits he'd never shed—especially when he was alone with his elder brother.

He came back, stood with the vanishing sun setting his hair on fire, his hands clasped behind him. "Does it matter? You know Ayawit, he'd find a way to co-opt them, no counting their inclinations and Intentions. He would and he has. You're a reasonable man, Aste my oste, that's your weakness. And you like people too much. That's another."

"And you're not reasonable and you don't like people? If that's true, why are you doing all this?"

"It's a scam, Aste. Look at the way we're living." He waved his hand at the house and the wild extravagant view. "Were you half this comfortable when you were beating history into stoneheaded Kawas and Kisars?"

Asteplikota shook his head, smiling fondly at his younger brother, not believing a word of what Kiscomaskin had said, judging him by himself and by the oldtime wit he remembered when Kisca was a brilliant but erratic scholar, filled with fervor for the righting of ancient wrongs. "You could be sitting at Ayawit's right hand, brother. Have you forgotten his fancy for you?"

"Not half." Kiscomaskin shuddered, swayed, jumped hastily down. "Enough of this silly

game. We have to take them out fast, brother. People are getting confused and dispirited, watching Ayawit parade them about. She was on the comcircuit, that girl of yours, singing for them like she sang for us. A week ago. I've been getting shit in the face ever since. The Opla-cursed Judges want to know what's going on. We could lose a big part of our funding. They have to die and we have to find a way to blame the Nistam for it."

"Kisca my oste, get her away from them, she'll be more useful alive. If you can't get them all, at least take her, It'll break the set, that's all you need."

"Can't do that, Aste my oste. Be hard enough to pull off an assassination, kidnapping is out of the question."

"They'd help, if you could get to them. I've seen that girl work. It is amazing what she can do."

"So you say, little brother. I can't take the chance. Besides, it's already started." He looked up, frowned at the clouds gathering overhead. "I'm leaving for the Main less than an hour on. I probably won't be back before the Culmination. You take care, you hear?" He closed his hand tight on Asteplikota's uninjured shoulder. "Don't stay out too long. It's going to rain, I don't want you catching pneumonia."

CELL 4

Late at night in the Nish'mok's personal quarters on the fourth level of the Kasta, a small sleek cat darted from behind a leather divan, ran like black water along the wall and crouched by a cluttered worktable, ears pricked, whiskers twitching. When she was satisfied the silence was going to continue unbroken, she jumped lightly onto the table and nosed through the papers, files, cassettes, and other items scattered about on the polished wood until she found Makwahkik's keypac. She batted it onto the carpet, then stalked tail-high to the board beside his computer outlet. Her tail jerking side to side, she crouched and nosed at the pad, then she raised on her toes and batted at the onswitch. When screen went bright and the outlet started humming she jumped away, then dropped to her stomach and crawled cautiously back; moving awkwardly because control was being forced on her from outside, she hit other keys, entering the Nish'mok's password. When she was done with that, she licked vigorously at her sides, looking up repeatedly at the screen until the run was finished.

Shaking her head angrily, the rider on her brain irritating her more and more, she settled to work, tapping instructions into the outlet, shutting down the security network over certain selected areas of the Kasta.

She stared at the screen until it flashed the endsignal, then she exited the program, turned off the outlet, and leaped to the floor. For several moments she raced wildly about the room, playing with ghosts, then she bit at the keypac until she had it secure in her mouth and went trotting around behind the divan. The POV slid after her, caught the tip of her tail as she vanished into a heating duct whose loosened grill she'd clawed aside.

"Amazing what the girl is able to do with that peculiar Talent." Ginbiryol Seyirshi scratched behind the simi's small round ears; the Pet sighed with pleasure and flat-tened himself against his owner's chest. "One would think that its scope would be quite narrow."

Ajeri Kilavez crossed her legs and jiggled her foot. "One would think," she said Her voice was slow, slurred, and there were dark circles under her eyes. She wasn't used to endphasing under this much pressure, especially without Puk as balance, and it was undermining her confidence in herself. More important, it was eroding her confidence in Ginbiryol.

He looked swiftly at her, as swiftly away, and seethed with hatred for that interfering girl. Voallts had insulted him and he was going to destroy them for it, but there was none of this corrosive rage in that, it was prudence more than anything else; he didn't leave enemies behind him. Her he wanted in his hands, his own hands. Ur-gently, passionately, he WANTED her. He glared at Cell 1; Shadith was stretched out on the top bunk osten-sibly asleep, her face a map of her efforts, grimacing, twisting, continually shifting expression. He was tempted to send the mercs after her, but he resisted, it would throw everything into chaos; he might get some good footage, but he couldn't control the outcome. Let the Schema run its course, let her play the role he chose for her. That would have to do him. He set the simi aside and swung the chair around to take a look over other developing scenes.

"They're turning against us...."

"No, that's not it, the Pakoseo helped us in the beginning, now it's hurting. The Maka have no time for us, no thought for us, they're getting ready to walk away. Tanak, they're worse. We're losing our base."

"No, that's not it, it's the Three, Ayawit's got his claws in them somehow, I've heard...."

"And I've heard, and I've heard and I've heard, I'm tired of hearing. ."

"Whose fault is that? If you DID something...."

"Do what? Makh Hen's agents are like fleas, they everywhere and you don't know when they're going to light or who on...." The acrimonious exchanges went on and on in the basement somewhere in the Maka Quarter where the Five were meeting, waiting for a sixth to arrive—the Council of the Five, all of them with prices on their heads, the men who provided whatever organization and leadership the chaotic rebellion possessed, the reality where Kiscomaskin was the shining symbol, the grounding under his feet.

Kiscomaskin came in quietly, no fanfare, no kaboom-here-I-am-look-at-me, but the carping died immediately and the Five turned to face him. He waved his bodyguards out the door, pulled it shut and dropped into a chair. "Tell me."

A Maka with long red-brown hair plaited into half a dozen thin beaded braids, Nastrldmas leaned forward, elbows on knees, a frown on his lean, worn face. He was the leader of the Shawanalotah (windwalkers), the Action Triads of the Council of the Five, nightstalkers hitting inside the strongholds of the Pliciks and the Priests. There was a price of five thousand wiyas on his head.

"We've got access to the Kasta, right into the Maid] Hen's bedroom." He took a keypac from his shoulder pouch, dangled it from long, bony fingers. "With security blanked out where it counts."

Kiscomaskin tapped his fingers on his thigh. "And?"

"Miowee the streetsinger. You know her. She was picked up a few months ago, she got word to us while she was with that girl supposed to be Nilcamo-Oskinin, when she was practicing the Pakoseo Songs in the Kisa Misthakan. She got these out an hour ago." He rattled the keys. "Malch Hen made a big mistake; he thought he could control that girl by making Miowee a whipping churl. Instead, he going to lose the Three, that's the price for this." He swung the keypac again. "We bringing them out tonight, long with Miowee and her daughter." He straightened, raised his thumb in defiance, grinning as the rest of the Five shook their thumbs with him. "And slit the Makh Hen's throat before he know what hit him."

The Tanak Mohecopah cleared his throat. He was a sturdy, sour-faced man, with broad hands and large feet, a hard, solid body, dark suspicious eyes and a straggle of brown hair kinking about a bald spot the size of a saucer. He was a total loss as an orator, but one-on-one he could sell a man his own skin and make a profit on it. He was the one who maintained the web of support services in Aina'iril and throughout Wapaskwen, providing intelligence, housing; food, even coin. He had a prodigious memory and could usually produce people, tools, and supplies for whatever projects the Council of Five had working. The price on his head was fifteen thousand wiyas.

"I keep trying to tell you all," he said, his harsh voice strident with anger. "We can't kill the man. It would ruin everything. Hold him to ransom. Keep him as hostage so the kanaweh won't firebomb the Quarters. Otherwise, don't touch. We kill him, we trigger a massacre. What then? Who's going to listen to us when their families are dead? When they're all dead?"

"You!" The word was an explosion from the second Maka, Dencipim. He was a thin, intense man with gray-streaked black hair plaited into the Make braids, a bum scar along his jaw and a number of thin white knife scars on his face and neck, the backs of his hands. He led the strikes, the marches, the barricade fights in the streets of Aina'iril. His temper was notorious, it gave him a ferocious energy and drove him to acts of legendary daring. The price on his head was ten thousand wiyas. "You make me sick," he shouted. "I spit on that weasel talk. I spit on you."

The Kisar Lihtaksos hissed impatiently. "The both of you, we've been through this and been through it. The decision was made, Mohecopah. Makwahkik is one of the few loyal and able men the Nistam has. Too able. He is more dangerous to us alive than dead. And dead

he'll be when the Shawanalotah go in." He crossed his legs at the ankle, tented his hands, touching fingertip to fingertip in a characteristic pose—for what he called far too many years, he'd been a lecturer on Early History at the University, a colleague of Asteplikota. He was a fair, frail man, with fine lank gray-blond hair and faded blue eyes. That frailty was misleading; he had a tough incisive mind, a resilient body and an undentable will. He lived on the run, in cellars and rags, eating when he could, snatching sleep whenever he could find a safe hole, but he never lost his poise and his worn elegance. He was the mediator of quarrels among the Five, the least known to the people in the streets. Because he had difficulty with ordinary chit-chat and few close friends outside his work circle, he had no constituency. Among the Kisars, even including his family and clan, he was held to be both traitor and fool. The price on his head was the smallest, only a thousand wiyas.

The fifth sat silent, watching, the Kawa Wetaklsoh, a small, wiry man huddled in heavy, embroidered robes, the scalplock of the Kawas trained to fall past his left ear along with the totemdangles of his personal clan, small copper ovals hanging on copper chains, with the namaska fish stamped into them.

Ex-smuggler, ex-trader, he was the Five's tie into the disaffected Kawa clans, reaching men who were too cautious to declare themselves but were willing to provide services and supplies for the rebels; he understood and shared the prudence of his caste, kept his head down himself until the Nish'mok forced him into the open. The price on his head was five thousand wiyas.

He stirred as Lihtaksos finished speaking. "We're wasting time," he said. His voice was a deep soft basso, a gentle rumble that was as misleading as the scholar's frailty. "The Shawanalotah are waiting. Kiscomaskin Sa-Pe, have you anything to tell us?"

Kiscomaskin tapped his fingers on his thighs. He wasn't happy at having this pushed in his face, but he couldn't let it slide. He was hardly past puberty when he learned that the prime secret to being a leader was the ability to recognize a developing consensus and to articulate it before anyone else.

All the Five wanted Makwahkik dead, even Mohecopah, but what troubled him was troubling the others—and more than they were willing to admit. "I have a thought. Nashkimas, you've made copies of that pac?"

Nashkimas tossed the keypac into the air, caught it and dropped it into his shoulderpouch. "Of course. Make one, make ten, doesn't take all that long. Why?"

"Send in an additional Triad. Once you've taken out the Nish'mok, don't leave his body there, have them get it away while the rest go about their business. If they can, they should take it to the middle of the bay and drop it in, weighed down with enough scrap metal to keep it there till worldsend. Leave the kanaweh a mystery to investigate, not a death to avenge. While it might be satisfying to cut his throat, don't.

No. Get him some way that doesn't leave traces behind that you can't clean up. The strangler's cord. Yes. Yes. Yes! How appropriate, don't you think? Use his own tool against him." He sat back, smiling at the shouts of approval. "Right. Now, where you going to put the Three when you get them out?"

Ginbiryol set the Pet aside and began entering short notes into his mm pad. There were two strands develop-ing below, two promising fates for that girl: the Fire at the Culmination and Kiscomaskin's assassination plot.

Ginbiryol was not sure which he wanted to come to fruition; he was also unsure whether he had any say in the matter. He preferred the burning. He wanted to see that girl writhing in the fire, the others did not matter that much, but she had earned the fire over and over by what she had done to him, to them all; she had made a mockery of them. He replayed the scene between the brothers and brooded over the exchange. He could not make up his mind whether he should call off Kiscomaskin or let the man try what Puk had so disastrously failed at; he had a strong feeling that the local would not manage it either. The girl by herself was bad enough, put her with that lizard man, they were hoodoos of major proportions.

He watched Cell 14 and brooded some more. He could call Kiscomaskin off. Probably he had better do that. Letting the girl get at the Kiskaid might be ... **no**, would be disastrous. She knew too much. She talked too much. Even before she got him killed, she had wiped out Makwahkik's usefulness. If he lost Kiscomaskin as well.... On the other hand, Kiscomaskin had a nose for smelling out weaknesses no matter how deeply they were hidden. Ordering him to keep off would send him dig-ging

at the girl as soon as he thought he'd dropped his watchers. No. The least intrusive way was the best. Let events play out. It did not really matter. Nothing the locals could do would change the end. He rubbed at his jaw and stole a look at Ajeri. She was reading one of her magazines, ignoring the cells. The girl had gotten to her long before this, she could not stand to look at her now. Well, Ajeri tiszteh, come the burning you will be right again. Come the burning....

CELL 5

Black fabricwings rode the eddying winds to the roof of the Kasta. The Shawanalotah made the precarious landings with precision and silence despite the slant of the leads and slimy mixture of dust and dew that made the roof a potential deathslide. After folding the kites and tucking them behind the parapet, the five Triads ran bent over toward the lit-up area of the Nish'mok's private flit landing.

Miniature crossbows loaded with drugged darts in their left hands, the front Triad crept forward, moving with the undulant predatory grace of blackvipers. The leader took out the dozing sentry before he knew he wasn't alone on the roof.

After a quick scan failed to locate anyone else up there, the leader waved the others forward, keyed open the lift, and punched in the code that would take them down into the heart of the Kasta.

Fourth level: two Triads peeled off, trotted for the armored doors of the Nish'mok's suite.

Third level: one Triad stayed to hold the lift, one scattered to plant the firebombs they carried in their sacs, the third followed a small black cat through the maze of corridors.

Twenty-three olph. The leader checked the designation, opened the squint. Throaty growl, smell of cat. "Ah," he breathed. "Hunter."

The word was a thread of sound, but the answer came back immediately, a snarl filled with hostility. "What?"

"Get ready, you leaving. Singer say this: Miralys have your skin you mess this up, kitcat's word on it." He keyed the lock and swung the door open.

A snort from the darkness, the sound of something big moving about, then Rohant appeared in the doorway, pouch over his shoulder, cats at his heels.

The Triad collected Klkun, then Shadith, swung Miowee into a leather harness, strapped her onto the back of the largest Shawal and went trotting back to the lift to wait for the bomb planters.

CELL 4

One ansit. The number glyph and the letter glyph were ornate, thick silver shapes inlaid with elaborate gold scrolling; the door itself was steel veneered with purplewood, polished and waxed and shimmering like gemstone in the brilliant white light that kept the hallway clear of shadow. The lead Triad spread out, a Shawal facing each way along the hall, the third trying the keys on the lock. The second Triad trotted off toward the armory—they were were going to collect what they could carry and set the rest to blow once they were away.

The child lay on a pallet at the foot of a wide bed, a blanket over her, a chain from her leg to the bedpost. Though the Shawanalotah came as quiet as shadows moving across a wall, she started from a troubled sleep and sucked in a breath, preparing to scream. A Shawal sprang at her, got a fistful of blanket across her mouth and held her as gently as he could, pressing down on her leg so she wouldn't rattle the chain.

Makwahkik was deeply asleep, but something must have reached him, because a faint snore broke in half and the springs creaked as he shifted position. The Shawanalotah rushed him, one caught him by the hair, jerked his head up, the other whipped the cord about his neck, pulled it tight.

Makwahkik clawed at the Shawal stranglers leather gauntlets until the second Shawal caught his wrists and forced his arms down. When Makwahkik went limp, the Shawal dropped his wrists and stepped back. He stood a moment looking down at the man responsible for the death and torment of so many of his kin. "Too easy. Too fuckin easy." He turned and trotted out.

The Shawal with the child eased the pressure on her, brought his head down close to

hers. "Kayataki," he murmured, "Your mum sent us to get you. You'll be seeing her in a little while if you're quiet and good. She said you'd worry whether we were telling the truth, she said tell you remember Mohe-mohe the turtle and how he used to cry." He began easing the blanket off her face. "Don't be afraid now, we wear these things so people won't know who we are. You're a big enough girl to understand that."

She stared up at him unblinking, her body taut with rage, not fear, a rage his words did nothing to diminish. "Him," she whispered.

"He's dead."

The slight body relaxed suddenly, the child gulped and began to cry, silently, making no fuss about it, as if something inside her had chosen that moment to break.

He lifted her, held her close, patting her back and murmuring comforting syllables in her ears. The other Shawal tied off the cord, then came to the foot of the bed and began trying keys on the cuff around the girl's ankle. It fell away with a dull clank and the Shawal got to his feet. "Come on, you take his legs and let's get out of here. I don't trust those timers far as I can spit."

Ginbiryol Seyirshi watched as the Shawanalotah streamed from the lift, collected their kites, and liberated three flits from the Nish'mok's personal fleet. They went skim-ming off, flying low, almost brushing the rooftops, avoid-ing the areas where the kanaweh were ending their nightly scramble. He locked in the sequence where Makwahkik went tumbling toward the cold black water out near the mouth of the bay, a good distance from the moored freighters and government armships, then he turned his attention to the chaos and destruction as the bombs began going off and the Kasta started to burn, gloating at the pain-hate-fear his pathe-EYES were sending up to him.

Chapter 21. Running again

The flits darted flat and dark into the murk of the swamp fringe south of the city, landed on a sandy island thick with intertwining puzzletrees, a small, clear spring bub-bling from the side of a hillock near the middle. The Shawanalotah piled out; a pair of them began work on the propulsion systems, breaking recklessly into the sealed units.

Shadith hauled her harp overside, hefted out her travelpouch and trudged with them to the fallen tree where a Shawal had deposited Miowee, Ler daughter, and her gear; Kikun came and squatted beside them on a patch of grass; Rohant strolled over carrying his pouch and Kikun's, the cats pressing close to him, irritated and unhappy. He dropped the gear to the grass and settled on the trunk beside Shadith.

"Didn't have a chance to say before," she said, "it's good to see you two again. What's that about?" She nodded at the flits.

He snorted. "Suicide," he said. "Or stupidity."

Miowee clicked her tongue, irritation momentarily chas-ing anger. "Not half, Hunter; talk about what you know. They've done this before, they know what they're doing."

She turned to Shadith. "They're inducing shorts, they're going to use the flits like flying bombs, send them at the Kiceota, that's the Nistam's pile up there on the Horn."

"Seems chancy."

Miowee shrugged. "We can't keep them anyway, have, to get rid of them, why not stick a bomb up the Nistam's arse?"

"Makh Hen's going to be spitting mad. He'll go through the Quarters with a burning rake."

"No, he won't." The child's voice was shrill and loud, colored with a disturbing satisfaction.

"Kaya?" Miowee sounded startled. "What do you mean?"

"They killed him." Kayataki yawned suddenly, groped for her mother's hand. "They took him away. Gonna dump him deep. What they said,"

—Miowee looked fierce and squeezed her daughter's fingers. "Good." She spread Kayataki's hand on what was left of her thigh, smoothed it with gentle strokes as if it were a kitten sitting there. After a minute she winked at the girl. "We'll have to swear off fish for a couple months or old monster's like to give us a belly ache."

Kayataki giggled drowsily, pressed her face a moment against her mother's stump, then cuddled

against her; she was shivering, the night was chill and damp and all she wore was a skimpy white shift. Her lids kept dropping, she was swimming with sleep, but when she looked up, her dark blue eyes were as fierce as her mother's. She had reason, there were bruises over all her body—abrasions, burns, and ligature marks. Makwahkik had used her ruthlessly, knowing whatever he did would be erased when he had her killed which he'd scheduled for the day after the Culmination when there'd be no one left to claim her. Shadith watched her, sickened by the ugly mess of hurt and hate she read in the child and by the memory of what she'd seen in that bedroom; she hadn't said anything about it, and Miowee hadn't asked, perhaps because she didn't need to. No doubt the Nish'mok had thought his tastes were secret; like many of the ruling kind he'd have been appalled to learn just how much of his private life was known to the underclasses. All of which was beside the point, he was too dead to care what anyone knew. And they were alive and needed to get on with living.

The Shawanalotah clamped the workports shut and stood waiting beside the flits. They watched the sky and ignored their ex-paksengers, except for the Shawal who'd been carrying Miowee. He left the group, ran to the downtree, tossed a small bluedsteel handgun into the singer's lap, trotted back to his Triad.

"Friendly types," Shadith muttered. "I feel like lost luggage. Cheap luggage."

Miowee snorted. "What'd you expect, flunkies bowing you around?" She removed the clip, examined and re-placed it, made sure the safety was on, tucked the gun into the case with her kitskew.

A third flit came skimming under the trees and landed beside the others. A Triad climbed out. The leader wiped under his mask, readjusted it. "Feeding the fish," he said. "Finished?" He nodded at the other flits.

"Ready to go. What about yours?"

The leader tilted his head back, measured the progress of the stars. "No time. Only an hour or so till dawn. There's a couple incendiaries left over, I'll set those before I jump. Let's go."

Rohant got to his feet, stood watching the flits vanish into the fog gathering over the water. "There's brave men and fools and that bunch is both. I wouldn't have got back in those things with a gun at my head. Shadow, any trouble close enough to bother about? I want to take the cats hunting, they're getting hungry, so am I."

Shadith sighed, gave Miowee a quick halfsmile. "I have to tell you, Mee, we didn't do all that well the last time we were in here." She put out feelers, tasting at the life forms around them; for the moment there seemed to be nothing threatening, no Pariahs for one thing. "Noth-ing I can smell out."

Kikun stretched, got to his feet looking sleepy and mostly absent. "No informers in the Pariah, not now not later." He shuddered, intoned, "Makh Hen made it so, there's no reward that's rich enough to pay for dead and maimed. Kana or Na-priest, come they near the Fringes, they are dead—and dead we'll be, should we stay too long." He opened his eyes wide, spread his hands and jerked them up-down, a chopping gesture meant to underline his words. "My azee tells me begone before the week ends."

Rohant scratched at his jaw, shook his head, then whistled to the cats who'd gone off exploring; when they appeared, he went striding away along the island with the great black beasts frisking beside him.

Shadith watched them vanish into the gloom. "Well, it is to be hoped nothing eats him or shoots him." She stood and looked around. "What now?"

Miowee scrubbed her hand across her face, bent to touch her daughter's hair. "There should be a shelter somewhere around the spring. I expect it's been provis-ioned for us."

"If not, our stay'll be even shorter than Kikun suggests."

Kikun chuckled. He jumped to his feet, turned around twice, then fell onto his knees with his back to Miowee. "On," he said.

Miowee scowled at him, angry because she had no reasonable choice but to let him carry her. For over a decade, since she'd lost first her eye then her legs, she'd fought against pity and horror, distaste and averted gaze, fought against being shut away in a genteel home run by Kamsisters where her injuries

wouldn't offend the pass-ersby. Despite desperate times she never spoke of, including repeated rapes, muggings, pecking-order battles, and bearing her daughter alone on ragged sacking in a deserted warehouse, she'd made a life for herself where she was dependent on no one for mobility or support; more than that, she'd won a wide following for her love songs and joke songs and above all the passionate and powerful songs calling for redress of the wrongs done Maka and Tanak in the name of traditional values—those values that perpetuated ancient injustices and maintained in power and wealth those who'd always had power and wealth. And now she was discarded like sucked-out pulp and reduced in front of her daughter to the cripple she'd refused to be. She said nothing. She'd learned in a hard school to do what she had to without making a fuss about it. She swung herself onto Kikn's back, told Kayataki to take his hand and come along.

The shelter was a shikwakola makee, a three-room but on stilts with walls of woven reed and a thatch roof.

Shadith ran up the ladder, found a heap of supplies piled into the middle of the front room along with an assortment of spare clothing though there was nothing for Rohant except one extra-large robe that might or might not accommodate his shoulders.

She swung round holding up the robe as Kikun put Miowee down on an aromatic reed cushion. "Looks like Ro's going to be stuck with blankets if we're here long enough to do a wash."

Kikun heeheed and went back to collect the rest of the gear.

Miowee tried to smile, but the grimace evolved into a yawn. She shook herself, gazed thoughtfully at Kayataki crumped beside her, head on her thigh. With a visible effort she lifted her head and looked directly at Shadith. "Put Kaya to bed for me, will you please. I'm too tired to move."

A small but energetic fire crackled in a three-legged stone brazier set on a round ceramic tile in the main room. The cats were a complex knot of black fur in front of the door; in the puzzle tree spreading like an umbrella over the makee, Sassa was asleep and dreaming of fish. Kayataki was deeply asleep on the springy pile of bedmats in the small room to the left.

Shadith lay with a battered mug warming her stomach on the outside, most of its contents warming her insides. Her eyes were closed; she was looking through the eyes of a flying furwing similar to the furry she'd ridden the first night in the swamp, but considerably larger. "It's like someone pulled the plug, it must have been going on since before we got here. I suppose that's your people, Mee, passing the warning the town's getting too hot for anyone." She paused a moment, but Miowee said nothing. "The Pilgrim Road out of Iiril is wall-to-wall people, far as the furwing can see, most of them walking, some riding or driving ... urn ... I suppose they're mos and kekelipis, not that I've ever seen those beasts ... no motors ... that's the rules, huh? Back at the city ... kanaweh flitting about firebombing the Quarters and they're not being all that careful about boundaries ... from the way they're built, some of the houses burning are Kawa. And the fires are spreading. The fools are going to burn the whole city if they don't cool it." She grinned into the twilight where the others were dark lumps barely visible. "I don't hear any groans, so I'll keep on. The Kasta, I can see some *windows boarded over, smoke stains, not much damage, it'll take more than a few bombs to level that lump. Flits going in and out like bothered bees. Hmm, that's odd. The guard on the roof is a Na-priest. Looks like the Gospah has expanded his territory. Well, well. The kanaweh out of control or near to it, the city burning and Makwahkik vanished, I'd say your people really made a dent this time. The Kiceota. Hmm. One of the flits seems to 've taken a hefty bite out of the north tower. There's a sag in the seaside wall, flit didn't hit that, but it blew one helluva chunk out of the cliff beneath. Searchlights all over the place, probably if we went outside, we'd see them from here. Small army on the walls. Maybe you didn't actually put the bomb up his arse, but I'd say you've got the Nistam sitting nervous. Ahhh! My head's getting tired. I think that's all for tonight."

Early morning of their fourth day on the island. The biterswarms were still sleeping off the night's excesses, the air was pleasantly warm though heavy with damp and just enough wind was blowing to brush the flat, lacy surfaces of the puzzletree fronds against each other, producing a gentle susurrous.

Nflowee was sitting on the fallen tree near the sandy stretch where the flits had landed, Kayataki beside her; she was playing a jokesong on her kitskew and singing harmony with her daughter. Stripped to shorts and an undershirt, Kikun was dancing on the sand, a slow sinuous twisting that was more plant-like than animal.

Shadith stood at the water's edge, frowning at the enigmatic swamp; she couldn't see more than a few me-ters into the trees, not with her own eyes and she was feeling more than a little burned out after the nightly sessions flying over the city, not so much from the effort it took as from what she had to look at. She'd seen death before, destruction, war. She'd never learned to look at it with indifference, perhaps because after the first time, the time her family died, she'd always been been an outsider with none of the resources the locals had for deadening that fear and loathing. None of the justifica-tions. None of the righteousness. Rohant had been gone for hours. At least it seemed like hours.

He's restless ... only four, no, three days, can't count this one yet, and he almost can't stand it. Maybe its the length of the rope tying us down, the longer the tether, the closer to breaking it, the more impossible ...

She glanced over her shoulder at the others, smiled, then went back to glooming at the water.

They're out there now, the shikwakola, I don't have to reach to fed them watching. Kikun was right. We're going to have to go somewhere else. Soon. Where? No answer. How? Worse. No, boats, no flits, no nothing. We're almost as much in prison as we were in the Kasta, they stuck us in the pantry to save for later, the kuudj ... might as well've stayed where we were ... except for the burning—Sar! don't want to think of that ... Walk out? There's Miowee ... she'd have to be carried ... and Kaya ... it's impossible ... a raft? have to cut down trees ... hard to know what the shikwakola would think of that. Feed us to a slither, maybe?

She clicked her tongue, kicked sand into the water.

Cut down trees, Sail With what, our teeth? I swear, next time I get to a city, rm going to STAY there. Hang on with teeth and fingernails if I have to and kick the crutch off anyone who tries to shift me.

Kiscomaskin strolled from under the trees. “No, don't stop,” he said. “A charming tableau. Finish your song, please, my dears.” He dropped to a squat beside Shadith and watched Kikun dance to the song Miowee and Kayataki were singing.

When they were finished, he clapped politely, then straightened up and moved away from the water's edge. “I imagine you're getting rather bored with this ... ah ... solitude. Where's the Hunter?”

Suddenly wary, though she was careful not to show it, Shadith got to her feet. “You said it, bored. He's off nosing around the swamp.” She reached for the nest of muddaubers she'd located in case of trouble. “He'll be back before dark. Probably not much before.” She felt Miowee's eyes on her, but she wasn't worried about the streetsinger fumbling a cue. Or Kaya—the girl had learned before she could walk to smell trouble and keep her head down.

Kiscomaskin inspected Miowee as she set the kitskew on the trunk beside her and reached for its case; Shadith felt him decide the cripple was nothing he should worry about. “Too bad. I was hoping to make a sweep of you all.” He slid his hand beneath his coat and brought out a small quickfirer ...

... and before he got off a shot, Miowee put a bullet through his head, using the pistol in the kitskew case. “Shadow,” her voice was a harsh rasp, “any more of them?”

“He wouldn't bring witnesses.”

“Don't give me logic. Are there any more?”

Shadith loosed the daubers and made a quick sweep around the island; she caught a distant hint of Rohant-coming back for lunch as usual.

Not as usual when he gets here and sees what dropped in. Shikwakola, too. Watching.

More of them. Not good. No one else. Mee can let her hormones rest.

“Rohant’s coming in, no strangers around,” she said wearily. “At least we have transport, courtesy of that.” She waved a hand at the corpse. “Has to be a flit back there, or a boat. We’ll need it, the shikwakola about ready to pop. Better to go before they do—if we had any idea where to go.”

Kikun looked at her, moved quietly off into the trees.

Kayataki had her legs pulled up and her thin arms wrapped round her knees; she was a little paler than usual and she was carefully not-looking at the dead man, the man her mother had killed. She was too calm. Shadith read emptiness in her. Seven years old and she’d seen more death and torment than men ten times her age.

Like the child, Shadith was feeling nothing. No revulsion. No regret. Not even anger. Not any more. Not at Ginny, not at the people running this world, not at Fate or Luck or whatever it was that ran the universe. She was worn out. She went over to the dead man, stirred him with the toe of her boot in his ribs. “Why?” she said after a while. “I don’t understand. Why?”

“Weyy-ah, I don’t know.” Having broken the gun down, Miowee was cleaning and oiling it. “I could guess. You’re too hard to control. Like trying to hold a live kilifish. It keeps squirting out of your fingers no matter how tight your grip. He’d get more mileage out of you dead, especially if he could lay the blame for killing you on the Nistam.” She inspected the barrel, gave it a last wipe, and began reassembling the weapon. “He can’t do what the Makh Hen did; he’d have to coax you and that wouldn’t work, would it? The three of you’ve made no secret about wanting to go home, wherever it is you call home.” She put the gun in the case, snapped the latches and set the case on a clump of grass beside the trunk. “Kaya, you all right?” She reached down, stroked her daughter’s hair. “Home, child a mine, the man goin home,” she sang softly, her voice in its lowest notes, caressing yet remote. “Walkin the hard way, the long way, walkin on stones he pile up hisself ...” She began humming and plucking single notes from the strings.

After a while, her voice shaking, then gaining strength, Kayataki took up the chorus: Walkin home, walking home.

“Home, child a mine, the man going home,” Miowee sang, repeated the phrase, Kayataki blending with her, child soprano light and pure, woman contralto, worn, ragged, as powerful as it was let to be. “A long way, a hard way on the shells of his hurts....”

The song went on and on, adding travails to Kisco-maskin’s route to redemption until Miowee laughed, ruf-fled Kaya’s hair, laughed again as Kikun was suddenly there, handing her a mug of hot tea.

After they rolled Kisco-maskin into the water for the slithers to feed on, they sat and drank tea and ate stale biscuits and waited for Rohant to get back so they could argue out what was best for them to do.

They were still arguing when the Na-priests came for them.

WATCHER 12

I

Cursing with concentrated malevolence, his voice a shrill whine that sent the Pet shuddering onto the back of the Chair where it sat with its hands pressed over its ears, Ginbiryol Seyirshi watched Shadith and Kikun roll Kisco-maskin’s body into the murky water. He glanced at Ajeri, saw her shudder (absurdly like the Pet) and fix her eyes on her magazine; she was too afraid of him to open her mouth, but he knew she was dreading a Praisesong with him in this mood. That gave him a savage satisfaction which was momentarily pleasing, but he knew it wasn’t prudent; he needed her. He didn’t like it, he loathed the truth in it, but he considered himself above all a practical man. He made a note to start looking for candidates to replace her and Puk, then went back to wrestling with the current crisis.

When he had his rage under control, he touched a sensor, gave a set of coordinates to the listener

below, and followed with sour satisfaction the arrival of the Na-priests.

2

The days rolled on. The EYES continued to collect scenes and send them to the satellites which fed them to Ginbiryol while a third of the world's population poured into Wapaskwen—only a third because the Pakoseo fervor dissipated considerably as it reached the more ratified levels of power; the crowd of pilgrims was heavily weighted toward Maka and Tanak with a salting of Kawa and Kisa and a very few Pliciks. There was a complex web of consinships, of shared attitudes, most of all a shared hatred of the Plicik AUTHORITY and all the brightsider priests who collaborated with that AUTHORITY to wring everything possible from the low, to pile the chains on the workers and keep them on. There was kinship and a common history, a common enemy. Perhaps because of this, perhaps because there were whole families, infants to grandmothers, walking together, perhaps because the Pakoseo fervor exhausted them, the immense throng was extraordinarily peaceful. Elbow to elbow they marched without much clashing; there were a few fights, none with weapons, a few screaming matches curiously muted and soon over, nothing more.

In Wapaskwen, especially in Aina'iril, the Five fought a chaotic battle. The city was burning and Mohecopa's fieldcorps were scattered along the Pilgrim Road, most of them impossible to contact. The few kipaos left in the city retreated to their blockhouses and ignored whatever happened in the streets.

Makwahkik's death was proving one of the Five's larger mistakes. The kanaweh had slipped beyond anyone's control; in addition to their nightly raids on the Quarters, individual kana were breaking into armories, taking flits and going on killing sprees among the Pilgrims, concentrating on Maka and Tanak groups but not worrying where their stray shots went; others were looting Kawa storehouses, even some Kisa compounds; shrines were losing their votive tokens, the gold and jeweled bits, and what the raiders didn't take, they destroyed and desecrated. The Gospah Ayawit tried to calm them and reinstate discipline, but they wouldn't listen to him and beat or shot the Na-priests he sent out to them. The Nistam didn't bother trying; he stayed in the Kiceota behind rank on rank of Royal Guards and pattered in his garden. For the most part, the other Pliciks were cheering the kanaweh on, only having second thoughts when their own houses got singled.

Ginbiryol tasted, dumped, selected, saved, excised, drowning his anger in the flood of satisfaction at the savagery and chaos below, in the familiar, comfortable work of compiling his images, the anticipation of the final cut, the pulling together of those images into a unified work of art, that final satisfaction that was greater than any other.

CELL 9

Asteplikota lay back in the longchair as the girl brushed and braided his hair, pulling the shining blond loops around to cover the ridged scarring where his scalp had been sliced away. It was a pleasant attention, but it made him uneasy; he had a strong aversion to such pampering.

And he was worried about his brother, uncertain, now that Kicomaskin wasn't here to reassure him—not with words, because words were unimportant and unreliable, but with the flash of his smile and the warmth of his fondness. It was at those moments when they were alone and wrapped in bloodcaring that he felt Kicomaskin's posturing was only that, the mask of a man

protecting himself from his gentler side.

The girl finished her task, dipped and backed out. As if he'd waited outside for

her to be done and begone, Lihtaksos tapped lightly on the doorpost, came in without ceremony, a measure of his disturbance. "Oppla Bless, Aste my friend. Kicomaskin, has he been here in the past week?"

Asteplikota sat up. "No. I haven't seen him since he left for the Main."

Lihtaksos dropped on the hassock by Asteplikota's feet, seemed to crumple in himself. "The Three are in the Gospah's hands, have been for the past two weeks, but he doesn't have your brother, even in his deepest pit, we're sure of that. And he's nowhere else.

We've looked. I'm sorry, Aste, but I think he's dead. I don't know how or who, but I can see no other answer."

Asteplikota closed his eyes, touched the tips of his fingers to his brow, hiding his face. Grief was cold in him, it was

a loss he couldn't comprehend. He'd half been expecting it, but that didn't help. Somewhere distant, almost beyond reach, he felt anger, he knew it was anger, but it was meaningless right then. He dropped his hands. "I see. So?"

Lihtaksos brushed absently at the wrinkles in his shirt. "Killing Makwahkik was a mistake," he said wearily. "Maybe there was satisfaction in it, perhaps even justice. But it was most definitely

a mistake. There was a center to what we were fighting, now there's none. We hit at clouds and gain nothing from it. People die now for nothing, nothing at all, Aste, nothing at all. Come back with me. We need you. Dencipim is at everyone's throat; Wetakisoh is drawing back into himself his caution is becoming paralysis; Mohecopah goes around in a permanent gloom saying I told you so. He warned us against killing Makwahkik and now he's proved right." Lihtaksos smiled wryly. "Much more of that and I'll strangle him myself. Kiscomaskin was our balance wheel, Aste: we could defer to him. None of us is willing to give that power to the others, none of us is big enough to take it. We need you."

"I don't have Kisca's talent, Lihto. I have enough trouble driving myself, I can't..

"You don't have Kisca's flash, my friend, but we can do without flash now, be better off for the loss of it. We, know whose mind devised the strategies that kept your brother afloat, we know who helped him polish away his excesses. We need you."

"Well then, I'll come, do what I can. Are things on the Main as bad as we've been hearing?" He held out his hand, let

Lihtaksos pull him onto his feet. "The scenes we get over the corn are enough to make a slither cringe."

CELL 4

The flatwagon was assembled outside the city on the Road itself, guarded by the Nistam's troops who were nervous enough to shoot without warning anyone who came too close, and their idea of close was a measure that changed with the changing tensions.

The wagon was fifteen meters wide and thirty long with six sets of double wheels individually mounted along each side and an additional four in front with twin tongues for the two teams of twenty kekelipis that pulled it.

Once the basic assemblage was finished, with the shell stage for the Three made ready, the throne of the Nistam installed above the warded cabins where the passengers would retreat for meals and sleep, teams of Kisar and Plicik women decorated everything with silk flowers, bright ribbons and gilded lace.

Royal Guards in gilded armor, Plicik men and women in beaded silks with quckfirers in silver studded straps, Kisar Judges and Scholars in their blowing beaded crimson robes, kanaweh in flits and prowling about on the edges of the throng, in the midst of all these (sweeping along with him the angry, reluctant Avatars, Miowee and her daughter) the Nistam and his Court PROGRESSED to the wagon. ("So that's your Nistam," Shirai' whispered to Miowee. "What a weed."

"Of course It isn't," Mlowee whispered back. "The real one's even worse, he wouldn't dare stick his nose out where it could get shot off. Everyone knows that. That's his fifth double, the others were poisoned or stabbed or something. Look at the bastard sweat."

"If everyone knows, why should he be sweating, who'd waste his life on a double?"

"You're thinking rationally, Shadow. That's a mistake. Someone might lust decide to send a message to the Nistam, keep him nervous."

"Hunh! Sweet folk, yours.")

When the Procession reached the wagon, the PseudoNistam was Installed on his throne, his court settled around him behind screens of pelletproof glass. The Avatars were taken to the shell, Rohant told to sit on a massive bench at the back, the cats flanking him on their own benches as Sassa came circling down and perched on the rod at the apex of the shell. The Ciocan was a magnificent figure with his springing mane and golden eyes, his huge size and powerful musculature, the brilliant, barbaric clothing he was given to wear—black leather beaded all over in crimson and gold, azure and emerald. Against the matte white of the shell,

he sprang to the eye; there was a hissing of approval from the watchers out beyond the ring of guards.

Kikun was led to a round dance platform and told to squat there. He wore a fringed harness hung with copper chains and totem dangles, and was painted head to toe in horizontal black and white stripes. There was a shudder of pleasurable fear among the watchers as he took his place.

Three Plicik honormaidens took Shadith to a white bench halfway between Kikun and Rohant; she wore a long white leather robe beaded in lapis lazuli and gold with crimson beads in a diamond between her breasts, she supposed it was meant to represent her heart. Her hair was an explosion of tiny curls, the tips bleached to gold; they shimmered in the sunlight, making a gilded halo about her face. Her Plicik attendants spread out her skirt panels, arranged her limbs in the proper position, slapped her spine straight, fluffed out her hair, smoothed pearl powder over her face and arms, clucking as they always did at the darkness of her skin. She sat glowering through all this, only smiled when they brought Miowee and Kayataki to her and settled them at her feet. When the Plicik maids moved to take their own seats; she bent down. "Is this thing really supposed to move? And what happens to this foofaraw if it rains?"

Miowee snorted. "It gets wet, what'd you think?"

"You mean we get wet."

"That, too." Miowee winced as the drum corps started banging away. "Get ready, Shadow, another minute and you're on."

"Give me half a chance, I'd...."

The only way you could get out of this now is invisible or dead. Your choice."

"Fool." She laughed, tapped Miowee lightly on her head. "So ... where'd they get that lot of tin-eared dead arses? They're not the ones, we practiced with." She wrinkled her nose. "I've heard more rhythm from a seaslug."

"They're Pliciks, what did you expect? They've never had to please or starve. They bought the right to make fools of themselves."

CELL 19

The wagon creaked out of the city and plunged into the throng of Pilgrims. Following the pattern drilled into her during practice sessions in the Kisa Misthakan, Shadith played the sacred Paleka Kitskew and sang the traditional Pakoseo songs, Miowee and Kayataki blending with her, their voices picked up and amplified by concealed lug-ikes.

As they plunged deeper and deeper into the Pilgrim throng, the people took hold of the song and began singing with them, the sound spreading and spreading until it filled the space under the bowl of the sky.

Sometime around mid-afternoon there was a disturbance by the right front corner of the wagon. A man as elaborately dressed as Rohant was screaming something that was partly drowned by the shouts of the guards and partly carried off by the wind. He tried to climb onto the bed of the wagon, laying about him in a frenzy of desire and determination with a seasoned quarterstaff, his strength multiplied by his insanity. In a lull when the wind dropped, Shadith heard what he was screaming: I am Nataminaho, I AM, not HIM, not that IMPOSTER. I AM NATAMINAHO, I AM ANOINTED BY OPPALATIN, I AM....

He was driven back, knocked down. A moment later she heard him scream as the broad wheels began to roll over him.

Ginbiryol scowled at 18 as he recognized the shouter, one of Puk's protégés, the country Plicik with the taste for torturing children; he had some effective scenes from that one, this would finish the tale, but there was a problem with the style of the end. He considered a moment, then isolated the sequence; a good many of his clients shared the tastes of that local and would be in-sulted by his ignoble death, seeing it as a judgment on them; however, there were two or three who had a sentimental gloss on their attitudes toward children, they'd enjoy the pain, the writhing, the blood, and feel a special glow of virtue as they also enjoyed the wretched end of the torturer. He dumped the sequence into a special file for a Limited Version of this Limited Edition. Though finishing the story off satisfied his aesthetic sense, it was a dangerous ploy. If he misjudged his audience, it wasn't merely a matter of refunding the purchase price;

he would have some very unpleasant people angry with him, people who had a propensity for direct and bloody retaliation for anything they considered an insult.

He continued monitoring the Cells, brooding over timing as he watched. The emotional content of the scenes was intensifying to the point of exaltation and the autumnal odor of endphase was strong as burning leaves. Time is now, he thought, I had better set the Banger in place. He tapped his forefinger on the armrest. Ajeri wasn't here. She'd taken to avoiding the Bridge.

The kephalos tracked her and found her in the gym where she was exercising with grim determination, sweat rolling off her body, her face a grotesquerie of strain.

Ginbiryol watched a moment, decided to leave her where she was. He called up the record of what she'd already done with the Planet-Killer, nodded with satisfaction when he read its current status; he finished activating it and used servos to ease it into the drone which Ajeri had already programmed. All he had to do was pop it out and send it down.

3

The drone dropped in a slow lazy spiral, taking most of the day to reach the surface. It slid into the ocean and drifted down and down for another half a day until it nosed into the muck at the bottom of a vast chasm in the seabed, near hotvents that went even deeper into the worldheart. When the slavecircuit beeped to notify

Ginbiryol the Banger was in place, he set his sandwich and kaff aside to contemplate the dark bulk in the darker rift and savor in anticipation Shadith's consternation as the world blew up around her.

4

Almost as an afterthought, he started a quartet of quiverworts droning out to Teegah's Limit. These quasi-plants, which had been developed by the Sikkul Paems from their own root stock were ordinarily not available outside the Paem system though there was a good deal of interest in them because they were sensitive to disturbances created by surfacing starships, were the most reliable alarms around. Ginbiryol had acquired his worts by means devious and expensive and was careful to keep their presence on his ship from the Paems who cared for his drives.

He wasn't worried about help arriving for the Avatars. Kiskai was so far off the usual ship runs there was very little chance either Hunters Inc or Voallts Korlatch had ships closer to it than Spotchals; by his calculations no ship was likely to make it here for at least another three weeks. However, he was a cautious man and even a minute chance was worth guarding against, especially when it was something he planned to do anyway.

He finished his meal to the sound of the com bell; emergency calls from downside agents were coming in faster and thicker as the hours passed. He ignored them. Events had their own momentum now. He didn't need to prod them any longer. The on-planet agents were expendable and it was as good a time as any to cut them loose.

After the serviteur went off with his lunch tray, he sat back and contemplated the busy Cells, satisfied finally with the way things were going. Let the girl plot and twist and subvert all she wanted; in the end she was just another tool. In the end she was ash.

Chapter 22. Riding to a fiery finish?

Knowing that Ginny was watching and savoring her growing terror, recording it for his loathesome clients, Shadith fought it and with it, a sickening sense of helplessness and a rage that nearly strangled her. She could put on a face to fool Miowee and Kikun and Rohant and their captors, but HE could read behind that face and gloat over what he saw. And sell her fear, her frustration, her fury. In all her long hard life she had not hated anyone so much, not even the slavers that took her and murdered her family.

Late on the third night in the Kisa Misthakan, Shadith lay on the cot with her eyes closed. The bare lightbulb that hung from the center of the ceiling was swinging slightly at the end of its wire; it was never

turned off and she was not allowed to cover her face. A priest with a shaved head and a brown leather half-mask sat on a chair by the door, arms folded, eyes following her every move. At regular intervals he got to his feet and came over to her, stood looking down at her. She ignored him; he was just one more irritation.

There were no rats or mice, not even any spiders in this prison wing, so no ears and eyes were available to her; it was like living with a sack over her head and boxing gloves on her hands. Her cell, every cell in this section had all been scrubbed until they stank of disinfectant; even the microbes were annihilated. Either Ginny had warned the Gospah about her talent, or he was by nature obsessively neat. Perhaps both, the one reinforcing the other.

Outside the walls of the Misthakan the city teemed with small lives, this was a time of feasting for them, the streets were full of dead meat, much of it fried. The kanaweh were deeper than ever into their killing frenzy, preparing their own doom though they seemed incapable of realizing that as they went from looting shrines to raiding the Plicik Ispisacos. She shuddered away from the bloody chaos and brought the small black furwing she was riding into the Misthakan Courts and sent it sniffing around for the others.

Kikun, Miowee, Kayataki and Rohant were one, two, three, four down from her, in cells that stank of disinfectant with watchpriests sitting by the door. She hadn't seen them since they were dumped here. In her training sessions young Aspirants took their parts in the choreography the Gospah was drilling into her. No doubt the same was happening with them.

They all had small barred windows high in one wall. Unglazed. Coneshaped. Cut through several feet of stone. She tried flying the furwing through the bars into Rohant's cell, but the watchpriest saw it and killed it. She wrenched her mind loose, but not before the creature died and its small agony seared into her. She moaned and curled into a fetal knot, crying with a grief that, reached to her toes, that filled every milliliter of her body.

In the morning, heavy-eyed and so angry still that she couldn't eat, she went to the training court and worked on the songs, the stylized stiff movements of the sacred choreography. After a while she was almost happy; the work absorbed her and kept her from replaying the death of the furwing and remembering the Fire that was beginning to haunt her dreams.

And so it went, day after day. No threats were made overtly, but now and again, whenever Ayawit felt she wasn't cooperating as enthusiastically as he thought proper, Kayataki was brought in and whipped gently, her skin reddened but not broken. It was enough.

Shadith bled again, was isolated and purified, and put back to work.

The priests who watched her would not talk to her, would not respond to anything she did; even when she hit at them, they only moved away. She was not alone, never alone. Despite that, her days in the Misthakan were very like those in the cell on Ginny's ship. This time, though, she couldn't let herself give up. The Fire was waiting for her.

She kept trying to find a crack to wiggle through, but there was nothing. By the time the wagon was finished and the trek to the Otcha Mistiko Cicip was about to begin, the futility of everything she did was beginning to wear her down. When they came for her, she stared at them, then went without comment. She was taken with the others and incorporated in the PROGRESSION, riding in a palanquin with Miowee and Kayataki, Kikun and Rohant walking beside it, the cats at Rohant's heels and Sassa flying overhead.

Ignoring the warning hiss of their priestguards, Shadith leaned out, bringing her head close to Rohant's. "Any ideas? My mind's blank."

"Nada. Can't breathe without a damn priest up my nose."

"You too, huh?"

"Ten days on the road, maybe there's something there."

"We wait and see, I suppose."

"Yeah. You better pull your head in, our guards are getting nervous. We want to keep them sweet."

"Sweet, hunh." She straightened and looked around with considerable interest as the parade formed up, the court like painted paper butterflies fluttering around a slight figure she took to be the Nistam until

Miowee told her otherwise.

Day drifted into day as the wagon moved along the Pilgrim Road; Shadith sang when she was ordered to, Kikun danced, Rohant preened and posed (and muttered angry sarcasms that almost made her laugh.) Each day the response was more intense, so intense she was battered to a nub by day's end and Kikun was reduced to a lump of skin and bone. Day after day after day, the wagon crept among the crowd that spread from horizon to horizon, funneling onto the long twisty grade that led to landing place, the dead volcano. The place where they were going to die.

They could talk, they were freer than they had been, but there was even less chance of escape; they'd have to push through the throng of pilgrims and it was obvious at half a glance that they'd get two steps, three, before they were herded back.

Night ... ghost dancers like painted shadows pale against the dark watchers ... Tapwit priests ladling soup in pilgrim bowls and passing out hard biscuits ... pilgrims sitting motionless and hushed around the wagon, focusing on the Three, praying at them, worshiping them, like a blanket smothering ... Shadith couldn't think, could barely breathe ... Kikun huddled close to her, used her as a buffer, a far too inefficient barrier between him and the silent demands of the watchers ... Rohant, more and more the predator ... restless, irritable, pacing, sniffing at every crack for a way to escape.

Death by Fire ... it hung over them all ... burned alive ... and no way of escaping it ... burned alive ... they weren't thinking about helping the others, not any more, it was how can I escape . I ... I... but there was no escape ... unless... Unless Aleytys came faster than Shadith had a right to expect ... vengeance was ashes in the mouth, what good would it do them when they were dead ... eighty-three days ... eighteen now, fifteen when they reached the Mistiko Otcha Cicip, twelve when the Fire was lit ... Lee would get here too late, at least a week too late, maybe more. Unless ... unless Shadith could finesse a way out ... contrive a holding action ... something, something...

Mid-afternoon on the tenth day, the wagon labored across the floor of the crater and pulled up before an immense broken Bubble of black volcanic glass.

The PseudoNistam climbed down and vanished into the housing cavern while the VraiNistam took his seat in the crystalpalace (pellet proofed glass on an armorsteel cage), on the crystal throne with his court around him.

The Kam priests got the wagon into the store cavern and unhitched the kekelipis.

The Gospah and his Na-priests herded the rest of the sacerdots and the Three up one of the twin ramps into the black-glass Bubble and began laboring to bring order out of Chaos.

By sundown they all were settled in, pilgrims and Pliciks, prisoners and priests.

Small fires bloomed across the crater floor and climbed the walls as high as people could perch. The Otcha Cicip hummed with sound, laughter, music as people ate their dinners and exchanged the gossip they'd packed in with them. The noise rose to a peak as Sisipin Full reached zenith, then faded as families and clans and single travel-ers settled to sleep.

Shadith crouched by the front of the cage they'd put the prisoners in and watched the moonshadows crawl across the floor. Three days, then the Fire. She reached into her boot, touched the welt that hid the crystal knife and was tempted. Then she sighed and took her hand away. There was a solid rank of Na-priests sitting like stone teeth across the mouth of the Bubble and a score of others rolled in their blankets, sleeping on the floor. She wouldn't get two steps before she woke at least one. No chance. Not now. Gods, Lee, put your foot down and GET HERE!

Chapter 23: Shadowplay

Invocation—the first morning:

The Gospah Ayawit's mellifluous voice dripped out over the pilgrims from speaker-towers twenty meters high scattered about the five-squared kilometers of the crater floor. Clad in cloth of gold with Kiskaid totem symbols wrought with colored gemstone beads and Kiskaid holy writ in gold and silver

wire with diamond accents, the Gospah Ayawit shimmered and glittered like the sun himself from screens ten meters tall. “Mat Weh Kat ta ti...,” chanted the Gospah, calling Oppalatin to wit-ness their worship, calling the folk to listen, hear the bells of change ring out, hear the word of Oppalatin:

Mat Weh Kat ta ti Oppalatin
Ma! Illiloo Kiskaiwin
Eh ishi shikahisheeywin
Keh kah Sak kehaaa din
Kid Ma! Kid Ma! Kid Ma....

The antique syllables went on and on, slithering and sliding past the ears of pilgrims mostly ignoring him—talking, laughing, doing clapsongs and slapdances, setting out their blankets and their jugs of wine and fruit drinks, their crisps and popcorn and pretzels and fried fowl and roasted kipsi fruits and the thousand other things they’d packed in for the occasion, tying on their ribbons and testing the bells on their leggings, the wooden clackers on thumb and forefinger, their bone pipes and baby kitskews, their drums and rhythmbones. The sun was pleasantly warm with a few cloud puffs to turn the sky bluer than blue and just enough of a breeze to make the crowding comfortable. They looked up now and then to see the Gospah glitter, to see the Longhorn Pipers stand-ing on their benches, the Palaka Dancers dancing on the Great Drums: Ni-tahwaikis in husks and seeds; Tahnokipo Waposh in tortoiseshell and polished stone with clackers on his legs and soundstones in his hands; Shapostim Mayah in feathers and ribbons with strips of bells along his legs and tinkly, tiny cymbals on his fingers.

Shadith watched from the cage at the back of the Bubble. Kikun was stretched out on a lumpy pallet laid along the left side of the cage, recovering from the bat-tering of the trek here; Rohant knelt by him, holding his hand. Miowee was huddled at the back of the cage, sunk into a black depression that Shadith had a hard time shutting out—especially since she was looking fire in the face, at the moment a more literal fire than the one that had been haunting her. Bonfires crackled energetically, one on each side of the stage at the front of the broken Bubble, near where the ramps went, down. These weren’t the Sacrifice pyres—those were set up at the back of the Bubble, cameras focused in tight on them, carved posts and carved sticks saturated with aromatic oils. Now and then an errant breeze brought her the odor of those oils, nauseating her. Bumdeath—it scared her witless. As time passed and hope evaporated, she was more and more out of control ... turning into a quivering mess.

The sun went down and supper was served.

Shadith couldn’t eat.

Kikun wouldn’t eat, couldn’t lift himself off the pallet.

Rohant raged at them. Teethtips bared, he shook Shadith out of her lethargy, shoved bread and meat in her mouth and held his hand over her face until she swallowed. When he was satisfied she was aroused enough to keep the juices flowing, he tore small pieces of bread and cheese and fed them to Kikun. He wasn’t interested in Miowee and left her in her gloom until Kayataki pulled at his sleeve, crying because she couldn’t get any reaction from her mother. He slapped the streetsinger into fury, got her energized enough to eat on her own, then went back to feeding Kikun.

The Shadowplay Goddance began in the early after-noon on the second day.

The Palaka Dancers stamped on the Drums, shook their clackers and their bells. The Longhorns hooted, low grumbling sounds that entered the body not so much through the ears as the pit of the stomach.

Rohant marched from the cage and climbed upon a broad and massive bench, the cats beside him, heiratic symbols out of history and dream; Sassa rode his arm, gold eyes glaring, head erect with fierce and deadly pride. The image of that ensemble was repeated over and over out across the crater, cold-eyed predators staring down on the pilgrims from hundreds of screens.

On his feet more by will than intrinsic strength, Kikun danced onto the low flat drum at the front of the stage; he wore no bells or clackers, only a loincloth and the black and white paint. His image crossed and recrossed Rohant's.

Grim beneath her whiteface paint, Shadith walked slowly from the cage. Miowee and Kayataki were already in place, chained to the floor with gilded paper links, loaded down with rustling chains until only their hands and arms were free, Kaya to play the finger cymbals, Miowee with her kitskew. Shadith sat upon the ivory banc and tuned the Paleka Kitskew until she was satisfied with the sound. Then she sang.

Kikun danced.

Rohant posed.

The cats leaped down from the bench and danced with Kikun, writhing and winding about him, black flows mov-ing in time with the song.

A sigh passed across the throng of pilgrims, faces turned to the screens, she could feel them coming together as she'd felt them not together before....

The Gospah stood in front of Rohant, on the floor of the Bubble, his head barely past the Ciocan's knees. The Mime Ni-tawaikis stood beside the lefthand fire, still as a graven image. The Mime Tahnokipo Waposh and the Mime Shapostim Mayah stood beside the righthand fire, still as graven images.

Shadith brought the song to its end.

Kikun froze.

The Longhorn players puffed through their three me-ter pipes and the Palaka Dancers, swung into stamping circles; behind them the Kam priests chanted: Ma Ma Ma Ma lillo Kiskaiwin Ma Ma Ma....

The pilgrim wave began to break apart.

The Gospah blew on his little pipe; the shrill note broke through the, chant, brought it to an end. The Longhorns fell silent. Shadith sighed, moved into the second song of her program, Miowee and Kaya singing with her.

About halfway through, the pilgrims took up the song, the sound was a low hum at first that rose and spread and filled the whole of the crater, even unto the sky....

...and Shadith felt her power on her, without the hallucinogens of Avosing, nothing but the intensity of the belief before and behind her. And Kikun squeezing down that force and funneling it into her. Even the Gospah was in the circuit which would have surprised her if she'd had mind enough left for wonder; he burned with fervor. Nothing he was doing now was cynical, he believed in his righteousness and in the thing they were evoking, be-lieved it with a force of will and spirit that had nothing to do with that part of him that maneuvered so skillfully and ruthlessly for power and influence, the part of him that could watch unmoved as his Na-priests tortured a rebel. The pilgrims elbow to elbow across the crater were perhaps less complex, less divided against themselves, but their belief was as strong, each individual reinforcing the reaction of the individuals around him, each family group, clan group, accepting and reflecting the fervor of the groups before, behind and to the sides....

...the feedback built and built until the air itself clanged like metal....

...she began to SHAPE....

...digging deep within herself....

...laying hold on the power offered her

...crafting out of memory and instinct....

...out of the people's belief....

...she SHAPED the THREE and sent THEM danc-ing over the crowd....

...made them sing with the voice of the throng....

...made them strut and posture and gather to themselves every eye, every heart, every fragment of brain....

...the priests in the Bubble left their places and streamed down the ramps at the two sides of the Stage, melding with the crowd, chanting and rapt, their eyes fixed on the THREE....

...the Palaka Dancers lifted their arms and danced round and round where they were, moaning and turned so deeply inward, they were beyond noticing anything around them....

...the Longhorners blew in a trance, seeing nothing but the THREE, hearing nothing but the groan and thrum of their pipes....

...the Na-priests were on their knees, sobbing, their arms stretched toward the THREE....

Shadith looked over her shoulder, caught Rohant's eye, jerked her head at the front of the Bubble.

Still singing, almost blind with the effort, her voice picked up and transmitted to the speakers by the lug-ikes clipped between her breasts, she got to her feet and began moving step by slow step toward the ramp at the right curving down from the Bubble Stage to the crater floor....

Behind her Rohant launched Sassa into the air, then reached for the Gospah's neck, caressed his carotids until the man was out cold. He laid him on the bench and stepped down. Moving as quickly as he could—the air felt thick as chilled honey and his head was throbbing, his eyes tearing so badly he could barely see—Rohant crossed the few steps to Miowee's side; he tore away the paper chains and swept her up and around so she could cling to his back, then he caught hold of Kaya's hand and led her after Shadith....

The cats writhing about him, Kikun danced his shimmer-dance, putting aside the stamps and turns beaten into him by the priests. Shiver and shimmer he moved slowly after Shadith and Rohant, holding the feed steady, maintaining the flow from the pilgrim trance into Shadith so she could keep that trance going, keep the illusion there to pin the eyes of everyone and let them walk away....

Using the hallucinated THREE to open a way for them ... Nikamo-Oskinin twenty stories tall, bending to sweeper illusory, fingers through the pilgrims ... Shadith struggled across the floor of the crater ... exhausted, running on the dregs of her strength, emptying herself to keep the trance in place, the IMAGES whole and pres-ent ... she won one meter, two, three, ten, twenty ... the Firedeath at her back ... pulling endurance out of a consuming terror, she drove herself on and on ... playing the kitskew till her fingers bled ... singing the same song over and over....

WATCHER 13

1

Ginbiryol Seyirshi watched the Invocation begin, then switched his attention to the prisoners. All that chanting and hopping around, it was boring, the kind of thing one might expect from that woman the girl was going to meet, that xenoethnologist, boring, boring, boring. Most of it he would have to throw out, maybe keep a little for the color—and of course one could always sweeten the scenes by mixing in the pulsing terror from the girl. Ahhh, she was afraid, ah yesss, she was sick with horror. He touched the test-sensors on the pathecorder and smiled as he felt a lump of horror/terror/fury grow inside him; he savored the sour flavor of her nausea. Yes. Fire and death. Ahhh, that would be splendid. Firedeath. He ran his tongue over his lips, tasting the burning in anticipa-tion, smelling the meat....

2

The second day started out more interesting and im-proved as it progressed, especially after the girl began singing. He listened to that soaring voice, contemplated the shining youth of the singer, so sweet, so tennder-and on the verge of ceasing to exist. Exquisite pathos. He could see his clients weeping at the sadness of her fate, reveling in every nuance of her pain. They were a sentimental lot. Which was just as well—if they were not they would not pay his prices.

In the early afternoon when the resonance was born between the singer and the pilgrims and began to build and build, he was elated; the charge coming through the EYES was so strong it was close to blowing the circuits of the pathecorder. His connoisseurs of emotion would be ecstatic.

When he saw the giant Holos form, he laughed aloud and murmured encouragement, tender nothings, loving nonsense. “So good, so good, a phenomenal finale, blessed be the Lady for sending you to me....”

3

A moment later he was scowling as Shadith began slogging slowly and painfully down the ramp, then

across the crater floor, forcing her way through the pilgrims, heading for the broken section of the crater wall where the Road came in, the Cicipi Gate. Kikun, Rohant, and his beasts were following her. "That, that..." He looked around as if the answer to handling her was pinned on the wall somewhere. He was alone, Ajeri was in the gym, and Puk was still tucked away in the tranx web. He rubbed his hands together, glared up at the Pet whose chatter was beginning to irritate him. He didn't need them. He knew the kephalos better than anyone, it just took time....

Stroking his thumbnail over his chin and down along his throat, he contemplated Cell 1. She was halfway across the crater already, the others plowing along behind her, the Holo of the local demigods dancing a stately pavane—above them, the pilgrims swaying and ululating, lost in a trance so deep they were blind to everything but the towering images moving over their heads. He examined the readouts and frowned. What was pouring off the locals was beginning to move beyond the capacity of the pathecorder circuits, even of the kephalos itself. Triggered, he thought, by the Three, especially the girl and that odd little lizardman. Despite the strain of his instruments, it was good. It was very good. Better than anything he'd expected to capture. Fascinating, the synergy developed by those Three.

He unfolded Cell 2, the one assigned to Rohant, emp-tied it out and sent the POV dancing from EYE to EYE, the scene careening here and there, front and back, side to side, as he tried to decide what to do; he did not want to break the trance and lose the dancing demigods, they were going to make this Edition the best he had ever created ... still, he did not need much more of that Shadowplay, that giant ghostdance. Yes, he thought, yes. More pathos. Let her allt-most reach the Gate, then drag her back. Yes.

"Ajeri tiszteh, come to the Bridge immediately. I need you."

4

Ajeri Kilavez strode to her chair, a vortex of nervous energy in precarious control. Once she was settled, she glanced at Cell 1 and her mouth tightened until her lips disappeared. She swung to face Ginbiryol. "Well?"

"Let them get to the Gate, then pull them back. From what I have seen, all you will have to do is disrupt that trance."

"That's all?" Her voice dripped sarcasm.

He ignored that, though he added it to the balance against retaining her once this project was completed. "You will find it easy enough, simply disrupt what comes from those speakers. It is her **singing that controls** the effect she is producing."

"Hmm." Ajeri swung back, frowned at the Cell. "Given it works, that should be easy enough. All right. What about the Banger?"

"It is in place. All it needs is the touch of my finger." He held up the bony digit, the flesh finger on his realhand. "That is not long off, Ajeri tiszteh."

"Good." After a long dark stare at the Cell, she bent over her sensor board and started working.

5

The music and the voice came from everywhere, sound picked up from a thousand speakers, Shadith singing with herself, smooth as water flowing, effortless as breath-ing or so it seemed until the POV swooped closer to her, showed her face, gaunt with strain, sweat rolling into her eyes, dripping from her nose and chin....

Ajeri leaned forward, smiling; tongue moving along her lips, eyes glowing with anticipation, she reached slowly down and touched a sensor....

CELL 1

The song collapsed into a screech ... the kind of noise that made the teeth ache and put twitching knots in the back muscles....

Shadith dropped the kitskew and fell to her knees, her arms pressed over her ears, her eyes squeezed shut....

Kikun fell flat, unconscious, his eyes rolling back, his mouth sagging open.

The cats went crazy, clawing at their ears, rolling on the ground during the first seconds of that assault, then they howled and attacked whomever they could reach, grabbing with their forelegs, disemboweling with their powerful hinddaws, one stroke and twist away, on their feet again, jaws closing on necks, a shake and leap ahead to the next..

Rohant brushed Kayataki away, tossed Miowee off him (she landed on several surviving pilgrims, rolled to the ground bruised but intact and screaming for her daughter) and raced after his beasts.

Before he got near them, Na-priests came from the crowd like maggots from meat and shot the cats into hamburger.

Rohant the Ciocan roared his fighting challenge, and ran at the nearest shooters, his lips drawn back from his tearing teeth, his eyes red with fury,

As he ran past, a priest snapped erect, hammered him to the ground with a club like a young tree.

The sound cut off.

Shadith struggled to her feet, looked wildly around, started running, head down, driving as hard as she could for the Gate.

A Na-priest came after her, whipped his stranglecord about her neck, jerked her back against his body, tightened the ligature ... she started to lift her hands then there wasn't anything left....

6

A chime sounded repeatedly, a pleasant bonging sound. with an unpleasant message; quiverwort #3 was announc-ing the arrival of a starship—over a week before he was expecting it. Ginbiryol swore, swung round and tapped off the alarm. It might be coincidence, a wandering trader, but he didn't think so. He set the kephalos searching for the intruder and turned to the Pilot. "Wake up the Paems and get ready to go, fast, Ajeri tisz. Thirty min-utes, no more, then we run for the Limit."

"Trouble?"

"It could be. We will continue to record as long as possible. When the time comes to leave...." He pointed to the traces of a ship racing recklessly insystem. "Head out ninety degrees that line, as fast as you can wind her up." He looked at the track of the incoming ship for a minute. "Yes, I'm sure of it, that has to be a Vryhh ship. If we are not obtrusive about it, I believe the Hunter will ignore our departure in favor of the world itself." He smiled tightly, slanted his eyes at Ajeri. "With a little Luck, she will still be there when the Banger lets loose."

"Luck."

"Oh, yes." He turned his shoulder to her and went back to watching the scene in Cell 1 unfold.

CELL 1

The stink of perfumed oils brought her back. She was tied to the center pole of a Sacrifice Pyre, her

boots sunk in the carved sticks, Mlowee bound beside her knees like a slave sacrificed to serve her mistress in the afterlife, Kayataki beside her mother, bound and gagged so she wouldn't cry out when the Fire took her, both of them tethered to the center post. Shadith tried to say something, but all she could do was croak; her throat felt destroyed. He should have ended it, that priest. He was too cruel. Ropes wound round her, knees to neck. No more running, no more maybes left for her.

Kikun was slumped on her left. He was alive, but

his soul was somewhere else, the body was an empty sac.

Rohant was on her right, struggling with the ropes that bound him to his pole, so much rope he was like a worm in a cocoon. Blood dripped from the wound on the back of his head, his eyes were glazed, wild, no intelligence left, only the ancestral beast glaring out.

The Gospah Ayawit came from the side and stood in

front of Shadith. He was furious and afraid of the consequences flowing from the past hour's events. For one thing, Oppalatin had almost been denied his prime Sacrifice—the thought of his God's vengeance for this failure made him sweat all over. And there were

Kiskai's bloodily, publicly, dead—already howls out there for his hide, rebels stirring everyone up against him. And against the Nistam—his hold on power would be even more precarious and the Nistam was not a man to tolerate the lapses of his subordinates. Both aspects of the Gospah's ambitions, the sacred and the secular, were put at risk by what the Singer had done. What they all had done, those cursed Avatars. If they were such.

"By your choice, so be it," he chanted, his voice carried out over speakers suddenly cleared of noise. (or so it seemed to Shadith as she twisted her wrists against the ropes, searching for a way to slip her hands clear). "You chose to begin the Last Battle beforetime, so do you bring the Culmination on you

also beforetime. Come the sundown we send you home." He bowed, turned and walked to the front, brought his staff down three times on a sounding board and the ritual took up where the priest-Mimes, the Longhorns and the choir had left off when she brought their gods to life.

For a moment she gave in to panic, then she bit down hard on her lip, closed her eyes and reached—searching for something, anything she could use to disrupt what was happening, rats or any sort of furry capable of chewing the ropes off her ... I won't give up, she croaked, the words lost in the hum of the horns, the doordoom of the drums ... I won't give up as long as I'm breathing ... there has to be a way ... has to be.... She spoke aloud to help focus her efforts, to escape from a terror-induced passivity, to remind herself of the fragility of the body she wore .. despite the pain in her throat, she kept on talking as she searched.

Shadows crawled across the bubble as the sun descended, time was running out....

7

"Ginny, we're ready. Give the word and we go."

Ginbiryol grimaced. He was going to miss the Burning. Well, what could not be cured must be endured. He glanced at the ship-track; at the rate she was going, the Hunter would reach Kiskai about sundown, a nose to nose finish with the Fire. He spent a second hoping she would be just too late, then he unlocked the Kill-link and touched the sensor. "Right," he said. "The Bang's set for the moment we cross the Limit. Go."

8

As Ginbiryol Seyirshi's ship slid into the insplit, her detects registered an enormous burst of radiation. He turned his head, smiled at Ajeri, then coaxed the Pet into his lap and began stroking the simi's velvety fur.

Chapter 24. Boom!

Shadith let the reach fade. Even Sassa was too far off to answer her call, driven away like all the other beasts and birds by the turmoil in the crater.

She was shaking with fatigue; her strength was gone, her mind was mush.

All she could see was fire.

All she could think about was fire.

Their voices deep, burring, near subsonic, the choir was chanting: Ma Ma Ma....

The lug-ikes picked up the sound, transmitted it to the pilgrims along with the Longhorn bellows and the beats of the god-Mimes' feet on the great Drums.

The cameras at the front of the Bubble sent images dark and bright of the choir, the Gospah and the god-Mimes out to those thousand screens scattered about the crater, showed the pilgrims their shadowforms circling through the ancient dance of the gods.

The back of the Bubble was dark and quiet, the cameras there were turned off until it was time for the Fire; there was no lug-ikes close enough to pick up the screams of the burning Avatars. That would be aesthetically displeasing.

The ropes were wound round and round Shadith, knees to neck, were jerked so tight they dug grooves in her flesh. She fought against them until her arms and legs were numb and swollen and she couldn't move them anymore.

Finally she rested her head against the pole, closed her eyes.

Out on the crater floor, new trance-nodes were form-ing about ghost dancers and chanting rebels.

Men were calling for the Avatars, they were calling for the Three to come back, they were cursing Priests, Pliciks, and the Nistam.

Women, children, and grandparents moved into en-larg-ing knots and began pushing toward the edges of the crater.

Rage built across that floor, rage against the Priests and the Pliciks and the Nistam himself, Tanak and Maka blaming him and his followers for the dead, blaming him for the vanishing of the demigods—the pilgrims' demi-gods, not the priests', not the Pliciks', most of all, not the Nistam's.

It was unifying them again, that rage, pulling them together almost as strongly as Shadith had.

The sticks were heavy on Shadith's feet and the stench of the oils that saturated them crawled up her nose. She wanted to sneeze, but she was too tired.

Her eyes burned with the sweat dripping down her face.

There were Na-priests out among the pilgrims, exhort-ing them, threatening them. Ayawit had given the orders.

They moved in a fog of rage, untouched by it, arrogant in their reliance on the terror their black vizards pro-duced in everyone who saw them.

The pilgrims moved back from them, muttering inaudi-bly, not yet worked up enough to overcome their fear and attack these symbols of the sacred AUTHORITY.

A row of Na-priests were crouching across the front of the stage. They weren't watching the captives any more, they were watching the pilgrims.

Like the pilgrims they had dropped out of the celebra-tion; like the pilgrims they paid no attention to the ritual, they no longer felt its compulsion. They were too afraid, too angry.

Serene in his conviction that he was right and would prevail, the Gospah chanted his litanies and moved through a choreography of worship so old it antedated the arrival of the Kiskaid on Kiskai.

Shadith was so tired. So very tired. Maybe it was time to accept the inevitable. She'd lived long, she'd known more worlds than most people knew cities, it was a strange life but a good one—in many ways though not all. She didn't want to die. Not now. But there was no way, no way....

The Pyres were cubic piles of seasoned hardwood, each piece of wood carved and saturated with sacred oils, raised two meters high about the center post. The top of each pile was relatively flat, two meters by two meters square.

Tethered to that center post by short lengths of rope, Miowee and Kayataki lay on the wood by Shadith's feet, more cursorily bound than she was, hands tied behind their backs, Kayataki's ankles also bound. The child was gagged (presumably because the celebrants didn't fancy listening to the screams of a little girl), but they hadn't bothered with the woman.

Miowee had forced her body around until her back was pressed against Kayataki's.

She was cursing and struggling with the rope on her daughter's wrists, her fingers bleeding as she tried to solve knots she couldn't see so her child could wriggle loose.

A SOUND came from the Maka and the Tanak, a low growl, not loud enough yet to overcome the volume of the chant pouring through the speakers, but it was grow-ing, a wordless, shapeless SOUND, as the men began pressing toward the Bubble and the portable Crystal Palace where the Nistam sat.

Shadith heard that SOUND and she savored it; she wouldn't be going into the dark alone—the men who murdered her would be just as dead.

It wasn't much of a comfort, but it was something.

She managed a wry smile as she remembered telling Miowee: if you're set on dying, take him with you (him being Makwahkik)

What with one thing and another, Makwahkik was the one that went, not Miowee, not Shadith.

The Nistam would go this time. Probably. The Gospah. The Na-priests.

She wouldn't see it. Sun was almost down.

For sure, not much comfort.

The Gospah finished his supplication and began turn-ing in stately circles while the choir slid into another litany of praises.

He was pressing on to the end despite all distractions.

A moment ago, when he moved offstage for a change of paraphernalia, the Ni-ot Pipondihek (chief of the Nistam's Personal Guard, ex-liwa to Kati Mola), brought orders to cut the ceremony short and light the fires so they could get the hell out of there before the place exploded.

He nodded politely, acknowledging the command. And ignored it thereafter.

The Nistam's wishes were not important now.

There were things that must be done if the Sacrifice was to be acceptable.

That was more important than the Nistam's life, more important than his own.

Miowee was whining with frustration, an odd little sound, rather like the noise an exhausted and angry puppy might make; her fingers were strong and agile but she couldn't see what she was doing and the knot had been pulled tight by a Na-priest with long experience in the unnatural strength of people pushed beyond their limits.

Shadith blinked the sweat out of her eyes, twisted her neck around so she could look down at the singer.

"Mee." It was more of a groan than a word, but her voice was beginning to come back to her. This body was resilient as hard rubber, recovering with a speed that still managed to astonish her. It was too bad....

She, shrugged off regret, tried again. "Mee! Listen!"

"What?" Miowee didn't look up, just kept on clawing at the knot.

"If you can reach my left boot, there's a knife in it, but be careful, don't get near Kaya with it, you'd cut her in half before you knew what was happening."

"What good is it, then?"

"Cut the tethers. Roll her off the Prye. At least she won't burn."

"Ah." Her eyes closed, her mouth working, Miowee slumped for a moment against Kayataki's back, then she shuddered, collected herself and began working her body back around until she could reach the boot top, listening as she moved to Shadith's explanation of how to get into the sheath.

The Nistam was in a rage almost as great as the pil-grims', a fury he intended to exorcise by ridding himself of that idiot Ayawit after this stupidity was over with and he was back safe behind the Kiceota walls.

Until the ceremony was completed, until the Culmina-tion was enacted, he couldn't leave. He had to perch on this ugly uncomfortable throne and put his neck on the line. His OWN neck.

Elementary precautions were one thing, running from' a gaggle of Maka clods was something else. His legiti-macy and the power it conferred on him came from family tradition and the reputation of his ancestors. Run-ning now would destroy that—and him.

There were dozens of other Pliciks and Plicik clans with ambitions to replace him and his, half of them sitting around him now, watching him.

In the cavern behind the portable Palace, the Ni-ot Pipondihek was calling in reinforcements from the city and the countryside, every Plicik capable of bearing arms.

It was a desperate throw, the landlords and their forces might prove more dangerous to him, than the pilgrims, but they were a greedy lot with delusions of competence, feuding with their neighbors, trusting no one and far easier to manipulate than the bloody fanatics out there now.

Divide and buy. His ancestors had done it before and won.

In smaller ways he had kept himself intact and in power buying and dividing. He could do it again—and win.

The Nistam sat impassively behind glass and steel and watched the not developing around him.

Miowee drew the crystal knife from the sheath in the boot, but her hands were clumsy because she couldn't see them and she didn't fully understand the danger of the blade; as she pulled it out, it sliced through ropes and cloth and pared away skin and muscle from Shadith's leg.

Until she felt the warm gush on her hands and twisted around to see what was happening, Miowee wasn't aware of what she'd done. She sucked in a breath as she saw the red flood. "Shadow...."

"Yeh, I know." Shadith managed a creaky laugh. "Told you."

"Death to the Pliciks! Death to the Godkillers!"

Dencipim came out of the crowd, leaped the rope, and buried the pistol in the belly of the nearest Royal Guard. As he pulled the trigger, he snatched off the Guard's gilded helmet, threw it to the men following him over the rope. "Death to the Pliciks. Death to the Godkillers!"

Darkness flowed across the crater; the shadows at the back of the. Bubble thickened. Shadith froze, but the rite went droning on and the sun came out again. Cloud or what?,

Maka and Tana began throwing themselves at the Guards and the portable Palace, coming at it in waves, individual men dying and dying and dying, the waves never dying. "Death to the Pliciks! Death to the God-killers!"

* * *

Miowee shifted cautiously, located the tether that bound Kayataki to the pole. "Kaya."

"Mmmphmm." It was a small sound, but as much noise as the girl could make around the gag. It was just audible above the chanting of the choir, the groan of the Longhorns, the doomdoom of the Drums.

"Child of mine, you know how to fall, soon as you're loose, go over the edge, then scoot for the back, find a hole and crawl in, you hear me?"

"Mmmooohminm!" The sound rose in protest. The child shook her head.

"Do it. I'm coming soon as I'm loose, but I swear, baby, I won't move till you're out of sight."

"Mmnimm." It was a falling sound this time, acquies-cence. Shivering and icy pale, Kayataki hunched forward, pushed her head against her mother's side, then pulled back, stretching the tether taut so it'd be easier to cut.

Miowee handled the knife more awkwardly than she intended, applying too much force despite her care. The blade went through both ropes, hers and Kaya's, without noticing them and kept on going, missing her buttock by a hair and sinking into one of the oily sticks. She let go of the hilt as if she'd closed her hand about a snake.

A redheaded woman came riding through the Cicipi Gate, sitting in an arslibre howda mounted on the arch-ing back of an immense and ugly warbot like the worst possible cross between a spider and a lobster. Two more paced alongside and a third followed behind. They shot gouts of steam through spiracles along their sides, open-ing a path for themselves through the surging throng of Kiskaid, walking with ominous, sinuous inevitability through the self-created clouds of steam.

The pilgrims scrambled to get away from the things, frantic with terror, seeing them as demons from

hell's cellar.

Maka and Tanak were swarming over the glass palace, stomping on it, kicking at it, shooting at it with guns they'd brought with them or taken from dead guards; the glass was chipped and webbed with cracks but would not break, the cage groaned from the weight it was carrying but refused to collapse.

Men died, their bodies piling up against the glass. Inside the portable Palace, the Nistam stared grimly at grotesque dead faces staring sightlessly back at him.

Loyal Guards fired into the mob, killing hundreds, but a half a million men were coming at them, they couldn't kill them all. There wasn't enough room for aiming or even for using their rifles effectively. One by one they were falling.

About half the Guardforce deserted and slid into the crowd the moment they got a chance to tear off their uniforms.

By will and the force of the discipline he'd imposed on Aspirants all the long years he'd been Gospah, Ayawit was holding the rite together despite the chaos out on the floor of the crater.

Though he was gradually losing some of his priests, the core held. The Longhorners played their bassnotes, the choir sang, the god-Mimes danced—and the Na-priests crouched in the guardline between the Gospah and the people.

One by one the weaker souls slipped away, throwing off their robes and cassocks, stealing clothing off the dead, melting into the mob outside. But the core held.

* * *

As Miowee went over the edge and landed with a thump on the planks behind the Pyres, Shadith sagged against the ropes.

They gave a little. She could move her hands, her arms.

After a moment, she understood why.

Getting the knife out, Miowee had cut through several loops of the coil that bound her to the pole and that coil was beginning to unwind.

Her leg burned a little, but she still wasn't feeling much pain, the crystal cut too clean.

She flexed her knee, gasped at the sudden agony, felt sick when her foot sloshed in the blood that was filling the boot; the knife hadn't touched an artery, but she was leaking like a holey pot.

I'm going to bleed to death, she thought. No!

She rocked her body. The rope unwound faster and faster.

Fire. She was fire.

The Gospah was coming toward her, his eyes glazed with the intensity of his concentration.

He didn't see the loosened rope.

She had the feeling he saw nothing but whatever it was inside his head.

His arms were outstretched and empty, but three Kam priests behind him held torches.

He stopped in front of her. He chanted something. A Kam priest gave him a torch. His voice rising to a shriek, Ayawit looped it onto her Pyre.

It landed by her feet; the sticks caught, exploded into a sheet of flame.

Shadith closed her eyes, stopped breathing. She shut down everything but that rough pressure against her body and the slow, agonizing dance that kept the rope uncoil-ing until she tore the last loops off her neck and shoulders.

She dropped to her knees, reached through fire and grabbed the knife, ignoring the pain as the hot hilt burned into her palm, then she flung herself off the back of the Pyre, her bleeding leg giving way as she landed on the planks beside Miowee.

"Your wrists, push them away from you."

Not daring to cut all the way through (she didn't have time to take care not to slice into Miowee's arms), she nicked the rope round her wrists deeply enough (she hoped) to let the singer break free, then started crawling toward Kikun's Pyre which was burning now as the Gospah marched away with the last torch, crossing to Rohant.

She heard shouts, shooting, ignored them as she stabbed the knife into a stick near the top, then concentrated on pulling herself up the back of the Pyre.

The choir's chant faltered, stopped, the Kam priests shouted and began pushing and jumping, trying to get away from something that was more terrifying than the Gospah's anger.

The Longhorns went silent, the Drums stopped sounding. There was a rattle of high-pitched pings so close to-together they produced an almost continuous whine that improbably filled the whole of the broken Bubble.

Shadith levered herself over the edge of the pile, re-trieved the knife and cut cautiously at the coil of rope binding Kikun to the center pole.

He woke from his trance and began helping her peel the rope away. His face was blistered from the heat of the flames, he was coughing as a few tendrils of oily smoke blew into his nostrils.

The Fire quit.

One minute it was there, the next gone, leaving behind a foul stench and a sudden chill as if whatever had snuffed it had not only killed the flames but sucked the heat out of the fuel that fed them, out of the air itself.

Steadying herself as her leg threatened to give way again, Shadith grabbed at the center post and gaped at the devastation in the Bubble, bodies sprawled every-where, piled on top of each other, stunned not dead (they were still breathing), the new arrival sitting calmly in the middle of all this on a huge warbot of worldclass ugliness, three smaller clones of the thing standing guard behind it.

Aleytys grinned at her. "Eh, Shadow, Dea ex Machina reporting for duty."

"Eh, Lee." Shadith closed her eyes, popped them open again as she remembered... "You better machi-nate some more or all we'll be is smears on rubble." She eased the blade into the center post, above Kikun's head. She didn't trust herself with it, not any more. "I suppose you didn't see any ship in orbit?"

"Someone was skittering for the Limit. Thought I'd better collect you first. Machinate how—and why?"

"That someone probably left us a little present. Planetkiller. Think you can locate it, say it's there?"

"Lovely friends you have. Here, before you bleed to death and waste my worry." Aleytys tossed a medpac to Shadith, then snapped a command to the warbot she was riding. It twisted its long jointed neck up and around, bringing its head close to hers; she began talking rapidly and inaudibly into its shielded sensors.

Leaving Kikun to finish freeing himself, Shadith eased down onto the quenched and blackened sticks, maneu-vering her wounded leg around so she could see the cut.

Not much point in cleaning it up now, leave that to Lee's Autodoc. Better stop the bleeding though. Sar! I've lost enough blood on this jauza world to feed a vampire for a year. Come on, come on, Lee, move it! We die now, I swear I'll haunt you ... hey, I wonder if one ghost can haunt another? Sheehl Pm getting giddy....

She broke the seal, brought out the canned bandage and sprayed a thick layer of foam over the cut. The foam solidified into resilient fauxskin—that hurt! Pressure on the damaged nerve ends. Knowing what was doing it didn't help at all. Hands shaking, she dug out a painpopper, checked the dials, her eyes blurring unreliably, then man-aged to get a pop into her leg and shut off the agony.

Cool dry fingertips touched her face. "All right?"

"Right enough."

Kikun straightened, looked around. "Useful friend."

"Yeh."

"I had better cut the Ciocan loose, don't you think?"

"Cool him down first. Um. You know about the knife?"

"I know. Cuts anything."

"Not a great exaggeration, my friend."

"Wa." He gazed across the backs of the warbots, shook his head at the bloody screaming war going

on out in the crater. “Wa weh.”

Shadith grimaced as he jumped down, the knife held loosely in his left hand; he was surefooted but given the properties of the crystal, prancing about with it like that came absurdly close to suicide. She’d done the same thing a minute ago, but she hadn’t been tracking very well just then.

Aleytys was still talking to that bot. Shadith’s stomach knotted and she swallowed hastily to keep her dinner down.

That ship of hers ... Tigatri, she calls it ... Daugh-ter. I don’t know. Maybe it ... she ... can handle the Banger. Be the baddest joke in the universe if Lee rescued us just in time we all get blown to nada ... got here faster than I expected. Maybe ... depends on Ginny. Double-knotter. If I read him right, he’ll want to be insplitting before the Banger goes. If... Gives us some hours working time ... maybe ... I don’t know, I don’t know ...

She hitched painfully over to the center pole, leaned against it and shut her eyes.

Its chelae absurdly gentle, the warbot plucked Shadith off the Pyre and deposited her beside Aleytys who was leaning back but keeping a wary eye on the readouts spread across the front of the howda.

Shadith forced herself erect. “Lee....”

“Relax. Tigatri’s got the Banger located, she’s slapped a stasis field around it. That’s the good news. Bad news is there’s no way of shutting it down and the field eats power like it’s cotton candy on a stick. She’s in the process of hauling the thing up and carting it to the next world out, that’s an iceworld, barren, better it goes than this one. That’ll shake up the system some, but Kiskai and these people, they’ll survive.” She glanced over her shoulder at the war outside the Bubble. “If they don’t kill each other off first.”

“How long before we can get out of here?”

“About an hour.”

“Oh.” Shadith hauled her leg up, rested her ankle on the front of the howda. “Well, I lasted this long....” She inspected Aleytys. “Had the baby, hmm?”

“Two months ago. Daughter.” Aleytys’ eyes went fond and sappy (Shadith’s assessment), she smiled down at her hands. “Her name’s Lilai. You’ll meet her when we go onboard Tigatri. She’s beautiful, Shadow, she’s a little firehair, got angelcurls redder than mine. Grey’s gaga over her. He didn’t want me to bring her, but I’m not leaving her like I did my son. No. Never. Where I go, she goes.”

Rohant was squatting on his Pyre, scowling. Abruptly his face relaxed. He got to his feet. “Shadow! I’m calling Sassa in, tell your friend to let him through, right?”

Aleytys raised a brow. “Sassa?”

“Hawk.”

“Ah.” She lay back, closed her eyes. “Bird. Raptor. Admit.”

Shadith—eased back, the tension dropping out of her; for the first time in months she was safe, she didn’t have to fight any more, she didn’t have to scramble or run; she could lie there and let the minutes drift past.

She enjoyed it for about a minute and a half, then her eyes popped open and she sat up again. “Miowee,” she said “Kikun...” She broke off, then burst out laugh-ing as the little lacertine came stumping between the pyres, Miowee on his back and Kayataki following be-hind. “Kikun, if you can’t read minds, you do a good imitation.”

Kikun wiggled his pointed ears. He deposited Miowee on Rohant’s bench and went trotting into the darkness behind the pyres. A minute later he was back with the Paleka Kitskew and her harp. He set them by the bench and dropped into a squat beside them.

Shadith took hold of her leg and shifted it down, caught hold of the top of the console and pressed herself forward until she could see the singer better. “Looks like your revolution’s kicked off to a good start, Mee. What about you? What are you going to do?”

Miowee passed her hand over her tumbled tangled hair. “Wait,” she said after a while. “I’ve got

people out there. When the fighting's over ... it will be over soon, it can't last ... Kaya and I, we'll go back to Aina'iril and see what we can do to help pull things together."

"Asteplikota's going to be looking for who killed his brother."

"I'll face that when ... if ... I have to."

"Come with us. I'll get you into a place where you can regrow your legs, fix your eye. Starfolk klem, you know."

Miowee covered her face with both hands, hunched her shoulders. For a long time she said nothing, then she shook her head. "No," she said. "No."

"Be reasonable, Mee. The next months are going to be hell and a half, by the time you get back things will've settled down some."

"Reasonable!" The word exploded out of her; she glared up at Shadith. "If I'd been reasonable, I'd be dead. Reasonable snuffs out the light. I never have been reasonable and I'm not going to change now. Look at me. I can make you look at me. I can make you SEE me. I can make you listen. You listen out of pity and horror, but you do listen. And you HEAR!" She sighed. "You're a nice child, Shadow, and you mean to be kind, but you don't understand."

"Maybe not, but..."

"I am who I am, Shadow; I am what I've made myself, and it's something to take pride in. I won't take gifts, I won't unmake ME."

There was a soft, almost subliminal chime. Aleytys sat up, frowned at the console. "There's a swarm of flits coming this way."

Miowee heard her, laughed, not a nice sound. "One gift," she cried. "I'll take one gift. Will your friend open the glass for us, crack the oysset so we can get at the putrid pearl inside? Nistam, the Nistam! Let us have him if we die for it."

Shadith nodded. "Yes. I owe that lot something, too. Lee?"

"If you mean that hill out there, look at the thing, Shadow. It's five deep with stomping locals. I doubt you want me to punch holes through them."

"Kaya, bring the kitskew." Miowee pushed off the bench, crawled rapidly toward the front of the Bubble, humping over the stunned sacerDotes scattered about the planks, ignoring them, wriggling through the jointed warbot legs, ignoring them. At the outer edge of the stage, she settled herself on the back of a recumbent Na-priest, took the Paleka Kitskew from her daughter, tuned it, and began playing. Improbably, the sound cut through the noise. She'd collected a lug-ike sometime during her crawl; Shadith hadn't seen her do it but was amused, it was so like the woman, practical and outrageous at once.

"Harrowee darrowee yarrowee HOO!" she sang. "Hear ye oh heed ye oh dearie my LOO! I am Miowee, you know me, you DO!"

At first it seemed absurd, singing a song (and a nonsense-song at that) to a war-in-progress, but one, then another, another, and another called out: *Miowee. Miowee. Miowee. It's Miowee. Listen.* The name went, skittering across and across the crater and those who could did stop to listen.

"The landlords are coming, be ready, my dears. The landlords are swarming in flits to this place." She stopped her chant and played the kitskew for a moment to give them a chance to absorb her warning. "You on the glass, get down for a while, we'll break open the oysset and you pluck the pearl."

Almost before she was finished the men on the porta-ble Palace were jumping down, clearing a space around it. There were no Royal Guards left alive outside the glass, only bodies kicked to jelly. The glass was still intact though opaque from cracks and smears of blood and other body fluids, the people inside invisible.

Aleytys hesitated. "This is what you want, Shadow?"

"It's what I want. You don't know, Lee, you just don't know."

"All right." She tapped a sensor, spoke quietly into the warbot's 'ear'. A second later one of the clones was spitting a cutter at the dome, slicing neatly through the glass, opening an oval hole near the bottom of the dome.

There was a roar from the spectators as the remnant of the Guard came charging through the hole,

laying down a hail of pellets as they tried to get the Nistam and the court out and into the housecavern behind.

The Maka and the Tanak died and fell, fell and died, but the mantide rolled irresistibly over the Pliciks and the Guards.

Aleytys moved her shoulders and looked grim. Shadith felt sick, but she wasn't sorry she'd asked. Miowee was lying flat behind a pile of Na-priests, Kayataki hugged against her.

Rohant sat on his bench, Sassa perched uneasily beside him.

Kikun was leaning against a warbot leg, sunk in one of his enigmatic reveries, mostly not-there.

"Lee, how close are the flits?"

"Ten minutes at most."

"Don't you think we better get out of here?"

"No. There are enough people dying. I don't want to have to kill more."

"Yeh, well, nice. But tell you true, I'd rather them than me."

"Tigatri's on her way back. In a hurry. She'll lay down a stunfield, flatten everyone, we walk out taking our time."

"I thought you said an hour."

"It's almost that now, Shadow."

"Already?"

"Already. You were too tied up to notice." Aleytys patted her arm, chuckled. "Tell you something, my girl, this time I'm delivering you myself to University, make sure you get there."

"No, Lee. I don't think so. I think we've got unfin-ished business. The three of us." She straightened. "Rohant. Kikun. Come over here."

"It's a practical matter," she said. She eased her throb-bing leg. Her foot moved in the blood in her boot; it was a sticky gel now, disgusting but she ignored that. Wouldn't be long before she could take the boot off. "Get him before he gets us."

Rohant bared his teeth. "It's personal. Very personal."

"Personal, practical, a difference with no difference. We go after him."

"Yes." Rohant held his hands out, palms up, claws showing. "What I have, I give. Blood, body, and gold."

"Yes." Kikun straightened. "His dead want him. So be it."

"So be it."