

The background is a complex, abstract composition of various shades of green and teal. It features a grid of small, light-colored plus signs scattered across the upper half. A series of thin, curved lines sweep across the middle section. On the right side, a bright, multi-colored light burst or starburst effect radiates outwards, creating a sense of dynamic energy. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and ethereal.

# Ri

Eye of the Ocean Book One

A fantasy trilogy by

**Laurel Hickey**

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Laurel Hickey  
638 East 3rd Street  
North Vancouver, BC V7L 1G7  
Canada  
[www.2morrow.bc.ca](http://www.2morrow.bc.ca)  
[lhickey@2morrow.bc.ca](mailto:lhickey@2morrow.bc.ca)  
604-987-3835

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## Part I

### - 1 -

*The air was frosted, the tiles beneath their feet were frosted; breath surrounded their heads like clouds of incense. The others of Ulanda's beginner class giggled with relief at having made it through the dance without too many mistakes.*

*The Temple Dance Master tapped her stick. A light snow fell, the first of that winter, the crystals like pollen on the woman's yellow robe. A knot of several other people stood a little apart, shadowy figures in hooded white cloaks.*

*Ulanda blew on her fingers then pulled the sleeves of her knitted tunic down over her hands and grabbed the ends to make mitts. The Simic-born Dance Master was watching her, not her five classmates.*

*"Ulanda." The Dance Master's voice took each syllable and shattered it. "From the second chorus, min'tat position, without drums." The neural Net feed they had been using for music snapped off, and the frozen square was quiet.*

*Slippers had caked the dusting of snow into broken foot shapes on the tiles, obscuring the colored placing squares. Her feet were already numb. She licked her lips and tried to hear ci-ci drums in her mind.*

*Third time through and her lungs were as frozen as her feet. The snow fell harder, hiding the tiles entirely. When she looked up from the closing turn, only the Dance Master and the strangers remained. The other five of her class were gone and she couldn't see their footprints.*

*Fifth time and at the end of the last turn, she fell. The Dance Master helped her up, and then wrapped the ends of her thick woolen robe around, leaving only her head out as though she had grown from the teacher's middle.*

*One of the white-cloaked forms moved closer, snow breaking away from the cloth of the hood. Eyes the green of the ocean looked at her.*

*"Ulanda, will you dance for me?"*

*Tilting her head back to look up, all that was visible of her teacher was the wrinkled throat and chin and the ends of the yellow hood. "Must I?" she whispered.*

*The chin nodded down to her. "You must."*

*Another of the cloaked forms drew closer. "Sarkalt," Ulanda heard him murmur, "it's too cold. Let the child go now."  
But the Dance Master's stick tapped. "Ulanda, again."*

\* \* \*

The warm rain stopped and the runoff from the roof into the flooded courtyard slowed to single drips. Now Ulanda could hear the drums clearly. They were for the la'cellini, the dance of thanks, prelude for the cel'ka that in its common cycles, each building on the last, took an hour or more for the Temple dancers to perform. Part of the K^sini festival for the start of the rainy season.

And the dream? The beginning of the broken promise -- drums and winter ice, a snow-covered patio. Not this hot, airless *now* where there were no promises left.

Patyin was curled against her back, part of the heat. He stirred, then stretched and smiled. "Did you say something?" At his words, the glow-globe began to shine, rising slowing to ceiling height. "Is it morning?"

"No to both. You only just fell asleep."

"Then the dances haven't finished. Good." With a grunt, he turned half over, then reached to the opposite side of the bed, looking for something. The bottle of wine. Empty. He let it drop. "I told Gei we'd meet him on the jetty before the procession started."

"If he's still at the K^sini."

"He'll be there. Or we'll be there and he won't."

Ulanda leaned against him, her hair falling over his chest in a dark shower. If she was hot, he was on fire, like a stick of incense burning, his skin scented with cedar. In Kalin, she thought, an honest prayer would be accompanied by incense made of marsh grass and mud, not cedar.

Wetting the tip of one finger with her tongue, she traced the outline of his lips. In her face, his breath was samp grass and bitter almond from the local wine he'd had earlier. "The procession is boring. Stay and make love to me instead."

He chuckled. "Time enough after we get back. Tomorrow. Or is it today already?" He looked mildly pleased at his wit.

"If it's tomorrow, then we don't have to go." Ulanda smiled into his eyes as though as pleased as he was at his wit. She didn't need to watch what her fingers were doing: darting along his skin, barely touching in light strokes that might end with a pinch and become, as quickly, a tickle. His shoulders, his arms, along his ribs. Waking sated nerves.

When he gasped, she covered his mouth with hers, her cheek against his nose, holding his breath in. Chest heaving, he pushed her away.

Instead of the passion she wanted, he only looked puzzled. She laughed, and with the back of one hand, stroked his red sweaty face. From simple fire, to a live coal. When he reached to return her touch, she thought he would finally pull her to him, but he only coiled a long dark strand of her hair around one finger.

"Gei said..."

"Did I mention boring?" Drawing the strand free, she brushed his chin with the already straightening curl. From his chin, letting the hair go, she drew her forefinger down his throat and then his chest, the thick, almost white curls parting under her long fingernail. He was the typical ice-blond of the southern islands.

He tried to capture her hand, but missed when she moved to his belly, pushing the light cover away. And moving lower again to the still erect flag of his penis.

"I don't know if I like you when you're like this," he whispered as this time he managed to take her fingers in his.

"Did I ask you to like me?" she said, lying back.

He chuckled as he swung around to get to his knees and then straddled her.

"No, I don't recall liking each other had anything to do with it."

After they made love, he gathered her to his side, her head in the crook of one arm. In a moment, he was snoring.

Her short sleeping robe was on the floor next to the bed, and careful not to wake him again, Ulanda disentangled herself from his embrace, and slipped it over her shoulders. From Wis'opil, bought years ago and half the world away; a soft indigo cotton. Piltsimic weaving. There wasn't anything in Kalin Market to compare.

As she watched Patyin sleep, her hands smoothed the few wrinkles in the cloth from lying on the floor. And from smoothing, to brushing the tips of her fingers across the surface of the weave. Closing her eyes, she saw what her fingers couldn't feel in the fine weave -- or her mind find in the sound of the rain. Patterns in the weaving. Nights and days in her life, the extract of years. And still, the threads crossed and re-crossed, relentless in their perfection.

She balled her hands into fists, wanting to strike somebody, anybody. Patyin would do. Sudden rage filled her throat; she couldn't breath.

*And it's not his fault.*

Memory slammed into her. Ri-altar. Niv. And her words to the Overpriest.

Days of rain had turned the small back courtyard off her bedroom into a shallow pool, about an inch deep. She splashed through her own reflection, dark with a halo of golden light from the glow-globe. The air smelled only of the nearby river: brackish water and fish and hemp from the nets. Beyond the courtyard wall was another house, the roofline dark against the clouded sky. A

baby began to cry, but was quickly hushed. Further away, in the direction of the river jetty, a dog barked.

And from the town center came the roll of the ci-ci drums, drowning out the sounds of the river.

Ulanda didn't remember the end of the dance on the snowy patio all those years ago, but only waking the next morning, expecting the crowded warmth of the Temple dormitory. Instead, she had been in a small cold room with two other children, only their noses and hair showing above the blankets. Blond heads, Ri-born, most people at South Bay Temple were native to the world. Shivering even with the blanket around her for warmth, she had stood and looked out the single window. The ocean was white-green under the crack of light that was the dawn. She was in the Priest House. In the Acolyte's quarters.

Despite the sound of the drums, Ulanda heard Patyin get up and call her. And again. Then the commode, then a mouthful of water gargled and spat out. Then the front door hit the wall as he left.

When the rain started again, covering the sounds of the festival, she went back inside and shut the front door. Hot water for a bath, she thought walking short passage from the front of the house to the covered rear porch where the cooking was done, the glow-globe following her. And while she bathed, heat more water for tea. Then to bed.

Suddenly, the glow-globe darted past her and brightened. She looked up.

Leaning against the post supporting the porch awning was a man. Black pants and vest, the vest open to the mat of dark curly hair covering his chest and rounded belly. He was tall for a Piltsimic, perhaps to her shoulder, but easily three times her mass.

"You're supposed to be in Cam^ka." He spoke in Empire plain-tongue, not Ri-native.

The fear she had only just then felt, disappeared. She wasn't sure what replaced it. "I take it this isn't a casual encounter."

"Does it look like one?"

"May I offer you tea, then?" At the same time, she made a sign with her fingers that meant acquiescence, a Temple-based gesture that had no Ri equivalent. An allowance, an admission that she was open to the possibilities his being here offered.

He grunted. "And talk."

"About what?" Then added in the poetry of High-formal: "The curl of the tea leaf off the bush? The release to the steam?"

He chuckled then laughed, shaking his head, the dangling lobes of his large ears flying. And in Ri-native said: "Something like that."

His Ri-native had the accent of the Yulse Calsai, a long chain of islands that circled a quarter of the world in an arc that pointed on both ends to Ri'sani, the main island. Most off-world trade was centered in the north Calsai islands, but there was an easiness even in those few words that suggested he might have been born on Ri.

Three oral languages without a neural Net to translate... and one that wasn't oral and which was usually only known to people who had dealings with Temple. Plus a fifth, she could assume he knew Piltsimic-native, a language she didn't. An educated man. His directness -- or rudeness -- she discounted, both were Piltsimic traits.

Ulanda poured fresh water into the kettle and took it to the ceramic fire-ring set in the tile floor. Next to the fire ring was a tea service and a basket of twigs and dried marsh grass twisted into knots in the Kalin fashion.

Live coals remained under the ashes from the tea she had made earlier for Patyin. A knot of the grass rekindled the flame, but she let that die, watching silently as the fire-spent embers, still in the shape of the long leaves, collapsed under their own weight. Let him wait. The Piltsimic had come to her.

The stout man grunted again as he knelt with the tea tray between them. He added more grass to the coals, then a handful of the twigs, and put the kettle on the ring. "Well?" His low voice turned the word into a growl.

Flames had spread out against the round bottom of the kettle before she spoke, this time in Ri. "Why should I be in Cam^ka?"

"Because some fool didn't manage to notice that you'd left. Because I went there first and wasted a day."

She raised her eyes to his. So, his being here had history behind it, and some effort. And resources that included the use of a flitter and likely access to Net records from the two ports, Cam^ka and Kalin. Very well connected. Or rich, or his connections were. Or Temple.

"A whole day?" She was careful to keep her voice light, almost playful. "And much of the night, apparently. I don't envy this fool of yours. Did you come with the Temple people for the K^sini? I heard they came by flitter, not boat."

"Don't recall saying I was with them." His small dark eyes narrowed. "You've been here, what? Two months? Plan on staying long?"

In marshy Kalin? On a mud flat turned shallow river for a few hours after the almost daily rains? And with the real rainy season and the floods about to start? She looked away with a shrug that mirrored her thoughts on the matter.

From one of the jars of tea, she took a pinch of the leaves and dropped them into the fire. Sparks and the scent of the leaf, anticipating the flavor. She could turn his Piltsimic directness back on him. "Where were you before you went to Cam^ka?"

He opened the other tea jar on the tray, shook his head and put it down. "Where I was only matters if you agree."

She moved the jar back to its proper place on the tray. "Agree to what?"

His inspection of the teapot was next. An unglazed yellow clay base, marsh flowers carved into the clay and the cuts outlined with a shiny blue glaze. Local made, and like the furnishings, it had come with the house.

"A job," he said without raising his eyes from the tea pot.

"I have one."

With a sidelong look at her: "So you do. What about the boy?"

She shrugged again. "Does he matter? If you're offering something better, that is."

"His father is Master of Scribes here in Kalin. No mean position."

"In Kalin? What of the job you're offering me? As mean a position in as mean a place?"

A final inspection of the teapot -- as though the shapes his broad thumbs traced in the glazing pattern took all his concentration -- then he put it on the lip of the fire-ring and took the jar of tea she had just opened and held it under his nose. "This stuff is pitiful."

"Patyin likes it. Perhaps it's an acquired taste."

"Have you acquired it?"

"How many times need I say no?" She got to her feet and went to the cabinet. "I've some wine. It's local, but..."

He shook his head. "Probably another acquired taste."

"After two months in Kalin? Yes, it is." In the cabinet were several bottles, something Patyin hadn't known or he would have taken them. With them were some fruit, mangos and bananas, and a bunch of wilted kale she had meant to cook for dinner. And under the kale, an oiled paper bag. Anise cookies, most of them broken. The few whole ones barely covered the surface of a plate and she arranged a rosette in the center from the larger pieces, sprinkled loose seeds over top, and brought them to him.

The Piltsimic picked out a whole cookie and ate it in one bite. And another, but this one he held up instead of eating. "What are stale cookies supposed to contribute to the dialogue?"

"Crumbs?"

He ate it. "Crumbs, it is."

A sharp whistle, the water was near boiling. She slid the kettle off the fire. "Is this the point in our talk when I get to hear who is doing the offering?"

He moved the plate of cookies to his lap. "Call me Bolda."

She raised one eyebrow. "Your offer?"

"What? The substance or the who?"



She made an exaggerated motion of allowance. "As I don't know either, whichever or both as contributes to the dialogue."

He chuckled through crumbs, but didn't answer.

"I'm gratified I amuse you."

"Well, it's not me you have to amuse."

So, it wasn't him. She felt disappointed, but knew it hadn't been likely. "At such great personal effort, you must trust that I can amuse."

"For more than two months at a stretch? Actually, amuse might not be the right word. You'll catch his attention like fingernails on a plaster wall."

"Such confidence in my skills. I'm overwhelmed." She put another pinch of the objectionable tea into the dying flames. "Or is it my dancing we're speaking of?"

"Just one dance."

Smoke from the burning tea caught the back of her throat. She couldn't breathe. Out of the harmony of the rain on the roof, the water running from the kitchen awning onto the courtyard, came the sound of the individual drops, each distinct, each creating another harmony, the one she had looked for earlier and hadn't found. A resonance with the air, the cloth, with the tiles, with her heart beat. And in the sound: the ci-ci drums.

Will you dance for me?

"Of course," she managed to say.

"According to Patyin, it's a dance you perform very well. Although I doubt he has much basis for comparison."

"No."

"Is that my answer or your opinion?"

She shook her head. "No. And no again if you ask again without telling me more."

"You get a standard contract. If you please the man. If you don't, then your expenses will be paid, and if you need it, some help making other arrangements."

"No."

The last cookie eaten, he fanned his face a couple of times with the empty plate, then put it on the floor. "This is getting boring. It's too hot to argue."

"So? Your being here says you know more about me than you let on. And knowing more and being here, says..."

"Says what? Temple? Temple doesn't hand out second chances. You screwed up; live with it."

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Asam e'Bolda of the Imperial Household."

Cedar. Black joss sticks burning. Prayers that Patyin would have made to the Empress. "You misjudge me. I'm no fool."

"Is that so?" Without taking his eyes off her, he got to his feet. "Is there anything you want to pack?"

"Now?" she said and felt like the fool she had claimed she wasn't. Of course, now. A day wasted.

She heard the front door open and stay open -- a difference in the flow of air and the sound of the rain. Patyin. She didn't take her eyes off the Piltsimic. Behind him, the silvered curtain of water running off the awning blurred as she lost the edges of her vision.

But there were two sets of footsteps in the hall and a change in the air again, the feel of more people, the sound of their breathing, emotions like scent. Possibilities.

She turned her head and had to blink rapidly before being able to see Patyin and Gei, shoulder to shoulder in the hall.

"Ulanda?" Patyin slurred her name. "What... who's that?"

"Another customer," Gei said. He sounded sober. "I thought you said you had an exclusive arrangement."

The Piltsimic said something in a language she hadn't heard before. From the courtyard where she had stood earlier, two forms rose out of the darkness and were gone into the bedroom before she could make sense of what she was seeing. There was the sound of scratches on the floor tiles, not footsteps. From the hall, Patyin and Gei could obviously see what was making the noise. They backed up. Then her sight of them was blocked. Dark robes, a glint of ochre chitin.

"I told you it was too hot to play games," Bolda said to her in plain-tongue.

As though that had been a key, she suddenly caught the Piltsimic's tight Net lead. And the node? Tiny Kalin had a single node but it wasn't available for general use, the links set for the one school in the town, the weather watch, the port assay, and the navigational leads. Besides, what she felt wasn't a domestic Net system; the signature of the energy pathway was hauntingly familiar.

He blocked her from the lead like swatting an insect. It faded, then, suddenly, was there again. He looked amused. "So, you haven't forgotten everything."

And through his lead -- and then in the air, surrounding them -- the whine of a flitter. And then the shape of the craft over the house. The flitter landed half in the courtyard, half in the next yard, the mud wall between flattened under it. Black hull tiles gleamed dully.

She stood to see it better. A design around the eye of the ship, a change more of texture than what the poor light allowed her to see. The wings of the Empress' signature?

"I want a permanent position..." Her heart was in her throat as she turned towards the Piltsimic. It was all she could do to keep her voice from breaking. "Something at least equivalent to a Steward Third Grade. And I want it as a signing bonus."

Again, the Piltsimic looked amused. "Fine."

Coming out of the last corridor, Cassa had been beside him. Impossibly, they were arm in arm and Garm put his hand over where hers would have been.

*You said you wouldn't leave me.*

The words were like the strange mood he had woken with, like the ghost at his elbow. Garm didn't know if he imagined her saying them or they had come from his own lips. He had never let her go and he never would.

His hand still over hers, he stood at the entrance several moments before realizing he knew where he was. Risent Common. Round sided, the high dome was supported by arches that spread their legs to arcades within. He was in one. Sunshine on marble the color of new leaves -- a false sun on stone leaves -- a small green world in the depths of the Palace in low orbit over Ri. On the banner above his head, in one or more of a dozen languages, was written the names of the shops he had just passed.

"Tea, lord? Leaves from Visnet, the finest amber..."

A vender, only the closest of several targeting him as he left the shelter of the arch, all of them dressed much the same in bright rags. A... man, Garm thought, deciding on the sex even as he had no idea of the species. Obviously dyed red hair, the vendors face striped with the same color. Painted on -- the makeup had caked in the creases around his wide mouth -- the sight left him vaguely relieved without knowing why.

"... steaming hot, sweetened with..." The hand not holding the bowl under the spigot of the urn held the price formed by fingers without apparent bones to restrict the shapes they made. Tea bowls hung from a waist cord, he wore the urn like an extra hip.

"Tea, yes. Tea." But not here and not standing. Garm signed a negative but was followed in his retreat.

"Fruit buns, sugar rolls..." Another vendor had joined the first.

Facing the common were several cafes, their tables like game pieces thrown to occupy as much as of the open area as possible. Tea and a rest, he decided as he knelt at the closest table with a thick cushion over the floor. His legs bent reluctantly and his back complained. One of the servers chased the vendors away. Garm turned his back to the fading argument and sighed with relief.

A spider-like Wa'tic sorted beads across from him, the rhythmic tic-tic of its words keeping time with the clacking of the bone rounds. As expected, the small creature ignored him. A table away, a pair of young girls exchanged pastries, giggles and confidences. About him? He was being peeked at, but the whispers were exchanged behind sheltering hands and he couldn't hear.

He shook his head. No one here knew who he was and had no cause to wonder. A tired old man -- a common breed in age if not in species.

Swollen fingers entwined, he stretched his arms until the joints popped. As he folded his hands back in his lap, the smell of rotting meat replaced the scent of tea and pastries. The talisman hidden up one sleeve had fallen out. Small white flowers, each with six cupped petals -- crushed now and turning brown -- were attached to a narrow silver tube. Complex braiding surrounded the tube but done in red strands, not the usual black. The entire thing fit in the palm of his hand.

A call of luck in the color and an offering to Cassa in the silver, and the talisman placed on the threshold of a service door just outside the ruined portion of the Imperial Suite. He had found it an hour earlier.

He remembered that the plainness of the door had appealed to him. Unpainted wooden planks, it had felt warm, alive. Another ghost? Or a welcome change from what he was leaving? With the door held open, he hadn't noticed the talisman on the floor until he stepped on it.

Putting it there certainly should have been noticed by High Council Security, although he doubted his own Security routinely extended that far any more. His taking it would have been noticed by both, his entrance into the secured area noted and his exit watched for. Minutes after picking the thing up, he'd had to wave off his flitter, his message in the Net to the pilot and the guards inside, quite clear: leave me alone. And knew his Security wouldn't do anything of the kind. He was certainly being peeked by more than curious children.

Tucking the flower back in his sleeve, he turned to find the serving woman watching him. "Tea," he said. "Roasted honey-leaf and strong." As blond as most here, her round face spoke of frequent smiles, but now the smile looked as painted as the stripes the vendor wore. Her eyes had been on the talisman.

Cookies he hadn't ordered came with the tea, nutmeg in the crisp rounds, and the plate scattered with candied rose petals. He wouldn't pay for them he decided as he crumbled a rose petal; he wouldn't subsidize another's hope.

For the first time in years, this morning's walk had taken him deep into the wreck Cassa had left of much of the Imperial Suite. And now... what of his own hopes? A long, very foolish walk as far away from the endless granite as his legs could take him. His courage had been a mood quickly over but even at its height hadn't taken him into Cassa's study where some of the stone was her.

He blew over his tea and sipped, hearing each swallow. The glass bowl clinked on the small tray when he put it down, the sound making him wince. All around him, whispers had replaced talk.

From a Piltsimic matron a full table away, he heard, "I tell you it's him. No one else would dare have taken it." Glossy black and round bodied under exquisite silks, she whispered her words in a soft growl as she leaned to the man seated

next to her. A daughter -- splotchy colored still as young Piltsimic were, but looking to proof black like her mother -- was up on her knees, frankly staring.

"San Garm, her tass'alt, then," the man said, an eyebrow raised in appraisal. "Doesn't look like much."

Raising his cup, he saluted the three. "Yes, hers." In the new silence around him, his words were as stark as the feelings that threatened him. "Always hers."

Thirty-five years of waiting, the ghost ready at his elbow. Always.

That last day, Cassa should have been sleeping; she had been up all night and still at Ri-altar by sunrise. A wet day, he remembered. No heavy rain, more a settling of the cloud against the low mountain. Normally visible from there, a finger width above the highest peak, Palace was hidden by clouds. Best seen at dawn, it burned like a morning star in a sky where no other stars were visible.

They had gone straight to Ri-altar on the main island, from the Imperial Hall of Justice in Palace, landing in the clearing a few minutes walk from the ring of trees that made up the altar. Only the glow from the flutter lit the ground, the hull tiles had been left translucent, turning the people inside into flickering shadows and the surrounding mist into silver threads in the weave of evergreens.

"I could swim in this air," Cassa had said, sounding amused as she turned around only to face him again, the heavy brocade of her Audience robe sweeping about her ankles. "I feel I've been crawling all day. If I heard one more presentation of the obvious..." Her tone was higher pitched than usual, brittle -- she tended to a full throaty voice which broke to a rasp when she was tired.

"Here I thought you were asleep through most of the judgments. Was I mistaken?"

She smiled. "Perhaps I was the only one obvious."

"But only to me." Asleep most of the time, waking only to insist on some seemingly arbitrary change to the Justice decisions. Justice analysts and Priests both would be scrambling to decide if the differences meant anything or were a whim of a woman they had no chance of understanding. He shook his head, he certainly didn't know, and he knew her better than anyone. "Have you had the fresh air you wanted? The rest of us have beds we'd rather be in."

"And you?"

"I'd rather you be with me in my bed, not here at any rate." He frowned but it was play. "Or am I mistaken again, are you here to pray?"

"What would I have to say to a ring of trees?"

Playful in return and willing to be amused. He might tease her out of the mood. "And me?" he asked, letting his hands make an abortive prayer sign in Ri-native, his fingers against her skin. "What would you say to me?"

She moved against his hands. "I'd say I don't want to stay here."

"Then..."

"And I'd say I don't want to go back. Come with me for a walk."

"Where?"

"We could walk to the beach by dawn. Or we could swim there through the clouds. Would the way be shorter?" Amused and playful, but she moved like an awkward girl, all stiff limbs, each surprised to find themselves attached to a body. She had none of the grace so common to Empire Priests.

"Can we swim to South Bay Temple instead? I'm thinking of breakfast." A peace of sorts had been reached with Sarkalt, the Overpriest of Forms. South Bay was an allied Temple of that Office. And he could trust Cassa's instinct for survival, instinct augmented by pattern sense. If South Bay Temple wasn't safe, she wouldn't go there and any reason why not would do.

He continued to touch her, now drawing out the ends of the long cords that bound her wrists, now rubbing the g'ta points, tracing the energy pathways from face to neck, along her arms. And loosening the ties in the layers of robes she wore, moved to her breasts, to her waist, always stroking, his hands warm from the silk and her skin. J'yi watched from the door of the flitter, watched him, not Cassa. The tass'alтин would step in only if Garm allowed.

Both her hands on his arms stopped him. A dead weight, there was no strength in the crippled wrists. "I don't need this, let me go."

His hands said he would in a polite shape, then denied the possibility as he lifted her already damp hair from where it lay against her throat and smoothed it back. He was constantly surprised to find her face to his; too often he felt he held mist in his arms.

Leaning forward, as though to whisper in his ear, she relaxed against him. He welcomed what he had thought was the return to his attentions. That her desire for flight was a thing of the moment. She couldn't hold such thoughts for long.

Her next words weren't whispered, he thought they weren't spoken at all, but burned directly into his mind. "Damn you, let me go." With the words came frost, the mist made solid on his skin. The hair on his arms looked like winter-fast grass at the edge of a pond.

"How could I?" he asked through a brief, instinctive panic, only glad he wasn't capable of seeing the rise of pattern energy she was capable of calling. If she killed him, he didn't want a warning. His throat was dry; he could hardly breathe to speak. "You chose me. If I'm damned, then it's your doing."

O'lin'te, her Chief of Staff started from the flitter, pushing J'yi back when the tass'alтин tried to follow. Two of the Guard circled around. The Net lead showed Garm what the Temple-trained ti'Linn could see and he could not: the overpattern threads like lines of fire all around him and Cassa. Garm ordered the others back to the flitter and cut the lead at the same time.

Listen to me, feel me... his hands still said the important things to Cassa and he listened in the same way. Where he couldn't see that kind of pattern energy, he could feel her and force her to feel him.

A walk it turned out to be, but to the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean. Dressed only in the innermost shift, she sat on a stone ledge. Braid ends from her bound wrists flowed between her knees. Some time into his effort to reach what existed of the woman within the Priest, the Audience robe and layers of petal shifts had been abandoned.

O'lin'te brought him a blanket. The ochre ti'Linn carried the light of the flitter in the reflections from the hard chitin of its exoskeleton. Using serrated pincers, the first pair of limbs shaped a sign of formal Opening. "Sarkalt seeks allowance to join her here."

The Overpriest was apparently on his way -- the faint whine of a flitter grew as the sound bounced off the higher mountains in back of them. "I'd have thought he had enough of her during the Judgments."

The ti'Linn nodded towards Cassa, mouthpieces clicking in another language before deciding on the usual mutilation of plain-tongue. "Walk or swim, best we leave. She drifts on a dark wave." From the direction of the flitter, he heard the two Guards making a similar clicking sound.

When he made the necessary allowance for the Overpriest's pilot into the Net lead O'lin'te offered him, the ti'Linn blinked its distress, the jeweled lights in the eyes momentarily darkening to red. Bred out the Wa'tic line, but larger, and the ti'Linn's four eyes weren't faceted in the same way.

Niv, Sarkalt's tass'alt, joined him beside the slight shelter of a large rock, but the Overpriest walked to be with Cassa at the edge of the cliff, the two watching where the ocean would be if there had been anything to see but gray cloud. They didn't talk, they rarely did.

Niv had been speaking of South Bay. "He said we would go. Saleyin, the ranking Priest, was told to expect us. We should..."

"Saleyin has been told differently by now." Garm gestured to Sarkalt. "He's where he wants to be."

Blue nails clicked against each other, showing the tass'alt's distress. "He looks at her. What does he see?" The words held a faint lisp carried from the native Camerat.

Sarkalt's eyes hadn't left the clouded ocean but he thought Niv might have meant at the Judgment Assembly earlier; the young Camerat didn't appear to have a highly developed sense of time. "What are you worried about? Not the Priest in him certainly. And what remains of the man... if you're to his taste, she certainly isn't."

Walking from the flitter, J'yi joined them. Wearing formal clothes still, as Garm was, but in the style favored by the Tass'Holding at Palace and which complemented his grace. The wet had the lace weave dragging along the rough ground, gathering cedar twigs and leaves with the hem. "O'lin'te says she's still

not stable," the tass'altin whispered, sparing Niv both a glance and a half-formed sign with his fingers that requested privacy. Garm countered it.

"I hear no discourtesy from him," Niv lisped softly.

J'yi bowed. "The access is increasing and not residual. I must agree that the Overpriest being here..." He stopped, his eyes on Niv. "The medic scan can't reach her, she's stopping anything we try. She requires proper attention, at the very least a neural blocker. Her reserves are over-extended from the Judgments, her body can't handle much more without her becoming ill."

At J'yi's words, Cassa turned her head and looked at them. Simply the look of a woman, he had been surer of that than the tass'altin. If there were still a problem then O'lin'te would have delivered the message either in person or through a tight Net lead. He told J'yi as much.

Niv watched J'yi leave. "Is he to the Empress's taste?" Asked as softly as his earlier words, but the few strands of crest hairs showing under the cloak's hood deepened to the same cobalt as his scales. Without waiting for an answer, he left to join Sarkalt.

Cassa stood, the clouded dawn behind her and started back to where he waited. Wet silk clung to her, was molded to her slight frame, the pearl colored light showed each caress of cloth on skin. She looked like a child returning from bathing.

As Niv passed her, she said something to him. The Camerat stopped only a moment, Garm couldn't see his face or hear an answer. He met Cassa halfway, she barely appeared to notice as he wrapped her in the blanket warmed by his body.

He remembered Niv's more gentle anger and his own. Constant and biting. Had the passion in him burned out at last? What had driven him to use those words?

"I hardly remember who I was then," he said out loud.

"San?"

He jumped. Bending over, the serving woman's face was inches from his. "San, I've sent my boy for the Common's Security," she said, apparently speaking to his nose. Her own wrinkled as though at a bad odor, and the smile, forced or not, was gone. It took a moment to realize she had addressed him by his title. "San, they should be here by now, you need an escort. Your own people... I couldn't get through, the Net is closed to everyone without high clearance."

Even so close, her voice was almost lost in the noise surrounding them. While he dreamed of things years past, the quiet had vanished.

"Tass'alt. Hers. The Empress' man."

"San Garm, please wait..." He didn't wait or respond to her pleading. He didn't think, he just moved. The voices followed as he ran out and still waited ahead of



him. Touches for luck -- he was being pawed -- and prayers, the shouts made his ears ring.

At the mouth of the arcade he fled towards was an ancient man, human, but his species lost in the ruin of age. A seller of candies with bowls of sweets arranged in front of him. He called as he rocked back and forth, his hands folding paper into cones by rote. "Two-a-penny."

The heavy edge of Garm's robe tagged one bowl. Narrow sticks flew out as the bowl spun, red and white in a dizzying roll. "Two-a-penny," the hawker called regardless, his voice reedy and thin. Yellow -- the only colour left him -- streaked down his beard from either side of his mouth.

With the side of his foot, Garm began pushing all the sticks he could find towards the man. The hawker kept singing as he started to fold another cone of paper, his voice ringing louder and louder. "Two-a-penny, five a two penny." His blue eyes were white streaked and shrunken, the rims a watery red.

The sound of boots on marble stopped behind him with a brittle crunching sound. Garm turned to the scent of roses and a curse. Reaching for his usual Net link, he had to put the House mark in the calling before it would respond and again before it would break out of the Imperial Suite's system. The man's name and rank fell out of the air like a leaf in an autumn storm. Three Crescents Temple. Sarkalt's. And the man: a Security First.

Suddenly, the candy seller's thin hand grabbed at Garm's sleeve, the paper cone crumpled against the yellow wool, the man's other hand fumbling in the bowls, scattering more candies than he picked up. "For her sake, San," he said, pressing the sticky things into Garm's hand. "Ask her to come back. The stone in her rooms, we'll all be like the stone if she don't come back."

His hand full of the candy, Garm bolted, almost tripping over a Wa'tic in the darker corridor, the small creature skittering back with a scream.

### - 3 -

The talisman went on the table first, tossed there without any particular attention and it slid between two stacks of books. Garm left it, already sitting and feeling the ache in his legs change focus. The lights next, they were too bright, and he signed the nearest glow-globe off entirely.

Of the area left alone by the change which had the greater portion of the Imperial Suite turned into stone, only his apartments were still in use, and here, off Simquin Hall, only two rooms: his study and the bedroom adjoining it. Comfortable rooms, patterned wood floor accented by rugs, the wall tiles covered

with green silk and book shelves. The audience and meeting rooms on either side hadn't been used in years.

Bolda snorted, startling him. Garm hadn't noticed him in the corner. "So, you're back," he said. "I wish you'd tell me before you disappear."

A measuring look, not an answer, and Bolda continued with what he was doing. Behind him, silver threads in the silk that covered the wall traced the outline of a bird. The shape was part of Cassa's personal Signature; the silver marked the placing of the portal she had set in his room. Silver like the tube of the talisman. In the past thirty-five years, how many of his prayers had the portal heard? It hadn't been used since she'd left.

Bolda rolled the service cart over to him. Sweet Ambisit charcoal burned in the squat round brazier, the spice of the Possitt root tea as counterpoint. Already steeping, the pot next to the brazier.

"You didn't answer me," Garm said.

"You want this or not?"

Garm crossed a leg over and pulled up the end of his woolen robe to rub at a foot. "Where were you this time?"

"Do you want the bloody tea?"

Bolda had already poured a bowl for him. Amber tea in a dark blue cup. There were stars in the summer night of that blue, but in the tea, not the bowl. He nodded. "Perhaps a lemon tisane."

"Perhaps not." Bolda put the tea down on a cup sized bare spot on the table, and with a scowl, started pushing books to one side to find room for the pot. And found the talisman. "Why the hell did you bring this back?"

Garm changed feet, feeling the bones move under the working of his fingers. "It was at that door, the small one near the main service kitchens on the second level. Well within the area bounded by Sinci Gate, but past what's become stone. You know it."

"I asked why, not where. Sloppy. The braiding, I mean."

"A Ri pattern, I think."

"You guess it's Ri, you mean. Well, it is." Cords that were not much more than threads snapped between Bolda's short fingers. "You could have left it where you found it."

"It's trash now, so throw it out. Just stop complaining."

"It's the local's version of a Temple design; burning it might be better."

"I wouldn't think, or guess, that there could be any prayers left after your mangling." Despite the words, he shaped an allowance for the burning with the fingers of one hand, the other hand finally warming courtesy of the tea bowl. He would feel even safer with it gone. Once he had touched it, he hadn't known what to do. Leaving the talisman behind had felt dangerous, as though he risked

leaving a portion of himself with it. No one should have been allowed to get past any of the Gates much less so close to the change.

The stink of the blooms followed the burning threads. In moments, all that was left was the tube, streaked with black. Bolda returned to sorting books, then from sorting, to reading. A glow-globe had drifted from the corner to shine in Garm's eyes. If the smell of the flowers didn't give him a headache, the glare would. That globe died as well.

Another moved over, but the angle of the light was less annoying and Garm let it alone. "Ri, an archaic form, but definitely Ri. For the twins." He touched the spot where the flowers had lain.

"What?" Bolda looked up from the book, one finger keeping place.

"That grass cloth scroll, from... a Temple archive I think... no, it was a private collection. I can't remember where."

"Pistalina'silli Gate Station." Bolda had pulled the name out of the catalogue lead that Garm's usual Net link had offered during his rambling. "And it doesn't say a word about twins."

"The scroll wouldn't have started there, only ended. And what do think the word 'etinicin' means..." He held his hand up to stop Bolda telling him. "...if you base your primary translation on a cohort version of Win'slikan Trade before updating that language..."

"Why bother?"

"Because the Win'slikan influence on the higher caste languages of the... of that people, and the several marriages into the ruling dynasty... several marks of inflection were dropped from the common..." He ran out. His notes existed only in paper form, written in the margins of the scroll. And it wasn't just the legends, but Cassa.

"She'd say that they must be my children, and hum the start of one of the ballads that said they were, that I'd lain with the woman and that her death had been Cassa's revenge. Then she'd laugh and say they must be hers in any case because I was. The last time I saw her, they were with her." He sighed. "Well, I suppose none of it matters."

"Depends on what the Ri asked, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" Switching to old-tongue, he added a spin of relative and absolute as only possible in that language. Bolda knew the words.

But he got a grunt for an answer, an older tongue still yet. Bolda's round face reddened and he went back to tidying instead of reading, the push of books growing into a sorting of books. Next, he'd be going to put them away.

Books already covered two walls, some obediently on shelves, others stacked on top of bookcases to wait their chance, and still more on the floor. Scrolls -- paper and parchment both -- sprouted from the openings of jars, some of the scrolls with ribbon ties knotted or broken, others loose. Small, elongated boxes of

recording crystals, the enamel coding in bright bars on the sides, occupied the odd high spot. He tended to step on them.

"What are you doing?" Garm asked. "Leave the books. I don't know why you're always fussing at my things. I'll need these... no, give me that one." He held his hand out for the book Bolda had been reading.

"You haven't touched them in days."

"How would you know, you haven't been here for days. Besides, I need them now." He opened the book on his knee, or let it fall open; the place he wanted was well worked into the leather spine. Blue leather cover, paper pages in a lighter blue. Then he remembered something else and let the book ride his lap while his fingers found the deep pocket in the robe by feeling for the brocade trim. A handful of candies: white sugar twists came from the pocket colored with yellow wool fuzz and various colored lint. The green balls wrapped in smoky paper had fared better.

"Here," he said, pushing the candies across the table. His fingers were scented with almond, he had to peel a white twist off his palm. "You can give me the silver tube in trade."

Bolda took the fire marked tube from his vest pocket, his blunt fingers seemingly trying to weave themselves into the metal. "You know better than to bring garbage in here. Other than the rest of it." Despite his words, he took one, a green ball. The gray wrapping made a crinkling sound as it unfolded on the table.

"They're from Risent Common."

"Think you had to tell me that? You really are an old fool."

Rolling sugar sweet lint from his palm with a lick-moistened finger, Garm shrugged but didn't look up.

Bolda unwrapped another mint. "More excitement than they've had around there since the Risent Common Rompers won the spin-ball tournament." He popped the mint into his mouth and talked around it. "I've indexed the Risent Assembly recordings to our own spins. What to have a look?"

The Temple man had reached Garm before the Risent Common Guard were even close. And no one had thought to order warding restraints. He hadn't, but it wasn't his job to think of such things. What would Three Crescents Temple hope to accomplish by allowing a near riot to happen? And his own people?

"No, I don't want the index. Security can worry about it, not me. Just give me the silver." This time he kept his hand out until Bolda took the rod out of his pocket again and gave it to him. "Perhaps I'll send it to the candy seller. Neither he or the tea shop were paid." It slipped through his fingers and bounced off the blue tea bowl to clatter on the table. He let it ring down, the pitch rising until shrill and then gone.

Bolda watched it. "Like hell you will. Think burning was enough?"

The talisman had been tucked up his sleeve the whole time. Prayers, he thought, all those prayers shouted at him. A sudden thought made him laugh. He could take the prayers with him. The talisman wasn't needed. "Would you burn me then?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Garm sighed. "If you're so worried about prayers... simple words, not like this... I think the Spann have the right of it when they pray to chaos, and not the part that an Empress or Emperor is of the Unity." The Spann heresy. Cassa had made it flesh and bone. No part of her belonged to Empire's Unity. He turned the page to catch the light. "I know you've read the book."

"Put it away, or better yet, burn it too."

"You were the one who choose it, not me. The climatic fight between the Rin'cass wu, the rider of the dark flood of chaos, and the hero, the keeper of the Law of Empire. Preserver of the Unity of the world-patterns. Would you like one of the roles?" Bolda only scowled at him. "No? Perhaps you would prefer the one about the twins, or that other book..."

"Which?"

The silver tube had recalled it. His wife had worked on the translation with him. Dead now, he had said good-bye to her over the length of her illness. Did he have other good-byes? His daughter on Lillisim? A Priest, she would scarcely notice his death. His son? They hadn't spoken in years.

"You awake?" Bolda shouted from entirely too close. "What book?"

"I never said that and I'm not deaf. And I said scroll, not book. The white one that Ena had..."

"Damn it, Garm, that jaunt through Cassa's..."

"Did I go there? How about Risent Common? Did I go there too?" He sighed as a Security index sparked along one edge of his vision. The Temple records? Ignoring the index and the neural call-flags riding it like bees on a honey bush, Garm traced the complex form of the first phrase on the page before him with a finger whose skin was as soft and worn as the paper. And touched the silver tube with the same finger.

"Death and birth, the title form means both, the same as on the scroll. The scroll describes a transition, more so than this story does." At a touch, the Net flags flew away. "Still, there's enough of a transition here for events to shape themselves to. Life and death, they're both the same thing. Like Cassa is both life and death to me. She stole my family and my friends..."

Being with them had been like trying to speak a language half forgotten from disuse, where you think you know a word but the shape in the mouth is wrong. He blinked back the prickle of tears, but they were from relief, not sadness.

He looked up to see Bolda watching him. The shape on the page was his own thoughts and as hard to define into words that insisted on being one thing or the

other. Would he even live to see his notes completed? “Life and death. When are death and birth ever separate?”

Tiny knowing eyes were screwed up until almost lost in the mass of flesh. “You tell me.”

Garm threw the silver tube back. He had to be wrong. Even allowing for the difference in species, he was at least as old as the candy seller and most of his reaction to the man had been horror at the mirror of his age.

“I don’t think this whole thing means anything more than that I’m old. I didn’t go into her study this morning. It’s been years since I’d last been through the outer seals, I can’t remember how much longer since I’ve opened that one door. This morning, I stood on the threshold, my nose pressed against the stone of the closed door and I thought I could smell lavender... I thought about her while having tea in Risent Common. Ri-altar in the rain, that last day. Sarkalt was there, and Niv, we...”

“So was I, remember?”

Had he been? Garm shook his head. In all the memories, he hadn’t seen Bolda but then he might have stayed in the flitter, keeping himself and his cording loom out of the cold and wet. “Then you know. I’ll be with her very soon and I’m not sorry for it.”

“Sure you will.” Bolda pulled at one long ear lobe.

He waited a moment for the rest of the answer then sighed when Bolda crossed his arms, a sure sign there wouldn’t be anything more. “Go find something else to do for a while,” he said, but his fingers formed a shape that made the request into an order. He was tired of Bolda’s interpretation of events.

“Fine. I’ll send Vi’si in. Let him put up with you.”

“Don’t. I’m going to do some work so I don’t need baby-sitting. If I want someone, I’ll call. Now go.”

That earned him a glare but the man left.

- 4 -

Squinting as he held the thin sheet of paper at arms length, he forced the calligraphy into sense and read out loud, “First, day-break illustrious, morning of the Empress...” He shook his head. Written in a variant of High-formal he hadn’t used before and he couldn’t for the life of him think why he had decided on it now. At the thought, a Net lead buzzed in the air like the wings of a bee: Ki-Ki, one of three styles approved by the Greater Scribe Hall Association as compatible with...

Pulling his mind sideways, he let the lead fade until it hovered as an whine about his ears, close enough to pop forward quickly when he needed help with changes to several quite elaborate forms. Then, after reading it over again to the end, he laid the paper on the table, rubbing at the creases where his fingers had broken the smooth gilt surface. Green below the gold, the same green as the ink he had used. The paper looked bruised.

The rest of what he had written had been more of the same, none of it meaning what he had wanted to say. He was about to die and for all his talk, he couldn't face it. He wouldn't manage Ena's grace, and at the end, if he had any breath left, would be pleading for more.

"I'd rather get it over with," he told a particularity stubborn fold in the paper. "There's no need to drag this out." No grace and no courage.

The woven reeds at the window shivered in their frame of wood, but when he looked up, they were still. More memories, he couldn't leave them be. It was a real window -- his rooms were on the outer shell of Palace, a mark of rank or privilege to have anything 'real' -- and the warding was set to concentrate then draw the air inward. Cassa had liked a breeze; she had liked a cold room those nights she had joined him here instead of him going to her.

His fingers moved against the fold of paper with a whisper of sound and in those sounds were words. "Words?" he heard, followed by a rapid patter and a sudden icy wind, a sound like the first sleet of autumn. "Is that all I am to you? Just words?"

"No," he said and placed the inkbottle on one corner of the paper to keep it still. His fingers creaked with the movement and the cold. "No, of course not."

Folding his hands into the long sleeves of his robe, he felt himself shrink down inside around a knot of fear. From the cloth of his sleeve, where he had carried the talisman, came the smell of the flowers, like rotting meat.

Is this how it ends? With the curtain of his mind opening as he died; with dreams and reality becoming one and the same? Had he even gone for a walk?

A harder blast of air. His eyes watered at the cold, the writing in front of him blurring. And in the blur, he saw himself as though a part of his mind looked into the room. Wind lifted the fine silver strands of his hair as he looked up, and the faded green of his eyes flickered to emerald in the uneven light as the reed blinds at the window fought against their fastening. And saw also, that in the eyes doing the looking, he hadn't changed any more than thirty-five years had passed.

"All I would speak or write, I find in you," he said, with the start of a smile. "Cassa, it's been a long time."

The reeds shattered as a fist of air slammed through the window, the scream of their flight shredding the memory of the flowers and the lingering buzz of the Net. Thin air as cold as winter filled the room with a crackle of ice. "Time, Garm?" the crystal flakes sang as they danced. "Has it been any time at all?"

For a fleeting moment, no longer than it takes for a flake of snow to melt in the hand, he remembered his fear at the rise of power at Ri-altar, all those years ago, and wondered that he felt none now. Then his smile grew and he laughed, snow falling from his breath. "No, Cassa. No time at all."

- 5 -

Open to the sky, the dome above the spirals in the center of Three Crescents Temple was a darker circle in an arc of green marble. The thin atmosphere outside Palace sang with a moaning sound at the interface, sipping at the air within, drinking and occasionally gulping. The barriers were unstable things, deliberately so, meant for interest in the sound and in the way the torches on each pillar responded to the movement of air with quick flares of light.

Sarkalt noticed the offering of heat and light, noticed them like he did the people in the promenade surrounding him, those within the spiral as he was. All minor and unimportant compared to the six narrow columns of green that rose around the mound of soil for which the leading arms of the smaller spirals reached. The draw of air pulled the scent of the loam away from him, but he was aware of it as much as the other things. Soil from Ri-surface, the acid mixture of the cedar forests near South Bay, but with the sand of the beaches mixed in, giving salt and the decay of different lives.

The placing was deliberate: they stood at the Spring-tuff spiral, the small primary spiral nearest to the entrance and one of the six that were evenly spaced around the center. Pilvir, his Chief Salin, turned to him, green fire and torch light reflecting from the dark chitin. Except for the sound of the torches and the moving air, all was quiet. "Lord Priest?" the ti'Linn asked in High-formal. "What form do you wish?" Despite the even tone, reluctance showed in the slowing of the revolving lights in its eyes.

Sarkalt didn't need to look to see the other person with them, but he did. A third to Pilvir and his pairing, the Acolyte was as contained but with quite different feelings if such could be called so. Aides, not guards, were on either side of him, and even they wouldn't be needed except for support.

"As is required." Sarkalt motioned that they should kneel. Pilvir anticipated him, folding two pair of its legs, the aides holding the boy as much so, and he knelt only moments later. The teal of the boy's eyes was a thin band around the black pupil. Pleasure at the harmony -- at the inevitability of their actions, a fitting into the pattern with a grace that Sarkalt had looked for and not found in himself, despite his being a Priest.



"As is needed," he said then remembered he had already said something close. The near pillar, he looked there, the drummer hadn't moved but the small drum in her hand sounded with a quick sharp beat of nails against leather. Niv, his tass'alt, had been waiting, watching. Sarkalt hadn't thought he would stay; his leaving was the continuation of the less than subtle protest started this morning. Riltic, his Second, was still there, the Priest's tass'alt with him.

"Once removed," Sarkalt said around the small sound and let the Temple Net read the order before he sealed the area against any outside Net interference in much the same way as it was for an Initiation.

An attendant passed the same drummer, carrying to him in the skirts of her robe the softer rustle of air over leather. "Lord Overpriest." The greeting was for him, but she knelt beside Pilvir, the small, elongated basket she carried was for the ti'Linn's use. Her eyes went briefly to the third person before returning to her hands folded in her lap, and Sarkalt saw she knew him.

In the basket were allipalli stems, matched in weight. Six of them. Taking them, Pilvir taped the lengths even against the marble then shaped the request and held it until Sarkalt gave his attention. "And the form?" the ti'Linn asked again.

"Blood Sacrifice."

Pilvir motioned and the nearest drummer stroked the surface of her drum, and had the sound picked up by the five others spaced at the pillars around the spiral centre. And repeated, the dance of hands becoming more complex, each beat shading into the next.

The sound might last forever, Sarkalt thought. It held him suspended in necessity, it was a focus and a reminder. Blood sacrifice, an extreme form of prayer and one that Temple reserved for its own use. Sarkalt moved the slight amount that helped with the focus of the energy blade, a shift of white braids against one thigh, one hand only and less a physical need than something instinctive, that more than thought should be required for this much result. The aides strained against the sudden dead weight of the boy. The drums stopped.

And in the sudden quiet: blood scent with earth and sand. And allipalli stems. Narrow and strongly lemon scented, they were from young growth, probably the secondary shoots that followed the first blooming, and growing high on the mountain, rarely had time to set seed before the killing frost. A memory: he felt the easy snapping of the stems against finger and thumb, a motion he hadn't been able to perform since becoming a Priest and never had on any world that grew these plants. He had walked the high meadows above South Bay where these would have been gathered and as easily as he had felt the picking, he was there, the green sky above him. He thought it might be earlier this same day.

Who am I, he wondered, expecting the one doing the picking, but when he expanded his awareness to see, he was wearing the white ceremonial robe, blood

in a tear across one side where it had splashed at the first cut. Yellow w'tin pollen streaked the silk and mixed with the blood. He was out of season, or part of him was. This was late summer near South Bay on Ri, the w'tin among the allipalli were in full bloom but those plants he saw around him were in bud, not bloom, and still he had their pollen on his robe.

"Once removed?" Riltic breathed into his ear, the fingers of one hand in a form that had Pilvir stopped in the midst of the first movement, the allipalli stems poised. Sarkalt felt Riltic follow Ri-pattern into the Unity. Searching for him.

"A meadow," Sarkalt said. And looked to his face. Torchlight or sunlight? Was his Second with him on the mountain? "The allipalli stems," he added, wondering. They weren't fresh after all, but dried, the scent would be a memory of both the growing and the picking. The ones held by Pilvir were much thicker than what he had first seen, the lengths intricately carved and with faceted crystals set into their lengths to guide the recording of what Pilvir was attempting to find. Only when a Priest or union of Priests directly searched the pattern energy released in a sacrifice, were the stems plain.

"What of them?" Riltic asked. Koisen, his tass'alt was at his shoulder, the gentler set of her features allowing the worry to show. "Shall we delay this?"

Sarkalt let his gaze go to the dying boy. His eyes were open but unfocused, lost to another vision perhaps, but the pupils remained dilated as death approached. "Can this be stopped?" he asked, and signed Pilvir to continue.

One dip of the ends in the blood and Pilvir held the allipalli stems between the flat of two pincers. Rolling them slowly to start, tiny drops flew off the spinning stems, a spray of red on the white cloth, drops on Sarkalt's face as he watched. More drops fell on the green and white marble as the Salin rolled them faster and faster until the first stems escaped and the ti'Linn let them go. Three touched Sarkalt's robe, at the edge where it was fanned out before him.

Pilvir was panting with the effort of watching for any pattern the stems might echo, its eyes darkened almost to extinction. And blood still flowed slowly, pooling about the boy's knees.

"Nothing comes to me from the stems," Pilvir clicked in ti'Linn-native, glancing at Riltic, then repeated it in high-formal. "Nothing of past consequence or future design. The woman is only the girl our last records of her show."

"Do it again," Sarkalt said.

His name was Dal'itin, he was seven years an Acolyte and he died, sliced from the inside of his elbows to the start of his fingers. "I know that," Sarkalt said. Or I will know it. Will die, future tense -- he forced the words to make a framework of time in his mind, and watched as Pilvir dipped the stems again.

"Know what?" Riltic asked.

Sarkalt didn't answer the other Priest, saying only, "Again." The boy still breathed and still there had been nothing they could see.

*You sent him to his death.* I know that also, Sarkalt thought. Or not sent, he went willingly. Despite my caution, I was with him; we walked together. Is his life more or less because of his death? Should I mourn what is?

After the last throw, Sarkalt sat back on his heels and listened to the small noises, the fire of the torches, a faint rustle of cloth and bells as one of the attendants shifted position, the soft crying of the attendant who had brought the allipalli stems, Pilvir's labored breathing, the soft, involuntary clicking noises, even the distant reflection from the pattern-blade in the ripples of power that could still be seen in the blood that splattered the space around them. The six columns of Ri-light hadn't changed; he hadn't changed.

Marble, granite, tiles. The space weighted him down. He would have rather done this at Ri-altar in the open air, the dark presence of the small cedar trees set where here there were pillars of granite rising to the dome. He didn't think he would have gotten lost at Ri-altar.

Koisen stirred from where she knelt at Riltic's side. "Was this for any good at all?"

"Anything that I missed, Lord Priest?" Pilvir echoed in heavily accented Ri-tongue.

Sarkalt shook his head as he rose but signed honor, that the fault wasn't in Pilvir's effort. Or in the ti'Linn's skill. The pattern lines -- even augmented by the release of the boy's life -- gave no past and no future to their actions. Only this present. For a moment, and in the same way as he had become lost on the mountain, his memory of the past was muted, as though none of the events had actually happened, but were a fantasy, a drama stored in the neural Net systems. For amusement, for entertainment. He laughed, the sound rolling around the processional. Cassa. The Challenge and the deaths that brought her to power. The sheer force of her creation that kept her there despite the united opposition from the balance of the High Council. The brittle reality she had left behind in her flight from Empire's domination, from the millions of years old structure that constrained her actions regardless of her will. Ulanda's birth, her training, his failure with her.

Walking was difficult; the sodden robe slowed him. A weight more of place than blood, he thought, when the burden lightened by the time he reached the granite pillars. He stopped there then turned his head to Koisen, motioning her to join him. Over the boy's body, Riltic was chanting the start of Ri-common burial prayers, a spinning of the energies here into a cohesive whole that spoke of the

person the young man had been. Hopes and dreams rose out of the past, a past of seven years ago, there hadn't been any since he had taken the Temple vows, a lack that Sarkalt thought had lead him to send the boy into this when he had the choice of doing nothing and would have arrived at the same end.

Pilvir was by the main entrance talking quietly to the Three Crescents' Head of Security, another of the Skybite Caste ti'Linn. With them was Anga. The Piltsimic shook his head and looked towards him. The two ti'Linn left then, still talking.

In the spiral, one of the aides gathered blood soaked cloth; another unwound a bolt of fabric for wrapping the body. "Have Niv wait for me at the baths," he asked Koisen. "Can you manage to get him there?" She nodded.

"You coddle him," Anga said, coming to stand at his other side. "This whole business is his fault."

"I don't recall asking you here, loom-master."

The dark Piltsimic walked forward to toe the still form of the boy before answering. "Way you've been acting, don't know that you would recall it. Besides, Pilvir thought I might be able to talk some sense into you."

He had no doubt of the ti'Linn's loyalty, but loyalty didn't exclude other sympathies. "I doubt my Chief Salin said it quite like that."

Anga snorted then rubbed his toe on the back of his trousers before kneeling close to the body. He examined one arm closely, ignoring Riltic as he was being ignored. "Why did you choose him for the sacrifice?"

"He's dead."

"I can see that." He wiped his hands on his trousers as he walked back over, the blood showing only as moist streaks on the dark cloth. "What the hell did you think you were going to accomplish by this?"

"You're repeating the obvious," Sarkalt said as he sat, using the pillar to support his back. The drummers had left; he would have liked them to stay. Another sound that wasn't Anga or a reminder of the death he had just caused.

Anga took his sitting as an invitation to join him. "Which part is repeat and which is obvious?" Small dark eyes crinkled in laughter. "You're a mess. Is that obvious enough?"

"Are you asking for restrictions or for permission?"

"What are you on about now?"

"What I do is none of Rigyant's affair. Or do you have a tame Priest you think capable of challenging me for this Office?"

"Damn it, we had an agreement."

"Past tense?"

"You tell me." Anga motioned to an attendant and a moment later a bowl of tea was brought. "We need to talk." He looked at Sarkalt through the rising steam. "Can you manage that much?"

"Here," Sarkalt said.

"Pleasant choice." Anga put his tea bowl down and looked over his shoulder. "I'm always surprised how much blood there is at a slaughter. I don't know why."

"Am I supposed to know why?"

A narrowed look, then Anga shook his head. "If you want us to talk here, then open the area."

Sarkalt released the block on the nodes in Three Crescents that served to carry Palace's various neural Net systems. And then authorized a further opening: a limited intrusion of the Palace-based loom-master Council's Net. Temple Net flooded in. And, he could assume, the other, although he had no sense of it. A tight lead to Anga alone.

The aide tying off the wrapping had blood dried into the lines on the bottom of her feet. Some of the footprints in red on the marble matched. Human and the scratches of ti'Linn claws. "Footprints," Sarkalt said, suddenly bemused by the way they crossed and circled.

Anga turned where he sat to get a better look. "Do you see something there that you missed with killing him?"

"No, only chance married to where the feet had to be."

Anga sighed and shook his head. "You could give a little here."

"I have no need to give. The Unity is; I am."

"The Unity be damned. South Bay Temple Net records show Ulanda as dead. I've got witnesses to her execution who aren't the kind to be fooled by any pattern pull you could manage on your own."

"And was I on my own?"

Anga snorted. "Apparently not."

"And now she's here in Palace. Am I still on my own?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't depend on your current alliances holding. All you've got to show for this is an Acolyte turned whore who will die like she would have twenty years ago if she'd gone into Initiation. Hell, like the others of her people did. Badly."

At the sampling of the Altasimic people that had created Cassa, only she had survived. The Initiates had been selected over generations from blood lines intended to produce the Priest caste for their people, and then kept in stasis. All except Cassa had completely unstable access to any sort of pattern. And, with two others besides Cassa, access to overpattern. How many more had died before Rigyant had abandoned the attempts? To the Rigyant faction on the High Council -- to the loom-master Council responsible for creating the race -- information was currency. Little came out of the Bilo'pan Plain Sector, not even from the Temples.

Sarkalt crossed his legs. "I wonder if we didn't ask the wrong question."

"In the spiral?"

"Lives are currency."

"Some cooperation might reduce the costs."

"Apparently you have a plan for neutralizing the Empress that doesn't involve a direct challenge for the Office she holds. What?"

"First, I want them both dead. And this time, I want the bodies."

"Ulanda, of course."

"Damn right. And the Simic."

"And the Weaver?"

Anga grimaced. "No."

Was there trouble on the loom-master Council? "As I said, lives are currency."

"Is that an agreement I hear?"

"You won't be stopped by my people." The words became orders as he pushed his mind into the awakened Net, using Ri-pattern to set parameters of will rather than reason. If Anga wished the two dead, he had the resources of Three Crescents and affiliated Temples in Palace -- allies, if reluctantly so, of the Empress at the time of her disappearance and with links to the Imperial Suite systems.

Anga gestured for more tea and waited until it had been brought. "Instead of Challenging the Office, we're opening the Altasimic Sector."

"That's early by what? A Nexus?"

"Close enough. What's a million years or two."

After the failure of the Sector sampling, Sarkalt's analysts had concluded that Rigyant would modify the evolution of the people themselves, not simply wait for its maturation. And which is why they had secured genetic material for their own purposes. As was usual with a new people, the Altasimic Sector had been warded against outside pattern energy, with only enough of their own pattern set deep in the worlds themselves to guide the evolution of the life forms. A creation, a blend of chance and design. And a new note to the harmony of the Unity.

Except unfolding the set pattern threads would normally take hundreds, if not thousands of years in a slow shaping that allowed for what the people actually were, not just what had been planned.

"An Opening with Nexus Change building?" he asked.

"Is it? Hadn't noticed." Anga snorted. "Don't worry, everything will happen in just hours. A few months for the pattern threads to stabilize, and then we can get in there to salvage what we can. Nexus Change won't even be a blip on the horizon."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Then the loom-master shrugged. "Among other things, we'll set the unfolding so that most of the current generation who are sensitive to pattern will die without imprinting the new pattern threads to any degree. And we'll get rid of a few loose ends. Like Ulanda. That blood line goes."

The loom-master made the last into a demand. Sarkalt made a motion of indifference. Only she was necessary. And Anga's attempt to kill her would fail. Or

it wouldn't. He could be wrong. In the face of Cassa's power, even he could be wrong. "And what's left? A people who don't throw Priests? Like the Spann? I'm surprised."

Something else shimmered out of the dance of Net systems. "The Spann have their uses," he heard. And around him, the processional flattened and spread. Sheets of marble, columns, the tiles of the infrastructure of Palace, all became interconnected lines, and the lines became a net of blue fire. And in the fire, a constantly changing mix of mind and will. Poultat. And confirmation of at least one of Anga's allies.

Anga looked around, a sour expression on his face. "No, not like the Spann. We're talking half a hundred worlds here with variations on the gene line. There'll be survivors capable of stable pattern access, even if not from the Priest-lines we had intended."

"Or in the way that had been intended?"

His question didn't get an answer. What had already been said was an admission of failure on a massive scale. And with it, something Sarkalt hadn't expected: an admission that access to overpattern had been bred into these people. Was it a blindness of his own that he hadn't realized the deliberate nature of what Cassa was? Or had he been blinded?

Looking past what his eyes persisting in seeing, Sarkalt stretched his will into the Net, jostling the watchers, Three Crescents Temple staff, and now the loom-master's people in the Temple system. And a third, riding on the second to create the Net image he saw.

As the familiar inner Temple reformed around him, he heard a laugh he recognized. Mullaki, Overpriest of Initiates. Poultat pattern sparked against his Ri and the Net threatened to fold. Despite similar origins, pattern and the neural Nets didn't mix easily.

Another push of will and around him grew a stream shaded by willows. A meadow, and in the distance, rose and gold in the sunrise, was the lake the stream fed. Free to the sun and wind, he sat surrounded once again by the frothed milk of allipalli blooms.

He let his will match the time it was now at South Bay. Late afternoon and the delicate masses of flowers shook less, the wind was dying to an evening calm. And here, where he sat with Anga, there was no wind at all; in his mouth was the stink of blood. Two realities -- and he found to his surprise that it was his pattern sense that insisted on the focus. The processional, the blood, the body of the young man. The green sky was a domed ceiling and the stands of brush cutting through the meadow were the pillars of stone. And the people: foxes panted in heat of the afternoon as they paced the gentle slope, the deer, shock-still, had their long legs folded, only heads and slender erect ears showed above the grass and flowers.

Mullaki had pulled back past where he could feel her without opening himself too far. "And the way that had been intended?" he asked the loom-master again. And through the checks attempted by the loom-master's people, the impressions came.

Anga nodded, his heavy features drawn. Sarkalt knew he would be getting a more literal version through his private link to the loom-master Council's Net. "For several of the Priest blood-lines, the sensitivity to overpattern we saw at the sampling is tied in with their ability to access pattern. It was the degree of access and the degree of instability for any type of pattern that wasn't expected."

And Rigyant's purpose in such a creation? A purpose that had been unfolding since before the Altasimic suns had formed? Holding himself very closely, Sarkalt pushed deeper into the Net, searching for the interface between the loom-master Council's system and Temple Net.

"Forget it," Anga said. "You're out of your class."

"Is that a threat?"

"Where the hell did that come from?"

"Is it?"

"You're noted for not provoking personal threats. I'm beginning to think it's an unwarranted reputation."

Sarkalt's impressions coalesced in his mind and the air about him shimmered in sympathy to his inner reality. The meadow faded until it was more a scent in the mouth than the place where he sat. Had the loom-master's words been a threat? Or a puzzle, not a simple threat. Heat and cold. Tones of voices, if not words. And his own piece of the puzzle? What did he contribute?

Lingering in the air was the scent of the allipalli blooms, powder dry and tasting of sunshine. And the scent of cedar from the forest surrounding the meadow. Dark, cool, moist. The taste of stone in the mouth along with the perfume of the leaves and bark. He let the remains of Net image and pattern pull die and the processional where he sat became whole in itself again.

"Cedar," he said, and laughed at the expression on Anga's face. "Shaping Empire is a dangerous game, Anga. Don't you ever tire of it?"

"It's not a game."

"And what would you and Mullaki weave with your newly limited Altasimic Priests that could contain Chaos itself?"

The scowl deepened.

"I'm not surprised your creation got away from you." Sarkalt shook his head. "I wonder if the solid Piltsimic form doesn't give more to the Rigyant loom-master memory weaves than simply a body and a mouth."

Anga snorted loudly. "What does your body contribute to the Office of Overpriest of Forms? As a Voice for the Rigyant loom-master Archive, I've known



a fair number of Overpriests. When we see the end of this mess, will your signature have a dark band over top the green?"

An Empire Select like Cassa? And if so, then possibly with enough power -- his own wedded to his allies -- to gain ascendancy in the High Council?

"Emperor? Is that the ambition you suspect me of? Is that the ambition you bought Mullaki's alliance with?" With one hand, Sarkalt brushed the marble beside him. Out of the green sparks trailing from the blood stained braids wrapping his wrists, shapes appeared. Rings of silver and small stones of jet. Two ivory dice. The game pieces dissolved even as he looked up to Anga. "You look at Cassa and see only your spoiled creation. The Spann's god of Chaos. The destruction of the Unity."

"And what do you see?"

The question came from Mullaki, not Anga. The Poultat Priest stood before him, her tass'alt at her side, between her and Anga. And through her, that particularly Poultat gestalt of her Household. Nets of blue fire -- a promise in the species that hadn't been kept, that many could become one mind.

His Security began to move. Surround and contain, repair what they had already failed at. People, energy systems, warding. He made a motion for them to stand down. His will to live was as much a defense as it was his chief weapon. He hadn't felt an approaching danger, so he wasn't in danger now.

"I see what I'm offering her through Ulanda," he said to Mullaki alone, in one small place out of all the various realities either of them could fashion at will. And to Anga: "I don't need to see. As Overpriest of Forms, of Empire Law, I am Empire."

Anga drained his tea bowl and put it down. "And what do you see when you look at Ulanda? What did the boy's blood gain you?"

Do see? The loom-master hadn't used the past tense. Was this another admission of failure? Sarkalt laughed, wondering if the man had noticed the lapse, or if was an unconscious result of what the loom-master was hearing through his Net leads.

He saw an end to the danger that Cassa meant if she was still Empress at the cresting of Nexus Change, if she provided the focus for overpattern to invade and destroy the Unity. If no successful challenge had laid that nightmare to rest. Or if Riggant failed with what he now thought they planned: a binding made out of her native Altasimic pattern energies, most likely done while the threads were released. A very special weaving of reality meant to contain one woman.

"Ulanda... she's the words I hear Cassa whisper to me, she's my breath when I stand before the night sky."

"How far has this gone?"

Another admission. And just then, through his own Net lead, from the Empress's Weaver: Cassa has returned.

Garm inched the chair closer to the table so that when he wrote, he wouldn't be leaning at an awkward angle. His apartment was furnished Simic style, not with the cushions and low tables more common in Palace regardless of species, and as he had gotten older, he welcomed the reminder of home as much as not having to get up and down.

*"On the first morning of her rule, the Queen walked from her Suite and onto the colonnade. She was followed by those of her Court who believed they had business with her or who looked for favor and by others who were curious or merely idle. The colonnade was like a spear in the side of the Palace, itself without sides and without an end until you were there, suddenly, with the whole of Ri before and under you."*

Not bad, only one large ink smudge among the many smaller. The rustle and squeak of the white ceramic nib against the paper was entertaining, that and watching the ink flow from the surface as the paper took it. He could see why the Scribes preferred this to the redi-stylus for languages needing a finer line than a brush gave. He dipped again, quite pleased with himself. This was what he wanted to leave behind when he died. Not exactly memory but truer, he thought, than if it had been.

*"The Queen stood looking out, her toes curled slightly over and feeling the edge through her soft leather slippers like the edge of a stair before stepping."*

*"So, this is all belongs to me," she said.*

*The High Priest was the only one who spoke. "Not even the clothes you wear are yours."*

*The Queen turned her head to look at the people scattered like sown grain behind her. Closest but for the High Priest was the Royal Chamberlain. He stood very still, staring at the surface of the colonnade with eyes the color of green stone.*

*"Do you belong to me?" she asked and he raised his head.*

*He would have looked away but she held him stilled like a terrified rabbit.*

*"Yes," he said in a hoarse whisper, the word choking him.*

*He was a tiny reflection in her brown eyes, there was nothing else. "Yes," he said again, but softer now, as though waking from sleep.*

*"That is enough then," the Queen said and let time roll past her as a tide around a stone through the long afternoon and into the evening and the others drifted away except for her Chamberlain.*

*When the light was almost gone and the last of the day was a thread of tangerine wound between the mountain peaks beneath them, she turned to him again.*

*"Will you come with me?"*

*And, one last time, he said, "Yes."*

*Sometime in that night, the courtiers would later say, the Queen took the form of a great bird. And some among them said they had even seen her as she rode the towering thermal columns, a great bird of silver with eyes of green crystal, the crashing beat of her wings echoing from the walls of Palace with a sound like diamonds shattering.*

*The Chamberlain had spent those days, from the dawn of the first until the Queen returned, in his rooms. His friends came and he laughed and talked with them as was his custom but his eyes were veiled and in quiet moments he would go to the window and stand there looking out at the green sky until the others became uneasy and would find a reason to leave.*

*When alone, he often picked up a tie of dark green ribbon -- Simic green, a hair tie -- from the table by his bed and would run his fingers along the length, smoothing the satin weave, and holding it to his nose, would inhale the faint lingering perfume. On the third day, when he knew the Queen had returned, he took the small lacquer box in which he kept his memories and put the ribbon inside and sealed the lid."*

A scatter of ink from the last close, where the nib had caught on a crease, and Garm stopped to let it dry. That last part had to go at any rate, he thought, rubbing his writing hand to ease the cramp. Old memories. And now? The book spoke of a battle between good and evil. An archetypal myth that showed the creation of order out of chaos, a cycle that occurred each Nexus Change when the very fabric of their reality was threatened. The Unity was made up of numerous world-patterns, orderly, made things, not the wild chaos of overpattern. The drag of the Unity of Empire against the larger universe outside caused stresses only resolved by reforming the original order. The death -- and in some stories, the blood sacrifice -- of the Rin'cass wu, the rider of the Change phoenix, sealed the victory for Empire.

He looked at the pen. It would only be his own memories, his own death. The Rin'cass wu was a face to chaos, or rather, a mirror of it in which others could see what little could be understood. To those who had written the story, the Emperor -- the man or woman -- would have been the hero. A Priest, a bulwark of order. Someone capable of directly touching the Unity through their world-pattern, not simply a highly trained Salin. Both though, were a part of the Unity. They hadn't foreseen what Cassa was.

He laughed again, breaking the stillness of the room. The weariness was gone and with the ice melted in an opening of sorts, an unfolding somewhere deep inside him. When he looked down, for a brief moment, his hand was a smooth amber, and strong. He had no regrets in loving Cassa, regardless of what she was. How could he die when she couldn't?

Then just old again. Waiting for Cassa he had often regretted his peoples short life span, not like the Piltsimic... and, as often, had regretted how slowly the years without her had passed. And wished himself already dead. He looked back at the writing with a sigh. Bolda was right. He spent too much time alone with his own mind. Nexus Change would happen in a future he wouldn't know. He'd be dead long before the Change Phoenix rose.

Everything seemed to hurt as he got up. He left inky fingerprints on the wood where he gripped the back of the chair for balance. As he walked slowly to the door, he glanced at the broken reeds from the window shutters strewn on the carpet. And stopped, his breath caught in his throat. Forgetting how difficult it would be to get up again, he knelt on the edge of the carpet. His hand trembled as he reached out.

Wool, the pile sheared smooth, and from how the colors glowed, there was silk in the fine yarn. Bolda's work and recent, he thought, but wasn't sure. Half a dozen small and large rugs between this room and the other -- rugs came and rugs went, they weren't anything he paid particular attention to.

This rug was in a pattern of flowers and vines and small brightly colored birds. And over that, the pile finely clipped along the edges to raise the design, were the long pale brownish reeds broken into lengths by fillets of sharp edged glass. Or they had been sharp, biting mouths if you didn't handle the window shutters carefully. But now, not wood -- or stems, if reeds weren't wood -- but part of the rug as though woven there from the start.

His fingers fanned the threads like the bound pages of a book, the brown surface speckled with dark blue, giving way to a washed lavender center, darker again below, and under that, pulling color from the sides, was the deep red of a rose petal.

"What have I done?" he said with a release of breath, drawing back and keeping his eyes narrowed to a small segment of the whole. When that wasn't sufficient caution, he concentrated on the back of the hand that pushed against his knee as he struggled to rise.

He glanced back at the rug and snapped his head away as quickly, eyes shut too late as the image flashed: twin suns mated in a lavender sky over low mounds of blue grass that rose out of a flood. Islands skirted with reeds, purple against ebony, reeds that sang with diamond tongues as the wind blew a serpentine path through the black water marsh.

"San Garm?"

Bells? He opened his eyes tentatively. A dark haired woman dressed in formal robes, the girdle ties the red and blue of the set Imperial colors, and the girdle pattern that of a near-aide. The robe itself was black. Cassa's House colour.

A deep breath started him coughing. Cassa. A very long time and he had forgotten entirely too much. He took another deep breath, fingers trembling

against his lips. What he had seen had been Camerat. The thoughts trembled like his fingers, feeling as weak.

"Who are you?" And before the woman could answer, added: "Bolda's doing?"

She bowed. "San Garm... is there something wrong?"

He walked to the table where he had been working. An inkbottle. Creased gold paper. A pen, the nib stained with green ink. He picked the pen up and held it like a trophy, facing the window where the reed shutters had been. From this angle, there was no horizon, no world below him. The entire universe might be sky without end. He turned away, feeling the ice of Cassa's return all over again.

The woman was still there. A question? He remembered now. "Nothing is wrong that is any of your business. You can clean up here, there's the tea... and my writing case..." Where had he left it? Under the table. "Here... no, leave the books. And the paper. And have someone in here to take the rug out." He waved to include whatever else might need doing, and sat. "And fresh tea, no order it, don't go." And: "Well, go as far as the Hall. The Net isn't working in here. The node must be broken. Get someone to fix that too."

As she tidied, he watched her from the corner of his eye while playing ots and crosses on the back of the original paper using the well chewed pen. Not a little finger width of clear surface remained on the paper, the game having gotten progressively smaller until the o's were mere dots and whole sets were played out within the bars of the larger games.

Once, she stopped next to the rug where the reeds had fallen earlier, her head turned slightly as though hearing something. "Pattern energy," he said shortly to her question. "And none of your business either."

The tea arrived and she busied herself with that. "San, service has delivered your dinner. Do you wish..."

"Black doesn't suit you at all."

She glanced away momentarily and her color deepened. "My apologies if I offend you, San."

"Well, go change."

"San, if I may serve your...?"

"Are you deaf? Oh, don't bother, come here instead." She frowned as he handed her the paper he had been working on. "You do know how to read?" She went from a tight-lipped frown to a puzzled look, but not any softer an expression. She was looking at the ots and crosses. "The other side," he added sharply.

Irritated, he watched her read the entire thing without a Net link, read in moments what had taken him an hour or more to scratch. And was more than irritated at the look she spared him half way through that reading.

He snatched the sheet back. "Never mind, where's my dinner? Tell Vi'si -- you do know who Vi'si is? Well, tell him I'll have it here." Pulling a cloth from a pocket

and moistening it at his lips, he wiped a dark speck on the surface of the table, alarmed at the amount of ink that blossomed and spread. With more spit, and a grimace at the bitter taste, he rubbed at the stain until Vi'si covered it with a plate.

"Take the other chair," he said to the woman as she backed off. "I see a dinner for two so you're obviously here for my company. Move the books..." He motioned to Vi'si. "The floor will do for them, it's dry enough."

With his usual monosyllable offers of food and drink, Vi'si served them then withdrew to wait by the door.

And the woman... dark hair. Black? No, a very dark brown, he decided, although the fine braiding and the ribbons made it difficult to be sure. Eyes to match? He couldn't tell and hadn't thought to look the few times she had raised them to him. She moved her food around rather than ate, and it wasn't long before her eyes drifted again towards the rug nearby and became very still. He tapped the side of his glass and coughed, then finally had to wave the small serving spoon in front of her face. Her fork dropped, clattering against the plate and flipping a green bean into the custard.

"Don't look at the rug," he said as he used a spoon to scoop the bean out. "I would have thought you'd have learned better the first time."

When he put the spoon down, she picked it up and traced the shape on the handle with one finger. A bird, wings stilled in silver metal.

Cassa had liked silver. The alloys woven into the braids that bound her wrists were based on silver as was common for most human-line Priests, but she liked the metal as well. The spoon was from her personal service, a very few of them made of silver where the rest were the hard, dark ochre Siltiwood from Alista-center. He couldn't remember how this one had come to be in use in his apartment.

"It looks like it could fly away," she said, her voice hesitant.

He swallowed a mouthful of pudding. "It's just a spoon. There have to be spoons, why not one with a bird on it?"

"As you say, San." She turned the spoon slowly, and rubbed a finger over the breast as though she expected to feel the heartbeat, then put it on the tray.

When he had finished his third helping, he leaned back in the chair and loosened the girdle around his middle to ease his breathing. The chair squeaked, the joints needed gluing.

She watched him as he watched her, their eyes sliding away if coming too close, like the same poles of a lodestone. Quiet, seemingly shy, despite what she had to be. What she was meant to be to him.

A bit late, he asked: "What's your name?"

"San?" She looked up, the blush in her cheeks reaching to the tip of her narrow nose. Dark brown eyes, he decided. Closely set, each pupil a dull circle, without light. She looked back down at her plate.

"I asked for your name."

Eyes still down, she answered, "Ulanda, San, if you please."

He tasted the nuances as he repeated the name. A compound Temple-style name but without the click at the back of the throat that would separate the two parts of the word. Ul and Anda.

"Ul^Anda," he said to himself in old-tongue. Bitter seed.

"You may serve the tea," he said to her, and motioned Vi'si to withdraw.

She selected a minor tea ceremony, the least of what he would have expected of a courtesan and that was what he had decided she must be.

And yet, traces of a much more complex ritual were in her movements, the Temple mannerisms not unfamiliar to him. Leaning forward, he placed a hand on one arm and she froze. His long fingers, amber to her white, were dark where he touched her skin, then yellow as sitsi leaves against the black silk that started at her wrists. The teapot dropped heavily and she would have drawn away except for the strength in those fingers. Then the resistance vanished and her hand relaxed under the pressure.

There was teaching in that, he thought. In the yielding to his touch, training that was bone deep with time, the same as with the smooth grace. Both his hands on her one, moving a slow steady motion, he turned her hand over and gently rubbed the cup of her palm, then counter-wise on the soft flesh between thumb and forefinger. Moving slowly, he traced the lines across her palm, then other lines, not seen, only felt.

"Where did you train? You are Temple trained, aren't you?"

"Ri-surface, San."

"I asked where."

"South Bay."

Affiliated with the Office of Forms, and with Ri-altar on the crest of the low mountain in back of it. The last time Garm had been there would have been before this woman's birth. With Cassa, perhaps a month before that last night at Ri altar. He tried to visualize the place. Extensive gardens... he and Cassa had walked in those together, he remembered them more clearly than the buildings. And in his ears was the sound of water drums -- a hot springs with the ritual baths built around it. And the beach: walking distance if you liked walking. Cassa did, he didn't. Or, he hadn't then.

Fragments he couldn't make behave and take proper shape. "Why did you leave? Or did you?"

She laughed softly. "San Garm, not everyone's service is accepted. I was a very young woman when I left."

And not so old now. His hand on her chin, he raised her face to his. "The grace of a Temple dancer -- but the obedience, where does that come from? An Acolyte?"

She nodded.

Sensitive to pattern, then, or she wouldn't have been given the training which could lead -- for a select few -- to the Priesthood. Which explained her reaction to both the rug and the spoon. And the discipline that went with the training... how far had it gone, and how much of it still held?

"Were you sent here to watch my death?" And what of Bolda's part in her being here? The Weaver's oaths aren't to him but where he often had reason to question his taste, he'd rarely had reason to question his motives.

"San ..."

"I think the Council would have expected something like this business with the reeds to have happened." Her eyes flickered to the rug. Which, despite his order, hadn't been removed. "For Cassa to return..."

He beckoned to her, rising stiffly as he did. Circling around the rug, he poked his head out the doorway. He tried to open further to see past this area, but the Net wouldn't behave even to the point it had earlier. When he pulled back out, still less remained of the lead as though his being there stripped it of substance. Disturbed, it was a presence not quite seen, like the moisture in the air just before the rain starts.

And like his walk this morning, like the reeds and the rug, apparently the damage to the node in his study was going to be as ignored.

"The story you read..." He hesitated, trying to collect his impressions together so he could find the words he needed. "Cassa," he whispered, and shut his eyes quickly when the room blurred. That Bolda was involved meant Cassa was. And the way of Bolda being involved? "Cassa, the Empress... don't you understand..."

Just outside the cafe where he had stopped for tea, a Poultat woman, her broad red girdle like a painted mouth across the middle of a shiny purple robe -- hideous choice -- had called out the twin's names in the prayer form of Poultat-native. Had she called Cassa? Or had the Ri with the talisman? When he hadn't been able to in all this time?

The Poultat woman had added the embellishments of pitch that raised the twins to minor deities. The local domestic Net had squawked the equivalent in High-formal along with the translation references, choosing her shouts over the rest.

A walk and Cassa's return and now this woman.

"San?"

He chuckled, quite suddenly giddy. "It's in the stories." His hand waved to encompass the books on floor, those on the shelves. "Chaos."

"San, I don't understand."



"Why would you?" It came out a challenge and he softened his tone. "Cassa was chaos, is chaos. From the start, I think, and by choice. You know the Spann..."

"Choice? The Empress believed in the Spann Heresy?" Her voice showed her disbelief.

Belief? He wasn't sure. Years after fleeing Temple, she had returned. As a prisoner, he had been told. He had first seen her as Empress, in State robes already, her overbraids simply done but with the ends cascading like water over her lap as she knelt in Audience, receiving the first of the oaths of personal service to her.

If she had been killed either way, he could have understood, but left alive to come to Palace, left alive to issue Challenge to the established order? What end had she seen of that action, he had asked himself over and over. And what end had Temple seen of it? It's possible the answer was held by the alliance behind Donotat, the Overpriest of the Third Concord and the old Emperor, the first to die under Cassa's Challenge.

Figuring out who was who, and who counted and who was a figurehead... and the politics of the moment, or the millennium, or the Nexus... was to ask to be mired in an endless morass of misinformation and rumor. And in the final analysis, the gestalt -- that created and usually shared vision of Empire arising from the Priests making up the Council -- cared nothing for the politics or the factions that provided their backing. Only who had the power and how much. And Cassa had power. Unconscious, unschooled power, enough to drown Empire in its flood.

"I don't think Cassa believed in anything." Garm shook his head. He had tried to supply the faith in the rightness of the Unity. "The Spann believe that the Empress or Emperor are captives of Empire, a part of Chaos that has been trapped by the Unity. It's why they worship the Empress while they detest Empire. And think that Cassa's flight is both a fulfillment and a new beginning to something that began a long time ago."

"When she became Empress?"

A long time to her, well before her birth, he thought. Always a long time to anyone. He took a deep breath and tried again. "Longer, much longer."

Ulanda sat cross-legged on the floor, preferring the wood to the awkward chairs. The blue book was in her lap, the complex picture-words blurring more the

harder she tried to decipher their meanings. Written in an ideographic form of old-tongue that she hadn't seen before, she was still able to deconstruct many of the words, but putting them together to mean something was proving more difficult.

Garm was kneeling on the rug, his eyes squeezed tight, weight resting on one hand as the other brushed the surface of the rug. A smallish rug. How long had he been at it? Ten minutes? Twenty? He said he was searching to see if any of the residual energy patterns were a message to him from the Empress.

"San Garm, what exactly am I supposed to find in this," she asked, tilting the book to him as though he could see it with his eyes closed and his head down.

She was answered by panting, then the panting coalesced into words. "Read the story. How many times must I say it?" And under his breath, most likely not for her, he added, "Damn foolishness."

"San, the crystal has your notes, why not...?"

"Just read it, don't talk it to death."

He was still at it, the yellow of his robe darkened to gold at the knees from the damp. At this angle, she could watch him without worrying about seeing too much of the pattern on the rug. Ulanda closed the book and put it on the floor, then drew her knees up under her chin and hugged her legs. She took a deep breath and released it slowly, feeling the warmth and moisture through the layers of cloth.

*Engage his attention. Seduce him.*

Bolda had left her in the care of an elderly Steward and two Trill'kon Dressers. *The Weaver means well, but...*

That statement had followed on the heels of barrage of questions. Are you up from Ri, then? And hands and eyes on her during the bath. Ah, lass, you must be a dancer... am I right? And: Temple trained, are you? The questions didn't stop when her answers did.

The Weaver means well, but...

"Weaver?"

"Master Bolda, the Empress's House Weaver."

A man of his rank and importance sent to fetch her? "And who I'll be going to?"

"Why, San Garm. Didn't you know?"

"You're lying."

The Steward pinched her lips together. "Best you don't take that attitude with him."

The Trill'kon woman said something in a language Ulanda didn't recognize and the Steward nodded. "Aye, he was married and no, she doesn't look like her. By all accounts, his wife was a lovely woman ... he wasn't a tass'alt, not then, only a

Law Clerk, and not even Temple, but Palace Administration.” She sighed deep in her throat. “And after... there wasn’t a commons or square in Palace that didn’t have at least one minstrel singing of it. Two women in love with the same man, so common a thing it hardly warrants mention, but when one of them is a Priest and the new Empress... well.” Expression distant, she began humming a plaintive tune. “... petals on the grass scattered beneath us lie, spring blossoms fallen to a cold wind, brown petals in the grass. He takes me in his arms, and dancing mouth to mouth, we say good-bye...”

As she sang, the Steward spread the braided ties of a formal girdle on the bed. As she smoothed the red and blue silk, on each girdle tie, a tiny bell jingled then died against the coverlet.

*Catch his attention like nails on a plaster wall.*

The Empress’s tass’alt? A man scarcely less a myth than the Empress herself? Ulanda only half-listened to the Steward’s song. She was being wrapped in layers of delicate petal shifts, stick strips holding them in place. She thought the heat of the Trill’kon’s hands as they smoothed the cloth might seal her in the shifts permanently. Carried deep within their breathing was the music of ritual, not the song the Steward sang.

The Trill’kon woman fitted the formal overrobe -- the work of moments, the heavy black brocade had its own idea of shape -- then started to tie the girdle while her husband painted Ulanda’s palms in a filigree design using a red cream. The tiny bells on the end of the girdle ties sang with each movement, now low tones, the voice lost in the cloth of the robe, then, with the lengths hanging free, ringing higher and sharper until beyond her ability to hear.

“Did you know her?” Ulanda asked the Steward.

She looked up from folding Ulanda’s robe. “The Empress? Aye. It’s her you’ve got some of the look of. And the manner. I’ll have to give the Weaver that much.”

Catch his attention. And the Empress’s attention?

San Garm hadn’t been a surprise, there was nothing wrong with her memory of the Simic Dance Master at South Bay. Unconsciously arrogant. Impatient -- each interruption as much a surprise as an irritant. And in her smaller universe, the Dance Master had had as undisputed a say as the Empress’s San.

Ulanda got up to her feet, then dizzy, sat as quickly, but this time on one of the stick-legged chairs. All the furniture had stick legs, the lengths knobby from carvings, not joints. She thought they should bend like legs, lowering the surfaces to a comfortable level.

On each of the walls to the side of the one with the door leading to the hall -- and surrounded by bookcases -- was another door, not solid but made of the same wood and reed as the window coverings had been. Each was wider than the main door, and meant to be pushed back into the walls. The reeds were woven in

a simple diamond pattern, arranged so that the crystal bands on the stems made another arrangement, again barely seen, and dependent on the light. She squinted at the closest and tilted her head slightly. More diamonds.

Standing, she stretched, then walked over and ran a hand over the surface of one door, feeling the scrape of the crystal bands. "Do the diamonds mean anything?" she asked. He didn't answer.

Coaxing one of the glow-globes to follow her, she tried to see if diamonds were repeated in what she could see of the walls between the bookcases. The floor, the doors. The wall with the window, and the wall next to the window, between a bookcase and the corner: no diamonds, but from that close, the silver threads in the green covering took on the shape of a large bird, wings poised as though just taking flight.

"Get away from that."

Her hand had been about to touch the tip of one outstretched wing. She snatched it back.

"Sit."

She did, her reaction so fast as to be instinctive. Garm settled himself next to her on the floor and rubbed his knees, the skin red. The loose flesh of his calves wobbled in time. "You mustn't touch what you don't understand," he said, then sighed and leaned back against the wall as he pushed the gown over his legs. "What did you make of the book?"

"San, the same as in your notes. There was a battle, I think..." She wasn't sure.

"Go on."

He had watched her whenever he must have thought she wouldn't see him doing so. He liked her to be shy of him, almost afraid. Which she was when she let herself think of him as other than just another man to engage and bed. When she let herself think about where she was.

She bowed her head a little more. "The champion makes his way to the shore... there were things he had to do, a series of quests to prove his worthiness. He has a sword that he won at some point but the reference isn't clear as to when. I'm not even sure if the sword is being taken from the water or being thrust into it. There's mention of a flood, or the threat of a flood."

"Cassa is the flood."

"Someone comes out of the water towards the hero, there's one reference that indicates it's a sea-bird, but in the next it's a man... the events aren't linear. I mean, if the forms include a concrete time frame, I can't find it. I can't always be sure which comes first."

"And the dance?"

There was a dance, but only of water. One image from her own life had come to her, even as the detail was from the book. The beach just down from South Bay Temple, but with the white foam turned to red-black, the sand stained.

She strung the words together as though she was reciting a lesson to him. She finished with: "The hero victorious, the water recedes, heavy with the weight of blood."

He leaned closer. "And the one who comes out of the water?"

*Engage his interest. Seduce him.*

He was just words, not flesh. He looked as though a breath might carry him off. He brought the scent of lemon from the tea at supper, and something else, spicier. And damp wool. Her nose itched. She coughed then forgot to breath in. And as suddenly wanted to laugh. If he wanted himself in the story, he could easily do it.

"He's killed by the hero," she said bluntly, forgetting her resolve to act shyly with him. "It's his blood. Instead of the water destroying everything, control is regained." A thought came to her suddenly. "San, the only time evil is mentioned it's to do with him. Not the ocean..."

"It's just a story." His voice held a little of the protest she had heard earlier but well mixed with it was laughter and that started her off.

"A silver bird in the green cloth," she said, trying not to chuckle, coughing to hide it. "Green eyes?" And didn't manage to hide the giggle this time. "In the story you wrote," she said, to herself alone she thought, but Garm sighed again and whispered a yes.

"Yes, the story I wrote," he said, scarcely louder. All the fire in him seemed to have burned out in these few seconds. "After... after the Challenge, knowledge of what Cassa really was spread through the Imperial Suite like a ground mist, barely seen for disbelief, but felt like a slight chill against the skin is felt. But, understood or not, she was there all the same, in the flesh, and three of the Overpriests dead, one of them the old Emperor. And with the other Offices, with the Priests watching, with Sarkalt, the Overpriest of Forms and most powerful of those surviving, with his temper as raw as an open wound, waiting to see what she would do."

His voice showed his weakness -- shallow, rapid words -- and he leaned closer until she could smell his breath again, slightly sour, building on the other odors. He didn't move like the tass'alt she knew he was, but his voice sounded like a tass'alt now, need and loss plain in how the softly spoken anger built so quickly. She had heard it in Niv's voice, had seen it in his eyes -- that he couldn't have Sarkalt in any but the most physical way and even that touch too often tenuous. And for too short a time. Without the same access to the energy of a world-pattern, a tass'alt's life was brief compared to that of the Priest they served.

"So she changed you into a bird?"

"Or I was a bird all along and didn't know it until then. I still remember the cool air of the night under my wings, and how dark it was, with only Palace like a window into light and the lights from the few towns along the coast and them blinking off as the night lengthened and I was further from shore. Until all around was only the black ocean."

His hand was moving on her arm and she willed herself to share in the desire she felt mounting in him. Seduce him. The sum of her instruction.

"San Garm, did it really happen? A pattern construct, I suppose." Even a high-ranking Priest could have managed a pattern pull that detailed. Sarkalt could, and with her, had.

"Or I really was a bird. If she could create the actuality of her being Empress, from being a prisoner, for her to create the fact of her being Empress to the degree that no serious Challenge was ever made against her during the years she was here, despite provocation." He stopped for breath. "Oh, yes. Provocation indeed. Even rumors that her true backers were the very Spann who would see Empire destroyed. Assassination attempts, yes. But not a Challenge of Office. Compared to creating that, what difficulty would she have making a man of a bird?"

Garm traced the energy points on her arm from the shoulder down, rubbing through the sleeve of her robe. A long time since anyone had touched her with that kind of skill, but her body responded as though no time had passed at all. He was moving like a tass'alt now.

"But it's just a story," she said.

"Yes. Only one from so many."

"Are there others?" Books, she thought. All those books.

"Oh yes. There are others and not just old ones. I've heard the children here skip rope to a rhyme about Cassa becoming stone. Didn't you as a child in Temple? Or aren't Acolytes in-training allowed such simple pleasures?" He started on her other arm and she felt the relaxing of her muscles as she sat back on her heels, between his spread thighs, leaning against him. He wanted the timing to be his, she knew. The control, even what she could see of him. She felt that need in him like she felt his hands on her.

"Fly said the silver bird, fly into night. White is black, black is white." Whispered into her ear, the words had the lilt of a chant to them. "Fly said the dark bird, fly into light. Black is white, white is black."

She shifted her weight slightly and he blocked the movement. As she had known he would. And in the blocking -- and as she had intended -- his feeling of control was defined.

"There's a dance," she said softly in time to his hands touching her. "Done to the small hand drum usually, at least for practice. A six-beat, alternates minor and doubled, but it talked of silver and black stone."

That dance. Sarkalt's. This time he didn't fight the almost imperceptible movements she made against him, but took them as his own. She could feel the dance in Garm's fingers and she could see the dancers, six of them, a twining of movement, not in unison, but set one major beat off like waves coming to shore. The fear she should be feeling was held back, far back behind the touch of his fingers.

"A different one I think," he said, and sighed, stilling his hands for a moment.

No, she wanted to cry, seeing the motions, the weaving of the hands, old-tongue but silent, with the forms that meant stone and flight both, mirror words, where the chanted words spoke only of flight. One was the parent of the other, she saw the children at their skipping, the others dancing and found herself... Stop it! part of her mind screamed, the part with the fear, very far away now. Yes! said another part of her mind, growing stronger.

But this time, he was the one to move, breaking into the growing dance. The break left her exhausted, silver stars before her eyes, then she closed them and found red stars instead.

"This isn't perhaps the best ..." Had the words left her mouth? With the start of the dance, her body hadn't seemed to belong to her anymore. I should do something to focus, she thought. A mantra, part of the discipline she had learned along with the dance.

"Isn't it?" he said gently, his fingers as gentle as his voice as he reached around her to take her hands again. He continued talking as he rubbed her wrists, stroking one with each hand. "I don't suppose it would do any good to ask you for explanations. As good as to ask a mirror to voice an opinion on what it reflects." Again she could hear the laughter mix into all what else he was feeling. "Besides, Cassa always knows what to do; you will be no exception."

He kept talking, repeating himself mostly and she wiggled deeper into his embrace, scarcely capable of listening anymore or making sense of what she heard. His hands never stopped stroking her wrists. Heat grew and spread in tongues of fire along her arms to her throat, her breasts, her groin. Pattern energy twinned to desire.

Still his voice continued, gentle where his body was not, a buzz against her shoulder and the sour smell of his breath as her own quickened. "As a tass'alt, I'm afraid my training is sadly deficient; a lack of imagination on my part I'm afraid. What was the name of the dance you were talking of? Or is this the beginning of a different dance? One you're even better trained for, I think now. You understand, being raised as you were, what Initiation does. The breaking of the wrists to force the power outbreak just there, the purpose of the vass'lt's death in grounding the new Priest in their world-pattern, in Empire's Unity."

Too late, she realized the direction of his will. She tried to pull away without having a single muscle react. "You'll end up with us both dead," she panted.

"No, only me. Thank Bolda for me."

She couldn't shake her head, couldn't gather her thoughts enough to answer as the pattern energies mounted. No longer just there, something she could dimly see, or sense, but one with her body, her soul.

Here? Not in the spiral, but in the arms of the Empress's tass'alt? Was this what Bolda had wanted? Anything she could have thought to ask for would have been granted just to get her here, now.

For the Empress's San, an end. And for her, a start? A second chance?

It would do.

She released herself to his hands, to the dance, to the ci-ci drums she again heard in her mind. And with the Simic's willing death -- a link to the Empress.

And what Sarkalt had wanted of her? The look of the Empress? There was more here than what she could think of, the knowledge was in the pattern energies starting to spiral, rising from her bones, her flesh, nerves, sinew. Her mind. Her soul. Spiraling, searching for release.

Garm must have felt them. His hands tightened on her wrists.

Her death or his.

No knife, no Bearer. Just a book-lined room and the silver tracing of a phoenix watching her from a wall the colour of Garm's eyes.

The Empress's will. And hers.

"Kill me!" he hissed in her ear.

She saw the old man's death, his skin burned, peeled away in charred strips, his flesh scored. And blood. So much blood. She would always be held in his arms then. Something in her had found a home in being held by him. An eternity of belonging. Grounded in the Empire. In the Unity.

"Yes!" she screamed.

And from far within her came something like a voice but more diffuse, blending seamlessly into the black that sparkled inside her head and burst in her ears with a sound like hail. No. Just that. And the energy drained.

Then it was flesh again that held her. Wrists released, her hands throbbed as the blood returned. A long fingered hand, gentle on her shoulder, supported her. His warmth at her back was gone.

"Yes," she whispered, bending over, cradling her hands against her breasts. Rocking. Screaming 'no', inside.

"To killing me?" He laughed softly. "Or to everything?"

Everything? "Why?" was all she managed, and thought she should have asked what. Or who. She would have killed him except for that small voice. And she had failed the second chance Bolda had said Temple never granted. And the Imperial House? What did it grant?



"It's still not too late," Garm said as though reading her mind. "The breaks I make wouldn't be as clean as from a wrist-cuff but they would do. It would aid in the same release of energy. Although I make a sorry excuse for a vass'lt..."

He put his hand on her shoulder again, and when she didn't straighten, took her chin with his other hand and turned her face to his. "Look at me. You're not listening."

He looked the same. He shouldn't have. "I am so listening."

"Then pay attention." He let her go. "Despite the usual ritual surrounding everything, a Temple like South Bay or here in Palace, Three Crescents, is much more concerned with result than process. Any Temple of the Overpriest Sarkalt would take you as my Priest..." He chuckled sourly. "Mine."

"You'd be dead." His Priest? "And the result of this is that I'm not. I'm not a Priest. I was at the spiral... you don't know... I was..."

"You don't know what you are."

She tried to get up, almost falling in the first attempt. One of her own hands, swollen and hot, brushed the loosened strands of hair from her face. Keeping her eyes from the surface of the rug, moving from the walls to his shape -- still too close -- then to the table with the tray and the books and back to him. How quickly that was learned, she thought distracted for a moment.

Then wondered if the pattern in wool and silk could be any worse than the bottomless emerald of his eyes. A silver bird with green eyes. And the converse? What mirrored that?

Leaning against the wall for support, she closed her own eyes tight, but the emerald light followed her in the shapes squeezed out behind her lids. Diamond shapes burning within a stone, the stone held up to the sun.

After being sent away from Temple, she had salvaged what of her life that she could: her skill at dancing, at making love, the inner strength that had taken her from Acolyte to Initiate. And to the spiral. She could almost feel what she had then, the cut marble of the spiral under her knees and the smell of the loam from the center mound filling her mouth.

He whispered into her ear, "Shall I call them? Would you prefer this to happen in Temple?"

And when it could have happened with him? Impossibly so, but it could have. No. Just that. The voice in her head.

She looked back at Garm, still kneeling on the floor, not beside her to whisper anything into her ear. At the faded green of his eyes, like glass caught long years on the waves, rolling in the sand until pitted and scared. Old man eyes, watery and mild.

"You said I didn't know what I was. What did you mean?"

"You're something the Empress wants." The arrogance was back in his voice.

And Sarkalt. And Bolda. Except that she was almost something they wanted. It will happen, she thought, and saw again, without her volition, the courtyard in the snow and the Simic Dance Master. And Sarkalt.

"Can you do anything other than what is allowed you?" Standing, he stepped towards her. "I want something too. And I will have it."

His hands were on her, stroking through the black robes she wore. She closed her eyes again, became only skin and scent and nerves, his hands on her shoulders, her breasts. His fingers at the ties of the robe. The feel of the cloth slipping from her shoulders to pool at her feet.

*Engage his interest. Seduce him.*

She would rather have killed him.

With his scent quickened from the heat of her skin under his hands, he said again: "I want something, and I will have it. I'm from a legend. Not evil, like in the story, or you won't think so at any rate. From the perspective of Empire perhaps, but you won't have that perspective. You won't have the luxury of it."

Did she have the luxury now? "You could still die. In an ordinary way."

He laughed and she shivered at the sound. "I'm already dead."

## - 8 -

Net Placement had Niv at the baths, Koisen with him. And Riltic. The soft sounds of the cleaning ritual was a hum around the feel of the image. Niv wouldn't stay there, Sarkalt knew. Not for much longer, he read that in a posture as familiar to him as the sound of his own heartbeat.

"A while longer," he breathed and saw Koisen look up just as he let the placement die.

"Lord Priest?" one of his guard asked.

"Stay out here," he said and the two took opposite sides of the door.

Inside, the only noise was the trickle of water and the snip, snip from a gardener pruning a shrub. He watched while Ka'lt'ka, a small Wa'tic Priest-Select sat without moving, the end of one long sleeve trailing in the pond and nibbled at by half a dozen slender yellow fish. Watched the ripples spread, to cross and re-cross, thrown by the tails and the golden backs as the fish spat out the taste of the sleeve, then circled and tried again. And the Priest-Select didn't move.

A yellow sun sparkled on the water. As always, the pattern eluded him, faint and delicate, as fragile as a simple memory.

He waited, willing his mind to empty, and still the pattern hovered just beyond his ability to capture. For a moment, before leaving, he held the space in his

mind, examining each portion in turn. The Priest Select, its back against a rounded stone, that he couldn't follow, the heart of the stone more accessible than the small brown Wa'tic that rested there. Moving to the fish glimmering under circles of light, the yellow color became narrow bands of gold laid over scales otherwise so clear he could see the blood squeeze through the capillaries that fed the skin. The gardener, the twigs on the ground and the wilting leaves. He slipped deeper, past the details, letting the whole of the pattern pull wash over him.

Nothing.

- 9 -

Wrapped in a bath towel, his hair dripping, Sarkalt watched as Niv sorted through the choices of clothing offered him. From the stained white ritual robe he had worn, to a much heavier emerald cloth. Simic green. And the red cords? If the Simic, then why red? Sarkalt didn't ask or search, content to let his mind glance off the aura of rage surrounding Niv and take what his eyes and ears and nose told him.

And touch, that last sense invading by route of memory. Sharp fingernails -- he knew and appreciated how sharp -- threatened the silk cords. When a coil of those already rejected once -- fine green and white cords that went better with the robe -- landed in a puddle of bath water, Bas'ti, Sarkalt's House weaver, looked up from her cording loom and signed a query to Niv which was returned with a sharp 'no'.

The soiled robe and cording had been left on the floor tiles near the edge of the bath pool and would probably stay there until Niv ordered their removal. There was no ritual for disposing of a failure once removed -- no pattern energy had been released that might linger in the cloth -- but reluctance, or avoidance, scented the air as palpably as Niv's rage. The robe would eventually be washed, not burned.

Sarkalt walked over to the cloth. Everything he felt was a reflection of the eyes watching him, and everyone was watching him -- except for Niv. And Bas'ti, except she would be watching through the Net. With or without all of them, the scent of dried blood was in his mouth and he wanted smoke and flames.

"Were you concerned?" he asked Niv.

His tass'alt's hands were possessive -- and scarcely more careful than they had been with the cords -- as he slipped the towel from Sarkalt's shoulders, then his

waist, letting the towel join the mound of white silk on the tiles. One corner hung in the water.

"A stupid word," Niv said. And spat it: "Concern!"

With a foot, Sarkalt pushed the towel into the bath. It dragged a blood stained braid cord with it. "Did you think I would become lost in the garden?"

"I think you are lost in there." Niv snapped his fingers and pointed. The Steward who had brought the change of clothes waded into the water, hem of his robe floating behind. He used the towel to collect the braid.

The white robe and remaining braids followed the towel. The Steward froze as the full skirt of the ceremonial robe flowed around his knees, the gauze silk mixing with the heavier weave of his own. Braids like fish. Minute dark clouds drifted out from the spots and streaks of dried blood, staining the water.

"What is your name?" Sarkalt asked the man. Only slowly did the Steward raise his eyes from watching the floating cloth.

"He has none," Niv said before eye contact was made. Another snap of his fingers, but against skin, and a spark ran from the nerve cluster at Sarkalt's throat to his groin.

Sarkalt looked to his tass'alt. "I was only asking."

"Enough questions have been asked. You don't need to know names, you don't need to visit that garden. Not after the Searching, not after speaking with the loom-master. Especially, not alone."

"You could have asked for me." Niv didn't say the words, perhaps he didn't even think them. Talking had cooled the color of his scales to a lighter shade of blue. I can talk, Sarkalt thought. A return.

But the impulse died under a swell of impatience. He had to move.

Walking to the terrace off his bath, Sarkalt stepped into the night, leaving the glow-globes behind. Cold night air on his skin, he always allowed at least a fitful entry past the shielding, much the same as the interface over the dome of Three Crescents Temple but with the flow reversed.

"Reason?" he asked the dark as he allowed a stronger breeze, feeling it move his wet hair, accepting the change as a substitute for the action his body craved.

There were no stars visible, their light was blocked by interstellar dust clouds. He could feel them if he wished, through the Unity, the whole of Empire was there if he wished -- and didn't mind losing what was left of himself in the effort of seeing. But not the world-pattern in the Select's garden. He was familiar with proto-Altasimic pattern, what Rigyant had intended and what he had tried to train into Ulanda... but this was different again. Cassa's doing: the Wa'tic hadn't moved from that rock, the gardener hadn't stopped clipping that one shrub and the garden hadn't changed in forty-five years. Not since Cassa's Challenge.

Niv followed him out, bringing a wrap against what he would think of as cold. "I found myself in front of the door leading to the garden," Sarkalt said to him. "What reason did I need to go through it?"

"I don't mean reason. You are too close to what you are doing." Tracing energy points, he stroked Sarkalt's arms, the cam-claws on his inner wrists slightly extended, not enough to cut and drag into flesh, but to add to the resistance of scales on skin.

Still in Niv's hands, Sarkalt turned around, the cam of one wrist cutting across his arm. The pool was empty and a path of water on the tiles lead out of the room. Bas'ti still knelt at her loom, she looked up and shook her head, fingers never pausing in the work of crossing and re-crossing the bobbins of silk fiber. The growing cord shivered. Pale blue silk? Or did it gain the color from tiles the color Niv's rage?

Two Dressers remained, their eyes lowered. Ri-bred, both of them, one a young woman and with a delicate beauty as perfect as a flower. He had no idea if he had ever seen her before and wondered why he would concern himself. Bas'ti followed the direction of his attention; he felt the Net leads being woven through her mind like the cords were in her hands. He allowed the medic scan.

"I don't know her either," Sarkalt said to the weaver. She didn't answer and he felt her silence as a permanent state, each moment of silence as complete and whole as the Wa'tic's near fifty years of watching fish. "Weaver, are they threads in your loom?"

Niv pulled at his arm. "I allow them here." He faced bared teeth. "I tell them to come, they come, go and they go. Isn't that what Ulanda says you do?"

Niv's touch was allowed only by an act of will -- he felt it as a kind of pain that had nothing to do with scratches. "Don't provoke me," he said softly to his tass'alt.

Love or anger or impatience, he wouldn't stay here much longer. Through the image of his leaving, he knelt on the smooth glazed tiles, forcing his mind into the present. His back to the others, he signed for Niv to do the wrist braids himself, accepting the toilette while listening to the reports on the events in the Imperial Suite. Too much time had passed while embellishments were added until the spin of each Net-based analysis assumed a ponderous motion that threatened to topple the whole into uselessness. Too much time talking with Anga. Too much time spent watching the Select watch the fish.

No whim in that... and no reason for going there after speaking with Anga except he had, finding his steps on that corridor and the doorway before him. Meanings set in stone, in water, and fish.

He pushed the Net spins away too sharply to be comfortable for those sharing. The young Dresser took a step closer only to move back at a sign from Niv.

Niv didn't add more words to his disapproval as he completed the complicated overbraid, pulling the pattern from a link with Bas'ti. Red cords in the serpent pattern over the folded undercloth and a simple winding of metal impregnated cords in between. No proper underbraids, and the lack set his teeth on edge, but it was simply more temper, not need, the winding was sufficient.

At the finish, Niv massaged the wrist braids with the heels of his hands, warming the skin underneath. Moving past the pain at the touching, building the rhythm until Sarkalt flushed, the lines of power singing pleasure in his veins. Niv followed it with his hands on Sarkalt's thighs, a light stroking he had to reach to feel. Niv moved closer, his white crest feather soft against Sarkalt's face. The hands still stroked, just a little harder, the pacing deliberate, accented by the feel of Niv's tongue on his neck and the scrape of needle sharp teeth. Scales beneath the gland slits on Niv's face gleamed with oil, his own musk and lemon from the bath. Sarkalt raised his hands to touch the oil, using Niv's arms to carry their weight, returning some little of the stroking.

"Let Cassa's Weaver do what he will," Niv said, his breath against Sarkalt's throat. Words and fingers shaped the intent. Stay here and make love. No reason to go.

"No reason," Sarkalt said. He let his arms drop as he stood and stepped out of Niv's embrace. "I want the white gauze robe, not the Simic-green. And a yellow girdle."

Blue scales drained to lavender and Niv's crest fell.

"The Empress has accepted my offering," he said. He waited for a response challenging whose offer it was, but there was none. Had he spoken? "Time doesn't diminish what Ulanda is capable of being."

"Time?" The word was a sharp hiss.

He had a Priest's sense of time that came with their extended lives, noticing it only through the relationships between those events that came to his notice. And Niv, he had no sense of time at all. In his tass'alt's mind, was Ulanda still the child, then young woman, he had known? After Niv's part in her failed Initiation, there had been nothing Sarkalt could touch in pattern, in either Niv or Ulanda, to show why he had almost lost this man to her. Nothing that came back with him from deep Ri-pattern, and almost everything did, so little of himself left that the difference had little substance.

And had seen, or forced himself to see, at the last, when he had sent her away, that it might have been nothing more to Niv than the result of watching a child grow up and having it in him to love her. And if she became Empress, if she had both power and control, if Cassa accepted what was tantamount to an exchange? Would this tass'alt of his still have it in him to love her?

"Would you?" he asked. "Do you?" 'Love her', he didn't say, he knew they were words he didn't want to hear and wanted less, to know if any answer would be the truth or not. And he couldn't help but know the truth.

"I'm here," Niv said simply. He hadn't gotten up.

An act of will to be touched. And to stay? Sarkalt knelt again. "Why the red cords?" he asked.

Niv took a comb to the thicket of Sarkalt bath-damp hair. "They were in my hands first after rejecting the others."

He smiled at the image that came from his tass'alt's mind. "Do the same pattern for my hair," he said to please him. More red cords, stylized serpents starting at the temples and worked into the hair. The ends were left free, hair and cords, to fall past his waist. Mating serpents pattern.

The silk gauze robe arrived and he was dressed by the young woman while Niv continued with his hair. Only briefly did he think of the hands touching him, or near touching, and in that brief moment, wondered again at his notice earlier.

A priority flag addressed to him spun up into Three Crescents Temple Net, and from the balance of the message under the flag, it was a lead from the Trade Nets. The texture given by the favors owed and fulfilled was that of a wind frayed edge on a banner. It should properly have gone to his Chief of Staff or Head Scribe or any of a dozen other people. He let the message drift until Niv caught it.

"Lord Gennady again," Niv said softly. "Will you look at it?"

"No."

Niv signed persistence and indulgence. "Sarkalt, please. Regardless of the other things, the Zimmer lord has been waiting three hours already. Have the loom-master let him go."

"I said no. To who else should I say the word if you won't hear it?"

"You hold your staff up to shame. You should do it from the weight of obligation if nothing else."

Sarkalt didn't answer and Niv matched his silence but for the click of his nails as he fussed. Fingers the color of the horizon in Ka'lt'ka's pattern-pull twisted the ends of a hair cord, fraying the seal to release a multitude of minute threads. More than just red after all, a white on red scale pattern was in the braiding of each fine primary cord but buried, the white turned in as the fine cords were braided yet again to make the larger secondary cords. He followed the inner pattern away up the cording then back, enjoying the simplicity of the progression that wouldn't have been at all simple to braid.

And found the end was now a tassel under Niv's fingers. "You have something else to say?" he asked, to see Niv look up and the membrane of his inner eyelid flick to cover his eyes.

"Dreams, Sarkalt. The Zimmer Lord has them, I do, you also. And Ulanda, too. If the honor of those who serve you is of no consequence, let the dreams weigh the message instead."

He shook his head and the cord floated free again. "And the Empress?"

"Anga does this because you denied him, dealing instead with the e'Bolda Piltsimic. He sees events overtake his plans; he fears a shift in power on Rigyant because of it. It's in your power to let the Zimmer go. If you don't rein Anga in now, I don't know what will be in your power."

"Power? We have the Empress' past and her present and her future."

"But not you, please."

"Am I your true concern?"

"You've always wondered where my feelings lie... and never asked before." Fingers traced the wrapping of the yellow girdle, the musk scent following, stronger again and with the subtle shift in composition that spoke as much of pain as passion. A seductive scent. "I know you wonder, and in my pride, I let you. The Overpriest of Forms wouldn't have such doubts, only the man. If I tell you now, plainly tell you, that I would remain with you regardless of anything else, would you stay here and not force this?"

He could see himself in Niv's eyes. White silk crossed with gold, the red braid on his forearms showing through the lace weave of the robe.

He took in the scent of his tass'alt by the mouthful. With the heavy oil was the taste of pine and cedar. Cold rain on stone. Ri-altar in the rain.

Niv looked up and repeated the last part: "Will you let him go?"

With his tass'alt's question came a taste of green, but not the Simic-green robe Niv had chosen, but green as pale as new leaves breaking from the heart of winter. Ri-pattern telling him the presence of the Zimmer lord in this was pivotal.

"No," he said.

## - 10 -

Ulanda woke briefly from a dream. Niv had been holding her, she could feel his warmth and the strange, even then, strange resist of the scales on his hands as he held her tight. A singsong voice in her ears, a Camerat song, she thought, and felt safe as she rolled over and opened her eyes.

She was alone in the bed, and where Garm had been sleeping, the mattress was cold.

From the partly opened door to the study, voices drifted in: Bolda and Garm, and others she didn't recognize. Half asleep still, she tried to sort them, but



couldn't be sure even of the species. Hearing the tic-tic of Wa'tic. Or it was water dripping. The sounds slowed as she tried to listen until whole words hung suspended and she wasn't sure if she was awake or back in the dream.

Sarkalt, his voice, but that was part of the dream. He had been there with Niv, but cold against the fire in his tass'alt. Deep in Ri-pattern, the energy to control the shape of the pattern pull must have taken everything he could give.

Under her knees were grooves cut in marble and in front of her, the plain raked surface of the mound at the center of the killing spiral. Just sand with no world-mark traced in it, then she'd looked again and the surface was marked but in a design she didn't know. The rich scent of loam flooded around her until she sneezed and it was sand again.

The three, or four of them. Sarkalt, Niv, herself and the vass'lt. Without any transition, the sound of chanting was added and as abruptly, the drums. A harmony she recognized: the Opening for Initiation and she felt her training take hold as her body began to move to the beat. A part of it -- the core around which the rest was woven -- was the music to the dance Sarkalt had her learn. Now, with the distance of time and two failures, she remembered the sound as having invaded her sleep, her mind, well past learning it as a dance. It had been her heartbeat, the sound of her breath. Rain falling had the same sound. And the ocean at night. And knew she had thought none of those things at the time, only relief that despite what had happened between her and Niv, she was being given this chance. And that what she had lived for all those hard years, was about to happen.

The closest drummer raised his face to the torchlight, teeth bared in agony. For a moment, he had Sarkalt's face, and as quickly, was again the light blond of the southern islands, and she thought she should know who he was. Patyin? And with the name, suddenly the music she thought she knew so well was a discordant noise, it took her breath and slammed it to the back of her throat.

Hands over her ears, she sank to her knees, but it didn't stop. There was the same noise in the motion of the vass'lt's knife as he took it from the Bearer, the green cords attached to the handle floated in time. The same noise to the leaf shaped blade as it wove in and about in the ritual challenge to the Initiate. Beside her, there was a quick movement of the air and she heard the clinking sound of the wrist-cuffs. And she knew she was about to die. Until Niv moved first.

The whole thing had been created out of pattern energies except for the three of them and the vass'lt. And over the blood from the dead man she smelled the fear in Niv for what he'd done, even as he took hers away. The Overpriest's tass'alt held her -- made love to her -- as the killing ground of Temple, the central spiral, as it all faded from around them, leaving a plain stone room in the pavilion on the path that lead to Ri-altar.

And the Overpriest had let her live.

Bolda folded back the shutters to show daylight, a strip of pale green sky. "Breakfast is on the tray by the bath over there," he said, nodding towards the other end of the room. "Looks like you got more sleep than I did."

"Are you complaining? Or asking if I have reason to?"

He snorted, but a laugh came through. "You must have charms that right now, escape me."

She sat up in the bed and let the cover slide to the floor. Cool air raised frost-bumps on her bare skin. "He asked me to kill him. Was that your plan? That I kill him?"

Another snort. "Which of the messages here am I supposed to be impressed with?"

"Just tell me if it's over."

"Hell if I know. Get yourself dressed, it's late. Do you need a Steward?"

Ulanda shook her head and after a long, silent look that she returned as silently, he shrugged and left.

At the far end of the room, the parquet floor gave way to green tile and a pool, the water steaming in the cool air. She was in the water when the Trill'kon woman she recognized from the day before brought an armful of clothes, smoothed them out on the bed, then picked up those she and Garm had let fall.

The underrobe a simple slip-on shift with full sleeves, and the outer robe crossed in front and fastened at either side with stick-spots. A brown weave with a twist of blue-gray thread and cut on the bias so that the fabric fell from her hips in soft folds. The cloth felt strange, it seemed to sift under her hands as she smoothed it down and she wondered if it really did, or if the almost waxy texture only made her think so. She had no idea what the fabric was made of. The shift was a very good quality silk, a soft gray-blue, and she was glad it didn't allow any of the overrobe to touch her skin.

In touching the thin cloth of the underrobe to adjust the fastening, an image came to her as though from a subtle Net lead, teasing her into noticing, then stole her attention. The color was lavender blue, not simply gray-blue. Smoke on a mist ridden morning, lavender flowers dried, then wet again, on long brittle stems and still sweet. An image and more. The flowers stripped off to be crushed between her fingers into a sodden pulp, the smell making her want to sneeze. Winter air, and melting snow on winter-gray leaves, and snow mounding over the shapes of bricks set in a fan pattern in the courtyard and one pair of footprints showing ochre on the path.

The Empress's clothes and her memory as well, a residue of pattern energies similar to what she must have picked up in those couple of glimpses she had of the rug. What Garm had been looking for. Cassa.

She pushed the image away by chanting a mantra under her breath, one fashioned as a simple distracter. How much of any of what she had just seen was real, Ulanda wondered again, still smelling the lavender although she had vanquished the image. Something to scent a page and a color, something for private letters, or poetry.

There were braids to match the overrobe, full-length strands of exquisite silk cording. A single colour, but in a textured weave, with a surface of little knots. Secondary size braids, each thread of the braid was another cord. They were something that a Priest would have as decorative overbraids on their wrists.

She had one strand still in her hand when the door opened.

Garm took the strand from her then picked the others up off the bed. "Ts^lis shouldn't have brought these." Drawing them repeatedly through his hands, he seemed to have forgotten she was there.

Or didn't care. She couldn't tell what he was thinking -- or, more importantly, what he was feeling.

"What's the pattern called?" she asked.

Mild green eyes were raised to hers. Disinterested eyes. "Ask Bolda."

"They feel like dried lavender, like the tiny dried flowers around the stem..."

But there were fingers against her mouth.

"Lavender..." she started but stopped in confusion. His fingers tasted of lavender.

"So you said." He kissed her lightly on her forehead, then moving his fingers, on her lips.

"Did I mistake your disinterest?" she breathed into his mouth.

"Was it disinterest that brought us together yesterday?" One hand traced the opening of her robe, his fingers cold through the light silk of the shift.

She took a step away and sat on the edge of the low bed. "Not interest of any kind I think, but calculation."

"Of course." He sat close beside her. "But the result, I confess I did find interesting."

She took the dangling end of one of the silk cords and began to wind it between her fingers, her eyes on what she was doing. "Which result would that be?"

He laughed, and with the hand the cords held, cupped the side of her face and turned it towards him. Cold skin and the scratchy surface of the silk. As she looked away again, she lowered her eyes.

His lips on hers. Parchment dry. Then his tongue tracing the outline of her mouth, probing inside. "I don't drive the timing of the one," he whispered. "But the other..." With this longer, more searching kiss, he leaned into her and she settled back on the bed with him half over her, his hand stroking a leg, her robes pushed up.

Trapping his hand between her thighs, she turned, reversing their position, her body's full weight on one of his arms, and with the other, her fingers wrapped into his, holding them against the cover. The skin of his wrist and hand was like old silk, broken and wondrously soft, and it slipped over the bones and joints as though there was no connection, no joining of skin and body. And on the base of his thumb: half circle scars. Bite marks.

Under her as she leaned forward, he was all bone and skin and soft wool; there was no sense of flesh on his ribs or arms or legs. He'd find her softer, but not by much, she had a dancers lean build. Which last night, when she had let him create the reality of their lovemaking -- and during which she felt she had barely existed -- he had liked well enough.

He had undressed her then and she had let him. And touch, explore. And let him. Passive. Which he had wanted. And which hadn't been far from the best she had been capable of right then. Unnerved, stunned by what had almost happened. And knew -- in a part of herself that always knew -- that even in his seeming gentleness, he was glad of her pain. And that if it had been lacking, he would have found a way to create it.

This time, instead of flesh to flesh, they were making love through layers of clothes. For him, yellow wool, the same colour he had worn the day before. Silk for her, the shift, and whatever fiber this robe was made from. The lavender braided cords like sea grass in the bed and tangled with them.

They bumped heads. She laughed at his anger.

"It's not all at your convenience," she said. And let him go as she got to her knees.

He caught her wrist.

And later: "What is his name?"

He was leaning over her, his knees against the small of her back.

"Who?" she asked. She had been dozing. He had, she thought, been watching her sleep.

"The man whose hands I can still see on you."

Incredulous, she could only stare. "You can't be jealous," she finally said.

"Did he do this?" He bent to kiss a tiny bruise on one thigh. "And this?" He stretched the fingers of one hand to fit the one mark and presumably others.

When he came into his study, Bolda was at the doorway to the Hall, speaking to someone, a tall woman. She bowed in Garm's direction, then apparently taking

his presence as an invitation, stepped inside and looked around, a vaguely pleased look to her face as she paid particular attention to where the reeds had fallen. A quick tongue parted full red lips that belonged on a different person -- she had a neck like dried stem, skin tight over the tendons, the balance of her features twisted like a towel is to wring it of water.

She spoke to Bolda in Piltsimic, a language that except for the odd word, he didn't understand. Her actions he did, she spoke as eloquently with her fingers. Sensor scans and Net baffles. His Chief of Security? She had her arms crossed over her chest and he couldn't make out the pattern knotted into her girdle.

When she had gone, Garm opened his mouth for questions, but Bolda growled back to him, "There's nothing there you've bothered with for twenty years so don't bother now. I especially don't need you second-guessing everything I do." He came back towards the table, frowning at the floor as he did. The rug had been moved only to show the pattern of the reeds in the wood underneath.

"She's right about the reeds, anyway. Not much left, less than even an hour ago. The wood grain here doesn't look much different than the rest of the floor. Not unless you really look." He peered closer then squatted. "One of the window reeds, maybe, here, to... here.

Garm walked around, trying different angles, squinting then sliding his eyes over the area, keeping just back of the focus. Maybe a reed, he thought, and knelt next to Bolda for a closer look.

A suggestion of a shape, wood grain that lined up where it shouldn't and another that crossed over several separate pieces of wood, blond to cinnamon to ebony. Running the fingers of one hand along the shape, he felt a tingle and for a brief moment, saw sparkles, but only against the darkest wood. Faint as spent stars, as Possitt root dying in cold tea. The size of his palm.

Garm looked at his bedroom door, at the pattern of reeds. Each reed was less than half a finger thin and he saw them again in his mind, not brown but purple, and with mouths of glass singing in the wind. "I think the pattern is expanding as it sinks," he said and placed his palm down where the mark had been, feeling only cool wood against his skin. He straightened. The reeds were sinking but they wouldn't reach the mountain top far under Palace any more than there had been sand on the colonnade that first morning.

His body remembered his birth world more than his mind, and remembered it better as he grew older. A certain scent, or movement of the air, or sound, and a poignant feeling would seize him then slowly dissipate. He had been happy, he supposed. Before Cassa. Before that morning on the colonnade, shivering in the cold air and utterly bewildered as to why he was there. Hearing her say something and looking up to see himself in her eyes, standing totally alone.

"Do you belong to me?" he heard, not sure if it was the first asking or the second. Or if it had been asked at all, or ever stopped.

Then the wind had been warm, not cold, and it smelled of seaweed and salt. A warm wind that dried salt into rings on his back. Feeling the grains, he rubbed an itch against sand the same amber as his skin. Towards the land, the dunes were knife sharp against the blue sky. Amber and blue, the pink of the ostishell matrix the communal houses were grown from, the black-green of the sea grasses -- the colors of his world. In his ears were the sound of the waves and the low chorus of moans as the unceasing wind blew over the open mouths of the nearest shell-houses. He had still heard it in his mind for years after leaving Lillisim.

"Do you belong to me?"

He had woken to that question in the movement of the waves against the shore, coming to him through the body of the sand.

If he went back, he thought he might still be the same boy as in the memory. On Ri, everything lived and died and lived again in a rapid succession of seasons, pulling years behind the changes. But not on Lillisim.

Bolda was at his side, a strong hand on his arm. "I warned you," he said, giving him a shake.

"No, it wasn't the reed pattern." Garm's head felt fuzzy. Fly, his mind said. You flew then and still can. He rubbed his forehead just to feel the strength in his fingers. He had always been hers. "Something from long ago, an old memory."

"If you say so." Obviously not believing a word of it.

Fly. The word laughed in his mind. "Should I?" he whispered.

"What?"

Garm looked at him. "Why the extra security?"

"What are you talking about now?" The man's face had turned to stone.

"A fully trained Acolyte as a bed-girl? I appreciate the effort but question your sanity. What is your business in this?"

"In case you've forgotten, my oaths are to Cassa, not you." Then the scowl softened. "I did what had to be done."

Garm sighed. "You could tell me these things."

"It's just as well I didn't."

"Last night? My death?"

"Which didn't happen. Which means Cassa has other plans and the rest of us can play catch-up. Which... hell, it's not going to get easier from here. Kiokini -- that's the Security Chief who was just here -- she says the pressure on our system is critical. Nothing overt, it's all around, nibbling at the edges, trying to make like it's nothing more than the Palace neural system trying to block the spread of the mess Cassa made in here. She also says they could walk through anything we've got like it wasn't there."

Except that the nibblers weren't sure who or what would face them if they did. "Does she say who it is?"

Bolda snorted. "It's supposed to look like Temple Net trying to look like Palace Net."

"And it's not?"

"Well, actually, it is. Three Crescents Signature."

"You're not making any sense." Which wasn't unusual. "What does it mean that the pattern from the reeds is expanding?"

Bolda shook his head.

"Then how long until the 'nibbler' makes a move?"

"I'd say right after we make one."

"So anything we do had best be definitive." Which his death would have been. "Where's Ulanda?"

Another hard look, then Bolda sighed and went to the door leading to Simquin Hall and shouted. A few minutes later, she arrived.

"Come here," he said. As she took the few steps to his side, her eyes darted to the floor and back.

"What does it mean that the pattern is expanding?"

"San, I don't know. How could I?"

"Look again," he said, pulling himself up. His knees threatened to buckle under his weight. And more sharply, "Look, I said. You don't become what you are without being sensitive to pattern. And you picked up something before. Now look!"

She continued to look at him as though the words were spoken for form, not meaning.

Forcing her down to her knees took little effort, his own weight pulling as he dropped, did it. "Look," he said again, wincing from the pain, but he didn't let go of her arm.

"San, there's nothing there. At least nothing I'm able to sense. You need a Priest..."

"No, I don't" he said, releasing her. "I have what I need, it's been so thoughtfully prepared, packaged and served. You're Cassa's to make of what she wants."

She got her feet with the grace of a dancer, walked several steps away, her arms crossed, and turned her head to look down her nose at him. Any one who saw her move like that would know she had been trained in Temple. Had she changed -- or was she allowing more of what she was to show? Or was it only his perception of her that had changed?

"I'm not a peasant -- or Spann -- to think she's a god. And I think I'll be in Temple by this time tomorrow. And welcomed there."

A comment on their security? "Then you're a fool." He got to his feet, then went to the wall, and placed one hand on the green surface, his fingers touching the flowing crest of the silver bird. "You are whatever Cassa wants of you." And

what did he want -- with his life, not his death -- what did he want? Sex with Cassa had been either entirely recreational or entirely desperate, not a game either way. And games, this woman knew entirely too many games.

And sex with his wife? Something strained deep in him and released. And he admitted, looking back at Ulanda: "What I want of you."

When a part of him hoped it would, her look didn't soften. "What you want of me, you made clear last night. And this morning."

"And before that?"

She didn't answer. Her expression didn't change.

"My death was the point of your being here. As for the other..." He gazed at her a moment longer, wondering what it would take to get an honest response from her, then returned to his tracing of the silver bird.

What seemed like hours passed under his fingers in only seconds. But it wasn't his fingers, but wings unfolding. The wings first, then the silver traced neck stretched, lifting out from a green prison. A gossamer shadow, but light against dark, or everything else had reversed, light into dark then it was over. Where the phoenix shape had been, a plain green wall remained. And his arm was inside it to the elbow.

"You speak of wanting," he said, pulling his hand back, giving it a hard look and flexing his fingers. "Do you think she cares for what you want?"

She looked to Bolda but the weaver only looked back. She shook her head.

"Good. I despaired of your sense. Your desires matter not at all, no more than they did in Temple. Cassa has accepted the Overpriest's offering and that you're not with Sarkalt now, means you're supposed to be with me." He held his hand out. "Come here."

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Ulanda looked around her. She felt like she was standing in the center of an overturned bowl. Surrounding them was translucent white stone veined with clear quartz, the whole glowing slightly, as though illuminated from behind. It made her dizzy trying to see the floor and the ceiling; they looked all of a piece, without seams and without any energy pathways that she could reach. There was no Net, not even inactive nodes.

"San, where is this?" she asked, staining to hear an echo that didn't come, wanting to hear limits to the size of the space that her eyes couldn't find. If she walked ten feet she might bump against white marble. Or ten miles.



Garm was eating a bowl of soup, sitting on the rug Bolda had unrolled before going back. "It's still part of Palace, but places like this aren't very accessible. Cassa dragged the portal into my room, then reconfigured it to... well, it used to end up near the Hall of the Seals of Office, that's... in Second Horizon. Still Summer Run, I believe, but near Tranquil Depth and some down from this level. I suspect the portal still does go there as one of the options when we leave." He frowned, waving the spoon as though to point to where they might end up. "Much of Second Horizon is deserted, the Hall of Seals area at least. Warded probably, but we..."

"How did you get in?" she interrupted.

A raised eyebrow, but he didn't comment on her rudeness. "No warding barriers could keep her out, I don't even remember passing any. The restrictions of Office, the endless petitions, the ceremonies, they made her restless. Even the Justice Court sessions bored her. We spent a fair bit of time wandering -- no one recognized her, there are no records of what she looked like, except High Council records. Her own people, the personal staff close enough to look for her... and her Security... well, most of the time they wouldn't have known we were gone. And High Council, the other Overpriests and their people, not at all."

Another sip and he continued. "If you can visualize it, the Hall of the Seals of Office is simply a very long room perfectly plain and it looks empty, not unlike this does. Then, when you forget to look, suddenly all the Seals appear. It's quite remarkable. The Seals themselves are energy patterns, portals which lead to the formal reception areas for each of the people in Empire. Or, each people that existed when it was last used. Many of the portals we looked at had drifted. A couple of hundred perhaps, I lost count.

"You went through all of them?"

"No." He looked amused. Either the soup or their successful entry into this place had tempered him. "Of course not. With most of them, she just traced the portal pattern and then went onto the next. There were thousands all together."

He seemed to enjoy the role of instructing her and she dared a more important question. "Why are we here?"

"Ulanda, portals like this can be used to bubble off areas, more than just warding barriers do. And I've been given to understand that right now, we need more." He swallowed the last spoonful of soup and put the bowl aside. "Cassa is something new, something Temple hasn't the practice of understanding. The Unity, the Empire, changes over time, from Nexus to Nexus, regardless of how things are supposed to snap back to the original. Even the records telling us of our past change. Until Cassa, all the change was slow, with time to adjust between. You must know this. How far back in the Temple records have you read?"

"Whatever was required in my training."

"That's not an answer." Despite the sharpness of his tone, he still looked more amused than irritated. "I'm sure you've read more than I have," he continued. "At least of the kinds of things that have to do with Priests. Enough to know what that kind of power means, what the Unity means. And overpattern, well, it's always existed, it isn't a made thing like the Unity is."

He hesitated. "The human part, the conscious part, is like a skin over what a Priest is. You have to be aware that most of an Initiate's training is learning to let go to what is underneath that skin without having it kill them. To be a Priest is to just 'be' all of what they are. All of what their people are. But most are limited in what they can access directly: a single world-pattern, or at most, a few related ones. They hear a single note clearly and the remainder of the Unity as a kind of an echo, when all around them is a chorus they don't hear at all."

"And the Empress hears all of them? Not just the Unity?"

"Just? It's a very large 'just'." He laughed. "The noise. That's what she said. An awful racket." And more serious again, "There wasn't very much in-between for her. When she went into deep pattern, she often did so suddenly... or she drifted, barely skimming the surface of her potential. Just enough to increase her awareness of what 'fit' and to snag bits of things, most of them unconnected to anything else that I could see, not those leaps into the weave of life that a Priest makes and which are different than the kind of pattern access a Salin has. And when she was deeply into overpattern, there was very little of her remaining at all. Barely enough that her body remembered how to breath. Touching her then was like touching..." His voice died with the memory unvoiced. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Come sit here, with me. Eat your soup. I'm getting a crick in my neck from looking up at you."

The reeds were gone; apparently it was just a rug now. She sat and picked up the spoon just not to have him prompt her again like she was a child. Do this, do that. Irritation bubbled, prickling her skin. Then anger followed, burning along the same nerves.

Taking the spoon from her hand, he kissed her palm. "I meant for you to eat, not play with the soup."

"Don't...", she began on an intake of breath, the word rising like steam from the heat of her anger. Irrational, stupid anger, but her head swum with it. Since yesterday, since...

The rattle of a cart started abruptly as it appeared as through an open door, except there wasn't a door. Bolda was pushing it.

"We're under attack," Bolda said, frowning as he looked behind him. "You've got ten seconds to shut this thing down. The outer warding just went."

Dropping her hand, Garm was on his feet faster than Ulanda would have thought he could move and stepped to where they had marked the portal with towels, one at either end of where they had come through.

Ten seconds. Temple.

She got to her feet just as a fragment of Net passed through the portal. "Temple Net," she said, the words coming out louder than she meant them to. Her heart was pounding. Temple Net with the shreds of another hanging on it, slowing it, she could feel the resonance. There were shouts from the other side, then a sizzling sound.

Seven seconds.

Garm's hand was tracing something in the air. Another piece of the Net swarmed in, an intact thread, questing as it stretched, looking for a node, then it suddenly snapped and faded.

She was at the portal; she felt it against her, more in her mind than what her body could feel. And before her fingers, air like reaching into water.

Five seconds. An eternity in which to take a step. She expected Garm to try to stop her, or Bolda, wondered that they didn't. And fractions of moments more in which to wonder what she would step into.

And then the wings swept in from the walls, veins of light coalescing into a silver stroke of wings that blasted water thick air at her, pushing her onto her back. She rolled onto her side, fetal position. The sounds were gone, and any trace of Net.

When she opened her eyes, Garm was waving both hands in the air, both staying visible. Then he stepped back, a look of relief fighting with one of confusion. "What?" he queried softly, apparently to no one. Picking up the nearest towel, he started to fold it as he walked from side to side.

"Where's the portal?" Bolda asked.

Garm shrugged. Confusion had apparently won the battle. "I don't know," he said. And picked up the other towel. Then another shrug and he threw the towels to Bolda.

Bolda tossed the towels onto the cart. "You didn't say anything about this being one-way."

"I didn't know. It never was before."

"Why aren't I surprised." Bolda looked around, the ends of his long pendulous ears darkened to a brick-red.

Ulanda tried to stand, but fell to her knees. "There is a way out, isn't there?" And asked it again when no one paid any attention to the first question.

The face Garm turned to her was that of the Empress's San. "The way here was formed of pattern energies. I think we have what we need to leave." He glanced at Bolda and her eyes followed. "Bolda... is it time to tell me now what's going on?"

"You never asked who oversaw her Acolyte training. It was Sarkalt himself. And she's the same species as Cassa.."

"A small detail? Something so unimportant as not to tell me about it?" Garm's voice was rising; the light in his eyes a deep green. Then he laughed and looked at her. "Well, I suppose that if I was intended to be very quickly dead, then telling me wasn't a high priority. But I'm not dead, and I am right in this. You are a gift, one that others apparently consider valuable enough to break Empire Law to retrieve." He turned to the weaver. "Why?"

Bolda glared at her as though all this was some fault of hers. "They've run out of time waiting for a fix. The instant Cassa froze out those rooms, the tension between the Unity and overpattern started to grow. Hell, you can trace it out from her study, it started there. And stopped, if all you're doing is looking at it."

"But it didn't?"

"It didn't stop at all."

Garm rubbed his eyes. "I'd like you to go back to not making sense."

"Neither of you are making sense to me," Ulanda said. The same species as the Empress?

"He means that Nexus Change started some thirty-five years ago..."

"And is now cresting. Since yesterday when Cassa shattered the reed window. Hundreds of years worth in an instant."

"And when the crest passes, Empire will be stone like what she left behind in her flight."

"I mean that it's already happened," Bolda said. "From outside, if you could be outside."

"And you gambled that she..." He gestured at Ulanda. "That she could make a difference?"

"You've got the timing wrong. We gambled that all the pieces in one place would get Cassa moving."

No ceremony, just the Empress's tass'alt. And for a brief moment, she felt the warmth of his blood soaking her robe, the taste of his life. Wanting it. She got to her feet and this time managed to stay on them. "My chances are wasted here. The Empress said no."

"Said?" Garm asked, moving to her side, the word a breath in his mouth.

"Said?" One of his hands on her shoulder, as though offering support now where he had left her on the floor a moment earlier.

But Bolda didn't ask what she meant, only: "And what do you say?"

"There is no her," Garm said before she could think what Bolda meant. "She's a vessel for Cassa's will. Now or later, one person or another, what does the clay matter?"

Garm caught her hand before it connected with his face and twisted her arm down and to her back, forcing her to her knees. Searing pain shot through her wrist, her arm, matched an instant later in her free arm. She blacked out.

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At every hundred count, Ulanda turned around and looked back the way she had come. The sides didn't look any further or closer in front of her, they looked the same as when she started walking. The two men sleeping on the rug were a single dot against the whiteness.

Still no Net nodes or even the more minor linking systems, nothing that might at one time have served to carry Net.

She sat and tucked the overlong robe closer about her. One of Garm's, she supposed. She had looked for a warm cloak, but hadn't found one, and her robe was too light for comfort.

By the time she had woken, Bolda and Garm had been asleep. She had no idea of how many hours had passed. Even with the walk, the muscles in her legs were cramped and sore, but it could be from lying on the cold marble, or the aftermath of the adrenaline surge that let her think -- or not think -- that she could strike the Empress's San. He had left her where she had fallen.

After a short rest, Ulanda continued walking, only checking back to make sure she was going straight. If there was an exit, she should find it along one of the walls, and if it was a simple portal like the one that had brought them here appeared to be, she might be able to work it.

And if there was portal and she was able to open it? Three Crescents Temple. Sarkalt. Niv. And another chance? A better one than staying here, she thought. If she was valuable to one side, then she might be to the other. And she had been valuable once, valuable enough to warrant an Overpriest's personal attention. And the weaver's actions said she was valuable once again.

And if she couldn't open the perhaps-there portal? If she'd forgotten too much or if it didn't exist? She shuffled her feet on the marble surface just to get some kind of sound to drive those kinds of thoughts away. The only other noise was her breathing.

When she fell this time, the white marble reached up and embraced her, surprisingly soft and warm. And complete. The small area by her face could be the whole space, vision easily broke through the white surface, slipping down and riding the clear veins. Her mind buzzed as her sight played tricks and eventually, she slept, her last thought, that she was thirsty.

A wet drop on her nose woke her. The air was stunningly cold, her breath shot out in a white fog around her. At first she couldn't make the flakes out, they were just spots inside her eyes, the space around her robbing them of shape. Then one fell on her shoulder, white lace on the red robe. Snow.

Her hands disturbed crystals like a dusting of powder as she scrambled upright. She looked around. The cart, two men asleep on a small rug. Had she walked back? Or without spatial references, circled around?

Or they had come to her. I won't ever leave you... Ulanda shook the words out of her mind.

"It's snowing," she whispered. Her voice broke on the words. I won't ever... "Snowing," she repeated, a little louder.

Neither of the two men stirred from their sleep. The snow was easier to see against their dark shapes as though it was materializing as it came between them. It seemed to be coming down harder, and the flakes larger.

"It's snowing," she hiccupped and laughed at the sound.

The laughter brought Garm out of sleep as from a long journey. "What?" he said, brushing at his face with his other hand.

"It's snowing. Snowing." The giggles started at the look on his face, as he tried to see white against white, then focusing on her as she brushed a powdering of flakes off the red with the heels of her hands.

Another look at her, a look of concern, she thought for a moment, and had time to feel gratitude, and time to feel anger than she might. But the giggles were turning into more hiccups and she was losing her focus on him. Lifting her face to the snow, she watched the soft falling shadows until they hit her skin. She breathed them in gulps of frigid air that froze her throat.

"Stop it," Garm exhaled, or maybe it was the snow melting inside her. Then louder and she knew it was him beside her. Even in the cold, she could feel him. "Ulanda!"

But the snow wasn't melting, the cold spread, stopping her mid-gulp. Snow on her skin and on her open eyes, a white blanket that burned, then didn't, as warm as the marble had been. And the room wasn't quiet, why had she ever thought it was -- it hummed with sounds, each crystal of snow a single note, all different, making a harmony that floated around and through her.

She didn't feel it as pain at first, but as a force that shattered her bones, as ice dams breaking in the rage of her veins, and as a song that turned into a shriek. Not even pain when he slapped her hard, then again and again.

"Ulanda, stop it!"

She could have touched the words, fitting her fingers in the shapes like carvings in stone, but they were just noises. Sensations, words and body, but distant, like something reported second hand.

"Boldal!" he shouted. "Damn it!"

More carvings, but deeply cut until the stone bled. Hands on her wrists. We've done this before, she thought, coming back a little, slower than he had from sleep, a long cold way, with her hands dying in flames at the end of it.

But the hands still seemed to belong to someone else, enough of her keeping the cold that the pain was numbed.

He wiped the snowmelt from her cheeks with his bare hand and now she could barely feel the warmth of him at all. Turning each wrist over, one at a time, he ran a finger over dark marks that hadn't been there moments before. Not the bruises, but marks like tiny freckles riding the blue of her veins.

She saw him complete, just for a moment and knew even what she had seen of him earlier was nothing to this. Saw him flying -- or that was from the story. And here, but that was from the story as well. The rider of the dark flood, he rode her. He would. He did and had. Not an old man with delusions and fantasies, but the rin'cass wu, rider of the Change Phoenix.

Was this what it was like to be a Priest? Not just the enhanced senses an Acolyte gained through meditation and ceremony, not just the sense of pattern that was always somehow outside you, and all too readily vanquished, and for her, suppressed over the years of her exile.

For a moment she remembered the sound of the dance she had learned for Sarkalt, the drums of her Initiation... she should be hearing them now, or have some sense of them as they tied her into her world-pattern and the Unity. But she wasn't hearing them at all.

And wasn't confused by the critical lack, it was only a fleeting chance of thought that came complete and vanished the same way, leaving her empty, waiting to be filled. The snow had eased to a faint sparkle of white, almost not there -- and she reached for it. Father, mother, lover. Whatever Sarkalt had given her with the dance, she wouldn't have. Her people's world-pattern?

It didn't matter. Not here. Not now. She could run towards death or take what she found.

"I shouldn't have hit you," she said.

"Bolda," Garm called again, raising his voice when the white lump didn't stir.

At the second call, the white lump broke into plates of snow, then snowballs as Bolda flung the blanket off. "What the hell?"

"Get over here, help me with her."

She watched from a distance. Again as though the earlier moment was being replayed, she thought there should be music, at least the core beat of the drums in the dance she had learned so well and heard again at the failed Initiation where Niv had killed the vass'lt.

"Or did I kill you then?" she asked. "I can't remember."

I can kill him now, she thought. She wouldn't have a world-pattern, but with him as her vass'lt, she would be grounded in what he was... Empire's Unity. Simic. She would always be held by him then. She thought home might be being held by him. A voice in her mind couldn't, wouldn't stop her now.

"What have you done!" Bolda shouted.

Three shapes in a crystal bowl, diamond shaped, not round.

"I didn't do anything," Garm said.

His voice was softer. She liked the music in the way he spoke; there was something... a dance? It didn't matter now, no more than the anger she had felt earlier mattered. For a moment, she could feel the blood in his body, erratic spurts as though his heart was as hesitant as his words; she tasted his blood like wine on her lips, the essence of him. Simic green like the silk on the walls, it surrounded her, not in stripes, but in a whirlwind.

I know this from long ago, she thought, longer ago than the stories, longer ago than the people who had first told them had lived, much longer. She threw her head backwards, eyes to the endless white above. The green followed, but there were more colors there. In the center were all the colors and in the whirlwind, a pulling, as if of time passing too rapidly. The lines were Nexus Change and she was falling through the center to the beginning. And the end. The words he had spoken earlier thundered like Garm's blood in her ears, fast and slow, building only to hesitate again. Kill me.

Laughter rose to fly around her and she was back in the diamond, the same spiraling of energy, but now in her body. He would be hers. Kill me.

A white light blinked, and the three forms were shrinking again. A diamond mouth sounding in the wind with a hissing from the center where the double stars were. Kill me.

"No," she whispered and screamed and never opened her mouth. Then the twin suns died with a snap as the spiral burst from her.

## Part II

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Quiet as though asleep, but every time Garm looked at Ulanda, she was looking back. Layers of clothes were piled on and tucked around her, the blanket under in case the rug didn't give enough protection from the snowmelt. The air was warmer but still dripped, saturated with moisture.

A white marble room behind the portal? Had there ever been all the times he and Cassa had used it? He tried to think as he spread wet clothes over the cart.



He shook his head. Too many years had passed to make the remembering easy. Worrying about it didn't help; dry clothes and hot water were something he could deal with. Ulanda still watched him. Carrying a cup of tea, he moved around back of her, and knelt close to her head so that the tip of the cup to her lips would be as though he were drinking it himself.

"You need the warmth," he said to her silence and closed mouth. "A couple of swallows, that's all. Lemon tea with sugar."

Balancing the cup in a fold of cloth, he got down on one elbow, her head belly level and his thighs against her back. Wet wool and sweat, the inside curl of her ear was slick with oil, her hair loose in frizzy stands at the sides where it had escaped from the band. His own hair barely tickled his ears, too short, old man short, it grew too slow. Not for many years had it been the curtain of silver that Cassa had so liked.

As he stoked Ulanda's forehead and smoothed her hair back, his fingers automatically reached for the g'ta points, adding a caress with his next words. "Your wrists will heal." Her eyes closed at that, then opened to release a look that moved like a shadow over her face. They wouldn't, not really. Residual pattern energy tended to follow the same path out of the body causing the tissue damage in the wrists to become chronic. The joints stiffened even if the bones managed to heal.

"More than you think they can," he insisted, going back to a simple stroking of her skin.

"Why aren't you dead?" Her breath was sour with an empty stomach smell and he remembered that she hadn't eaten.

The muscles in her shoulder were knotted and eased only slightly under the pressure of his fingers, but he settled for that much as he curled lower, giving her what warmth he could.

She tried to turn her head to look at him. "You're supposed to be dead, I killed you. I remember killing you."

"I learned to move fast a long time ago." And slow, he thought as he traced the line of her collarbone. At the motion, she drew back with a rise of power like a sheen of frost on her skin. "Ulanda, you have to learn control, your body can't take much more of that, not this soon. There's no one here who is capable of checking your access to pattern, you're going to have to do it yourself." He kept his hand moving, flesh against flesh, in a steady rhythm and felt the beginnings of a response.

"It was beautiful." Her whisper held as much desire as memory.

"And deadly. You almost didn't make it back."

Her eyes closed tight against the sudden rim of moisture under the lashes but she moved against him now. "I didn't want to come back," she said, with only the slightest movement of her lips. "At the very end, I didn't want to."

That had been evident in her face, just before he broke her wrists. The body was such a fragile link. "You decided differently or you wouldn't be alive now. Ulanda, you can have both, within limits. Life and the other. You know that. Of all people, you know that." From the collarbone, down the cool flesh, under the protection of her upper arm, his hand followed the small curve of her breast, marveling again at the softness of her skin. It had been so long since he had taken a lover. Her eyes opened to his and they were just the eyes of the young woman she had been before.

So fast, he thought. The nipple hardened under his fingers as he cupped her breast, pressing the hardness against his palm.

"Your body wants to live," he said, carrying some of the cold with him as he brought his hand out. Wetting a finger with the tea, he moistened her lips and when her tongue reached for the taste, he took a sip of the sweet liquid and bent lower until their mouths met. She wanted more his taste than the tea, and he let the warm liquid seep past their kiss until she had to swallow or choke. The next mouthful was easier and finally he held the cup to her lips and she drank.

Pulling the layer of cloth over himself as well, he held her a while longer, wondering what he could manage if she insisted on more than holding and touching -- if she needed it to center herself, to find her body again -- but exhaustion took her instead and she fell asleep.

When she peaked, he hadn't expected her to live, not and live through it himself. Two deaths, the ritual form stated, the vass'lt and the new Priest; and the chant of Lamentation, the Close of a successful Initiation, was given for the new Priest. For a deeper giving of life than simply dying.

"Looks cozy," Bolda said, eyebrows raised as he straightened from rearranging the bundles in the cart.

"Not from here, it doesn't. She's going to need some hot food, and we'd better eat as well."

"And then what? If we stay here, hoping someone can open the portal, I can't guarantee who it will be. And in any case, once we're back, I'd count her life expectancy in minutes, not hours. Any ideas about what the hell Cassa is doing?"

Garm shook his head. "I thought that was your department. From what little you've told me, I suppose the Piltsimic loom-masters are mixed up in this somehow. Rigyant?"

Bolda shrugged. "I don't know why you think I have to spoon feed you. Think Cassa. Think who and what were running that show."

"Rigyant, then. And the Palace based loom-master Council?"

"What about it?"

Garm's arm was falling asleep, he'd forgotten this part of being a tass'alt, or had never been good at it, more likely. He started to twist a limp strand of hair around a finger, stopping when Ulanda moved. "And your place on the Council?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm a House Weaver, not a loom-master."

Garm knew from Bolda's look that evasions were all he was going to get. He shook his head. "A Nexus Change every, what? A million years or so? And Empire... how many Nexus Changes?"

He hesitated, expecting some response. And continued when it was obvious there wouldn't be one. "When I put my hand on the portal, I saw again the reeds breaking. One was a continuation of the other. Silver -- it tasted like Cassa did -- and white, I saw white, perhaps it was this room. I simply knew everything fit, it was something whole and complete against my fingers." He laughed. "They wanted a Priest who could replace Cassa."

"Well, any and all agreements count for squat now."

"Agreements? With who? Sarkalt?"

"What do you think?"

"And the attack on us? Was that a part of the agreement?"

"He's a Priest. You expect sense? Call it an exploration of the possible."

Garm laughed. "I think this here..." He waved one hand to the whiteness surrounding them. "... all this is an exploration of sorts."

Bolda scowled. "And with a result that trashes most of the others. Even if she does manage to pick up a world-pattern... which I don't think she will... she didn't have a vass'l't. She's got no grounding in the Unity at all. You're still alive and so am I."

"Can the rider of the Change Phoenix die before the end of the story?"

"Dying is easy. It would be favor to her to kill her now, before she wakes up."

"That's not an option."

"Yeah, well." Bolda stretched then rubbed the small of his back with both hands. "I guess we play wait and see. Unless you've got more to say on the matter."

"Me? Someone Ulanda half remembers killing? Can a dead man speak?"

"I've seen 'dead.' You're too noisy."

"When?"

"When what? Your jabbering? It's constant."

"What did you expect to see when you walked into my study yesterday? Can you manage one straight answer?"

The comment earned him a glare. Then Bolda sighed. "You know what I expected. You've been to Initiations; hell, I even went to a few before I grew up and decided I'd seen enough blood." Bolda paused and it seemed he might stop there, then he shook his head. "The last one I went to was at the main Temple in Cil'stat on the north coast. The spiral had been warded to the candidate's echo-line. It's supposed to help and maybe it did, stepping through the doors to the Inner Temple, you could feel the difference like it was a smell in the air."

Bolda rubbed under his nose with the back of his hand. "There was the two of them, both in Initiate robes, no vass'lt. And they both had knives right from the start, no Bearer at all. After they danced for a good half hour, things started heating up, they were going for each other for real, but always missing... I suppose, like it wasn't quite time, but not like it was really deliberate. Then something changed; there was a sound like the crackle paper makes being balled up. The male knew it too, he screamed as he went for her and with her next move, the power jumped, a cold flash, not much and not for long..."

Garm could see it and closing his eyes didn't help. "A pond, a skim of ice and sunrise," he said, the words spoken in High-formal before he realized his mouth was even moving.

He opened his eyes to Bolda's glare. "Don't start with that crap."

"I had no intention of doing so."

Bolda snorted. "Yeah, well." Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly and with it, some of the hardness. "He just sort of fell apart. Like he was a flower bud with the petals opening up."

Garm shook his head at the image. Last night. Today. They didn't seem remotely related. "Poultat again."

A Temple family most likely. Or not family, but an extended cohort association. The Hosts took their ranking, or increased their influence rather, from the Priests they managed to produce. And twins again. The Poultat threw twins more often than not. When they went to the spiral, only one of them comes out alive -- Priest or not -- that wasn't different than the more usual rites. Again he remembered the Poultat woman in the Commons. There would have been others nearby even if he hadn't seen them. Was it only yesterday?

"I know they were Poultat, I wove the bloody Initiation robes they wore, that's why I was there and not at home. That wasn't what I was getting at." Bolda sighed and the last of the fierce hardness left him.

Leaving ashes, Garm thought, seeing through to the man that lived under the surface bluster. "When you started service with Cassa, it would have been soon after that. She asked for you."

There was anger still in those ashes. "You think I don't know whose oath I took or when I swore it?"

"Of course you do," Garm said, as he wondered how much else to say. And how much of what he thought might be happening really was. Finally settling for saying, "I saw it. Through her eyes that is."

"The Poultat Initiation?"

"No, no... your cousin's."

"Shit."

"You've never told me about your family."

"Why the hell would I have?" Then the fierceness left again. "It doesn't matter now."

"Then tell me."

"If you'd shut up long enough." A moment's pause then a shrug. "He was a cousin on my mom's side. He'd been in training since he was boy, reached the 10th level as a Ri Acolyte quite young as Piltsimic count age. And Ri is supposed to be easier than most, I mean, look at Sarkalt, he's no more Ri than I am. Just in case he went for our native pattern instead, they crossed the soil with the Piltsimic mark as well as the one for Ri." Bolda rubbed at his face, the flesh like putty under his fingers. "Neither happened. That vass't gutted him like a fish."

"I know."

"Were you there? With her, I mean?"

"No, we were both at South Bay. We had taken a flitter to the crescent beach, down from Ri-altar." He closed his eyes then opened them, still seeing it. "The sun was behind us, and warm, with Palace like a moon rising over the mountain, eclipsing the glare but not the light. That sparkled back from the water and the white sand."

"Where I was, it was dark."

"Yes." He sighed. "This must be time Cassa has given us, or Ulanda really. A chance to become something different than she would have been."

Bolda snorted at the answer. "She's that all right. Garm, Temple doesn't kill rogues just for sport. They're damn dangerous. And she's something else again."

"She's what she has to be."

"Hell, why do I bother?" Bolda shook his head. "What did you see at the beach?"

Garm moved his arm, trying to shift the weight of Ulanda's head to another spot, one that wasn't right over a nerve. She made little sucking sounds, then a gurgle, her eyes moving rapidly beneath the closed lids. His feet were cold, the rest of him hot, damp from sweat and ice melt and this all felt too familiar.

"Linni and... I think it was Rint'allin... yes it was him. The two of them had set up a pavilion or were trying to, the wind was strong off the water or they weren't very good at it."

"Garm..." Bolda's voice was a growl.

He sighed. He was too tired for this. "The ti'Linn guards, Li'ti'ka and... I forget, there were four of them. They warded a watch perimeter not more than twenty feet out from the flitter while Linni and Rint'allin set the pavilion. Nothing I said affected them... I think they saw and heard only what she wanted them to, and that didn't include us leaving to walk further up the beach. Cassa was pleased with herself and excited... like a child before a festival. After a time, I didn't question why, her mood was infectious."

"All those people died when those rooms of Cassa's froze out...."

And they hadn't. "Let it go, Bolda." The words fell into sudden silence. Garm took a strand of Ulanda's hair again, plain dark brown and straight, slightly coarse, smelling of damp wool. He closed his eyes, wanting lavender with the salt spray and the fine stranded tangle of Cassa's hair mixed with sand, but getting instead a rotten meat smell that choked him. The white flowers.

"About a hundred feet down the beach from where we eventually stopped, a group of people, local to South Bay I think, had a fire going already. A woman was chasing after two young ones, a boy and a girl, hard to do in the sand, and she had to work at it. The children would hide in the long grass on the lee side of the first row of small broken dunes and she'd flush them out... I don't think she really minded, there wasn't any harm they could come to and she was laughing as much as they were.

"I would have liked to watch them, but Cassa didn't... she wasn't fond of children. I had lost track of them when the young ones all of a sudden came shooting out on top of us from the dune's edge, kicking sand everywhere, and long grass... they'd been picking it, the grass and the small white flowers that grow in the grass where the rain water holds longest."

"The flowers in the talisman."

"Yes. Sea-foam, they're called here..."

"I know that."

"Yes, well, they're not native to just Ri. Wherever the echo line is close to Simic, the flowers are there as well. We call them Lady bells on Lillisim but their real name is Li-Cassa: cry of the Lady. The seeds are used to help in childbirth and the form of the words can mean the woman or the child, or both. Green seeds, three to a flower, three ridges with a paper thin membrane between to make a hollow cylinder. They roll in the wind, you can follow their tracks in the sand, like something a small snake would make..."

"Garm, I know the bloody flower."

He squeezed his eyes shut a moment, seeing sunlight on the salt grass, and said what he had to. "The seeds are ground to a powder and mixed with hot water to make a tea, whisked to a foam and served in a white bowl with six sides, like the flowers have. The seeds still have the smell of the flower though and the plant's not grown for show, but wild everywhere, along the shoreline mostly in the dunes or rocky areas, a weed."

Ulanda didn't stir as he twisted a narrow band of her hair around one of his fingers as he talked, the strand released only to be coiled again, then released. An old habit, older than his being with Cassa. He had cradled Ena much like this during the early waiting in the births of their two children, and after, and with the tea, held much as he had the lemon tea for Ulanda to drink.

He didn't know Bolda had gone back to the cart until he heard a clank of containers. Looking up earned him a grunt. "I should know better than to expect you to make any sense."

"This is part of it. People have to make up their own stories around the little they knew, and well, this is the little I know that happened." He sighed and shifted his weight again, less for comfort than for time to gather his thoughts before continuing. "The sun was under Palace by then, low over the mountain and throwing its shadow far into the water. Cooler and the sand not so much white as a pearl color. The flowers were scattered everywhere and the seeds too, but they were so dark a green against the rest of it as to look black." Another sigh. "All this around us and Cassa lying there, laughing even as she was spitting sand and hair."

"The boy was off and running, but the girl was tangled up with us. She'd gone limp and I was worried she was hurt. I was still trying to sort out which were legs and which were arms when the mother climbed over the ridge, heavy enough to be dragging sand and slow enough to stop before she landed on top of us as well."

"The woman grabbed the child just as she started wiggling and kicking, she must have only had the wind knocked out of her. A moment later, the girl was chasing her brother in the sand. I was half on Cassa and I don't think the woman could see the braids, but it was obvious we weren't local and she might have known the flitter was near. I motioned for her to just continue on, when Cassa said something in Ri-native that made them both laugh out loud and I turned to ask her what it had been."

"Then, without anything in between, her eyes opened out of the laugh and I fell in." He shook his head. "Just a reflection of the ocean, she was facing it... but it wasn't, of course, or not for long. Then we weren't there anymore except for the rocking motion of the waves, or it could have been the sound through the sand..." Another memory, he thought, suddenly exhausted. "Your cousin's mother... she'd woven a robe for her son. For his Initiation. There were tears in the weave, through Cassa, I could hear them, and your aunt's crying, and the sound was silver in the green of the wool. The whole Temple moved to that sound and there was Simic light all around but one step off and nobody heard it and the boy couldn't make them hear it, not even the Priest. Couldn't quite catch hold of it. So he died. Not Ri. Not a chance."

"Her being there..." Not a growl but Garm wished it had been.

"I think of all the people there, the Warder of the Spiral sensed it, at the last, with your cousin's blood on her hands as she finished what the vass'lt had started. The one person who shouldn't have been able to sense anything at all. Her head was tilted slightly like you would to a sound almost heard and her breath changed to match the beat even as it faded." He waited a moment, for

strength and courage, then said, “You designed the pattern your aunt used, I could see....”

“Just drop it.”

“You asked.” He had seen more but it had faded or he had forced himself to forget. He wanted desperately to stop there but he said the rest even though Bolda knew this part; everyone knew this part. The woman on the beach had died close to a term later, but he didn’t think it was from the birth. Had she seen her newborn children before she died? Had she prayed to Cassa as the locals did, or had she needed to anymore? The family brought the twins to Palace and left them at one of the Gates into the Imperial Suite, much as they might take a child as a gift to a planet-side Temple. He had brought them in himself, one tucked in the crook of each arm, and taken them to her.

Bolda let him finish speaking before telling him to shut up. Then he shrugged and went back to sorting containers, opening several and sniffing before closing them again. “Noodles with ham okay with you?” he asked, looking up.

“Anything hot.”

“I brought a heating coil, so hot it is.”

“Then fine,” he said quietly, wanting desperately to sleep, a deep lassitude overwhelming him, pulling all his thoughts inwards, until they were muted and slow.

Bolda brought the container and a couple of bowls over, and set them within reach on the rug. “That robe’s not the only thing done in that pattern.”

He could scarcely move his lips. “I know.”

“You could have told me.”

He shook his head, not meaning no, just too tired to think straight. “Should I have to spoon-feed you these things?”

A look of disgust rippled across the heavy flesh of Bolda’s face, but he ended it with another shrug. “Speaking of which, are you going to feed her?” he asked roughly, spooning the thick round noodles into the bowl with a spoon. A silver bird on the handle, wings pushing against the short thick fingers.

Garm yawned as he nodded, then pulled the bowl closer until it was near her face. A couple of breaths and she started to stir, awake a moment later, fighting against his arms as he held her down, the effort waking him up just a little.

“It’s okay, you’re safe,” he whispered into her ear, and more of the same as she calmed and her eyes focused. When she moved purposely, he released the pressure. Pain showed her the limits of her hands, she cried out but still struggled to rise.

Her white face was washed with gray, her mouth open as she gasped as much for control as for air. The ammonia stink of urine and wet wool was added to that of salt ham and cream. Bolda wrinkled his nose but didn’t say anything as he took his own bowl over by the cart, then around to the far side at Garm’s motion.



Several of the fat noodles had slid onto the rug and Garm scooped those back into the bowl. “You can eat first,” he said then shook his head when she went to reach for the spoon. One hand still supporting her around the waist, he moved in closer until her back was against his chest. A pool of moisture spread around his knees as it cooled.

Raising her hands one more time, she gave the bandaged wrists and the tracings of red deep under the surface weave a long look, then nodded.

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Bolda was setting up for a meal and she welcomed the chance to stretch her legs, feeling the stiffness work out, then knelt, careful to get cloth between her knees and the cold marble. After checking on her, Garm continued inspecting the piles of leavings in their trail and talking with Bolda. She wanted to yell at them both, anything to get more of a reaction than this grim avoidance. Bolda ignored her completely, Garm always waited past the point where she really needed help, forcing her to ask.

Seven days. The only change in the room was the sound, a light hum and a vibration through the marble.

Looking from Garm to the cart and back, she lost herself in the white, then it flipped, white to black, and she squeezed her eyes shut. At the same instant, the sound had reversed, as though the greater silence was talking and Garm and Bolda were silent in the midst of murmurs and whisperings, sinuous talk drifting like waterweeds around her.

Or like the lesser water drums when someone fails to turn the reeds completely out of the flow. But it was only the hum along with the sound of the blood in her ears, the whispering was too, it was like being underwater... there was a shallow pond that fed off the ritual baths at South Bay Temple. For the younger children, both Acolytes and general Temple. Or rather, left to them and their nurses. The wild, mountain-cold stream past the orchards was where the older Acolytes made their own play.

The intensity and detail of the image overwhelmed her, pushing her mind flat. Bile rose in her throat as she fought to keep some small part of herself separate, and with her first breath, said: “It’s just a memory, it’s part of me.” A memory, but reinforced by pattern-sense. She kept the core of her mind like a polished stone that can be held in the hand as the images flooded over her again.

Always moist with steam from the hot springs and shaded by the overhanging cedars, the tumbled boulders of the creek were green with moss, and in winter,

were capped with fanciful hats of ice sculpted by knives of hot and cold. The quickest way to get to the ritual baths wasn't the steep winding pathway, but by following the watercourse. Five minutes of scrambling brought you to a small clearing where the bath house was, and for those who dared the trouble that would follow, another few minutes and you reached the natural springs hidden in a twist of the narrow mountain crevasse.

Uninvited, Ulanda had only ever gone as far as the bathhouse, almost a public place and certainly not forbidden. Over the stone foundation walls, hot water from the baths flowed into a sunny catchment pond and from there, to the creek. Higher than she was tall, the foundation wall was slanted so that the broad flow of water was silent and smooth.

Alone? Impossible that she had been, but the memory at least, didn't include others. With her back pressed flat against the stone wall, the water flowing over her face had the feel of heavy silk, body warmed. Her eyes were open, as impossibly so as her being alone, but still she saw the silver skin of the surface. Like parchment, it allowed a blurry and soft world through. I could be the wall, she thought, and never move, never be seen. The thought was from now, she hadn't thought at all then, only felt. And without thought, had let herself slide down, breaking the larger calm of the pond, her hair floating on the surface, caressed by fingers of sun brightened steam.

The image faded without resolution. Surface... she had to be content with what bubbles rose. Bolda had joined Garm; the two of them were looking at her.

"Am I her?" she asked.

"Physically, you mean?" Garm shook his head then knelt beside her. "No, there's some resemblance, but probably just of species. I don't have any basis for comparison. As for the rest... Ulanda, stories about the Change Phoenix appear in many forms, forms that aren't related in the ordinary sense. They were written by people widely separated by time and space. It's my understanding that creates the links, and right now, I truthfully don't understand at all. It's up to Cassa. She's very much in charge of what is happening." His drawing out the braids produced more sparks, and her eyes followed.

"And how is it different than what Sarkalt wanted?" And Bolda. Allies? She thought so now.

"What is Sarkalt?" he asked softly.

"The Overpriest of Forms of Empire."

"And the Forms?"

After the vision of herself at the bath house, the sing-song chant she would have learned about the same age came back easily. "The Unity of Empire Law, in the beginning and now, the same, and always."

"And the Unity?"

She was weaving slightly. "The world-patterns, the constant of the branches to the dance of the wind. One of the first dances we learned in the crèche." She laughed. "We took turns being the wind, with long streamers of paper that were supposed to flow around the ones standing still, but didn't very well." Her hands were over his now. The laughter was gone; it had all been surface. "We got to howl like the wind too, like the wind off the ocean. Everyone wanted to be the wind."

Ulanda watched his face slowly turn gray as she spoke, age settling down hard in the lines around his mouth, then softening again as the memories turned. He was seeing her this time, Cassa.

"That's what Sarkalt wanted of you," he said as he pulled his hands out from under hers. "And what Cassa doesn't."

And him? She wanted to have the touching come from him, the need felt as though it were something elemental. Her death -- as a Priest with access to overpattern, a Select, especially one without a world-pattern, she would die during Nexus Change if Temple didn't manage to kill her first. And right now, it didn't matter. He was her death. Not Nexus Change, not Temple. And she wondered if what she felt wasn't another thing from Cassa. Am I her? -- Not physically.

Love or need? The two weren't separate in what a Priest felt for their tass'alt, what Cassa had felt, what she felt despite herself.

She could need Garm like she loved Niv.

"You want this stuff or not?" Bolda with dinner.

Garm nodded at Bolda as he got up, took up one of the bowls and leaned against the cart to eat. Bolda handed the other bowl to her then shrugged when she didn't reach for it and put it on the floor.

The porridge was almost cold by the time she decided on her first spoonful. The silver spoon, the wings helped keep it steady in her hands, a two handed grip like a baby's. Yellow grains with shreds of meat that felt slimy in her mouth -- she dropped the spoon, splattering the front of her robe.

A bird in silver metal. Something played at the edge of her mind as she fought to control the spoon. And almost dropped it again when she remembered. With Garm at the table. Chicken with beans and the two of them sitting there talking about a spoon. But she hadn't told him what she had seen in the fall of reeds on the rug.

A small brown bird, claws hooked around a slim reed, feathers back ruffled in the steady wind. Only when it took wing, flashing a bar of gold under the wings, did she see that the feathers weren't an even shade at all, but a mosaic of browns: the palest lace of dried grass seed fallen on sun warmed soil, a carpet of autumn leaves, scorched brick framed by fire etched beams. The only thing not

brown were the eyes, or maybe they were, but shiny, reflecting the sky and the twin suns.

The colors of her hair and, if also brown, then her eyes. Had she simply seen herself? She found the spoon again and made a fist around the wings, unmindful of the pain.

Garm loosened her fingers from the metal. "You can eat later, if you wish." His voice was back to being gentle and his movements around her as he cleaned up the mess were also gentle. He paused now and again to touch her.

"Where is that place?" she asked, eyes following one of his hands as the dark fingers picked at yellow grains that seemed suspended in the translucent marble.

He didn't stop what he was doing. "What place?"

"Where the reeds grow, the window reeds."

"Camerat system."

"Was I born there?"

"I don't know."

"Niv is Camerat."

He raised his head and she wondered how could she have forgotten how bright his green eyes were. "Yes, he is. You knew him?"

When she looked away from him, Garm felt it like a drawing from his soul. The reflection in the center of her eyes had showed a tiny diamond shape, not him.

Bolda pulled him away. "You're going to have to do something about that. Or are you planning on waiting until there's nothing left of her to bring back out of pattern?"

Garm's turn to shrug. "Do I tell you how to weave?"

Seven days all together and he was heartily sick of walking. Time he could measure, and direction, but not distance. How far had they gone already? Or did size even have a place in where this was?

When he checked on Ulanda again, she had been eating -- her bowl was half empty -- but she was rubbing her forehead, the spoon again in a death grip in the other hand. Not as bland-faced as earlier, even the little food she'd had was making a difference.

He turned to Bolda. "Is there anything better left for her to eat?"

Bolda was picking dried corn meal from the stirring spoon with his thumbnail, popping the bits into his mouth. "No. And the water's almost gone."

A familiar clatter from behind -- Ulanda had dropped her spoon -- and Bolda flickered dangerously towards explosion. The echo of metal on marble blended with the vibration from the floor and the distant hum.

Sighing, Garm looked towards Ulanda. She had the spoon back already, holding it cupped with both hands, as though she were offering the bird to the air, her face raised.

He followed her look upwards. "Give me the stirring spoon," he said to Bolda. Grabbing it from his hand, he squatted and tapped the rounded side of the bottom on the floor. A pattern of sound, louder than the hum and more defined than their voices. Both Bolda and Ulanda watched him.

The corn meal in her bowl was still barely warm -- or his fingers were cold -- but the mixture was thick and made a smooth ball. He threw the mush as hard as he could, right over his head.

It stuck. About four feet up, black in contrast to the bright white. The flattened ball dropped a moment later with a plop. Bolda picked it up. "Was the ceiling always that high?" he asked, sniffing the handful of corn. His mouth was half opened before he blinked and dropped his hand.

"No. There was no echo before. The change must have been so gradual we didn't notice."

Garm walked back to Ulanda and took the spoon from her fingers. She didn't resist. The metal was warm, warmer than she could have made it by simply touching. As he rubbed the breast of the bird with one finger he almost felt a rapid flutter, a heartbeat.

"What makes the sound?" he asked, taking one of her hands. He wrapped her fingers around the shaft of the spoon then held them there with his hand. Her skin smelled stale, a metallic smell and the scent of corn. They all needed baths. "Is it the bird in the nest?"

She shook her head. "The wind." Barely more than a whisper. "The biting end of the diamond. When you close the blinds."

And saw again, the diamond reflected in Ulanda's eyes. "How do we get out of here?" He lifted her head, forcing her to look at him. She was deeper into pattern now, past easy answering. But gave no resistance either, she yielded as though she lacked any will of her own, and he was glad of it. Because the eyes that looked into his weren't passive for all that her body was; the word didn't have a place in what she had become, anymore than it had with Cassa.

"Just let it go, it's not important," Cassa had told him. She was curled spoon fashion, her back against him, holding his arms around her, tucked with her elbows. She had nibbled on the back of one of his fingers, pulling at the fine hairs with her teeth until he bit an earlobe in retaliation and it had been he who had to eventually stop, frightened at how easily she responded to the violence and even more at how he had.

"Scratch you and you still bleed like the Law Clerk you were. It's all one and the same, all those rules you worry about so much, they don't mean anything.

You should try worshipping Chaos like the Spann do. A different perspective might improve your love making." The words were growled and she sounded angry but it was just her manner, he knew she was teasing him. She was sleepy and satisfied, her body told him what her voice wouldn't admit. Only months after he'd first seen her and he had been that Law Clerk still... and he hadn't. Tass'alt. Occasionally, he still woke expecting his wife in his bed, or dreaming of her, woke to a different taste and texture of skin, and had to force his heart to slow, then to deliberately touch Cassa, to push the difference into his soul.

A delicate scatter of blue and red tattoos lay across Cassa's cheekbone, inches from his mouth, the crease of her eye and the stiff brown hairs of her eyebrow, just a tongue length away. His bed, and their clothes in a heap on the floor, surrounded by watery footprints beading on the waxed wood parquet and a blend of bath water and oils and sweat on their skins.

Months later and he would have known to let her fall asleep. "You don't believe in the Spann Heresy any more than I do," he said, smelling the lavender as he held her tighter and felt the tension he recognized as good part anger, replace the contentment.

"Does it matter what I believe?" She turned to face him, the anger leaving her eyes as quickly as it had come. "I am." Pain remained, and a sadness that was a permanent rider if he looked deep enough. And deeper still, if he cared to see it, was the measure of despair that was the pain's companion.

He signed the glow-globes off and she sighed at the gathering darkness and cuddled in closer, arms crossed in front with the scratch of her braids against his chest. "You know," she whispered, mouth against the skin of his throat, her breath tickling him, "when I come out of pattern, it fades like a dream. I only know it's real from the way other people act towards me."

She nosed against him, breathing deeply, tasting his skin with the tip of her tongue and he thought she had begun to relax again. Then she glanced up and he felt more than saw the shadows that were still there. "When I left with Gennady, I thought I had escaped Temple forever. Freedom. It doesn't exist anymore than good and evil does, not for me."

"You were free before and you are now, only in a different way. Perhaps you paid for one kind of freedom with the other." He ran a hand along her spine, to the small hollow at the base and the dimples. His other arm cradled her head, his hand playing in the blend of their hair. Hers appeared almost black with the only light coming from the coals of the brazier set nearby, the silver of his, red marked.

"Nothing's real but what's right now." Her breath came faster and her eyes closed.

He hadn't known enough to stop. "If the payment was real, perhaps what you bought was too."

She didn't answer immediately and he saw the flicker of her eyes under the eyelids, like the movement when dreaming. She was going into deep pattern. He massaged her shoulder to soothe her then used his new skills to feel along the g'ta points to her throat. She bit suddenly, with a sound half between a growl and a cry, her teeth catching the fleshy base of his thumb, pinching enough to hurt, then harder again. Burning pain, then the slight give that meant the skin had broken, and a trickle of his blood mixed with her saliva.

Working the fingers of his other hand into her mouth, bruisingly hard, he pushed down on her jaw until she released, almost getting those fingers caught next as her teeth closed with a snap. A different red mixed with his, she had caught her upper lip, the flesh sliced and welling with blood. Her eyes were open but empty, and gradually she lost muscle tone and slumped against him.

Well schooled, Ulanda didn't bite and she remained upright, kneeling. "Is there a way out?" he asked again, looking straight into her eyes, hoping for some reaction. "Where is the door?" And other variations, giving her time between each but with the same result. "Ulanda, we're low on food..." He shook his head. Her death might be what Cassa wanted... he might well be inviting her death and expecting her help in it. Reason had too dangerous an application here. He tried a different route: "Ulanda. The bird is flying. Do you see it?"

A slight contraction of her pupils was his reward. "Bird." Less a spoken word than a movement of her lips, but it was a start.

The metal spoon was still in her hand, her hand held cupped in his, he held his other hand over top. "The bird is flying..."

"In the reeds." Her body started to weave to the hum he could barely hear, a small movement, a tightening and easing of muscles. A dance, he realized, and he wondered what this one was, and its original purpose.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know that bird," he said, as he held her eyes with his. That bird hadn't danced. At all. There hadn't been anything in between, no link from overpattern to her body that would allow for dancing. And that body was stone now, the entire room in broken shards of stone like granite knives.

He had taken a piece from the study with him and worn it on a chain, a finger length of stone with silver wire wrapped in a coil around it. For years he had worn it. Out of the worst kind of pride, he finally realized. The hand that put the stone back had been old already. Months later, the wire was stone, breaking when he touched it. A year later, dust, gray as age. He hadn't gone into her study again.

"I know that bird," he repeated hoarsely, feeling his throat close from the memory. Another deep breath and he continued, "I've flown with her but never there, never in the reeds."

Her eyes focused on his. A look he remembered well and he'd always called it 'empty', the only word he could think of to describe something that must be the absolute opposite. There was very little that was human in her look.

But even this little bit of human was something he could use. He ran a finger along her jaw, feeling the weaving of the dance in her movements. "Could you show me the way?" And moved his fingers lower to follow the line of her throat, catching at the hollow. "We could go together."

More of a focus. Her mouth opened slightly and there was an inward drawing just before she blinked. Over her shoulder, two lights flared, then dimmed, but Garm could still see them far in the distance but more importantly, feel the energy lines as though they were etched in the surface of the marble. A simple portal.

A sweat had broken out on her forehead and she looked confused, then sick. But that was all -- she trembled as he held her close against him, totally out of overpattern.

He rubbed her wristbands gently, building only enough fire that she started to recover. Minor pattern responses to help to break the residual hold of the major forms, with the body following those minor things instead. Pain, but mostly pleasure. He stopped when the first black embers of the residue showed at the end of the braid ends.

A brief rain of sparks like ebony popped and sizzled before breaking into rainbows of color, shooting like comets across the marble. She pulled away, braid ends slipping through his fingers. He couldn't see her eyes, they were turned from him. Her body followed.

The last of the braids caught tight in his hands and she gasped. Slippery cords, pale blue silk strands with silver in the central core, and strong.

"You have what you want," she whispered.

"I don't know what I have. If you can see more, then tell me." Her expression didn't change; she was still too close to what she had just done. Again, reason had too dangerous an application in this. It would be very easy for her to see him as her murderer. "You were right, the braids are the same color as lavender flowers." As he spoke, he gathered the cords in, a single loop around each hand, blue on amber. He moved closer in that gathering, hoping to gather her, and took hope in that she didn't move back.

"And the weave, shall we call it that?" With his fingers still tangled in the cords, he slowly turned her face to his, his eyes doing the asking and finding the answer he expected already in hers.



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Ulanda watched the wind blow the reeds as Garm reset the braids, tightening them and smoothing the ends where they had gotten wet and wrinkled. The portal hadn't lead back to Palace. When he finished, he turned away without a word to her.

Circling -- he circled her. She felt as though she had taken a handful of his emotions and was spinning with her arms outstretched and she couldn't stop. She could feel herself losing him the same way she felt the deaths of the slow moving fish Bolda and Garm trapped in the shallow water, then scooped out.

The suns hurt her eyes; even squeezing them shut left burning twin spots of white in a field of red. With her eyes open, Garm's hair added a third source of brightness, one that moved constantly as he turned with and then against the direction of the wind. His hair was longer, past tickling the tops of his ears, and she remembered how it had brushed her face as he lay against her.

Getting to her feet, she walked to a sandy portion of the shoreline, concentrating on the feel of the water against her ankles. Brackish, but drinkable. The wind blew a whiff to her of the stock boiling on the heating coil, all the bones of the fish they had eaten earlier. Fresh pieces, chopped up, waited to be added just before serving. Bolda would season the stew with algae, same as he did the fish steaks and the grill and the broth. A dark blue on the greenish flesh of the cooked fish, the algae looked black in the water, it carpeted the surface, holding the waves to an oily ripple. Even the air smelled of the algae, peppery and warm.

When she looked back, Garm had left; he must be walking around the small island again. There was the start of a path along the edge; she had walked it just once. The island looked the same on the other side with the same black water surrounding it.

"You want tea?" Bolda asked. A knife was in one hand, heavy with scales and slime. He had been watching her and Garm while working with the fish.

Shaking her head, she went back to where she had been sitting and was almost asleep when she felt the tickle. A shovel footed insect, six legs pushed against the skin of her shoulder as it tried to burrow.

Just inches from her nose and she went cross-eyed trying to focus on it. Startled, she flicked it off without thinking. Pain shot through her hand and she tucked her arm against her breast.

Bolda retrieved the bug, and held it by the sides of the hard shell, all six of its legs scrambling at the air. Yellow with specks of lavender, blue legs, shiny except for the flat of the shovel ends. The ends were the same yellow as the back. "How about this, baked or boiled?" he asked.

"No thanks, you go ahead."

"You might change your mind after a few more days of fish." He sat down next to her then tossed the bug a few feet away. It turned over in a scatter of sand grains and dug in. Besides the fish and the plants, it was the only life she had seen. She let her pattern awareness follow it. One bug, on the whole island, only one. And no other creatures at all. Further out: fish, all the same slow moving fish, shallow-water feeders, eating algae. There were no fish past where they would be able to catch them easily.

She pulled back, her awareness returning through the water as though she were swimming the distance. If she made a leap she might get lost.

"I don't need more days," she said to Bolda. He was still watching her. "I'm enjoying this one very long day. When you two leave, I think I'll stay here. Reminds me of Kalin with a different colour sky."

"And there's less mud."

"Mud was safe. I should have stayed there." The two yellow suns hadn't moved over a quarter of the sky since they had come through the portal onto a circle of white marble, dead center of the round island. High noon to maybe mid afternoon. Brushing the sand smooth with the curled edge of one hand, she swept the algae covering the sand to a thin blue line. "I can't think of any place more perfect than this," she added as evenly as she could, resisting the sudden urge to yell. She winced when the fist she tried to make hit the sand.

"We'll leave soon," Garm said. "To some place no doubt as perfect." Ulanda could barely hear his voice over the wind. He had come up behind Bolda, a bundle of thin purple reeds in his arms. He threw the bundle onto the sand and then sat down, stretching his long legs out in front.

Bolda picked up one of the thin plain reeds and ran it through his fingers like someone would play with a long strand of grass before dropping it. But he didn't drop it. Holding the reed still for a moment, he stared, frowning. Then moving quickly, crushed and twisted the reed between his palms until the length separated into fibers, each not much thicker than a primary braiding cord.

Taking a piece of a diamond reed from a pocket, he pulled each fiber between the sharp edge of the band and his thumb. Garm and her both watched him as the mass of lavender strands grew, curling as they dried in the warm sun.

Ulanda pulled her robe over her feet to keep them from burning. "What are you doing?"

"Baskets. For the dried fish. They'll rot in the sealed containers or stink up the clothes if we wrap them." As he answered her, Bolda was looking at Garm. Another strand joined the others. "Somebody's got to do something."

"That's a bad habit of somebody," Garm said with a chuckle. He leaned back on his elbows and turned his face to the twin suns.

His profile looked carved in metal, all angles and planes in shades of gold and bronze. The mane of white hair fell back, away from his face. He was thinner, she realized, mentally superimposing how he had been when she first saw him.

Then he turned his head and looked at her and his eyes were emerald. She remembered too, how they could change.

Ulanda picked up a strand of reed that had rolled her way. The wind was scattering them in twos and threes, they rolled until caught up against something. Bolda ignored the lost ones, making more in a steady rhythm of crush and scrape.

Pinch lightly, don't bend the wrists and don't put any pressure between the thumb and finger, not any more than needed to hold the flat side of the fiber. Bending forward, she took one end between her teeth and nibbled, enjoying the crunch, crunch as she worked her way along. The fragment tasted peppery like the algae did.

When she looked up, Bolda turned away and tossed the diamond reed band next to the pile then picked up a fist full of fibers. Just a mess of strands, she thought, still biting hers, but a moment later he had a center, and spokes, and was already weaving the first round.

Garm picked up the crystal reed band Bolda had dropped, and turned it. A dagger reflection danced on her clothes, then her face. "He's woven us into his cloth," he said. "The shuttle carries the threads across the warp. In what pattern do you think?"

She raised an arm as a shield against the flickering light. "Were you thinking of a bird like on the wall of your study? I think for here, a blue legged insect would do better. Or, how about two blue legged insects?"

"Don't pretend to powers you don't possess." He reached over and dropped the band on her lap. "There's four points to a diamond. Besides the crystal mouth, I wonder if there isn't a portal in each. Is there?"

Ulanda didn't look at it, her eyes never left his face even when Bolda got up, retrieved the reed band, and put it back in his pocket. "How could I know?"

"How do you think you could know?"

Bolda glanced at her. He was working on the side of the basket, a shape in the weave appearing and disappearing as the basket moved, the outer rounded side of the fibers forming an elongated fish shape, surrounded by the shinier smooth side.

"A better question," she said to Garm, "is why should I care to know."

"Because I want it, like I wanted to come here. And now I want to go somewhere else."

His voice was part of the cold of pattern. She remembered how she had reached for it and how it had been her only comfort.

She heard him say something more, and knew she answered, knew the tone of her answer, but all the voices were far away and she couldn't hold onto the anger she felt, then stopped trying.

When she opened her eyes, there were three shallow stacked baskets filled with wrinkled fillets in front of her face. Her head and the baskets were at one outer margin of the tiny shelter, in the center, with her curled around it, was a bundle of reeds tied together, the ends stuck in the sand. The red robe was draped over top.

Red light like a storm sunset, the warm sand against her cheek was like blood. She started coughing, the air thick and heavy in her throat. The sense of overpattern was going, fading faster the more she tried to grab at it.

Garm held the tail of the robe up like a door curtain, his other hand cupping her face. "Calm down, you've been sleeping."

"How long?" she had meant to ask as she crawled out on her knees but the words died in her mouth before she got the first one out.

The lavender sky was gone. Even the pepper smell was gone, the air calm and stale. The twin suns took a moment to place, they were still well above the horizon, two spots in the green curtain of light around them, the only spots that remained motionless.

"Ri-light," she said. "Sarkalt. How?"

"Is it?" Garm brushed her hair back as she nodded.

With the wind stopped, even her whisper sounded loud. "He's at Ri-altar. We must be there also. The broken reeds." Suddenly, she felt like laughing. That much was from the remnants of pattern, in her mind the threads had slowed until she could see them in the same way she knew Sarkalt was at Ri-altar. Black threads, oily, all the colors were there but it made her sick to look at them. "All he needs is Ri, but that's not all he's getting." The words rose up from places she hadn't looked to see. "The reeds on the rug, Garm, all of it's not quite there or it hasn't happened yet. Or other things could still happen. I don't understand..."

There was more in what she was trying not to see. She shook her head then stopped when she almost passed out. The sudden laughter was gone, replaced with raw fear. "The shell is breaking." She heard ice falling on marble. A black Piltsimic. "Garm, it's not safe here."

"Where should we go?"

The fear was replaced as suddenly by anger. "How could I know?" she said again. She bit her lip against saying more, against saying "no" to him. Better to die here than leave and be killed. He could die with her. Here. And Bolda.

"This place is something from Cassa," Garm said, his voice unexpectedly gentle and she felt herself responding even as she knew it to be all his need. His desire.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that it is separate from the Unity we know. Camerat system has two suns but not twins. The Grandfather is a red giant that swallows the sky at sunrise and sunset. I didn't tell you, I didn't want to frighten you."

He held her closer and she took handfuls of what she wanted of his feelings. "Like sand," she whispered. Even that little of what she needed from him fell through her hands like dry sand.

"Perhaps it's most of what she really knew of Camerat, or first knew, something you might see in a reed garden when all you had were eyes to see with and every other kind of touch was touching sharp glass." He shivered as he held her, he wanted the comfort returned. Or it was all for his comfort.

"Bitter seed," he added and held her tighter when she tried to break away.

Garm was on his hands and knees before the portal, tracing the double sun pattern on the marble surface when the snow started to fall. She looked around. The sky was changing again, the twin suns lost in the glare. And not just green, not anymore. Images and sensations threatened to overwhelm her, to drag her into their reality. Her reaction was instinctive to protect who she was, to keep that some part of herself separate to return to... which, with her lack of practice at being a Priest, meant pulling her mind back into her body as far as she could.

"That's not me, is it?" she asked.

"No." Garm started over.

Cold invaded her bones. Snow. Regardless of what Garm had said, or how true it had been, the ice was becoming her.

The scent of cedar. Ri-altar. She could be there so easily. In the ice, in the snow. In this ice, this snow. And dance for Sarkalt? Or pray?

She thought again of Kalin. An honest prayer: mud and marsh grass. And here? The peppery algae and diamond mouthed reeds. To whom should she pray, here or at Ri-altar or in Kalin? She giggled, then hiccupped. The sound of the prayers was the sound of the wind over the reeds.

What would you...

Niv?

The twin suns began to spin, trailing lavender in the white stone. Two, then one, not as bright as before, the sky around them brighter. "Cutting it a bit fine," Bolda muttered, then pushed her hard as the portal opened.

His request for privacy honored, Sarkalt walked to the edge of the cliff. The skin of earth and plants was worn back here to reveal the bones of the mountain. Frost blasted crevices split the granite. If it had been any other mountain, the cliff edge would advance over time, the sheer drop taking pebbles and rocks with each thaw or storm until the mountain was sand to be washed away by the ocean. The path he used followed a short way into one cleft, the stone on either side rising shoulder high before the trail grew too dangerous and he stopped. Moss dusted underfoot, dried yellow-brown, lining the lower reaches of gray stone, lichen higher on the bare rock. Gray as the stone from a distance, on closer inspection, the lichen separated into forms with all the shades of a storm cloud at sunset, yellow, burnt orange and black.

Insects had followed him from the grassy area, flies most noticeably. They didn't bother him, he let them walk on his skin and could taste the salt they tasted and in return, he sensed the chemicals they left that called to their own kind. He had angered Niv further, laughing when his tass'alt waved them away and asked how that was so different from what he did.

Late summer and dry. Sarkalt felt the dust in his mouth, brushed into the still air by the long white robe. The air felt heavy with dust and spores and with heat. Near the edge of the cliff, he pulled himself tight within his body before looking outward, wanting the change in perspective but only with his eyes.

Harvest would be very soon, the grain fields were raw gold, reddish in the distance below him, the fruit orchards dark green: apples and late plums, winter pears. South Bay Temple was deep in preparation for the local Blessings and he had taken precious moments while there to feel the wholeness of what they were doing. He wanted to leave now, but knew his impatience was with the possibilities here, not the sameness of what his eyes saw. Ri-altar hadn't changed in all the time he had been coming here and the cliff would never overtake where he now stood.

"Has it ever changed?" Cassa had asked him once. "I'm breathing but it's always the same air."

It hadn't and he hadn't, his never of shorter duration but the same origin. He stretched to feel the distraction of his body and looked over the valley to the small city set where the sea began in a curve against the land like a shell, then to the horizon, green washed to white in the band of cloud before the sky started.

"I see a land ready for harvest," he said to the distant water. "What have you sown here?"

A pebble fell to land by his feet. "The wind," the stone said and he thought it might roll to the edge and fall clear. The day was hot and dry but it could be wet

so easily. Always when he thought of her it was wet and often winter, and he felt the drawing to allow it that was part his desire and part hers.

"Are you going to stand there all day talking to yourself?" Anga asked from above him.

Sarkalt looked up. In the panted words had been fear at the drop so close to the loom-master's feet. The man was covered with sweat. Pilvir stood beside him, one of the other Salin, a human, close by, working a crystal. A passive eye. Sarkalt let himself notice the minor energy distortion as the settings changed -- the effect feeling much like a heat shimmer looks -- then the man moved away and the stone of the mountain blocked both him and the crystal.

Another skitter of rock came from directly behind him and Niv's voice. "Lord Priest, they wait."

High-formal, his tass'alt's last refuge of disapproval. Sarkalt's gaze returned for a moment longer to the white line that separated ocean from sky, then shifted his attention, his eyes sore and burning, to South Bay Temple on the near, more gentle slope, and last, to the shelf of rock under his feet. Granite with ribbons of quartz. To his sun dazzled eyes, the vein appeared hollow and empty against the shadow of the cleft.

Niv waited well back. His nails clicked in time with the rise and fall of his crest. "How long will this take?" he asked, more normally in Ri-tongue, but it was a question he had asked repeatedly.

"A day," Sarkalt said once more. He walked slowly on the uneven ground. "We can stay another day at South Bay Temple before returning to Palace." He would let Niv talk him into two days and please his tass'alt. What he had to do would be done, regardless.

"I've set my own passive eyes on this," Anga said on joining them.

"Secondary to our systems," Pilvir said. "They have been checked."

"You could use the Net link for more than just music and save us all some trouble," Anga added. "A properly monitored Net interface and we'd get everything you get." He stopped, blocking the easier path. "I have the people here capable of doing it even if you don't."

"You forget there's a sense to this that is deeper and older than your loom-master memory weaves."

"Ri itself isn't as old as that. And Ri is all..."

The drums started, the sound coming from the pull of Temple Net focused through the flutter to give direction. "To see the pattern of what is coming, all I need is Ri."

A simple beat of one second spacing, no variation. The drums were to measure time and keep them together. When the pillars were set in Ri-pattern then even that Net link would be cut off. The loom-master wore his promises like a garment

to be changed at a whim. Ri was enough. Anga's passive sensor eyes would die the moment he was gone.

Further back from the ledge, small cedar trees grew in a ring. Twisted trunks with deep furrows in the bark and few stubby needles at the tips of the branches. The smell of resin greeted Sarkalt as he stepped into the circle of trees, and from the center, as he turned slowly, the twist of the trunks resolved into a regular form: branches leaned inwards, a rim of green frosted the inner edges, the trees slanted towards him. Further out from each tree, a high ranking Ri-Acolyte knelt, alternating male and female, all of them young enough that pairing the sexes had a similar effect on Ri-pattern as though he had Temple dancers here. Above each, Ri-pattern rose and in the shape of the energy, he could see the subtle variations in how each sensed this world.

Anga's crystals were more than passive eyes; Sarkalt felt how links were still growing between them and how they sipped from the others. In how they worked was the feel of the people who had made them: literal, systematic, exacting. And like Pilvir, ti'Linn.

"Your flitter is about to leave," he said to Anga. "Unless you care to walk down, be on it."

The loom-master looked at each of the Ri in turn while he scratched his nose. "Nice day. I thought I'd stay after all." He sat down and released his breath in a puff. "Comfortable too. There's nothing like fresh air."

Niv had taken privilege, waiting closer than the several other tass'alt, just outside the perimeter. He was as much a discord here as the loom-master and Sarkalt motioned him away, waiting until he was gone before responding to Anga.

"Or would you join me in here?" Sarkalt said, letting Ri-pattern start around him, taking the easy measure from the drumming and the harmony of the others, but letting the form he took be a threat -- he wove a web. "You've offered enough advice about our limitations, but haven't said what your own Net says about what the Empress is doing. Do the Archives that gave you birth whisper any possibilities to you?"

"You've chosen a bad time to start sounding coherent." Anga shook his head. "Thanks, but no thanks, maybe I'll be on my way after all." With obvious effort, he got up, then walked over to the nearest woman, and snapped his fingers in front of her face, then stood a moment still watching. She didn't move.

Sarkalt didn't extend his awareness, he didn't need to, he felt what the woman felt, he was her... all of those helping here were Ri. The presence of the loom-master was the brushing of a fly's wings against the threads they wove.

Poss a'tlic. Not raised in Temple, and young to have achieved the rank she had without having family connections. And ambitious to be one of the next called to Initiation.



His attention was noticed; those crystals of Anga hummed their messages to the man. A minor motion, once more for focus -- Sarkalt held very still the memory of the spiral where a similar motion had served him not at all -- and the loom-master's crystals died.

Anga turned from staring at the woman, his heavy lips pulled back over his teeth in a grimace. "Did you leave the recording functions alone?"

"Should I have?" Sarkalt made a sign to Pilvir, adding, "Have him taken to South Bay Temple in one of our flitters, keep him there."

Anga snorted. "I've got business at Palace."

Sarkalt shrugged and made a motion of allowance, his attention already split more than he wished. A bed of moss was under his knees as he knelt. Just before he dropped any outward notice, he let himself feel the softness of the moss over the rock, and where the moss changed to a brush of dried grass, the soil underneath. The scent of life, insects, a few roots and rhizoid... fungi, all one plant in a mesh of fine strands from the center to the circling trees and beyond. Life and decay of life, fragments consumed by what small creatures could survive here and they in turn by the slower feeders, the elements washing from the humus to the loose pebbles and shale, flowing over the rocks to the cracks and the streams, eventually to the coast and the sea.

He made his awareness go deeper to capture the rhythm of the cycle of life, the things of water and light. Plastic sunshine, he thought, molded of the same energy that warmed the air he breathed. Ri-pattern sparkled around him, joining him with the others as though they were one.

He never wanted to leave this, had never wanted, regardless of his earlier impatience. Desires, he thought and let the part of his mind that could be amused drift idly, willing to be amused at his inconsistencies. Things of the moment, desires, they were real only in the moment and in the consequences. They were as fleeting as a rainbow with the air drying after a storm.

Relaxing into the aura, he settled his body, tying the systems to the pace of the life surrounding him, the sunlight singing in his blood, his eyes open. A shimmer of power grew about him in crackling sheets of light, a curtain of fireflies in full sun. He felt the others in a rise and fall of power as the drums changed again, a new pattern woven in their actions and then he felt them fade, as one by one, the sequence dropped them, their part in this done. Poss a'ltic was the last out and the Net link died at the same instant, the two things joined to the whine of several flitters leaving.

And from the loom-master's craft, in the sound, was a poem.

*I picked the apples  
Fruit withered by the sun, the  
Spurs brittle as the leaves were brown  
Leaves curling in the dust...*

A late harvest in a ruined season? Or a comment of who remained in control of what was happening. Both were meant. Pushing the noise away, Sarkalt opened further to Ri-pattern, stretching his awareness outwards well past what he could have managed on his own without these others here to set the framework to control how this unfolded. The light became the sparkle of sun on water when looking up from the depths, and the pulse slowed to surges that counted centuries.

The other was beautiful but this is what he loved, this is where the world-patterns sang to each other like the great whales did across the breadth of Ri. Songs weaving a cloth. Time danced in that weave, in a fabric like shot silk, past and future, warp and weft, the now of the Ri-bred Acolytes, the several Warders remaining to observe, the other attendants and tass'alt. All were in a single ripple of the cloth, riding a crest of changing color.

A part of him watched that crest of present time, enough that he stayed human, even as he strained at the limits of what his body could endure and live. More than that he couldn't reach, this or death, his awareness of overpattern was only in what he could feel reverberating in the Ri song, but it was enough. If he could ever talk to Cassa, this was how.

"All he has is Ri," he heard as a whisper, and took it for his own mind. Holding the essence of Ri-pattern in his mind like a seed, with the vision of Ulanda as he had last seen her, the living germ inside, he let himself drift into the song, and waited.

The fireflies of Ri-pattern danced in the morning. The grass and trees were heavy with dew, crystal drops sparkled on the moss, and in the air above the leeward peaks, clear and sharp as cut glass, Palace rose. A single note became more notes, became a simple melody. I know this, Sarkalt thought, I know the several figures wrapped in blankets, two standing by the flitter watching him in the cool dawn, more people inside, all of those sleeping. And he felt a pulling away born of disappointment before he steadied into the song and looked again.

A moment stretched around him in a single yawn: Riltic, his Second was caught round mouthed, with a breath of warm air unfolding in a curl of white that counted eternity in the movement of one molecule. Koisen was forever turning her head, lips parted, a word forever forming.

A moment was long enough to sense another sound rising around him, and like Anga's sensors, this also had the feel of their makers. Rigyant. Another system was breaking into Ri-pattern. Anga at the Blood Searching. His threat: a pattern, a weave. An intent. The loom-master wove Empire and would weave him and his allies out. The other, more obvious, system had been a decoy.

The ability to create, to produce pattern pulls, required a deliberation that was lacking in what he had been doing. Even as Sarkalt thought of the need, shapes

formed in his awareness, mantras to act as the spatial anchors that right now, his body couldn't provide. The Rigyant energy forms sparked against them, regrouped and flared. Rigyant: Piltsimic, but with ti'Linn in the weave, an old ally. In that very long fraction of a moment, Sarkalt had time to wonder what truths the ti'Linn Priests who had bound the energy form had found in the loom-master that they could make such a thing. In context, it had only one purpose.

Sarkalt's deliberate creation bloomed and suddenly, the invading forms didn't exist, they barely ever had. Anga's dream, his intent, his weave. Gone.

But the weave had been huge in place and time, especially in time, and Ri-pattern fell into its absence like water falls into an abyss. And itself was gone.

No, not gone. Lost in the ocean. Palace still rose over the peaks, but his vision wasn't simply of one point of the Unity, but that of a span of cloth stretched out. How simple I am, Sarkalt thought as the cloth spread like a sail loosened in a hurricane, and as the fire in his body turned to ice.

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Niv sat as close as he dared, the flow of blue across his scales trying to match the rhythm of flashes in the column of light that surrounded his Priest. Riltic was dead, with a single open-mouthed gasp he had folded, the long ends of his wrist braids following him down like dropped string. Koisen's scream followed, sounding the alarm that had the others awake instantly.

Poss a'ltic brought him water, the outside of the container smeared with her blood, a single long blond hair stuck to the side. "I sent the others off," she said. "They had to take Riltic's body so that Koisen would go. And the others... I think Narwi won't make it, I don't know, they need help, they all do. The way the storm's coming, if they didn't leave now, they weren't going to be able to, not by flitter." And to Niv's gesture, "There's water enough, don't worry, drink."

"And you?" Niv said, unscrewing the lid. "Why did you stay? You're dying."

She laughed gently, a strange sound with the crackle of fire so loud that it seemed to be coming from all around them. Niv could hear the layers of meaning in her laugh and held them gratefully, the irony and pain, fear, and even the longing. Better than thinking about what might be happening within the fire.

"I'll take my chances here," she said, laughing again as water dripped from her chin. "If the cycling stops before anyone comes back, then I might still be allowed Initiation. If I had gone with them... Pilvir knew why I asked to stay, I could feel it, it was such a surprise, I've never been able to sense the ti'Linn before." She

hiccupped. “The flitter more slid down the mountain then flew but the shielding held and I think they made it.”

She looked at him again, but he still didn’t know what to say. He discounted her words, words meant little with people. They couldn’t be trusted with words, but were only what you could feel in your hands, taste in your mouth.

As they waited through the hours, he helped her as he would have Sarkalt, giving what comfort he could, feeling awkward with her lack of experience and how she reacted to him as though he were just a man. She confused his resolve not to understand her.

He should have killed her at once. Pilvir should have, but he understood why the ti’Linn hadn’t. There was still hope that she might get her pattern sense under control to the point where Initiation would have the desired effect of tying her into the Unity. The alternative was the useless death of a rogue.

Sparks from the curtain of flame were echoed in her eyes. He watched for the start of the trembling that could grow terrifyingly fast until they were convulsions, and each time he added points of blood on her skin from his nails as he held her down.

“Is he alive?” he asked, as the sky darkened around that column of green. He was too busy with his hands to signal the nuances he thought proper to the form of the question. “All I had were angry words to him, I want more words between us.” He whispered that last.

“He’s alive, I’m alive, we’re all alive.” Exhaustion flavored with hysteria showed in her voice and he held her tighter. With a blink, the fire in her eyes banked for a moment, then she sighed. “My dad’s going to be so proud.” She laughed again, hardly louder than the sigh, and it was an ugly sound full of hate, but Niv heard in it that she would survive this and dared hope as much for Sarkalt.

Morning again and his eyes burned from watching, the fire following even when he looked away. Gray was all around them, the clouds held back by the sheet of power. Blinking made the afterimage worse, but at the edges of his vision, the gray mass seethed with color just under the surface, like mother of pearl, and forks of light crossed and re-crossed the sky. He didn’t think anyone else could make it here, even walking up the path from South Bay Temple. They were trapped in a way, a trap of storm against the blanket of power.

“Is he alive?” he asked again. She had become very quiet sometime during the night and dawn showed the blood soaked fabric of her sleeves had dried to deep rust. He asked again and added a measure of insistence, then once again, in Ri-tongue, with only his voice to show his desperation.

When she looked towards him at the third asking, he saw that the same quiet had replaced the fire in her eyes. But she did answer. “I don’t know if he can come out of it.”

Still in Ri-tongue, he asked, “Why not?”

“I can only see small parts, but there appears to be something in the fabric, a loop perhaps, it repeats with the same series of notes over and over. The song is so complex, I can’t...” She hesitated a moment, then continued. “I think he’s trapped deep in Ri-pattern, and inside that... I don’t know what it is, but Ri-pattern is like a shell holding him in.”

“What can we do?”

She shook her head. “I can touch Ri-pattern, but... I’m not part of it. I’m not a Priest.” Fierce life showed in her words. “Not yet.”

Poss a’ltic made no attempt to stop him as he stumbled to his feet, half blinded still. Feeling carefully with his hands, he reached the circle and the first of the ring of trees.

They should be burnt, he thought as he took hold of a branch. The outer bark crumbled under his grip, coming off in flakes and small pieces, but it smelled of fresh resin and stuck to the smooth scales of his hand like a bitter honey. And his fingers found what his dazzled eyes couldn’t: short needles that were spring soft and just breaking free from the scales enfolding them. Next year’s, he thought, and held them to his nose. They would dry before full grown, a brittle waste, a year lost.

Throwing the fragment into the curtain he lost sight of it almost immediately. This close even he could feel something, a tingle over his body but it didn’t match, something of it alien, a disharmony that grated at him.

One more step, pulling loose of the innermost tree, and he was almost there, crushed needles clenched in his fist. Sparkles in a curtain of light was all he could see, there was no order to them. His hand entered the blind spot of his vision before it did the boundary of the curtain but the light had to be within reach of his arm.

“Sarkalt?” A whisper. His hand felt nothing but the morning air electric with freshness.

“Where are you? Sarkalt?” Air so fresh you could cup the moisture from it and drink, air like being reborn. For a moment, in the cloud of his vision, he thought he saw a form and turned his head to see better, hoping against knowledge that it would be Sarkalt.

A clouded morning, raining lightly. And cold, the air fresh, but he wasn’t where he had been a moment before. Cassa was before him, sitting on a rock, her hair and her light robe soaked from the rain. Behind her, the dawn was a brightening in the cloud. He was near the cliff’s edge.

“No, Cassa,” Niv whispered. He couldn’t see the long-ago Sarkalt who had been there as well, standing near where she had sat. “Let me go to him. He’s given you Ulanda as a prayer; everything you need from him is in her. Please.”

She stood and faced him. He saw confusion and pain like a blush over her skin, and as always when he saw her, even all that time ago when he had been so young, and even now, when he knew what she was, he felt sorry.

"Cassa, he's given everything possible there is for him to give. He can't give you what he himself doesn't have. Let him just have me. Let me have him."

She spoke as though he hadn't: "What would you do..."

He understood the words now where he hadn't when he had heard her speak them. Old-tongue. And understood also, that old-tongue or not, the words were as a flower is to the plant. And if any person was unreliable with words, she was.

"Nothing," he whispered, closing his eyes, squeezing them. "I would do nothing," he said again, but didn't know to what. Or to who. Or why.

He was running with the others. Near the second dawn, Grandfather had buried half the sky with red, but the spark of the Son was coming fast on his flank. The air held the scent of the city, rotting straw and wet brick. It was already warm. They splashed through pools of water in the dark narrow space between the buildings, then jumped the twin ruts where the streets crossed and where hard wheels had broken deep paths in the crumbling brick. Pippini alka d'Nivkh was leading, her first outing as a team leader and she was nervous enough to be angry at having even two of the smaller, less aggressive males along.

"Duka-duka d'Nivkh," his older brother teased, almost breathless with excitement, and slapped him into the black slimed wall, away from the quick nails of their sister. "Tag-a-long, you keep down." He nodded towards her then winked at Niv. Then letting Niv go, flattened against the same wall then inched to the corner and peered around. A single shaft of light poured down the street bordering old-town with the new. Yellow Son-rise bleached the pastel blue from his head crest as he looked.

Niv almost fell as he grabbed out with both hands. His fingers closed on air. "Kalmulla," he said, speaking his brother's name for the first time since he had screamed it over his body. He forgot why he was standing there, even where he was; all he knew was the smell of the old city and his brother alive. Instinctively, he reached out again. And felt a push stopping him, gentle as a nudge but relentless.

Gulping the cold air, he sank to his knees just outside the column. The rest of the memory was easy, worn smooth with retelling, a whisper he heard with rising and in the long times before sleep would come. After the failed raid and his capture, d'Nivkh Clan wouldn't buy him back.

Something in the push against his hands blurred his mind, memories of the years on Ri retreated as he tried to reach them, the times between rising and

sleep distant. There was something he had meant to do, he thought, clicking his nails. Something he had lost.

Someone moved beside him. He felt he should know her, but there was a strangeness to her, as though she flickered between what he expected and what little he could make out with the center of his vision blurred.

Her eyes were all wrong, the pupils round black specks, and the rim of blue color only a narrow band. "Niv," she said and it took him a moment to hear, the language was wrong as well.

He shook his head. "Kalduka."

She nodded. "Kalduka," she repeated, rolling the word in her mouth. On her knees beside him, she still looked up to his face, her hands resting in her lap.

Curious, he touched the dark colored cloth. Stiff, brittle. She tensed but didn't move. Then again, softly, she said, "Kalduka, there is something you can do for me. My arms, they hurt. If you could rub them..."

He moved one finger to her wrist, then both hands touching, he bend his head down, her smell tickling his nose. It was wrong too, he wasn't sure she was female and if female, then fertile. The roar all around him that he couldn't quite hear, confused him. He pushed her down, the cam-claws on his wrists snagging in the sleeves of her robe. A very little more pressure and the glands secreting though the special claws would leave her paralyzed for minutes. If she was female. If she was human. He knew... things... but understood so little.

She twisted under him then lay still, panting. And with a muffled gasp, "Gently."

The cloth of her undergarment was stuck to her skin, or she had used it as a bandage. She was crying by the time he was half finished. What skin was bare reflected light and at first he thought it was all just reflection, but she had a light of her own. Sparkles rose through the dried creases of blood and around the swelling flesh where the skin was broken.

When he started rubbing, she sat up, always moving with his touch as though to escape it. The blood chipped against the rougher scales along the edge of his hands, clearing more skin. "That's enough," she gasped. Then, "Just hold me, please Kalduka."

He didn't stop. His scales rippled with color, shades from turquoise to a blue deep enough to be black, and in the darker ones came a reflection of her light: green stars that were born and died as he watched. They distracted him from being aroused, he kept forgetting, then startled, would find himself again with a body. Was she human? And in season -- did he risk wasting his seed? And why did the questions come to him flavored with agony. He drank fury as he tugged at the tie of his robe with one hand so he didn't let her go. Rage in how he tightened his grip with the other. He didn't need to see to be aware of how the curtain of

light before them was growing to meet them, streams of energy leaping to meet those around her arms.

“Niv, you were going to him, remember?”

The energy buzzed around him and he shivered. “Who?” he said. “My brother?”

“Niv. Kalduka. Think, please. I can’t control this much longer. You were looking for him. Not your brother. Sarkalt. Sarkalt.”

Sarkalt, something in his mind repeated. And the closed dreamtime opened to memory.

Poss a’ltic panted, “Go to him. He can’t find his way back. He’s waiting for you.”

“No.” He stood and backed away. “Nothing, I’ll do nothing.”

There were other words crowding his answer, but not his words and not Poss a’ltic’s. What would you do if you were me? Cassa was there, even if he didn’t see her. Ri-altar in the gray dawn of a winter day.

Poss a’ltic was bent over, rocking, arms tucked and hidden by her long hair. Green fire crackled from the yellow tips, drawing them in a current of Ri-light, joining the curtain that held Sarkalt. When she looked up, her face was whipped by hair and power. “What do you...?” she panted.

Part of Cassa’s question? Her eyes had always been human. And with the same pain showing so clearly. He knew Sarkalt’s pain chiefly by touch, never seeing it as with Cassa or now, this woman. Or with Ulanda, especially with Ulanda. Niv took another step back. Gray in the center of his vision, gray cloud all around... and a column of green.

What would you do?

What would he? Taken quite plainly... and not in how the tendrils of Ri-light caressed him, having gained substance from when he had reached for them instead. Now feeling like braiding cords dragging against his scales in a ruin of the weave, a Priest’s caress. Now like words... Sarkalt’s words and simple in comparison to what Cassa spoke. “I need you to be human. What is human in me, loves you, and what isn’t, loves you more.”

Taken quite simply. “I said I would stay with him,” Niv whispered.

“Then go to him.” Poss a’ltic spoke, not Cassa. “Go, he’s waiting for you.”

## - 19 -

Gennady stood center, his arms crossed, wanting to be well seen by the guards watching him. Unarmed, they were a reminder of his impotence rather than a direct threat. The scans hadn’t stopped a moment since he had been



escorted from the secured rooms in Three Crescents Temple. He had no desire to be subjected to a restraining field; his teeth still ached from the last one.

From the time spent traveling he assumed they had left Three Crescents. Was this another Temple? The flitter matched the flitter bay with the same deeply overlapped tile design, and with the same shifting aurora of blue and gold in the frosted plates. They provided the only light, and he allowed yuin sight to grow behind half closed lids until the blue was touched with silver and violet and the room brighter. There were no recognizable signatures in the tiles. They could be any place.

The guard facing him had backed up a step; Gennady smelled the fear in the man. "Stand down," the loom-master growled irritably to the guard, then swore as the seal pattern he was attempting failed. Without turning from another attempt, he said to Gennady, "It won't do you any good to impress him by showing yuin change, and I'm not."

Deep red flickered in the belly of the rounded Piltsimic where the cloth and flesh was heaviest, but the face glowed silver-red with the heat of his blood. Gennady let the scent of the loom-master move over his hollow honor teeth and thought about ways of killing the man. But only said: "I don't like being asked to go around half blinded."

And was ignored. With a mental shrug, he blinked rapidly to speed the change back to normal sight, and when the room was blue again, went to wait with Olumka. Two guards had stayed close to the Spann, they moved off at Gennady's approach. His friend clicked mouthparts together to make a soft noise, a Spann version of a nervous tick. Not a place he'd choose for a talk but Gennady didn't think he was going to be offered better or more private. Olumka and the guards had been waiting here when he arrived.

"Is this your doing?" he asked in his limited Spann. He gestured around him, willing to include whatever Olumka wished. Place, freedom -- however limited -- present company.

"Talk, talk. Here and here." Trade-basic.

He wasn't interested in polite chitchat which was all Olumka used Trade for and then only among non-Spann. What Olumka did usually translated as merchant but nothing tangible was bought or sold. An influence broker rather: words offered over thimbles of qui-fire. Promises between Spann breeding groups, gene lines bartered. Debts, like what Gennady had entailed by using Olumka to get a message to the Overpriest Sarkalt early in his imprisonment.

He tried again. "Where are we?"

"Here." Apparently the Net restrictions didn't apply to Olumka, the word was in Spann-native this time, but embellished with an explosion of clicks that sent the watching Net reeling. Here. Gennady had a brief impression they were hanging on the outer skin of Palace and suddenly, the blue and gold light had the taste of Ri.

Salt in the thin air -- any skin here, even that of Palace would have salt dried on it; Ri-surface was a string of islands set in a planet-skirting ocean. Gennady ducked, the move pure instinct. The Net surged to surround him in a wave, and he bit his sharp honor teeth into his lip for control of his reaction. Open water on the plains of Zimmer meant the sasi rain. It meant death.

A warding field sparkled then faded unborn, Anga's mark over the orders. "I don't have all day," the loom-master said. "And if you're not any more use to me than you've been so far, I just might dump you in that ocean." He glared at Olumka next, as though considering a comparable threat. And then apparently reconsidered. A gesture that was echoed in the Net as orders had all the guards back in the flitter. A moment later, the ship left.

The seal dissolved at the loom-master's touch and the door opened a hole into darkness. "We have to bring our own light with us," Anga said. "And the Net, we'll be pulling that in a tight lead from a very resistant link, and even then, it won't hold here for long." From his pocket he took four tiny glow-globes, each the size of his thumbnail. The lights preceded them in, brightening as they floated upwards.

Gennady looked around. Past the barrier, the emptiness surrounding them was more than just bare walls. Stone was everywhere, all the same. Olumka chittered softly, running his hands in pairs over the walls, the layers and ties of his robes floating behind him.

The Net link offered Gennady a limited translation: "Feathers, frozen flying." The translation didn't include that the Spann words were prayer forms. "It's granite," he said, putting a hand flat on the cold surface. Stone wasn't unusual in Gate Stations, or likely, in Palace, even relatively un-worked stone as this appeared to be. He turned to Anga. "So what?"

Anga shook his head. "It wasn't always stone. For the first few years, the stone held to the shapes that were here originally. Mostly the structural elements, not so much the furnishings or people." He looked nose-close to the wall Gennady had just touched then patted it. Bad eyesight, Gennady wondered, or making a point? "Further in, it's worse. Some of the tiles still showed design stamps for the first decade. Marble fared better, not in content, but in holding the shape. The changes slowed, or we wouldn't be walking here."

"What was it becoming?"

"Is becoming. I said slowed, not stopped. And the change isn't even, it's slowest here. You're right about this part being the outer shell of Palace..." He jerked a thumb to one side. "... not that it does you any good."

"And the point of bringing me... us, here?"

"This is Cassa's Suite."

And that would, of course, be the point -- which he had known. He shook his head, what happened to Cassa wasn't his concern anymore. "The Empress's Suite, you mean."

"Part of the point of bringing you here is that a very few things in the worst of the area didn't change at all. Some tapestries." The man's smile was more a wrinkling of dark skin around eyes than mouth. In the Net, several tapestries fell a long way to a granite floor. "You should remember these. One of her first acts as Empress was to have them brought here."

Gennady remembered. He had last seen Cassa at Zista Gate Station, she had stayed when their ship, the Ladybug, left. Contracted for a job doing portside security for a Norneda merchant enclave, she had told him. The leaving hadn't been any different than the other times, her temper had been stretched thin, but he had thought from close quarters and breathing each other's breath for too long. And that one of his wives had accompanied him.

"The tapestries were hers to take." They had been a gift from him.

"And their significance, Zimmer?"

Gennady shrugged, he knew their species shared the same meaning for the gesture. The loom-master could take it as the evasion it was. He was half through the next room before the softer pad of Anga's bare feet followed him. He blinked yuin sight away before turning. Olumka had stayed just that much further back again.

They walked from room to room, one leading into the other, the plan was a puzzle, each space with a name and purpose pulled from the Net by Anga and dangled as a prize. Each was totally bare. The four globes sent their shadows moving faster than they did, Gennady felt himself walking in the middle of a bizarre dance.

Footprints in the dust showed that they weren't the only recent visitors and the new marks were scuffed over older ones, some wandered in looping trails as though aimless, the dragging feet half obscured by sweeping motions of a long robe. Gennady squatted to look at one of the most recent. Human, not barefoot but close. Thin slippers perhaps. The shape of the foot showed, the curve of a high arch, each long narrow toe defined.

"Her San's," Anga said, and with his broader toes, rubbed though the print Gennady was studying. "Her Suite extends in a wedge towards Red Band Depth, taking up the top levels of Summer Run, but he only got half way to the terraces." A detailed map showed for the first time. The loom-master didn't appear bothered, place or company, he sounded the same as when they had started. "We'll go all the way -- do you mind?"

"Would it matter?"

"Hell no. Just enjoy this while you can. And you can think about how you might want to be nice to me."

After close to an hour punctuated only by footsteps they were at Red Band Depth, one of the main shafts, a mile or so across, the open space narrowing in the distance to pin-points of light at either end. Bare stone here as well, the limits of the Empress' Suite were a slash of gray in the mosaic of colors banding the sides.

Gennady stood at the edge, glad of being in light that didn't move. The floor of the terrace was smooth but not polished, some texture remained under his feet. Above him, more terraces were set back as though on a steep hill. To one side, a slide of boulders made natural steps. He considered that the effect might have been original and only the material changed.

Taking a flat cake out of a pocket, Anga peeled the paper back and offered to both of them. "Do you want some?" And at Gennady's nod, broke off half and passed it to him. "This place always makes me hungry," he said, panting slightly as he mumbled through a full mouth, and brushed crumbs from his jacket.

Slightly sweet, with an oily crumb. Nuts of some sort, Gennady decided by the second bite. Olumka was already back to inspecting the walls and chittering.

"I'd like to see the spins," Gennady said to Anga.

"For what?"

He gestured to Olumka and Anga shrugged. The summary that unfolded in the Net lead was simple and only covered a recent analysis of a small sample: natural frozen granite, nothing unusual about the crystalline texture or the components. "You're not as generous with your information as you are with your time, loom-master."

The Net stopped mid-word. "They have been studied to death, I'd have to be insanely generous with both my time and Temple spins." In place of the analysis was an index of options on the subject with study time guides covering several days. Even the index was behind an impressive array of security marks.

Anga led him up the steps to a higher level and down a wide processional. Past that, they were quickly into apartments and common areas. The loom-master stopped at a post. "I told you about some shapes staying longer."

Not a post, a worn statue. A human, the form barely recognizable. Gennady looked around, he had stopped consciously noticing his surroundings. There was no danger to him here, every sense he had told him that. Boredom had set in miles ago.

Other shapes had held up as well: stone that had once been wall tiles still bore the mark of the Emperor when this place had been built. Some of the tall individually set columns had branches, the branches shapes that might have been leaves. Trees perhaps, or the carving had been meant to be realistic. He shrugged. "Slowed?"

Anga nodded. "This is Cilcom Temple, one of three within the Imperial Suite. The outer shell, Red Band Depth, two Temples on lower levels and this one, together, they make up the boundaries of the overt change."

"There are no boundaries," Cassa said. She was standing beside him. A brown tunic over heavy cloth pants, her rifle strapped to her leg. How she dressed those times she left him, or came back. Port clothes, suitable anywhere and they didn't mark her as being one thing or the other. The tattoos on each cheek did that. They marked her as belonging to him.

The cold air held the scent only of stone and two people with him. He turned away. The Piltsimic was inspecting the remains of the human, Olumka next to him. "Is there more you want to show me?" Gennady asked. "Or is the tour over?"

Anga nodded but gave no sign that he had arranged for or even noticed anything. His attention was on something yet to happen, Gennady thought, and had his suspicions confirmed. "Just one more place," the loom-master said.

Ten minutes more of walking and none of the stone had shapes that told more than that they were walls, ceilings and floors. Then another change quite suddenly: snaking fractures in the gray stone. The dust was thicker; they crossed the shuffling footprints again then followed them in a trail leading to a door. Gennady stopped. Lips parted, he let his breath flow over the hollow points of his honor teeth. "There's a reason you brought myself and Olumka here and it wouldn't be for the company. Give me the short version. What went wrong?"

At the stone door, Anga stopped. "I never said anything about it going wrong." The small man's bare feet were over top of the San's footprints. He ran his hand over the surface as another might touch a woman they were making love to. Hand still to the stone, Anga turned. "Right, wrong -- you're really talking perspective." The door swung inwards, sucking three of the lights into the room. The fourth stayed outside.

More pearl gray stone but laid waste, pulled loose in knife sharp masses, man sized to fragments like the claws of a bird. Stone crunched underfoot as Gennady went in, a gray dust rising, choking him; he saw Anga kick up a cloud, his large foot covered in white. Gennady touched a mass, shoulder high, and the edge broke under his fingers, his eyes following the fall to find Olumka at his side, a pair of hands cupped, catching the fragments of sharp stone against the smooth chitin.

Choking, his hand over his mouth. "What happened here?" Three shadows surrounded Anga; every fragment had three shadows.

Anga didn't answer; he stood by the doorway now, his quiet watching threatening what little Gennady had held on to. He tasted blood; his honor teeth were biting into his lip. "Too sharp, by half," Cassa had complained more than once, and this time he welcomed the memory.

If the other had been memory. That thought sobered him and he saw in Anga's face the knowledge that the moment had passed. Stone dust followed him out, grit between his back teeth. He noticed that the Net link hadn't followed them in. "Did you expected more from me?" he asked.

"Hell, no." Laughing, but his face was shiny with sweat, dust caked in the creases, gray lines on a frosted black. "Although that could change." The white cloth the cake had been wrapped in was pulled out from the same pocket and shaken out to a large square. "You haven't demanded to speak to Sarkalt for days now," he said, wiping dust from his face. "Did you give up or is it that you used up all your contacts?"

Gennady could smell the oil from the nuts in the cake, and the man's sweat, and the stone. "Do I get to speak to the Overpriest now?"

"No."

Olumka said something in Spann-native, Anga replied fluently in the same tongue, cutting off the Spann. Did you weave that line, loom-master? And Cassa's?

Another walk brought them to a flitter bay, sealed like the first, but cream marble this time and much smaller. The same flitter as the one he had arrived on was already there. No guards but he could smell that they had left recently. This door must have been open longer at some time, dust covered the floor, thinning out in an arc and disturbed only in the path of the flitter from the tube opening. Anga appeared in no hurry to leave, he leaned against the side of the flitter, searching for and finding a crumb in the folds of his jacket.

"Are all the boundaries sealed?" Gennady asked. "The Red Band terraces?"

"The barrier was inches from your nose," Anga said. "There was no danger of falling." He grunted. "I just don't like heights. The outer terraces too. Oh, they can be broken, but not easily and not quietly. From the outside, they look the same as they did before." He scratched his chin as he looked around, scowling. "The Imperial Council put a Closure on the studies, of course, but the stories, well, you would have heard them."

"I hadn't thought the stone was literal."

"Then you've probably only gotten the orthodox Spann Wu'similini version. And if the rest of the heretical Coda is invented, why not the stone?" He chuckled but the tone was sour. "I always thought that the Spann religion to be an interesting mix of opportunism and invention. The Emperor as a captive god, a prisoner of Empire no less. Stands to reason that sooner or later one of them would escape. Did you keep expecting her to show up on the Ladybug, Gennady?"

"No," he said, not entirely lying. He hadn't for a long time now. But he thought the Spann had never stopped expecting it, and he had used that to his Clan's benefit. Olumka had squatted nearby, adding the odd click, his four eyes

reflecting them both in a multitude of images that drifted as the facets slowly rotated.

Twisting a button on his jacket, Anga looked at the Spann for a moment, but answered in the Trade language they had been using. "Do you believe in the Spann Coda, or is it merely expedient to act like you do?"

"I'm only interested in what helps my Clan."

Anga shook his head. "And that's the Spann? The Spann Heresy is subject to invention in a way that is a little too convenient. Empire as it is now works and works well. The size of Empire allows for only the loosest of controls, and the Unity of the world-patterns is that control. Order out of chaos. Civilization. Would you substitute rule based only on mutable belief?"

Olumka had started weaving beside him, with a singsong noise that rendered gibberish in the translation. "What's that got to do with all this?" Gennady asked.

"You're not listening." Anga scratched his nose, wrinkling the skin into folds that stayed put. When he continued it was in a different voice, one that sounded as though he was speaking from across the flitter bay. "World-patterns are the bedrock of the Unity, they set a framework for decisions as basic to our civilizations as the make-up of your genes to the growth and maintenance of your body. Priests are the link to that, a direct link. Without Priests, the Law can only be inferred. Without world-patterns, there is no Law. With them, then a change here, a shift, there, and what life evolves on any world is different than what it would otherwise have been. The creation of an echo line is a variation in a song, a different key, or pitch, or words in a different order."

"What did she do in there? To your precious order?"

But it was Olumka who answered. "Chaos." Clicked in Trade-basic.

The word Anga shot back was in Spann and unfamiliar to Gennady, leaving him blinking as the translation broke apart. Olumka bowed, the colors in its eyes fading as the crystal facets dived, leaving a velvety sameness, four dull black circles offset by white bone.

Anga slid down the side of the flitter until he was cross-legged on the white marble floor, undoing his jacket to allow the further rounding of his belly. His short pants showed a length of skin, stone dust thick on the black curls of hair on his legs. There were footsteps of dust on the marble, two sets, plainly marked with bare feet and fainter steps with the shape of boots, and a scratching through those where Olumka had crossed their paths.

"You both make me tired," Anga snorted. "Such religious fervor."

Gennady knelt. "You didn't bring me here to discuss religion."

"Sarkalt is dead."

"Am I free to go, then?"

Anga laughed. "You have a one-track mind, Zimmer. Makes it easier."

"For what?"

"You can tell about the tapestries for a start."

"Don't you know?"

"Straight facts, sure, some at least, but not if they're significant. The analyses fade like across a Nexus Change. And the Priests..." He looked strangely pleased. "We become limited by our tools. Sentient and otherwise."

Gennady closed his mouth. He's afraid of heights, he thought, and still he has that pleased look. "I paid for them but she drew the patterns the weavers used."

"Piltsimic weavers?"

"You know they were. Her own design or something brought back from overpattern, I don't know. If there's more, she never told me about it."

"They're from her home world."

"Copies then."

"I just said so." He scratched his leg. "Why are you here?"

Gennady sucked air. "Given a small chance, like this flutter, I won't be."

"I don't have the patience for this, Zimmer. Your ship was running escort on a Spann backed vessel. And on that ship, a contingent whose sole reason for being anywhere near Ri was to attend a Trade Assembly that was called, hell, caused by a dispute as carefully orchestrated by the Spann as Cassa's Challenge was fifty-odd years ago. And as orchestrated was the trouble in the Sevbi Sub-sector that made an escort a wise precaution regardless that the ship was entering an otherwise peaceful area. Coincidence?" Anga yawned hugely in a release of tension, another gesture their species shared. "How hard did they have to insist to get the Clan Lord of a'Genn himself on the Ladybug? You don't usually run escort yourself, not any more. Didn't you think to ask why?"

"If I had, the answer would have been that is was for luck. An answer I agree with. Besides, they paid for my being involved and paid well."

"I know. The question I'm interested in is: paid for what?"

He laughed. "You should have asked Cassa when you had the chance. I think she believed in my luck as much as the el'Linasstinilinki Family who paid me." And saw the man become quiet. "And you. I'm here, aren't I?"

"But are you enjoying yourself?" Anga glared at Olumka then looked back without changing expression. "You'd better be worth what we're paying out. Was involving you only wishful thinking on the part of the Spann?"

"The Spann cast for luck, loom-master, like they were throwing game pieces. The el'Linasstinilinki Family serve one of the High Families of the Spann Protectorate and that Family serves the Second of the Eight. I'll tell you what I've told Olumka: Cassa liked Zimmer ways well enough for a year or so at a time. Then something else until she came back. And then... she didn't come back. It's as simple as that, loom-master. She didn't come back."

"She's back now."

Gennady straightened, blinking away yuin sight.



Anga didn't back up as the guard had. "Do I have your attention now? Good." He sighed, and lowered his eyes as he smoothed down a pleat in the leg of his trousers, rubbing the stone dust into the fabric. "You're sensitive to pattern..."

"I'm not." He spat the words.

"Enough to use it as a web pilot."

"Two different things."

That earned him a smile. "If you say so. When you're in the web, what do you see."

"I see where I am. I see where I'm going. It's a navigational system. And nothing more."

"The context. And drop the Spann prejudice against Priests. I don't care."

No, the loom-master didn't care. Gennady took a breath. "I see Zimmer."

"What form?"

"Lines, threads, clouds, the sasi-web. It's what I know, so that's what the web uses."

"Like hell it is. It's pattern. You can survive that much exposure to pattern because the web systems limit what you can see. And in that you're right. The web gives it a predictable structure. And, you're able to come out again because the web keeps you sane. Priests become their world-pattern. Sanity isn't a requirement." He laughed. "We tied the Unity to ourselves through the world-patterns more than to the actual worlds, and we created something that hadn't existed before."

"Cassa had no world-pattern." Gennady concentrated on the words, trying to keep his control.

"Gee, I didn't know that." Anga punctuated the sarcasm with a loud snort. "It was a waste letting her go in the first place. At that time, there was still the possibility of being able to control her."

"Let go? She escaped."

"That's not what the Camerat Temple records show." The man chuckled. "She used you, you know."

A familiar feeling right now. "I know. And I used her. But we both ended up with more."

"What did you get out of it besides a step-up with the Spann?"

Gennady smiled, sudden cool air sending a shock through his hollow honor points and he felt like biting something. "Don't you know?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

Anga waited, but Gennady shook his head. They could fill Palace with words but he was tired of being prodded. "You mentioned the tapestries. Do I get to see them?"

"For what? Plan on taking up weaving?" Anga pushed against the flitter to stand, the craft bobbing with his weight. He was open mouthed with the effort of

rising. "What's your part in this, Gennady?" he panted. "You're here so it's important." His hand was up again. "She left Cam'lt Temple with just the clothes on her back. Then a few months later Clan Crues financed your first ship and it was registered in both your names."

"She was my loska."

Another throaty chuckle. "In your fantasy or hers? Hell, I guess I don't have to ask who made the first move."

"None of this is your..."

"Business? So what." The short man stretched as he grunted over several deep breaths. Then he chuckled again, obviously pleased. "I have something you want..." He laughed when Gennady challenged him. "For one, your freedom."

"Is it yours to offer?"

"Damn right it is. First, pay attention to my terms and you might see your ship again. Second... well, we'll get into details over lunch. Then a meeting with Poss a'ltic. Oh, hadn't I mentioned her? She was there at Ri-altar. Did I forget to tell you about that?" More crumbs were brushed from the nap of hair on his belly, the flitter rocked behind the man. "We'll talk about that over lunch as well. And if you're a good boy, I just might show you the tapestries after all."

Gennady found within himself the start of a darker rage. Not the trigger-fight that might lead to attack, but something worse, slower, and very slow to settle once woken. "What could I have that is worth your time?"

"What was worth a ship?"

Worth a ship then... was it worth the same ship now? Did the crystal girdle she had taken from Cam'lt Temple have a use other than the one they had found? When she had shown it to him, only one of the crystals was a sunstone, the one at the back. She didn't mention a purpose, only that it belonged to her.

Then he blinked and the cream marble flitter bay was suddenly etched with violet as yuin sight took his eyes. The Spann would know what use it had. The Pinett they had bought the ship from were bonded clients of the el'Linasstinilink Family. "If she had taken something, what use was it if not for buying ships?"

"It can't really be for anything. Cam'lt Temple had nothing of value for her to take. A few baubles, junk." A long look and then a shrug. "Cassa's Initiation was part of a sampling of her people. None of them were supposed to have been allowed to survive past seeing what they were capable of once in Empire space." Another nut bar was unwrapped, but there wasn't an offer to share. "With their Sector warded against pattern energy, they evolved technologies that use other sources of power. Their machines, their ships, don't work in our areas of space. I use the word 'evolve' quite deliberately, Gennady. You think you're not a part of the Unity, you hold your breath and think you're not breathing air."

"Forget the technology, what about the people?"

"Oh, yes, the people. The patterns were set deep in each world, not where they can be accessed, and just enough so they weren't totally wild. Out of Simic and quite close in some ways. Actually, a damn sight closer than had been planned." The last bite of the cake. "That Cassa, or someone like her, would find Simic compatible was not unexpected. Or Ri, even Camerat once she got past a certain inbred aversion to creatures with scales. The Camerat sli'ka hormones the breeding males use to get the females in the mood sure as hell would have worked on her. I don't know what she saw in you."

He ignored the dig and the admission that their relationship had been more than expediency. "No Priests then."

Anga shook his head, swallowing at the same time. "No Priests. Nothing even that you'd consider a Salin. Potential only. Without the lines to hold to, ability to access pattern is useless. I doubt even Cassa can access overpattern where there isn't at least some kind of world-pattern set to act as a framework for her mind. She's still human."

"Is she human?"

"She was definitely human back then. She came of bloodlines that should have produced a fair proportion of Priests and we weren't wrong about that. Of course, we had worlds and generations to select from. Their response to their world-pattern was explosive. Only Cassa was allowed to live, and that only because she was a curiosity at not having pulled a world-pattern at all." The loom-master hesitated and Gennady waited for him to continue but the man's expression placed him far from the flutter bay where he sat. A tight Net lead.

The Net died before Anga spoke. His voice was hollow. "I don't have time to coddle you. Nexus Change is happening *now*."

Gennady stepped back, his teeth bared.

"Settle down. What did you think you were going to do, bite it?" Anga sighed tiredly. "There's more..."

As he listened, Gennady appreciated what it meant that he was hearing any of this, especially in the presence of Olumka. Sarkalt's death. Ri-altar. Ulanda.

"And what... what Cassa had brought out of Cam'lt Temple?" he asked again, wanting both limits and definition to his understanding. He could sell his knowledge of where the girdle was only if it was worth something.

Anga snorted. "More details might help."

Olumka stirred. "Crystal, crystal. White flowers."

The same Net link whined briefly, Gennady heard it more clearly this time. Command level Net, Temple, but with a Piltsimic signature. He had his limits and his definition. The loom-master.

"Do you need my detail?" he asked Anga.

"Apparently not," Anga said. "A glass girdle and like I said, junk. Palace was at Camerat when the sector was bound, the shape of the girdle is an image of the

keying sunstones. There were several made as gifts to the Temples involved. The real one, the one that keys the warding of the sector, is on Rigyant. The others are worthless, but considering the circumstances... if Sarkalt wasn't already dead, I'd kill him."

"Again?"

"You have a mouth on you, Zimmer."

Olumka chattered as background to Gennady's laughter. "And I have a glass girdle. As you said, useless, except for buying ships. What else do I have that is worth your time?"

## - 20 -

The summons delivered to Poss a'tlic was from the Overpriest of Initiates. Three Crescents Temple accepted the warrant, and the Temple guards gave her only as much time to prepare as she could squeeze out as reasonable for dressing. She hadn't managed to get the names of those attending until she was already on her way.

Poss a'tlic looked at each of those present as she bowed, deepest for the Overpriest. They were in an Audience Hall in the Imperial Suite, a long room, narrow and made more narrow by the dark tapestries covering the walls. Along with the Overpriest Mullaki, three of those whose names she had pried from the Net sat at a low table at the far end, backs to the window and the green sky of Ri. Five chairs, plus one on her side of the table, were little more than cushions raised up on stubby legs.

Lord Gennady was standing. The Zimmer paused in his study of the tapestry nearest him to receive her bow, and turned away immediately. They should have invited her sit but did not and thinking she might have missed the motion while looking at the tapestries, she signed a suitable Opening and waited. The polished wood of the table was a mirror to the four dark figures surrounded by light.

Lord Gennady spoke first. "They are very beautiful, are they not?" Pale blue eyes still on the tapestries, he stepped back then turned to her again.

Seeing only a jumbled mess of plants and animal shapes in dull colors, Poss a'tlic would have liked to disagree, but said nothing. Reaching through the limited Net leads for information on their origin she came up empty except for Gennady's amused smile.

The smile made the marks along his cheekbones dance towards his temples and his lips drew back to expose sharply filed teeth. A face of bone with little flesh over. "They do and they don't exist," he said. "Do you know why?"

"No. But then, I wouldn't be surprised at anything here."

Another smile and she thought he looked like one of the animals on the cloth behind him, the one grasping a ball in one paw, a shape repeated with the chair legs.

"At the altar at the top of a small hill by the farm where I grew up," Poss a'Itlic added, "fragments of paper are left with the Empress's mark drawn on them in black ink. Some of the older prayers on that altar would be by my hand." She gestured to the tapestries. "I walked here through ruins only to find a man looking in a mirror. Should I ask what form your prayers to the Empress have taken?"

His answer was stopped by shrill laughter from Mullaki. "His temper is the smoke of those prayers burning." The woman's face was a porcelain mask even as she laughed, the expression lost in the contrast of the light behind her. "You might think of that before provoking him, Poss a'Itlic. But please, do sit down. You too Gennady."

Sitting, she found her eyes returning to Lord Gennady. He still leaned against the wall, arms crossed, and from him, faintly, she sensed a wash of pattern and one that made her feel ill.

"Poss a'Itlic, I wouldn't if I were you." Mullaki again and Poss a'Itlic turned her eyes back to the table as the woman continued speaking. "Ri and Zimmer aren't on the same echo lines, and they're not compatible or easy, not with you so recently a Priest. That was well done with Sarkalt's tass'alt, by the way. Ingenious."

"Kalduka d'Nivkh." The words came out without thinking, or rather, the feeling came before the thought: paper thin scales pressed against her skin as he held her. Multiplied a thousand times, the green shimmer of Ri-pattern changed to teal by the reflection from deep blue scales.

Mullaki smiled. "Of course," she said and Poss a'Itlic shivered, preferring the porcelain mask, even Lord Gennady's razor smile, to that look. "And so was your staying at Ri-alter... or being allowed to stay. Very interesting."

She bowed slightly. "As you say, Overpriest."

"And the spins that talk about these things?"

"I've walked a narrow path between walls of information that whisper at me but refuse to speak so I can hear." Poss a'Itlic stared at the green sky through the window, willing herself to be calm, staring until the dark figures in front of her began to dim. The spins hadn't been offered to her. "Is it that you wish to build the walls higher?"

Gennady moved, breaking her concentration. A snake, she thought suddenly -- for all his bony strength and angles, he moved as though without bones at all.

One of the two present whose bio in the Temple Net had been more behind privacy seals than not and she had settled for a quick look at the people to

supplement what was offered on the man. Even after forcing her signature as a Ri-priest over top of the request -- a two day old signature -- the bio had unfolded only a single additional level, from a few reference points to a few more words and pictures.

The Clan Zimmer were a sub-species with a strict hierarchy based on breeding dominance. Wealth of each Clan was dependent on the land and people held and defended. They weren't noted as merchants, even among themselves, and off-world trade was in the form of paramilitary services contracted or owed. Their principal clients were the Spann or Spann-backed enterprises. She had asked for an overview of customs and was given what looked to be the start of an exhaustive analysis of Clan and non-Clan Zimmer society. Too much information or too little, she was beginning to suspect both were intended to keep her in ignorance.

She bowed to Gennady and he stopped by the table, instantly so still as to make her think he had never moved at all. All the Zimmer in the bio had looked like him, his co-husbands, even his wives. Did they move like him as well, she wondered, her presence of mind broken by an image of what their mating would be like.

The short man on the far end moved before she could collect her thoughts. He put his hands flat on the table and rose slowly. She had to scramble to remember his name. Anga, a Piltsimic poet. The Net had offered only that much and she had gone onto the next.

He spoke softly, and in Trade-basic as had Gennady, but an older form, and she kept her wits enough to notice that the others listened, even the Overpriest Mullaki. With his dark skin and clothing, she couldn't see him very well; he blended into the shadow at the end of the room. "Lady Priest, we did not convene with your discomfort in mind." He looked at each of the members in turn. "My apologies, if you would, please forgive them, they're all a bit nervous."

"Lord?" Shocked, she barely managed the proper inflections that her translation Net link provided with the words.

"Not Lord, Ri-priest. My plain name, without calling or withholding of rank. Plain Anga, if you would please me."

"Anga then," she said, following the same form and she thought she could see him well enough after all. "For I would please you if I may."

"And be pleased in turn no doubt," he said then laughed. He was a small, round man, and jolly. "Well said, and a lovely accent. Gennady is the only person I know who can manage to turn this tongue to the attack, whatever the provocation. Although perhaps even he would have trouble this more ancient form."

"May I ask that we restrict ourselves to its use, then."

The man chuckled at her joke and leaned forward, hands still flat on the table surface, the change showing her more of his features. Ri-altar... she remembered seeing him before, she was almost sure and then was sure. "We've met before," she said, forgetting and speaking in Empire plain-tongue, the only language she knew well besides Ri.

He followed her lead and changed languages. "If you call being on the same mountain top, meeting, then yes. To my regret, I left Ri-altar before it got interesting. You might consider that your being allowed Initiation under the circumstances as being a result of that regret. Your connection to the Unity is entirely too tenuous for some people's liking. I suggest you don't disappoint your few supporters." Sitting, he waited a moment before speaking again, then motioned to the two who had not involved themselves. "This is the Priest Li-Fu, of a people sister to mine." Another Poss a'tlic had briefed over, by necessity. A name, title -- Ranking Simic-priest on Lillisim -- and a signature, not an image. The rest was behind privacy seals.

"And the merchant Olumka, of Spann, who is not."

Not indeed, Poss a'tlic thought. Non-humanoid, elaborately folded and tied robes hid everything except the upper portion of its face. Angular ridges of what looked like polished white bone divided the face in two and on either side, were a pair of complex eyes like rainbows. Beautiful but from an echo line with a different origin than Ri's.

She had heard of the Spann Heresy but only as a passing reference, such concerns hadn't been a part of her life in the farming community where she had grown up, and scarcely more at South Bay Temple where she had trained as an Acolyte. The Empire was a big place. Curious that a Spann would be involved, she had spent time on this one, relieved that the information was clear of blocks. But wasted time for the most part, and little enough information on Spann itself other than the religious controversy which the file assumed she already knew about. Not a world, an extended Protectorate on the edge of the galaxy, the worlds straggling half in, half out of Temple controlled space when the last cultural expansion slowed, then reversed. Yellow rose Nexus, three back. Their sphere of influence was principally far to one side of Empire but she had been right about the similarity to the ti'Linn in Palace, and both of them to the Wa'tic who were seen in Temples even on Ri-surface.

She bowed to each in turn, deeper than the first time. He said they were nervous, she thought, still surprised but only at the admission, not the emotion.

"Priest Poss a'tlic," Li-Fu said, in a reed thin voice to Anga's rich bass. "I find I have no patience for this after all." She rose to her feet in a fluid motion, the silver stuff of her dress floating around her as though it were alive. "I will visit with friends." Ri light seemed to grow in the emerald reflection from her eyes and Poss a'tlic as much felt as saw the essence of her in that reflection. Then a shiver

of what she had sensed with Li-Fu stirred, paler green to that emerald. When she looked back, it was to find her feeling of excitement mirrored in Anga's round face.

Then to Lord Gennady. No smile there, not any more, his face carefully neutral. He hadn't watched the leaving either, his eyes on her or the Overpriest Mullaki, even Olumka in turn. He hadn't looked at the Simic-priest all the time she had been there, Poss a'ltic realized.

The creases fanning out from Anga's temples deepened into ebony as he chuckled. "So, I suppose she finds us boring," he said in plain-tongue. "Are we?"

She returned his smile. "Hardly that. Her impatience, however, I confess some sympathy for."

Mullaki stirred. "You forget yourself."

"No," she said, facing that smooth, cold look, trying to hang onto the strength she had felt. "I don't think so."

The cold of that look increased. "Why are you here?"

"I answered a warrant that Three Crescents Temple allowed. May I assume you wish to talk about what happened at Ri-altar?"

"And the events that took the Overpriest there..."

"I know little that isn't a matter of common knowledge. If you need memories, his personal staff from that time would be of more use." The desire to leave this room was a bubble in her chest that restricted her breathing and she knew leaving here could take her further still. "I don't have access to the Overpriest Sarkalt's staff or his personal records, there's no reason I should have."

Her words were interrupted by a garble of noise, the sound coming from Olumka, followed by the Net translation in her mind. "Storm, the clouds break. Sun between clouds shines."

Poss a'ltic shook her head. What memories could she offer that would be of value? A storm, certainly. But the memories threatening her held more and she wanted to scream her protest. And leave... even though the memories would tag along relentlessly.

Anga scratched at his arm. "We do need answers. Don't bother about the things you know nothing about like Sarkalt's records, or what he was doing at Ri-altar."

She shook her head again, taking the time to center herself, not sure what she had to do. Or should do -- and she released to Ri-pattern, the awareness a glimmer of light in her eyes like residue sparks in a fall of cords. Startled, she watched Anga through the sparks, watched him change, the light rising now, visible to the others, something of the force Sarkalt had called. Her long hair flew with her overbraid ends, gold mixed with the white cloth and the green sparks. The startled feeling faded as her body reacted, easing into a distant hum, but



enough remained to have her wonder what he had done to her seeing of him before.

Others entered the room, feeding in from the group of people waiting in the corridor, a tight cluster against the immensity of the stone surrounding them. She had left Tissa, her aide, there but she wasn't one of those moving closer.

The stone of the walls threw an echo back to her. The small dark man was like a shadow in the room, she thought almost absently, like the dark flecks in the stone. And then suddenly enough to startle her again, she felt as well, the echo from a full placement crystal.

Anga stirred in a swirl of dark flecks, speaking with a gentleness she wouldn't have thought his deep voice would have allowed, and with the sound seemingly from everywhere at once. "Only three people were on that mountain top at the end, Poss a'tlic. Both of the others are dead now. Tell us what you saw, what you felt."

"You want more than my answers, I think." The words sounded strange in her mouth, coming as they did through the crackle of green Ri-fire. A fall of leaves and not flecks in stone after all. A pretty pattern of years of leaves in a cycle of growth and death. She reached for one and found herself pushing out instead. The space around her quickly cleared of people.

Silence again, although Lord Gennady moved in a white and red ripple across the pattern of the room. All around him, she still saw the veins in the leaves of Ri-pattern, like the branches of a tree, and not falling, but swaying as though to a sudden wind.

She remembered envying a similar grace in the Temple dancers. The nearest Temple to the farm was South Bay; she had first gone there with her father for the Winter Turning ceremonies. The winter after her mother's death, and the journey had been for prayers he had said, but she thought it was to fill his loneliness. She was an adult before understanding that last. He had left her in the care of the innkeeper and she had spent the night at the window overlooking the street, falling asleep with her hair frozen in the ice on the glass. She didn't remember waking but must have; she remembered seeing him as a dark shape in the night street, furtive and clumsily noisy at the same time. She was in bed before he came into their room, the covers up under her chin, and pretending to be asleep. He was as clumsy getting into bed... and as furtive, his touch shy as he had stroked her hair a moment before rolling over. He smelled of Temple incense, his breath of wine. His back to her, he had started crying.

And then, another memory but very recent: the dance of Lamentation at her Initiation. Her father an unmoving form always behind the dancers. And the same smell. And she felt the lines set in this room that had her spinning.

"An interesting game," she said, feeling her lips form the words and hoping the voice had followed. The leaves were changing color, spring to summer to

autumn... each time she noticed one color it was another as quickly. "Or is it a dance? Should I be dancing?"

Anga laughed. "I think we'll leave that to others." The spin died, and Tissa was there after all.

"It wouldn't have held up much longer in any case, Ri-priest." Mullaki, a silken sound in her voice and Poss a'ltic shivered from more than just the residue. "You need the services of a tass'altin, not an Acolyte's aide. You're a fool not to have taken one into your Household by now."

She had the nucleus of a Household already and at South Bay would have known who she wanted out of those who had courted her from the time it was obvious she would be given a chance at Initiation. But at Three Crescents Temple? There'd been no time to judge the value of those seeking to tie their careers to hers.

"The Overpriest of Initiates is of course correct," Poss a'ltic said with words as silken, adding what signs of deferment she could with Tissa busy. What had they accomplished, she wondered, not sure of what she had seen, and with the sense of it fading even as she still felt the effects. A burning and an itch on one arm -- perhaps just a memory of the shredded flesh of the power breaks at Ri-altar but she flexed her fingers gingerly.

"Do you still want this?" she asked Anga after a few minutes, her voice catching in her dry throat. "Or do you already have what I was brought here for?" She felt Tissa call for tea through the Net link to Cal'si, her Steward and only reaching the people in the corridor. None of them stirred.

Another call went to those who waited, but with Anga's mark over the request and a promise from him of something hot and wet for her. "Yes," he said. In old-tongue and somehow, she understood.

Her eyes closed against the word and man both. "I don't know why Sarkalt was at Ri-altar. Besides him, there were six Acolytes, and one other Ri-priest, Riltic, his Second. I was paired with Nimas from the North Island..." The pillars to support his effort, an anchor, she had been told, but not what he was attempting. She laughed out loud suddenly and opened her eyes. "Should we have prayed instead? A banner of paper... we could have wrapped the trees with flags of prayers for the sun and rain to eat." Tissa was trying to soothe her, one hand rubbing her thigh, there were words from her but Poss a'ltic didn't hear them. "What does the Empress want?" she said. Or had she spoken? The others didn't stir.

Rain. "What would you ask for?" The words were caught in the light pattering of water on stone. Cool air, rain-bitten, the teeth icy -- a fall day well towards winter.

"Always when I think of her it is raining," Sarkalt said. Poss a'ltic felt his notice like spring moving over a frozen land. Ri-light followed and she took the feel of it

as hope against loosing herself. The High Priest had the scent of Niv, of Kalduka on him, the musk heavy in the air as the warm spring day became summer then ripened into late summer and she was at Ri-altar. The flitters were still by the start of the trail that led to South Bay Temple and from one, stepped out a dark shadow, moving across her vision as a cloud does across the sun. Anga and she saw him very clearly now.

She shivered in the still heat at the top of the mountain. Stone was under her feet; bare stone, deeply cut and she felt that this room, where another Poss a'ltic waited, could meet those fissures crack for crack. Tissa's hands... or were they Niv's? Loom-master, she heard and wondered if it was from Sarkalt or if she needed him to tell her.

"I didn't know why I was selected," she said out loud, hoping the words would bring her to the Empress's Audience Hall in Palace where her body was. She opened her eyes to see that she was back where she had started, with Anga still watching her. Green flickered like tongues of fire and she shivered again before getting control. A poet, Temple Net had said. What now, what did he want from her now? It was too hard to think and she took the first lesson of Temple and let her mind relax into her world-pattern.

"My people are farmers," she said after a moment. "I never thought of entering Temple in any capacity. I even almost didn't go through with it when the local Way-altar committee put pressure on my father. They said I had a duty to Ri. That testing so high in response to Ri-pattern..." She faltered and willed the calming of her mind that she needed to continue. They had wanted the honor of an Acolyte, and better, a Priest, coming from their community, a focus for their prayers. By now, some of the prayer banners at the way-altar would have her name on them.

Something warm was against the palm of her hand and she looked down. Tissa balanced a tiny bowl, thin sides of matte cream paste, the stems of three tea leaves embedded in the drying of the bowl, their free ends only now uncurling in the freshly boiled water. "Should I get Cal'si?" her aide whispered as she bent over.

Poss a'ltic shook her head. "Just you, please," she said and her fingers against Tissa's hand added her thanks.

"Spawning fish," Anga said, laughter in his voice but not in his eyes. "The tea's name, fortunately not the taste."

The leaves slipped against her lips, as slimy as live fish, but the taste was just water. She finished the tea in one swallow, burning her tongue. Tissa added more water from the flask next to her, and in the rising steam was another scent. She knelt close by, her arm a light weight against Poss a'ltic's leg.

"I knew what was going to happen to Kalduka, he did too, I think, but it was my responsibility that he died like that. On his own, Ri wouldn't let him in, even trying had shaved him down to pure Camerat."

The flitter had come hours after he died, and even then risking the tail of the storm that had finally broken when the curtain of power blinked out. Pushing with her heels against the rough ground, wiggling and shifting them both along by inches at a time, she had pulled Sarkalt to a new crease in the mountain where the face of granite had split. The earth crumbled at the edges, tree roots exposed and bleeding where they had been torn. She wedged them both between the rocks, and hid her face against his robe, hardly able to breathe from the force of the wind. Splinters of rock had scraped her skin as deep as the power cuts, but she hadn't felt them at the time, still not down far enough from the cycling to feel too much.

"Niv was dead, I reached him first, then the Overpriest. I wasn't sure if he still lived." Too disorientated, she had given up on making sense of what she was seeing in him.

Another sip of tea finished the bowl. Tissa poured hot water into the bowl, her other hand under hers, giving support to the slight weight. "The flitter landed in the middle of Ri-altar, it looked as though a gust of wind pushed it there. The pilot..."

Ceramic tiles screaming on rock was the first sound she heard that wasn't the storm. The flitter gouged a wedge into what remained of the circle of trees, blasted stumps for the most part, one with Niv caught against the rough bark, fragile green needles mashed into the raised edges of the larger scales along his shoulder.

The pilot came out stumbling, hanging onto the side of the flitter, the side of his head cut open to the bone. He flinched when she touched him. "The Overpriest, he needs help," she insisted, one hand on his arm, dripping rainwater and blood on his sleeve. And realized the man wasn't seeing anything at all, he was blind with shock and terror.

Two more people were inside, a man and a woman, both unconscious. Then she found a third near the back, a ti'Linn, eyes showing only red crosses deep in the black, not the usual revolving lights. The shielding had failed; the trunk of one of the small cedar trees surrounding the altar had broken through the fragile tile wall of the craft to impale the ti'Linn through the thorax. A prayer rose to her lips in a chant, the one she had sung at her mother's burial. The flitter's Net link sparked to life at the sound, deafening her. A fragmented link to South Bay Temple.

"The flitter crashed," she said, trying to reach someone at the other end. The sparking stopped but all she felt were the questing tendrils of pure Net, no leads opened to anyone that she could reach. "Who?" it whispered in a dozen levels of

questioning, winding around to examine her for identification, brushing her without ever quite touching, wanting -- needing -- something she couldn't give it. She had the feeling it didn't really see her. The pilot had rolled into a ball next to the flitter.

With that image in her mind, Poss a'ltic paused for a sip of the tea. Just water still, slightly salty or the dryness of her mouth was affecting the taste. Leaves floated in a milky liquid, the paste sides of the bowl flaking off like snow, then dissolving. The leaves did look like fish rising in clouded water.

"Drink it quickly, or you'll end with it in your lap." Anga again.

She looked up at him and pulled Temple Net, pushing the lead through with a flick of annoyance. Just tea, as he said, and with a progression of tastes, most of which she wasn't capable of discerning. But it was wet and she took another sip while she thought.

No records held on what happened on the mountaintop -- or so she had been told -- not from the recording crystals set so carefully there or from the much later pattern-pulls. The Empress? She had made the leap once to involve her in this. The Empress' Audience Hall, her...

"Always when I think... the rain..." Sarkalt's voice but he was a ghost of a memory now. What she felt better, just that moment, was Tissa, and through her, Niv. And what she had blocked since killing the tass'alt -- what he had felt walking into the curtain of Ri-light. "What would you do..." The words were like black rain. The Empress stood there, laughing at her. "... if you were me?"

She remembered waking up the first morning at Ri-altar, stiff and cold from sleeping outside. She had preferred the privacy of the far side of the flitter. Koisen, Riltic's tass'alt had come to her just after sunset with a bottle of hot buttered tea in one hand and an extra pillow in the other. "Don't worry about what's to be done tomorrow, child," she said, sounding like the memory of Poss a'ltic's own grandmother. "You did well today."

"I'm not worried."

The older woman had smiled. "Then I should have told you to worry just a bit."

Poss a'ltic had laughed and the two of them talked until she was yawning through the sips of tea, her chin buttery, and then she found herself being tucked in for the first time in many years.

She woke to the half-light of early morning. Swallowing the last of the tea from the night before, still hot in the jug, she got up to stretch, already thinking of breakfast and wanting a bath.

When she walked around the side of the flitter, she found that two others had slept outside as well. She hadn't been the only one to prefer the fresh air. Riltic was standing by the entrance and she got a sympathetic smile from the Priest in return to her formal greeting.

"Breakfast at South Bay if we're lucky," he said. "The lines aren't obvious but Sarkalt is in deep now and what he's doing won't take long to unfold once he releases it. We'll set the lines again to bring him out."

The Priest was rumbled, skin creased from sleep, his hair loose around his shoulders. Just a man, her eyes said of the change from the day before when she hadn't dared speak to him at all. But half way into speaking to her, he had robbed his voice in the drawl of the South Bay area, and his eyes with the tint of the Northern Islands, had become as dark a blue as hers. He was a thief.

"May I ask what this is all about?" she said.

He shook his head. "That answer depends too much on the result."

Patronizing? She wanted to think so but there wasn't any of it in his manner. Impatient and aloof. Had he stolen those from her too or come by them honestly? Second to the Overpriest of Forms, it must come naturally. "And after the result is known?"

"Then you can ask the Overpriest."

His own arrogance, she decided. With a deep bow, she left him and walked to the ledge overlooking the ocean.

Perfectly calm, a smooth expanse of yellow-green water with the sun rise as yet only a line of brighter color. She could smell the salt except she shouldn't have been able to -- there wasn't any wind. Taking a deep breath, the scent was still there. Then she remembered the farm where she had grown up and the smell that a storm always brought, as though it brought the distant sea with it, as though the clouds were foam on the waves. And for a moment, she was surrounded by wind, electric with the change. Once more she was the child who had always run into the storm.

They had pulled that scene among others out of her memory, adding pattern to the pull, using her, and those pulls had held where the ones to do with Ri-altar hadn't. Riltic had stolen her manners as she had stolen his tass'alt, an exchange she hadn't the wit or humor to appreciate then. But stealing her manners had only been the start of the violation.

In the recreation of her memory, she watched herself standing on the small hill by the road to the village, the hill the only high ground on the farm. Rows of grain in circles surrounded her, in circles like Ri's world-pattern. The way-altar, a cairn of stones with sticks wedged between to hold the prayers set there by the villagers, shared the hill top with graves, and by local custom, the graves were left unmarked. Her mother was buried there and she thought the w'tic flowers grew thicker where her body was.

Standing on the exact spot where her mother was buried, Poss a'ltic had faced the mounting line of black before her, her expression lit by the flashes that split the clouds with silver. She had been eleven years old then, and across the

distance of time and space, she recognized the look on her face. The same look as when she went into Ri-pattern.

But she was in a stone room, not a mountaintop or that long-ago hill and faced, not a storm but a small black man, and still, to her eyes, like a shadow. Should she ask him what the Empress had asked? Or tell him? He should know, she thought.

She looked at Gennady. The blue irises were circled with black. "What would you do?" she asked, feeling as though her heart was breaking and not knowing why.

I can't do this, her mind screamed back. She was taking all this in as though a knife was cutting passage into her. What did the Empress see when Poss a'tlic looked at the Zimmer? Or when she had looked at Riltic and known he had felt Koisen's fingers wiping the butter from her chin. Prayers like smoke... but that had been something Mullaki had said... and she heard the cold laughter and wondered that the others here couldn't.

Gennady didn't answer and she thought she might not have said anything. Why was he here? Why were any of them? Olumka? The Spann watched her, she didn't need a sign of attention in the revolving facets, she could feel the interest and the weighing up as though she were goods being sold in the market.

"The Empress..." she started and this time she actually said the words. She could feel the Zimmer as Riltic had felt her. Not 'must have felt' but did feel, had felt... she could be back on the mountain top again, dawn at her back, the green light in Riltic's eyes and Koisen asleep in the flutter. And Riltic dead. She had taken his attention with her to the edge of the mountain -- the Priest and the man -- he had shared Koisen's sympathy.

"Did I kill Riltic?" she asked.

"When you walked in here," Mullaki said evenly, "I wouldn't have considered it."

"And don't now," Anga growled. "We don't need that kind of speculation. Besides,..."

Poss a'tlic looked down at her lap. The remnants of the cream bowl was still in her hand, but the fish were free, three leaves riding a stain of liquid from her hand to her robe. "Overpriest Sarkalt was at Ri-altar to look for the Empress, wasn't he?" She looked up at the Spann. "Will you add his name to the dark marks on the paper you offer to the wind at your altars?" Joss sticks and prayers but to the Wu'similini -- to the dark ocean of overpattern, not the Unity of the world patterns. The form of the altar was different than those common on Ri-surface. She remembered the details from the cultural spin too late then thought she might have meant the words for herself, not the Spann.

But Olumka didn't question her on details. "Sun, water water, sun. Always."

She shook her head. "The ocean is eating the reflection," Sarkalt... Gennady and the tapestries... something more opened in her mind as though she had taken a step. Memories but they weren't hers and she understood all at once why the Zimmer Lord was involved. She pulled back hard, her hand taking Tissa's and squeezing until her wrist screamed with pain. "Whatever happened has opened Ri-pattern to overpattern," she said.

Mullaki replied in plain-tongue. "Yes."

"And they'll die. I'll die. Nexus Change..."

"Is cresting," Anga said, and for a moment she thought she heard the voice of her father, sweat tired and dry mouthed, coming in from the field at the end of harvest. "What happened at Ri-altar only quickened what was already happening, both the climax of Nexus Change and the invasion of overpattern into the Unity. The deaths won't stop with Ri. The Empress has destroyed Empire."

## - 21 -

Mullaki watched Gennady as he set the wards in the Simic's study. He was assisted by the freeborn Zimmer woman, the sole female on the work crew. One other freeborn and three Clan Zimmer worked on the sensory grid.

"An expectant ginibun," Clanny, her tass'alt, said, but silently, by touch. Well fleshed in the Poultat way, he was rounded and comfortable. Playing word games to pass the time, he formed each against her sleeve with the fingers of one hand, attempting to break her composure.

The derivations were descending into lunacy; he shared her feelings for this enterprise. What he had done with the cultural spins on the Clan Zimmer-freeborn relations had Tallsin, her Chief of Protocol, taking fits. Ginibun were festival food for the gin'tala of a Clan girl when she was bred for the first time. The transferal of genetic material from a dominant male caused the completion of her maturation into the Clan subspecies instead of remaining in a form that was virtually identical to the freeborn. Occasionally the buns were stuffed with jam.

But when Clanny spoke it was of another joke. "Would you like tea?" Eyebrows raised, the blue frost marks on his round cheeks dancing. His equally frosted eyes sparkled. "Spawning fish perhaps? The effect was quite interesting."

She shook her head. "We fish a different stream, I think." But her tass'alt was correct, what had happened with Poss a'Itic had been interesting, and, although the effect wasn't due to the tea, that it had happened at all had been pure Anga.



A flash of light spun around the room, linking the three tiny globes, then faded. The Zimmer woman nodded to Gennady and joined the four others at the grid.

"The barrier is set," Gennady said. "If you have trouble with the Net, let me know. Or Kori." His eyes went to the freeborn woman then back to her, ignoring Clanny.

She nodded to the warding globes. "And their function?"

"They'll keep the residue of the fields you people used here from interfering with our measurements. If you wish, Kori can explain, she set the readings. Did you think they had a different purpose?"

She smiled as she made a motion of allowance. Of course they did, but he was welcome to whatever sop to his pride he wished just as long as he produced. The meeting with Poss a'Itic had been more to engage him than to pester the new Ri-priest. And the result? Serendipity.

Clanny's fingers queried the source of her amusement and she made the shape for serendipity against his arm but in Poultat-native... and felt his delight. Drawn as a narrow stroke with the end flayed, the original in Poultat was a rod with the tip nodding -- a fishing pole, the fish assumed, or hoped for rather. A related form meant fool of an amiable sort. Another related form persisted only in a language reserved for prayer and made into a mantra chanted as sweet sitilin tea was offered to the flame. She had a bet with Clanny about how long it would take for overpattern mark to become obvious on Poss a'Itic's arms.

Sitilin tea might be a joke the Zimmer would notice; he was experienced at picking up what was significant in the customs of other peoples. Later, with Anga, and see if he would notice, and offer his own contribution -- a poem perhaps. And then she would mention Poss a'Itic again. And the girdle. Both creations of the Empress.

"I would like some tea after all," she said to Clanny. "And something to eat. Buttered bread." When her tass'alt signed a polite opening that the Zimmer turned his back on, she added, "Would you join us, Lord Gennady?"

A glance in her direction but no answer past a shrug. As he ordered through Temple Net, Clanny watched the Zimmer but for a different reason now. Not anger, he wouldn't believe the continuing insult could be both something quite simple and directed against him personally.

"Is he a fish you would wish to eat?" she asked. But Clanny was closer to anger than she had thought. He tested the warding, not overtly, but with a multi-lead complex call to order the tea. One globe flared and settled.

"I think I'll have toast with rose petal jam," he said to her in Poultat. Only a sly return, she thought, but he actually ordered it, sparing a glance to the Zimmer woman. An allusion to the freeborn woman's fertility, not to her availability. The Clan Zimmer considered the freeborn to be scarcely more than animals.

She said as much in her own glance, shaping a default sign with one hand. He had gone too far and would owe her. “No, seriously,” he said out loud as though talking about tea and toast. “I’ve developed a taste for it.” Without waiting for her rejoinder, he began clearing the small table in the center of the room.

Mullaki considered. Only the breeding-dominant males and females or paltin of the Clan Zimmer were sexually responsive -- Gennady of course and his los, Simitta, his father’s brother. Two males. They weren’t aware of other paltin on the ship. Clanny might be right and she would owe him. Or he could be wrong regardless. Dominance and not sex drove Zimmer relationships.

Clanny blocked her view of Kori as he continued rearranging things. “Or did you wish to use these?” he asked, but contained in the motion of his hands was a joke about which dishes were suitable for serving fish of questionable freshness.

She allowed this new point to him and left the other open. Tea dishes were already on the table. Nothing had been cleaned. Remains of a tea gone to dust, dried leaves in the bottom of the bowls and mold in the teapot. Several large cups, and one smaller, of a size a Priest could use on their own. Clanny’s fingers lingered on that last one, then with a smile to her, it went into a pocket of his robe. From a set belonging to the Empress, kept here in Garm’s suite for her use and still here years later.

The San’s books were on the table and nearby chair, some of them water marked, the pages swollen to dry unevenly. There was a faint air of moldy paper when close to them, an unpleasant mix with the dust and leather. Several thousand additional books of various sorts were on the shelves along the walls.

Against one wall, sections of the grid had been moved to cover the silver bird of the portal opening, only the head remained clear. Gennady talked with the male freeborn, but his hand followed the outline of the crest. She went to stand next to him. Her mouth flooded with saliva at the proximity of the metal, she had the taste of it and would have liked to spit it out. Poultat and silver didn’t mix well. Simic related, but the branching had been very far back and less remained of the relationship than the human form suggested.

When she touched one thin line, nothing happened, certainly not the burning she had expected. She might have to settle for a rash, there should be something for the amount of distaste she felt. “Our reports say there is a time error in the bit of Net retrieved. Any idea why?”

“Your people are idiots.”

“And your own conclusions?”

Arms crossed again, Gennady looked at her. “A distortion, not an error. And it showed progression, something else they didn’t manage to notice.”

He gestured to the man beside him and the freeborn continued the explanation, letting the simple Net lead translate from Zimmer-native to plain-tongue. “Although the fragment is small, it indicates a finblat cycle distortion,

same as a looping Web-ship jump, similar to what the Gate Stations use for trade routes. Inside the loop, time stretches out and then retracts. The form of the jump exists only as potential until the ends meet back at the beginning. When they match again, at the nodes, that is when they would be able to come back through." He glanced at Gennady, but Mullaki felt that his attention never left her. An Empire Priest and by virtue of the Spann religion, an enemy.

The freeborn received the nod he apparently needed to continue. "If there is no jump, then the portal collapses. The portal would have been close to that when the San closed it. Master Warder Koikini of the Imperial Security confirms this, her readings say the same." His gaze returned to the grid and she felt a strong desire from him to escape into his work.

"But they would come out here?" she asked. They knew everything except the answer to this one question.

"Possibly," Gennady said before the freeborn could answer. One hand traced the silver outline as though he were touching feathers instead of metal and silk. "One thing...the thread showed the three of them and the white room, surrounded by the distortion as though they were in a bubble."

Another thing they knew. "So?"

He laughed, then surprised her by volunteering, "She was a lousy pilot."

Sunlight glinted from the head of the bird as Gennady moved, and the eye blinked at her, silver on green. Would he offer more? She hadn't expected reminiscing from him but certainly wouldn't discourage it. After all, his relationship with Cassa -- and not his redundant technology -- was the only reason he was here. Besides, they knew little of what Cassa had become in the years she had spent in this man's company. At Cam'it Temple on Camerat, the woman had learned to do just what she needed and no more. From the start, her greatest talent had been that.

Clanny watched them both as he leaned against the carved frame of the open door, just that little bit closer to her than to the table. One hand toyed with the tea bowl in his pocket.

When Gennady didn't continue, Mullaki prompted him. "What makes you say so?"

He hesitated again, then turned his back on the portal and walked to the table, and stood there, staring at the books. "She was fine in jumps," he continued, "but never really trusted what she read from the data points. Only the Web -- that she trusted. After a jump was the only time she remembered much about what she saw."

"Can you sense it?" she asked, gesturing around her, meaning the energy fields. "Is this bothering you?" He answered no, and she knew it for a lie.

"You assume our failure here," he continued. "Do you intend it to be an act of creation on your part?" He picked the top book from the table, a thin volume

bound in blue leather. Wood block printing using a variety of woods, the natural grain refining the shape of the words. The books had stayed here for the Zimmer to make of them what he wanted.

The tea arrived. She motioned her near-aides to put the service on the seat of the chair and then to rejoin her guard in the Hall outside. They wished the Zimmer to have the advantage of numbers -- for her safety. "Poultat don't create bad endings by speaking them," she said as she knelt on the floor. "We leave that for the Spann." Taking the tiny paste bowl between her fingers, she inhaled the delicate scent. A play on words in old-tongue to call this spawning fish as Anga had.

Clanny was using small bits of his paste bowl to scoop up rose petal jam from a crystal bowl, eating the combination like jam on crackers, his toast untouched. "Think, Lord Gennady," he said. "Not only no Priests, there won't be another Emperor. No god, a captive of Temple or otherwise. If you survive, whatever will you do with no one to pray to?"

"We'll be a myth like in those books," Mullaki said quickly to draw the Zimmer's attention away from her tass'alt. She drank the tea in a single draught, tasting the silt of the paste dissolving, then put the tip of one finger over the rim to show she didn't wish more water. "No world-patterns. No Priests." And that the end of her would be the end of what she was? The thought made her smile over the tiny bowl. Conceit? After living this long?

Gennady didn't raise the challenge she expected. "What do the Zimmer need to do?" he said. "What I see of what my children might be someday is what I see of the sun when I hold my hand up to shade my eyes."

"Reflective," she said. "I didn't think that a Zimmer trait. Of course, the imagery isn't Zimmer either, but as borrowed as your theology." A veil of cloud hid the sun on that world.

"Empire is half dead already," Gennady continued. "And what about the people that don't hold to Temple? Or the echo lines like the Spann that don't even produce Priests? Not everything will die."

"And that they were created by Empire not to produce Priests?" Her tone had several of his people glance over. "Don't be a fool, Gennady. The line is born to the Unity, they are part of Empire, and will be destroyed as thoroughly as any other."

The Zimmer held the book out to her but not to give. "You've read this, I think. It speaks of a war between the forces of good and evil."

"Does it really? I think not, or only in the most limited sense."

"We are the limits. You should remember that Cassa doesn't have any."

She hadn't started with a wish to provoke him, but couldn't resist one more poke. "Regardless of limits, Lord Gennady, we recognize your contribution and are in your debt." Accompanying the words, she made the appropriate forms in

High-formal, turning it into an overblown apology he would have to take as the insult it was.

"Debts owed to me are contingent on what we find here," he said and turned his back to walk away. Disinterest, not anger.

Coming closer to kneel behind her, Clanny stroked her arms, his breath warm against the back of her neck. Rose petal jam and the salt and vinegar of the paste bowl. "A unique response," he breathed.

"It was a perfectly good insult, I've been robbed." As his chuckle rolled through his flesh, she snuggled into his warmth to wait.

The portal was entirely encased in the grid now, the energies shifted as the Zimmer worked, the changes starting to come lightening fast, straining the floating warding spheres. The Net crackled than stretched to a gossamer thread.

## - 22 -

"Chanko, over here with that." The boy glanced at the Overpriest and her tass'alt before carrying the box to where Gennady stood. Listening to the Priest's insults, his Clan marks had almost disappeared in the bloom of his anger before he shunted the heat away from his skin, causing the hairs at the base of his crest to become faint pink. Chanko a'Genn d'Zimmer, the marks showing his full adult status not yet a year old. The boy was still touchy around anyone not a'Genn and especially not Zimmer. And being in the same room as an Empire Priest would be beyond anything he could have imagined.

"Use the warding spheres to set a baseline," Gennady added. At a touch, the grid crystal array unfolded, brightening at the main points as they joined the framework. Floor to ceiling and as wide again. He tasted the changes in the temperature of the already too-warm room as the structure built energies of its own. "Send the data to the ship for analysis, don't do any of it here."

Gennady pulled Allykh away when the freeborn started what he had just told Chanko to do. "Allykh, take these books back to the ship. Use the lead they've supplied from Three Crescents Temple Net to translate anything our Net doesn't have but be sure to filter it first. Nothing leaves the ship, remember that."

With a poorly masked look of relief, Allykh picked up a stack of books from the chair. Three down, one of the books was open, the spine bent from the weight of the others on top. He pulled it out, put it on the table and closed it, smoothing the gold stamped leather where it had buckled. "The sensor strips shouldn't be a problem," he said, opening to the inner cover. More gold lettering and a thin

crystal recording band. He glanced at the Priest then back, his eyes lowered. "Not the best quality crystal if this one is any indication, but adequate."

"Scan the pages as well, use the full range of the sensors we have, don't assume anything."

Not that he would. It was Allykh's kind of problem, and despite the strain he must feel, the man smiled momentarily, showing the blunt teeth of a freeborn. "They would have done it already," he said with another quick glance at the Overpriest.

Gennady picked up the book he had been looking at earlier. Blue leather, tooled in a simple design of interconnecting circles. Writing? Or just pretty? Despite a Net translation and what he had said to the Overpriest, the few lines he had read inside hadn't made a great deal of sense. Not unusual with archaic languages, but this was worse than usual, with every second word different than what he would have expected to follow the one before.

Gennady handed it to Allykh. "Well, we don't have the analysis. Make the priority second to the grid." Then changed his mind with a glance to where the grid hid the portal. The Change Phoenix. He was aware of the imagery Cassa had used during her brief stint as corporal Empress and what had grown as part of the popular religion about her since. That Nexus Change was cresting made the imagery all too real. Despite keeping an Orthodox ship out of deference to the Spann he worked for, he had believed most of it myth -- and had had to change his mind. "No. Do the two analyses together. I want a report as soon as possible."

He ended up helping Chanko himself, keeping busy in the adjustments to the grid and the seemingly endless test runs. Mullaki had slipped into pattern after a while, Clanny sat close beside her on the one rug in the room, playing a solitaire version of rings and stones and eating to pass the time. The San's game set from the bookshelves, the tea bowl for the die was the one the tass'alt had pocketed earlier.

Halfway into another run on the portal, his ship link opened. "Lord Gennady, Allykh here. I've done the analysis you asked for."

In the salute was one of the key words that meant there was a problem needing his attention back on the ship, but that it wasn't immediately life threatening. Despite that, he double-checked the security marks -- they were clear. "I was just heading back. I'll review it then." Then closing the link, added to Clanny, "This might be something the Overpriest would be interested in seeing. Can you pull her out of it?"

It took him a second to realize he was being answered. High-formal, but in the sign-only format and no eye contact. "No." Without regret, and with no change in the heat coming from the man as there would have been if he were challenging him. He didn't care that he couldn't help. Or, wouldn't help, and happy not to.

The yellowed ivory rings of the game broke the riot of color in the rug as they fell from the man's hands. The intricate blue drawing on the tass'alt's face twitched once but he didn't look up. Gennady watched as the carved stones fell next, waiting for a change in the tass'alt from being watched. Then decided to forget it. Poultat didn't rank based on dominance, either physiological or psychological. Despite frequent dealings with them, only with effort could he begin to image the order that existed in what appeared to be the chaos of relationships within the age-related cohorts that made up their extended families. Trade consisted of getting paid first and then bartering for the amount of goods owed with whoever was around to do so. Besides, he thought, nobody used to handling the Overpriest was going to be overly intimidated by him.

"Priest Mullaki," he said as he drew the sign for Zimmer in the air in front of her. He felt himself reach outwards as though entering the pilot web. *Pattern*, Anga had said. So it was.

No response. Their lines weren't closely related; he wasn't sure how much of an impact this would make. An irritant to bring her out of pattern was all he meant it to be and it had worked occasionally with Cassa. Clanny sat quietly at her side, still looking down at his game, but Gennady could feel his tension now like it was something alive.

And Chanko, openly staring at him, his Clan marks bleached with shock. With not a little temper, Gennady motioned him to get back to work.

With his third effort to call the Overpriest, he felt something interfere with the field he generated. He shut down with a feeling like he had been struck in the chest. After Cassa left, he had never thought to feel that again.

"An interesting sensation," Mullaki said haltingly. Her death was in her eyes, ice in waves coming from her. Still under control but the strength came from a force of will that hit Gennady a second blow when he scarcely had his breath back from the first. Without thinking -- or it was an old memory that prompted him -- he reached for her. Clanny knocked his hand away and pushed as between him and the Overpriest as he could get without stepping on either of them.

Gennady moved first to order his people to be still. And to back off. "My apologies to the Overpriest." He spoke in High-formal.

Mullaki made no move to intercede, leaving him to repeat his apology until the tass'alt signed acceptance in her place, and sat again without attempting to hide his anger.

"Allykh has found something in the books," he said. "I thought you might like to..."

"Garm's books," she said, an open smile breaking the smoothness of her face. The ice had receded and he could taste the heat of her body again. Then she laughed, leaning into Clanny, her dark eyes narrowing as her body relaxed. "Her tass'alt, Gennady. That's what he is. You can't even bring yourself to say his

name, can you? Is it simply Zimmer reticence about non-paltin sexuality, or something more?"

Allykh's message demanded his presence on the Ladybug. If he was going to leave crew here under those circumstances -- and he had to if he wanted what the grid was going to tell him -- he needed a hostage on his ship to ensure their safe return.

"Do you want to come?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral, very conscious of the stillness in the room, and the danger building since the Poultat had challenged him, and then not given submission, not even what might pass as a Poultat version. Danger, especially from Chanko. One shock, then another, but this one, was something a young Warrior would think he knew how to handle.

Gennady felt a movement and checked placement on the ship's Net. Kori had found a reading that needed to be done to his right, between Chanko at the grid and the Overpriest.

Mullaki got up, Clanny arranging her robes, a help that the woman didn't react to, for or against. "To your ship?" she asked.

"If you include a tour, Lord Gennady," Clanny said. The game pieces went into his pocket along with the bowl. "Perhaps this Chanko could provide escort. A relative, I understand."

A quick order on ship's Net kept Chanko back, his utter quiet was answer enough that Gennady hadn't underestimated the danger and how badly the boy needed to do something that fit what he understood.

Kori's eyes were on her shipmate, the sensor panel in her hands forgotten. Gennady appreciated the woman's courage but not her sense. With this stress to promote it, the first changes of the rasa were apparent in the young Zimmer. Chanko was becoming breeding dominant, something he himself would be unaware of but which increased his already hair-trigger temper. Danger that should have had the freeborn women cowering in the corner, not facing him down.

Gennady restated his offer to Mullaki, and finally, she made a motion of allowance and turned to leave. Clanny's eyes reflected the light coming from the window as he crossed it, walking on the near side of the Overpriest.

Gennady followed at the tass'alt's back. Turning at the door, he said, "Kori, leave that to Chanko and come with me." As she passed, he inhaled her scent, like a sasi rose with a catch of acid under the sweetness.



The terrace was a narrow lip on the vast outer wall of Palace, the Ladybug looked like a beetle in a spiders web, ropes of Palace shield hardened across back and belly. And only a single guard at the entrance instead of the usual triad. The man tried to look as casual as ordered, but had the hilt of his knife free of restraint and close to his throwing hand. His eyes were to the two Poultat who had joined the Overpriest in the processional. Several more had remained where they had been standing near a small flitter, Three Crescents Temple signature on the hull tiles. The Poultat went in groups, rarely on their own and very rarely wearing indicators of profession and status within their cohort. Only the flitter and that they served Mullaki, told him they were from a Temple based cohort.

Ship bands rose above him, red dots and lines. 'Ladybug', Cassa called the ship but she had named everything. The marks were identification marks, Zimmer registry coding set into the energy grid that flowed through the hull tiles.

He nodded to the guard, then unsealed the placing tiles that made the usual doorway, Palace shield pushed back first, then their own and the tiles. Allykh was waiting for him inside.

When he sealed the door behind them and set the inner baffle shields, Kori tensed, her head turned slightly in what looked like an aborted submission pose. "Lord?" she asked, eyes going from Mullaki to him, to Allykh and back and then down.

"Kori, show the Overpriest to the conference room, I'll be there in a few minutes." He would stretch Mullaki's interest past his finding out what Allykh had to say. She may realize that she and her tass'alt were hostages for Rigyant's behavior, but he didn't want her forced to act on it. He had five crew out including the guard and no assurances that he hadn't just brought very serious trouble inside with him.

He waited until he was sure the others would be out of range, and then a minute longer. "Where's Simitta?" And why the hell wasn't there a spin flag waiting for him from his los.

At Simitta's name, Allykh's head dropped into a submission pose. "Operations."  
"What's wrong?"

No eye contact, even as Allykh started speaking. "Books, for translation, crystal interface with Net, translation..."

Freeborn dialect as spoken to their Clan masters -- Allykh had been born into service on Zimmer -- the word passages broken into fragments. "Speak like crew," Gennady said.

It took a moment but the freeborn managed. "I was using the Palace Net to help translate the books, with a filter ward like you ordered. First book, the

crystal band and then a scan of each page. I was half way through when I decided to stack the two Nets instead of running them parallel and that's then I started to get an echo. I thought it might be an effect of the warding energy, so I changed the pattern, then the source nodes, but it kept happening. I did a full analysis of the backup recording..."

"Not the primary?"

"No, I didn't want to affect the results if this was something intrinsic to the book itself." He was getting calmer, on familiar ground, and knowing he was good at it.

"Go on."

"The echo was from the ship's Net, our primary nodes at least, some of the secondary nodes appear clear, but I'm not sure I'm looking at them the right way. The effect is subtle, some kind of pull residue. I think it's the remains of our nodes being tapped by another system."

"Any idea who?"

He shook his head.

"Did you try anything else?"

"While I was waiting for you. Passive records from this morning and some from random periods over the last couple of months."

"And?"

"Traces of the echo on some of the records since we arrived at Palace two weeks ago, nothing from before. Everything from this morning on is affected, the data from the portal study and all the intraship communications as well. Communication nodes are one set of secondaries that are definitely affected." He hesitated. The movement of his eyes showed a sudden remembering that Simitta would be listening from the passive ears. As Chief of Security, this was his failure, not Allykh's.

"When did you report it to Simitta?"

His head fell again and he didn't answer.

Under Allykh's nose, Gennady's fingers shaped a sign of allowance. He needed the freeborn functioning, not terrorized into near paralysis. "I want to know how ship's Net was compromised and by who." He passed the still silent man then turned. "And I want to know why it wasn't detected before this." That would have to do for a reprimand, but one directed at the listening Simitta.

Simitta barely nodded when Gennady entered Ops. His Clan marks showed blood sign but the surrounding skin was cool with control. Olumka sat next to the Web couch, jeweled eyes rotating slowly, two hands in a formal avoidance posture. Gennady ignored the Spann. Olumka would watch until it thought this too dangerous.

"You heard me," he said to his los. "Unless the ears are down as well." He licked his points, lips parted enough that Simitta had to see.

Dark grew around the pale of Simitta's eyes, normally glacial blue with a touch of green. "I heard you." Two of his security staff were at the passive reader systems; ship's Net would be out until they solved this. Simitta motioned to his people and they left quickly.

In a slow weaving motion, Olumka drew the form of peaceful leave taking, and Gennady returned it as formally. That had taken less time than he had thought it would. The other two leaving may have been the stimulus, or the Spann had somewhere to go to.

And quietly, when they were alone, the ear padded off: "Uncle, I'll use Clan or freeborn to get what I need. You should be used to it by now."

"That's one freeborn needing..."

"Sim, I don't have time to fight with you." Yuin sight had increased until the black obscured much of the blue of Simitta's eyes. He didn't return it, he had no need to. "I want to know what's going on and fast. If you think you can top Allykh on the systems, then go kill him and be done with it."

Teeth showed, not a grin but a start. "Can I wait on that?"

Gennady shook his head. "One time offer. Take it or leave it."

The man did laugh then, the tension in the room evaporating. "I'd better go see what tricks your pet can do." Then more seriously, turning just before he left the room: "Gen, nothing showed on the security scans and we've done random checks as well as the routine ones ever since we got here, and more after you were taken." He nodded in the general direction of Palace. "They either know our systems better than we do or have access to resources we can't come near to matching."

"Rigyant?"

"The loom-master appears to be running this show. And our sources say the Overpriest Mullaki is an old ally, not one of those who scurried for cover after the Overpriest Sarkalt's death."

"Check Olumka as well, though. This may be part of something older. If it is, go slow with it. Unless we can show it started recently, any tap by the Spann can be considered allowed by precedence and a change could indicate we intend to break our contract."

Simitta nodded. "And it would be nice to be owed for a change." Then he bared his honor points with the sound of air drawn slowly over the hollow ends. "You stink. Keep your other pets under better control."

"She's responding to Chanko. I'm giving you the responsibility of keeping him away from her."

"Even if he is rasa'ti, he'd hardly breed her."

He wouldn't, he shared his father's feelings about freeborn. Simitta's son from a breeding his los hadn't been happy about at the time. His own opinion that Clan a'Genn could use a male paltin from that line was as unpopular as his taking

Simitta as a los. The a'Genn senior wife, first Gen's own mother, and now Risni, had let few of Simitta's male children live.

He was tempted to call Chanko back now; he could hear Cassa opinion of his actions. Fate -- he wouldn't turn away from the chance that had the boy in the San's room at this time.

"I remember when you weren't so fastidious," he said to his los. But allowed his opinion of Chanko, Cassa had been an exception for them both. "Chanko wouldn't breed Kori, but he might kill her just for that reason. I need her alive."

"I'm sure you do."

"Just do it, Sim," he said, already turning away.

Sitting at the controls, Gennady padded the passive ears back on then thumbed through the security channels. As much as Chanko, he needed the information from the grid, preferably first, and in a form only he could use. And sell -- despite agreeing to help. Success was always worth more than the agreed upon price. Add Ulanda, if he got to her first, the price would increase again. And if she was already a Priest-Select and likely to survive long enough to replace Cassa through Nexus Change? Higher again.

Kori and the Overpriest were in the conference room, the tass'alt in the small galley just off it. Simitta had joined Allykh, talking systems, and Gennady wasn't sorry the simple ear didn't record more than that. He leaned against the wall, letting it take his weight, then slid down until he was squatting, arms supported on his thighs. The com board was eye level, he could still see. Most of the data points were black, but a few showed single line transcriptions, reference coding of what they were feeding into the crystals as they waited for someone to plug into them.

He wanted the portal data and he wanted who was responsible for tapping his systems and how. Empire was old, too many cycles had come and gone, almost anything was possible. Rigyant... and the ti'Linn. He had seen very few of the bug-eaters around, but the loom-master had treated Olumka as though he were more than a go-between. Was it from a sense of balance to the rank of the ti'Linn he had dealings with? Was that a Piltsimic trait? It was a Spann trait and the loom-master might have been sending a subtle message to Olumka. Or agreement on terms by the principles here -- Rigyant and the Spann -- had already been settled.

Well, he hadn't agreed and by the actions of both Olumka and the loom-master they were willing to consider that his actions might be significant... and unexpected. Being unpredictable might be the most effective weapon he had. Or the only one. He ran a few of the more obvious possibilities through his mind -- obvious to him and likely obvious to them.

"Lord, can I get you anything?"

In one hand, the woman held the recording she had been making. Gennady checked the time and winced. A few minutes, he had told the Overpriest. “Some tea.” Then, before she had gone, “A bun as well, Cunra, whatever is available.” The scent of burning went with her, carried in her clothes. In her prayer, had she found answers that still escaped him?

Leaning forward, he was just close enough to reach the data point for placements: Kori was with the team doing the analysis. Good. He listened to her a moment, enjoying himself, a luxury in that too. He would breed her if Sim wouldn’t have a fit, the other paltin as well, especially their senior sister-wife. Kori’s freeborn line had been selectively bred for almost as long as a’Genn had records and he knew it had been used as a gene source before.

The gin’tala first, making her a’Genn. Not that Kori would thank him for the honor that promised at least her girl children full status. She hadn’t been born on Zimmer, her family scratching an existence in the shadow of a Clan Holding or as bonded servants; she had been raised in a freeborn Enclave on a Gate Station. That her family was owned by a’Genn would have been something mentioned on the High Days when the Zimmer Speakers chanted the family names before the altar, serious attention paid it only when permission for marriage was sought. He doubted she had seen a Clan Zimmer until he had ordered her into his service.

What life had she planned for herself, he wondered? She had reached Master level in Security, but the work that had called her to his attention had been on tile energy conduits. At a work yard on Wisl’na she had been ankle deep in mud, working beside the Zeta Commta as they hand shaped flitter tiles. Singing the patterns, the Zeta patted mud into the wooden forms, the air around them bristling with the configurations. She wore a filter mask where the natives to that world didn’t. The esblat vine was in bloom, yellow pollen filled the air, showing patterns that would only be sensed in the tiles. He had watched a long while before she noticed him there, she had an ability to concentrate that blocked out everything else -- a disastrous trait for line security but useful in a scientist.

He checked placement for Mullaki and Clanny. In one of the guest quarters now, the room quiet, then he heard a light snore and wondered which of them it was.

Cunra brought the buns and tea then went back to taking readings at the com. Three crackle-top buns. From Palace, not ship’s stores. Gennady washed the first down with the tea then enjoyed the next two more slowly, licking the sugar from the tips of his fingers between bites.

The grid data should be complete by now. It was time to make a move. Almost any move, then see what happened, and move again. No plan, just trusting to luck.

Gennady paddled the ship’s Net open then ordered the baffle screens down, the walls groaning as the field collapsed. Data from the portal study flooded in,

the information condensed into milliseconds and followed by a real time request for orders. "Pull back in," he said. "Full alert."

Getting up to sit at the com beside Cunra, Gennady followed Chanko and the other three on the placement, using heavily filtered Temple Net to supplement the data while he still could.

A flare on the placement that would be the Overpriest's flitter disintegrating. Either his people were under attack or Chanko had over reacted. Damn the timing. Damn Cassa and damn what he knew she'd yelling at him right now. He should have left Kori at the grid instead of Chanko. As an experienced technician, she would have handled the grid better and as a Master in Security, the withdrawal better. And with Chanko out of the way, the Clan techs would have obeyed her orders if he had specifically told them to.

Says something about what you really want, doesn't it? He pushed the words - - Cassa's words, frequent words -- to the back of his awareness. What was done was done.

The outer guard was ready for the team; entrance shields programmed to a hair trigger, the other two of his triad just inside. Simitta had the crew positioned for a boarding assault, with only the freeborn and Pallin, the second pilot, held back, Olumka with them. The room with Mullaki and Clanny was locked, ship's Net bypassing them. Simitta's orders, and Gennady spared his loss a smile through the Net.

Just as his people showed at the entrance to the terrace, Gennady pushed ship's shield into Palace shield. The ship rocked slightly with the impact, the Palace shields more successfully resisting the extension of the ship's system the further out they got. The Net leads screeched with static but the limited version of ship's Net held, placement ragged and showing breaks but with people moving in a defensive formation.

"Have you relieved me of my duties?" Simitta said through a tight link.

One more trick, another push of the shield but in a different frequency and moving out and around the crew on the terrace. "I didn't see the need for consultation," he sent back to Simitta.

A crack appeared in the wall of the terrace -- the dressed stone over the building tiles showed better than the plants that would be slime against the walls. Their shields had been stopped. And Mullaki's people? They would be stupid to still be there and Poultat weren't stupid. Shifting the configuration of extra series of links to handle the placement analysis earned him two fuzzy spots that would be crew. Placement effect held better inside: three in including the guard but with the hole in the ship still wide open.

Suddenly, the extended shield was hit from outside, the blast burning through the Net. Slow emergency shut down had Gennady blinking at the glare as though blinking would help. Half into that reaction, the impact force hit the ship, the hulls

tiles screaming as they were chewed between the two energy fields. Passive backup showed the entrance closed, the outer shield holding the tiles together but the screaming continued. Nothing outside, they were blind, but it had to be a sustained energy beam, not a single shot.

His palms itched. Whoever attacked them had been ready, these actions at least, not unexpected. He could only pray the grid data was what he needed and that he would be able to get his ship to a place where the bargaining could begin without Rigyant holding every advantage. Like having access to his Net systems.

"Prepare for Web jump," he said, extending into the ship's Net and feeling the residue of Simitta's anger like it was a scent. "Damage?" he asked, wanting words to replace what he felt, but the reports were already coming in. Tiles had been chipped and fractured but new ones had swarmed in to replace them, the old ones riding piggyback for now, held to the outer surface of the ship by the shielding. Further in and he felt for his crew, no words, but each flared a signature. One missing: Chanko.

Further in again and his awareness of the separate data links spread, the systems becoming like simple-minded entities, fitting together into a whole. As the Web energies started to build and he slipped from the Net into the Web pilot system, he felt the beginning of the familiar time distortion.

If Chanko were still alive through that, the Web forming around the outside of the ship would kill him. And when they jumped, take a sizable chunk of Summer Run with them, he had neither time nor temper to be careful. If the damage extended to one of the Depths, like Red Band, other Runs could be affected. How much were the watchers prepared to risk? Or had they prepared for this as well?

Web fields showed him what the Net couldn't anymore. Ri was a blurred mass underneath. Too close, his mind screamed, wanting open space around him. Smaller, Palace was more like a station, or rather the effect of Palace in how it warped the fields. The smaller blur on the other side would be a ship. A very large ship.

The time distortion was growing; he had minutes now to their seconds. Definitely a Temple ship, a Justice cruiser. Would they risk him going into a Web jump this close? Outside eyes would help. He had no way of knowing how much they risked, how much additional shielding Palace could raise or even how much Rigyant cared. Or why there weren't two ships out there, or ten.

Someone was beside him, moving slow: Simitta on weapons systems, his hands pausing over the controls in a dance that held them suspended for what seemed like minutes.

"Hold fire, we don't need a war here," he said into the Net. "We're just feeling each other out." One ship?

And from Simitta, words and a shrug together: "Weapon systems have collapsed." Preliminary analysis followed in the Net from the automatic standard checks, and moments later, Allykh added additional ones.

"Keep Allykh on it," he replied. Apparently he wasn't to cause too much damage while he figured this out. Hands touched then lifted him. Direct Web cradle hookup, in case the Net failed. A little later, on his other side, Pallin arrived and Gennady felt him entering the Web. The other pilot didn't have any natural ability in the Web at all; Spann-made cyber-inserts gave him access to Web that he couldn't reach directly and which bypassed the Net. Ships could be run entirely through Net links, but the Web systems gave immediate access.

Time continued to slow, giving him time now to think when he didn't want to. Chanko would be dead, Gennady knew, his way out blocked by the second extension of the ship's shield. He fed in ship's Net, a trickle of information, mostly from Simitta -- and all business -- but nothing was flagged so he called up the injury report first, letting it build up in the Web-Net interface before releasing it. Two injured: the guard, Kamer, severe burns. The medic spin left the question of his survival open. He could survive but it was his choice and his triad's. Chanko would have been dead a long time ago, probably before the hatch closed. And his triad? They would have lost him to the rasa'ti in any case. The other injury was Pallin. Gennady hadn't felt that from the Web, in any case, the pilot shouldn't have been in the front ranks.

"Pallin?" The time difference was negligible, following in making it faster for him. "What happened?"

"Chanko brought in that Ri-priest. The woman, Poss a'ltic, from the meeting you were at. Pushed her in first, that's when the blast hit." He stopped and Gennady felt him scan the Web. "The energy beam is changing."

"I've got it. They've switched to a different source, probably burned out their main crystal array. They'll be lucky to keep their ship tiles together at this rate." Cursing to himself for not checking non-crew, he started another line trickling into the interface.

"We could jump."

"Not yet, the Web lines aren't holding properly." Their shields were holding, but barely, even with constant readjustments through the Web. Less than ten real-time minutes since the hatch closed but it felt like hours. They couldn't jump and they couldn't fight.

"What happened with the Priest?" he asked. Her being here should have been a flagged message from Simitta.

"The blanketing field we tried to use on her to put the fire out wouldn't work, she was shooting pattern blasts out every time someone came near. I could see... the inserts caught it, I think. I was able to get in far enough to knock her back out."



“Ri-pattern?”

Pallin hesitated. “I wouldn’t know. The passive eyes might have more.”

They did but not by much, they weren’t designed to record that kind of energy. He hadn’t been offered the spins from the meeting when she had managed to surprise the loom-master. Overpattern? Placement had only Mullaki and Clanny with her, the medic still with the injured guard. She might live. Had he bought her with Chanko’s death? Should he burn a joss stick to his luck? She has priority, he ordered, and pulled the medic away from the guard.

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The bed rocked like a cradle, a gentle, somehow familiar motion that inserted itself into the dream flawlessly. Mullaki was in a shallow-draft boat gliding over long ocean swells, no land in sight. The rhythmic lapping of water against the wooden sides was in time to her heartbeat. There were no other sounds.

One elbow against the curved side rail for balance, she absently picked at the paint with her thumb. Already flaking along the grain, the white paint easily came loose under her nail and she brushed the flakes into the water. Snow in the shadow of the boat, sun-bright, darkening, floating. A wake of white flakes, darkening again but from distance and contrast to the sun glitter.

“Mulli, please wake up!” The voice came from far away and was almost lost in the light of the sun on the water, all the colors dancing in that light. Her brother? She leaned over the side, closer again to the web of light. Was it his voice?

“Mulli, please.” The words were rising like bubbles, spreading out in rings on the water, carrying the nearer paint flakes with them. A long time since she had heard his voice calling her.

Bending over further, her shadow merged with that of the boat. He would be there, as lost as her shadow was, a face so like hers. A confusion of sounds rose around her, not just his voice. They meant something more, she knew, but it didn’t seem important just now. Only the water was important, the dark water and her brother waiting there.

Then the boat rocked suddenly, but not from waves: water boiled around the sides. She stood, lost her balance and fell -- or jumped. The water was her mother, she breathed it like being born back into the womb. As she sank down, something moved in the depths below her, something long and narrow and quick.

Her eyes blinked open to the bed still moving.

Clanny rubbed her arms. “Each time I think you’re back, you slip away again.”

Power flickered where it usually flared and a sick feeling hummed in her bones. The tiles that made up one of the walls and the ceiling swirled until she closed her eyes. She didn't remember leaving Garm's room.

"Both Palace and Temple Net went out a few minutes ago," Clanny continued, moving his face closer to hers when she would have turned away. Listen to me, his body said, trying to capture her attention back. "That's when I started trying to wake you up."

She had to be on Gennady's ship. It was difficult to think. "If they're shielding, then the attack has started. Is Gennady preparing to jump?"

He shook his head and her eyes hurt from automatically trying to follow the frost pattern drawn on his cheeks, but that was better than the white of the walls. They weren't really white she knew, and if she wished, could taste as changes in energy levels, what a Zimmer would actually see.

"I don't think so, not yet. Ship's Net is out now too."

She reached out so the touching was from her to him as well and he smiled. He was beautiful when he smiled, all of his smiles over the years having grown together in the lines at the corners of his eyes and in the subtle changes in the smoothness of his skin.

"Interesting, don't you think?" she said, drawing the fingers of one hand over the crystal shapes on his face, snow flakes and frost in Poultat blue. Not white. "We talked of fish... are we in the belly of the fish now?"

He took the weight of her hand from his face as his smile changed to a look of indulgence. "Poor fish, if so," he said and she heard that he was amused at last despite himself. "You're a meal that won't stay put." He added the inflection that made it into a double pun. "Where did you go just now? I didn't think you would leave me alone here without the others for company."

"My brother was calling me. It's been so long... I only think of time when I think of him."

"Are you sure it was his voice and not mine?" He looked into her eyes as he ran probing fingers along the skin of her face to check responses. "Or one of the others here?" His eyes went to the walls as though he expected people to walk through the tiles.

She chuckled and shook her head as she snuggled against him. "Your voice now. Let the others stay in the walls. I find them tiresome. When I give my brother back what I've taken from him, I won't need the others."

"You can't give back what is shared with so many."

She shook her head. "With all these here? The entire Host? Let them step forward and make a claim, then." Only this man had a claim and she thought he might have been with her and her brother then as well. "Are you there?" she whispered. "Were you?" A part of her wanted to give up easily, drift back into the dream, there was time there to find who she sought, an eternity.

But Clanny's hands wouldn't let her. If she had spoken the last part, he hadn't heard. "Tea?" she finally murmured to stop him. Her mouth was dry and with the asking, she found she wanted tea after all, and was amused at herself for losing to the needs of the body. "The Empress's tea bowl if you haven't sat on it."

But it was stale water he gave her in the fragile cup. "I can heat it," he said, after she refused the second mouthful. "No brazier but there's an altar and a fire-box." He swung around off the bed, carrying the cup with him. A cloth screen, the same white as the walls, sheltered one corner of the small room.

"Appropriate," she said, chuckling. A rectangular plate of unglazed clay, piled with smooth pebbles. Always water smoothed pebbles and always from Zimmer. A narrow wooden box was next to the squat clay one holding the live coals. Black joss sticks, no doubt, and she chuckled again. She might ask her tass'alt to light one stick, even if neither of them knew the Spann prayers.

"You could pray," she said, motioning to the joss box.

Clanny shook his head. "Will the ashes show me a way out of here when you wish to stay? You'd do better having a cup of hot water from it."

"Tea, not eternity?" She shared this laughter. "Don't bother heating it, but drink with me. I'd rather not be alone."

Taking a sip of the water first, he sat close and held the bowl for her, whispering in her ear: "You owe me a point for the admission. One more and I win."

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Clanny kept one hand along her neck to keep her quiet and watch her pulse at the same time his other hand worked. She hadn't stayed awake long. None of the pressure points got the usual reaction. A flicker at the edge of his vision and he thought it must be Bispony, but it was only the white of the walls playing tricks on him. His teasing of Mulli had grown into expectations of company, or he had been seeding fertile ground in his mind. The medic should have followed them onto the terrace and then the ship. Or Ispin -- he was another flicker of the white walls, the room was as haunted as the spiral in a Temple.

"If you brought any of the Host with you, please share," he complained to Mulli as he let his mind drift into desire more than memory. "A couple, several. A memory pull... this morning at the briefing perhaps... your brother can sit in the back, there's room." The meeting had been more virtual than physical and unnoticed by most of those in the Suite.

A sudden sharp groaning sound from the walls startled him fully awake. Was the attack beginning only now? Or just getting worse? He hadn't thought to check the various options being considered, most of them meant to get the Zimmer moving. He knew one entailed Gennady finding out about the tapped Net, but not the details of what would come of it. None of them included their being on the Zimmer ship and wondered when Mullaki had decided on that course of action. Had it been after she pulled overpattern in the San's room? Or before, and not told him or Anga?

Suddenly, he was in a cocoon of noise, the ship warbling like something in pain. Mulli shifted her weight but didn't wake up. He pulled the blanket free and tucked it around her. Her skin was cold, even with the napped angora overrobe.

Stretching back out, he curled on his side so that her head fit tucked by his elbow and his free hand could fit against her throat. Warmer cuddling and he allowed himself to become aroused so she would have something more pleasantly distracting than the white walls and the groans to keep her here. Gradually, the sounds of battle changed again -- a lower rolling sound -- and he hoped a sustainable balance or level of tolerance had been reached.

Bending his head over, he breathed into her mouth, tasting her lips and taking her breath in turn. "Come back, please. A few more moments won't matter to you." He kissed each eye. No change, or response to him rather, just an occasional whisper of sound that was matched by a frown and a trembling of her body, almost invisible through the layers of cloth.

He didn't know what to do to bring her back or if it would matter if he tried. He could see the progression to his own death every day in the mirror -- his age in the crow's feet and the graying of his hair and eyes, but he hadn't ever thought of her dying. She was a constant, she had never changed in his lifetime and she never would.

Like Empire. And Empire was dying.

Perhaps they would both die here, her in his arms, the Zimmer ship crushed under the attack. "Will we die?" he asked Ispin, keeping his eyes on Mulli so he wasn't confronted by the transient nature of his imaginings.

Despite his rudeness, the flicker answered. "Most likely." A chorus of agreement came out of the creak and groans. White walls to a flicker. Sounds to voices.

More like a persistent if poorly realized Net link than what he could share in from Mullaki. He decided the voices were more sustainable and using a child's trick, closed his eyes to help flesh them out. His hands told him what he needed to know about his Priest. "I'm glad we'll die," he whispered. "All of us together."

He woke up from a light sleep to shouts from outside the room. The noise was getting closer and he felt a pattern disturbance, then screams and the smell of burning. And blood. Closer again, then one of the Zimmer pushed the door open

with his back, pulling something wrapped in a blanket, smoking and stinking like a spiral kill with the pattern energy still eating it.

"Not on the bed," Clanny shouted as he rolled off to block the lead Zimmer, and found himself facing a knife and a snarl.

He tried to judge how far the Zimmer would go, wondering how much was bluff but found it difficult to decide with the white blade held inches from his face.

The Net crackled back on. Just noise in the room but the other Zimmer in the doorway swore. "Gennady's going for a Web jump," he said, backing into the open space.

The other one didn't move the knife. "Report to Ops." Then to Clanny, "This one's a Priest, take care of her."

A corner of the blanket had fallen away to show burned skin frosted with greasy looking foam. Her? "She needs a medic. I need one here too. Someone trained to handle Priests. And a Warder."

"Medic's busy. Give her some neural blockers, enough to keep her out." His eyes went to Mulli and back then he shrugged. "You're staying and the door gets locked, it's your skin." He started to back out, then pushed the burned woman further in with a foot when the door wouldn't close.

Trying his best to ignore the smell coming from the blanket, Clanny checked Mulli: steady pulse, her eyes closed, growling something under her breath. She twitched, cracked her jaw sharply and then ground her teeth together. Taking hope from the reaction, he began to caress her, but it appeared a one-time thing. Still the dream, he decided, not a preview of the convulsions that would begin once she began to loose control. Or she might be responding to the other Priest. If the woman wasn't dead.

Sliding off the bed, he knelt next to the body on the floor and peeled back the rest of the blanket. This close, he couldn't ignore the smell, it caught at the back of his throat.

The braids were charred black but apparently had protected the lower arms. She must have raised her hands to her face -- that had escaped with mild burns already puffing with fluid. Eyes were okay and dark blue when he thumbed them back. He let his fingers rest a moment over where he could press gently and she would be dead moments later, then sighed and continued his exploration. Fingers black and swollen with red cracks oozing fluid, the braiding was sloppily done with only a few crossover strands on the palm and those were burnt into the flesh.

She stirred under his hands and he felt the hair on his head try to stand on end. She was reaching. Hurt that bad, there was no way of telling what she would do. Fingers working what unburned skin he could find, he said the only words that came to mind, his fear rushed out faster than he could turn the tone from desperate to soothing. At the sound of his voice, the reaching died back, but she

didn't answer, nor did any of the flickers crowding the walls. He looked around and all the people disappeared, all their talk, just groans again.

J'Ini blocker, he decided, wanting the sedative to keep her unconscious. The braids were half undone and he finished the job, reaching clear skin near the crook of the arm. Towards the wrists were deep just-closed fissures, emerald green marks rising around the red wounds. Simic crowning Ri.

"Poss a'Itic." Mullaki was awake and watching, rolled onto her side with the blanket pushed off.

He tried to match what he remembered of the Ri-Priest with what he saw here. "Is she supposed to be involved? Something Anga didn't bother telling us?"

"Running to, running from..." Mulli frowned and looked around. "What's happening?" she asked. "Who were you talking to?"

"Two of the crew. They said Gennady's finally going for the Web jump." Wiping his fingers first on his robe, he moved to straighten Mulli's where the layers of loose fabric had caught under her. In her ear, he whispered: "All those here didn't tell me you were slipping back in. Shall I complain at the lack of attention?" Pressing hard, he rubbed at the major points along her neck. "Bispony..." He glanced to where the medic should have been. "A little help, if you please."

His jokes were wearing thin, as sustainable as imaginary voices... or Mulli's attention. She looked to the wall as he did, but between the start and the finish of the movement, all expression had stripped from her face. She had gone back into pattern as quickly as she had come out.

The other Priest? Mulli had responded to her once. With his foot, he jostled the still form. Nothing from either of them. Getting down on his knees, he forced the energy flow at each g'ta point where there was still intact skin, explaining at length the reaction he expected. In Poultat-native without a Net to translate, he suddenly realized and started to laugh. Poss a'Itic gargled deep in her throat then screamed. Over and over the same high, thready noise.

He didn't hear the door open. "What do you think you're doing?" A Zimmer pushed in, practically tripping over him.

"I don't know," he said, backing up to the wall.

The second Zimmer stuck a patch of something on Poss a'Itic's cheek and the screaming stopped. He lifted one of her arms and poked at the blocker circle with his pointed thumbnail. "Ri J'nli?" he asked and reached around to check the back of her neck, fingers coming away with the white skin smeared black.

"Poultat was all I had."

The Zimmer nodded as he started to pull the remains the blanket from around the woman and Clanny was wondering whether to help when Mulli spoke. "Kill her," she said in Zimmer-native.

The Zimmer by the door had his knife in hand and was between the Overpriest and Poss a'Itic before Clanny thought to move. Mullaki didn't move either, but she

had managed ship's Net where he hadn't and was searching for an in to the command structure.

Riding in with her, Clanny could follow only half of what she attempted, but he felt all of the anger building. Pattern aborted or went bad every time she tried to focus it, the backlash souring the Net.

"I gave you an order, Zimmer." Using High-formal like the weapon she couldn't create from her own mind. She assumed status in a twist of the inflections, adding pattern energy to force it. The air shimmered when Poultat-pattern failed again.

But the Zimmer laughed and replied in Trade. "I've seen better efforts." He turned his head towards Clanny as he slid his knife back in. "She needs more blocker," he said, adding a derisive motion in case the scorn in his voice was missed. "Make her one thing or the other."

Mullaki was out of the Net. Clanny sat back where he had been, and took her hands in his, braid ends flowing between his fingers. Hands that were a dead weight. The Zimmer hadn't moved to stop him at all. "She has a message for Lord Gennady," he said, not taking his eyes off her.

Mulli, please, his eyes said to her, not sure what she was going to do, even with all their years together. "One last cast into the water..." He chuckled weakly. "Ask the others here, they'll say the same."

He looked to the Zimmer. "If he's in the Web, can you get a message to him?"

"Through the Net-Web interface. It only seems slow to the pilot."

Clanny was about to give up, when he felt her pull a lead in the domestic section of the Net and pass the messages on as dead calm now as she had been raging before. And with the last, a question: "Fools? Are we fools of an amiable sort? All of us?"

"Yes," he answered her but too late, she was gone again, her eyes blank.

When the Zimmer moved, Clanny didn't have time to even start. Several of the cords he'd been holding from Mulli's braids were cut, and wrapped around his wrists and ankles.

"Gennady says that portal node is seventeen minutes off," the Zimmer said. Acceptance of the plan had come back in the Net almost instantly. "How long does she have?"

"I don't know for sure." He managed to inch over until his head was against her leg. Lying cheek against the nap of her angora robe, his breath was mist on the cloth, then ice. "Untie me. I'll need your knife, there's ways to reach her. I can bring her back."

"She's going over." Strong hands shifted him upright, putting strain on the bonds but the cords weren't cut. "Am I wrong?" Clanny didn't answer and the Zimmer shook him. "Am I?"

He felt the power gathering around her. His skin crawled. It wasn't Poultat, it wasn't anything she had any practice at controlling. The Zimmer was right and he knew what could happen, she'd be like a Select at Nexus Change. "No, you're not wrong."

"Are you kin?"

"I'm her tass'alt," he said. The lessons learned so long ago in the Tass'Holding whispered in his ears but weren't the comfort the flickers and their words had been.

"But it's your responsibility to kill her?"

Family and responsibility. The two words defined the Zimmer people, not Poultat. "I'm her tass'alt," he repeated, but heard in the word, a condemnation of himself, seeing too clearly the 'how' of killing her. "I don't move away, I'm always there." Not a flicker from a white wall, not a come-later, come-sooner.

The knife was out again. The blade might scratch the air, he thought. Cold had taken the moisture as it had all expression from Mulli's face. He made an offering of water to her with each breath, one greedily accepted and turned into an icy mist.

"Family," Clanny said in a puff of white. The crystals danced with the rise of energy coming from her. He looked up to see the Zimmer looking back.

"Responsibility," he added, breathing the word to Mulli. Snow fell on her face and didn't melt.

There was movement in the white of the snow as there had been in the walls. "I'll take the knife," one of the growing number of flickers said. Mulli's brother -- he wore the same face as hers and looked as far out from the cold as she did.

Clanny nodded at the aptness of the choice. He bent over Mulli and kissed her cold lips. The thin shell of ice covering her cracked, tiny lines radiating from the breaks as though released from an infinity of moments. "Game point," he breathed against her hair.

## - 26 -

Time, Gennady thought. Time to match the portal pattern. Ten minutes real-time and hours at his end. A mock jump first, using the set points that they had gotten from the portal. Within the web infrastructure, he put together a semblance of the multidimensional form that on the wall, only looked like a bird drawn with silver wire. Then placed it over their best direct reading of the portal. And waited for the two to come together, either as a perfect fit -- not likely -- or



a close enough fit that he could adapt his created form to the other. Nothing happened either way.

He had Anga's data to augment his own, courtesy of the Overpriest. They were still under attack and still from a single ship. Twenty-eight minutes. How far would they go in forcing him and what did they have available to take advantage of his jump? Another ship would be the most likely answer. And the reason for the attack was to keep him from finding a way to prevent it from following him.

He played the spins through again, matching the energy beam sequence and the effect on the shields and found something more just back of the attacking ship. Distortion fields, not directed, not as a weapon, but only to prevent him from setting a normal jump.

He let Pallin try his own mock run into the coordinates and watched from a distance to get a different perspective. The other pilot didn't get any further than he had.

"I can't believe all our set points are off," Pallin said. "Maybe the portal has been deactivated."

"I won't accept that. And I want an analysis, not an opinion."

The fragile rapport between them threatened to disintegrate, but the analysis came. "Without having activation at some level between the two, I can only approximate a match. Using the same criteria for both our mocks, you actually miss-matched more set points than I did, except that accessing the web differently than I do, not as much shows."

The other pilot would only use the word 'pattern' if left with no choice. Cassa had used only pattern, no set points at all; she ran though the mocks three times and if it showed okay, then off they went. Like watching a flower bloom, she had said. If you can see the bloom at the end of it, then don't worry which petal unfolds first. She wouldn't have set up the portal any different.

Something manual for Garm. And keyed for him as something he could reach through the web system like he would a gate jump -- at least Anga and the others must think so. And they could be wrong. He suspected desperation was what had put that Justice Cruiser out there shooting at him.

"Pallin, I want you to put a level one buffer between us. I'm going to do the entire jump in one step. Be ready to take over the shields."

A moment's hesitation. Then: "Done." Gennady felt him fade out, then a single channel reopen, a restriction that felt like fresh air.

"Do you want me to handle the Web dump when we come out?" Pallin asked.

"I was going to set the threads to strip the ship as we went through the portal. Anybody nearby would get fried otherwise."

"You mean enter blind?" Even with a simple channel, Gennady could sense the disbelief.

Net and eyes, but blind as far as a pilot was concerned. “Silent attack mode,” he said, amused but hiding it. Stripping the web-jump residue into the jump as you went through, so that another ship would have a great deal of trouble detecting the jump at all. A tricky maneuver, a miscalculation and you could leave half your ship in the jump interface at the same time. “You’ve done it before.”

“In open space, not... where ever.”

“I don’t think that going in blind will make any difference.” His back was crawling. Pure imagination but the itch seemed real and well beyond anything he was able to scratch. Nerves. He imaged a large yawn.

He aborted the first two mocks, losing any connection before a single match happened, the bloom wilting before it opened. To hell with it, he thought, and let his mind expand further into the web. Or let himself fall into it. There wasn’t any point where he was as self-awareness bloomed, small and large holdings that slowly faded to form again somewhere else, all somehow becoming him. Flowers at sunset, cloud shapes in the moist sugar scented air, sasi roses unfolding in a crimson sky.

A change -- something darker moved in the threads. Cassa. He could feel her here better than anywhere else. Only what they wanted of her existed in the joss sticks they burned on the altars.

He tested the interface like taking a deep breath, and feeling himself floating through and among the threads, he ordered them for stripping out.

Pallin cut in before the next mock-up started, and Gennady focused back out enough to hear him. “Two more energy sources, Palace side.” Accompanying his message was the latest data on the shields and more coming as it pooled in the interface. They were in trouble, the shields were warping. The other two beams weren’t nearly as strong, but they were different frequencies. It was necessary to account for the interactions between the three and much harder to keep the Web energies around the ship developing properly.

Don’t jump and they’ll crack your ship, but they’ll let you jump to where they want. Priests would be looking at this petal by petal and as a flower in full bloom at the same time, and trying to hold to that final vision as the chances fell around them. He could have pulled all his people in right at the start and Temple would have found a way to get the coordinates to him. Chanko would still be alive. And Poss a’ltic? Chanko was the smoke rising. His offering. Cunra had borne the scent as she sat next to him at the com. Smoke... and sweet, Kori’s bloom. A promise of the paltin the young Zimmer would have been. What had he bought?

To Pallin: “Continue with the shields, but keep a line on the jump Web as well. If the shields begin to fail, start jump sequence, no matter what else I’m doing.”

He felt the ordering change slightly, Pallin’s version of the complicated dance that kept the shield and Web energies separate and compatible while matching the changes from the assault. Gennady was already losing contact with the man,

getting deeper into the web. Forget the set point in the web, just “see” the end result. See what you want, then let it happen. And don’t worry about how. A house of cards, Cassa called it once. One breath and the whole thing tumbles. Let it be the right fall, he thought. The itch started again, his back and his palms.

Then, with the sureness of his faith starting to fill his mind, a whisper came from somewhere darker, and an icy laugh rang in his ears. “How could it not fall to your advantage?”

Riding the laugh and at peace, he watched a silver bird take shape, the image caught as though in a single instant of time, wings outstretched, hanging against the smoke of red clouds.

Then a single flare of light, electric green, burned through the cloudscape, turning the red to black. The light faded but not the sick feeling, it twisted into his mind as though the flash had existed in terms his body understood.

That wasn’t Zimmer. “Time left?” he asked of the threads but the answer that came back was the one that didn’t leave a choice.

“No time.” Silver broke all around him, glowing like ice crystals in the sun. A single stroke of powerful wings and he was flying beside it.

He came out fighting, struggling to kill with a body that felt like dead meat. This time, he couldn’t breathe for real then the mask was back on where he had knocked it loose. His struggles died against the restraints as his mind cleared. And he remembered how to breathe.

“Took you long enough.” Simitta unfastened the restraints, paying more attention to his eyes than to the joining. Probably full black, Gennady thought, blinking away the grit. But they were all alive and the ship appeared to be in one piece. He couldn’t remember the last of the jump, the portal, yes, and the start of the dump, careful to see that begin, but the rest was gone, he’d been too far in to bring that memory back with him.

Pallin was already out of the Web cradle, slouched in one of the chairs, a haunted look on his face as he alternated between watching him and the data points. One of Simitta’s people, Demitt, was in the next chair, running through a check.

“Net?” Gennady asked, taking the mask off then yawning until his jaw cracked.

Simitta shook his head. “All of a sudden it wasn’t there. Passive ears and eyes are fine, ship controls as well, including weapon systems, and all the sensory input is intact and the nodes. It’s the linking functions that aren’t working.”

He hadn’t thought of that happening. “Where are we? Anything on that yet? I think a ship followed us through.” He tried moving gingerly, already feeling the burning that told him he’d done some damage struggling against the restraints.

Simitta passed him tea before answering; holding the cup until it was obvious Gennady could keep it steady. “Sensory sweeps, the ones that come back at all,

show a marble room, white with faint er'e shadings like a new-born. And we do have company from Palace."

The last bit came with a glance at the data points. Gennady took the obvious. "Anga." This was the only thing Gennady could have possibly given him that nobody else could. A way in.

"Could be. A deep-space flitter. Two, three person craft, tops. It's mostly crystals and shielding and with about the same amount of clay as your average teapot. Rough ride from meshing with our shields, it's cracked and missing tiles on one side. I've got a triad waiting for orders by the loading hatch. Oh, and weapons are back on line."

"Good," Gennady said, and smiled thinly over the rim of the tea cup. "Is there any sign of the San and the two others?"

"One of the sweeps shows the residue of an energy signature at one of the diamond points. Maybe a portal, maybe still open, we can't tell for sure. From the rate of decay, if it was them, we missed them by minutes."

"Invite Mullaki to the conference room. I think we should have our talk now."

A pause from Demitt on the comp, followed by a shallow bow from Simitta. "The Overpriest is dead."

Gennady nodded. Probably one of the flags he hadn't had time for. He tried for the Net again, still nothing. He hadn't realized how much he depended on the Net spins to ground himself after coming out of the web.

"I want to see the spins on what the Overpriest gave us," he said to Simitta, letting his eyes rest on the solid form of his los. Then to Demitt when Simitta shrugged. "Pull it out for me."

"It'll take about five minutes," Demitt said. "Have to interface with the Net data through the Web controls and even then we'll only get what was analyzed before we came through the portal. I'll send it to the number one data point for readout."

"Do that. Pallin, I want you to analyze it."

Pallin looked at Gennady, exhaustion showing in the washed paleness of his Clan marks amidst the uneven stipple of his coloring. He was darker than most a'Genn. Cassa had called all the er'e shades red, but they weren't a red she could actually see. From him, the pilot's look went to Simitta. "Essen and Csisni... a few moments?"

Pallin's triad. Simitta's hands shaped an allowance. Whatever the two others were doing, it wasn't crucial. "A prayer group?" Gennady asked. Pallin hesitated at the rudeness then nodded.

Gennady took sip of tea. "What do you remember from the link?"

The pilot didn't move. Then, his eyes lowered slowly, taking his body into a deep bow. "Something, Lord."

"A gift few receive," he replied, as softly but in the Zimmer prayer tongue and Pallin bowed again and left.

Simitta motioned Demitt to follow the pilot out. He had appeared not to listen, carefully absorbed in what he was seeing on the data point.

"What gift did you get?" Simitta asked when they were alone.

Swinging his legs out, Gennady tried standing up. Muscles cramped instantly and he felt like he'd somehow managed to pull a tendon in his heel. "We're here and alive," he said. "If there's anything to be asked of Cassa, Pallin can do the asking, I won't." His mind wanted to shut down, his vision blurring with red clouds behind his eyes.

Warm hands raised his head up, he could almost focus. Then he did: Simitta, cool eyed, more green in the iris than blue, his tiredness gone as though it had never been there. "You have the look of a Speaker at the altar, burning his own name. What did you see in the flames?"

He shook his head. "It was just a haunting of her. From her setting the portal, or from the jump-Web. I was in deeper then I've ever been before. Pallin got the dregs of it, that's all."

Simitta helped him to sit and even that motion was trapped in warped time. His palms itched again, this time for real, and his fingertips prickled between hot and cold.

Demitt was at the door. "The flitter has opened."

"Have the triad wait," Simitta answered.

Then softly, in a whisper, directed at Gennady even though the other man in the small room would have to hear. "Take what's offered by the loom-master."

"And then we'll leave? Is it as simple as that?"

"It can be."

It could for Simitta. "Have you thought it might by your name on the burning prayers?" A funeral ritual. As he said the words, he saw the prayer sheet, torn into petals like those of a sasi rose, the lettering dark against the red. Thrown over the altar, the fragments floated up in the rise of air above the burning joss sticks, only to fall at the sides. Few reached the coals.

"They're burning," he whispered. Few in number, but all the marked pieces of paper had fallen in the fire, all the fragments of his uncle.

"Get Balin," he heard Simitta say, but from very far away now.

He struggled back. Enough that he felt the wall at his back. Enough for the dizziness to bring his stomach to his throat. "A few minutes," he said, letting his hands shape the order to keep the medic away from him. He didn't want to be drugged. He didn't have the time to waste.

And heard the original order repeated by Simitta. Demitt left.

"Do you have better orders for the triad?" Simitta asked.

"So you can ignore those as well?" He shook his head then wished he hadn't. What had been blank time was filling out as his mind processed the information his body had fed it. Parallel feeds: web and normal. The last was a plain slow gray in comparison to what he usually experienced, but his memory of it was rapidly became a nightmare as the two tried to mesh.

"Simitta, assume the bargain has been made with Anga... act it. Make sure your contact team understands this. I don't think the loom-master expects we have the where-for-all to bargain, and his blindness will give us the freedom to work out terms later when we know more."

"And Cassa's terms?"

Gennady chuckled at his los's stubborn insistence on getting to the point. "Do you see her in front of you to ask? Try Ulanda's terms instead. We get to her first and force our terms to be hers. Poss a'ltic and Ulanda, both Selects and we'll have them both."

"That kind of talk wouldn't sit well with the Spann."

"They won't hear it." He managed to get to his feet, Simitta stepping back to give him room. "And you?" he asked. "How does it sit with you?"

"I dislike that kind of subtlety."

"Too much like a merchant? It's no different than with a breeding contract." He laughed, showing points. "Think of it as one, but instead of generations, we bargain our souls."

## - 27 -

Ulanda's dark robe absorbed the heat from the blinding sunlight. Warmth that had been a welcome change after the cold of their long walk, was building rapidly, trapped in the folds of cloth. Her underrobe was stuck to her back. Covering her eyes with one sleeve, she tried to see through the cloth. Just light and sound and the deadening heat. From how the walls on either side angled in, she was about five feet from the point of the diamond.

She looked over her shoulder. Garm was bathed in the uneven light, the veins of the marble moved like grimaces and frowns, winks and sneers over his face but the cold green of his eyes never changed. Bolda was a few feet further away, sitting with his back against the marble, head turned, looking back the way they had come.

"If there's a way out, I can't find it."

"Then you're not trying," Garm said.

Since leaving the island through the portal and finding themselves back in the white marble room, the single point of brightness had started to move. Sunset had them walking into a narrowed focus of light, they were in total darkness before reaching the wall. Then dawn and the glow was behind them, but moving faster again, as though racing them. After a quick morning and quicker afternoon, the ceiling was finger height for Garm's greater reach, and the sun ahead of them had compressed into the point of the diamond. Light and sound competed for attention. But it wasn't the wind sound of the other portal, this was an ice crackle and groan of raw power unleashed.

Ulanda took another step towards the source of the light and froze, certain the floor would drop away with her next move. Instinctively, she reached out with pattern-sense. And found nothing more than what her eyes and ears and feet told her. And kept reaching. And didn't know she was falling until she hit the marble, her right knee first. The jolt snapped her teeth together.

On her knees still, she crept forward until she could touch the marble she couldn't see for the light. Instead of the heat her mind said would be there, the wall was cold. A hint of the ice of pattern? There wasn't any she could feel, nothing obvious like the last one, not even when she reached out slightly. No order in the stone that wasn't entirely natural.

A place where reality could be molded at will. Where a portal might take you to whatever place you could dream. That was Garm's interpretation of Cassa's diamond. Truth? Or one of his stories? And if it was true, what did she want? Her only dream had been to be a Priest and she was, of a kind. A dream come true, or one interpretation of her dream. She was more of a danger to Empire than Cassa had been. If she could choose a path from here -- knowing how mutable desire and result could be -- what path would she want?

Freedom.

The word came out of her bones in a wave, and the crest was rage. Except it wasn't hers. She looked back. Garm was still watching her. He had asked her to kill him and she had repeated it to him later like a promise, and that understanding hadn't come from her either.

Each time she fell asleep she was already dreaming of being held, imagining his arms around her, the warmth of his breath in her hair. She listened for his heartbeat as a beacon, his voice as an anchor. The years between her life in Temple and arriving in Palace were fading. Old reactions, older desires. A Priest and their tass'alt, the bond between them, the shared need that was the physical fulfillment of what the vass'lt gave in the spiral. Except Garm wasn't hers any more than the rage and he wouldn't be hers. Couldn't be, no more than Niv could have been hers.

Turning away, she pressed both hands flat on the smooth surface, wrists aching at the effort. Under her palms, the cold marble was slippery with the

sweat of her palms. She felt as though a layer of ice was forming between her and the marble, ready to crack if she pulled away, or leave a layer of her skin behind, frozen.

Her first day at South Bay Temple. The memory was sudden and overwhelming. Four years old.

She had been born at South Bay Temple, raised there, shared common memories, heard stories that became memories...

When she didn't think about it, her expectations allowed a history complete with very early memories such as the other children had: images of rooms, people, events, incomplete sequences, but whole in how they fit in the child's life.

She shared a crèche dormitory with others near her own age, the sons and daughters of the Temple staff. She had known them since birth, played with them since before they could walk.

And there was the flitter, the cold of deep space held in the tiles, the embossed pattern of the tiles under her fingers. And the green light of a Ri morning and the stone of the Priest House and the courtyard. And in the distance, the ocean. Four years old. And nothing before.

She moved forward in time, months passing, summer into fall and winter, then spring again and summer, then that one winter, the dance for Sarkalt. When she had first seen Niv. And then past that image to when she was eight years old.

It was a winter morning she saw, but she was warm, wrapped in the brown wool blanket she had as a cover for her bed, wearing it like a cloak while she watched the sunrise over the distant water, the same as she had that first morning in the Acolyte's quarters.

Their Steward, Omillion, was a man of moods, talkative usually, complaining often, but he didn't talk on those winter mornings. He would bring her a covered mug of tea and a slice of bread wrapped in a napkin. The tea he would balance on the outer circle of ash in the brazier to keep it warm and leave both brazier and bread on the table next to her.

This particular morning persisted in filtering out of the general memory. Rinni had gone to prayers at the first call, leaving to join in the line of Acolytes snaking down the corridor towards the Hall. Omillion had tried to herd Qalt'ici, her other roommate, out the door.

"It's not your place to say what I do," Qalt'ici said. "Besides, I don't have to go if Ulanda doesn't. I see...." She looked around as though seeing something more than the deliberately plain bare stone walls of their room. "I see... possibilities that have me staying here with her. I'll have my breakfast here as well. I shouldn't have to wait until after morning prayers if she doesn't." Her foot stamped in anger but it was meant as a distraction and she darted under Omillion's outstretched arms. He didn't chase her but stood by the door, hands on his hips.



Qalt'ici sat cross-legged on Ulanda's pallet. "And I think I'll just go back to sleep after I eat." She chewed on a long curl. Her hair had come loose from the braid all the Acolytes wore. "You can bring us both omelets and toast. Ulanda, isn't that what you want?"

She hadn't answered and hadn't looked, but she saw it now.

"You've got the order, you can go," Qalt'ici said to Omillion when he didn't leave.

"If you're not out of here in two minutes I'll have a word with the Master of Acolytes. And that's no possibility, that's a fact."

"I said you were dismissed!"

"And a word with the Lady Priest ke'Sal," he added as he turned.

Qalt'ici had stuck her tongue out at his back as he left. "Like she'd even see him," she said. "I should tell the Chief Steward." Tell him what, she didn't elaborate on, and she did leave then, having made whatever point the performance was intended to make.

And Ulanda was alone with the cold dawn, and both things -- alone and cold -- seemed the whole of her existence as the memory of that specific morning faded, or rather, blended into the others, many days worth although they couldn't have been consecutive. Some days it would have snowed, and early and late in the season, warmer weather could persist for a week at a time. But from where she was now, the frozen mornings, those seemed one after the other without interruption. She would wait until the first rays of the sun touched the window, then lean over the broad stone sill and place one palm flat on the glass and press hard against the cold, wondering each time if she would melt the frost. She always did, leaving a mark outlined in silver threads, and looking closer as the light of the sun moved, would see a rainbow of ice melt.

She came back to the present with Garm's breath against her neck. "Not South Bay. I won't go there, not now. Not like this." Her voice wavered, she was shivering from cold, not anger. The heat had vanished.

That winter ended and she hadn't thought of it again, especially as their training became more intense, but she could feel the cold now and the silver taste of the frost. Even the hot tea had tasted of it, as though Omillion had scraped ice from whole rooms worth of windows to make it. And she remembered the vague disappointment she had felt each of those mornings, that the frost had melted, that she had been able to melt it with the heat of her small hand.

Garm's hands were on her waist now, but his answer had been lost in the crackle of the air. "Garm?" She wanted to look at him again but didn't. Qalt'ici had died in the spiral, a vass'lt's blade in her heart.

What had her teachers at Temple thought of her small winter ritual? She hadn't thought about it at all, just done it as a child does some things without any

need for reasons until reasons are asked of them. But they hadn't asked about that or so many other things, only watched and taught. Afterwards, she would join the other Acolytes in the main Hall, the morning prayers already underway. And no one -- Priests, Masters, or Acolytes -- would say a word or appear to notice her coming late.

And Qalt'ici's death... South Bay Temple still but years later. In the Copy room, Ulanda had been preparing the poems written by the primary dance class that as a senior Acolyte, she helped to teach, brushing the words onto paper streamers for the children to carry in the High Day processional. Pushing three wooden trestle tables end to end under the windows, she had spread the paper and held the edges from curling by placing ink stones at either end. Light flooded the room from the small square panes of glass, six to a sash and the windows in an unbroken row across the width of the room. Outside were the kitchen gardens, and further on was the orchard and the start of the forest that led to Ri-altar.

Illis had come by just after she'd started. Standing in the sunlight, his head thrown back, his hair loose as though he'd just come from his bed. All he had on was a waist tie.

As though about to start the ce'lini that they were to dance later, he posed for her, his tall, lean shape defined by the mutable light coming through square panes of glass.

Grimaces and frowns, winks and sneers?

The reference escaped her, and putting the uneasy feeling down to the argument she had with him earlier, she returned to her work. "I told you I didn't want to speak to you."

"Did I ask for talk?" Under the guise of an embrace, he took the brush from her hand. "Here, let one of the Scribes finish, you need to rest."

"With you? You look like you've already been resting. Might I ask with whom?" She reached for the brush, but he hid it behind his back, his long hair catching in the wet tip. He had smeared ink onto the blond of his hair, and later, the stain had looked like just one more of the narrow ribbons braided into his hair for the dance.

Memory? It couldn't have been, she hadn't danced that dance with him after all. Nor been in the pavilion in the Commons of the village of South Bay to see him dance it.

"I can be anything to you that you want me to be."

His words, heard some time, some place. They had been fighting... when? "And to Rinni?" she had asked him. He had meant after her Initiation. If she was allowed the chance. If she lived. "What would you be to her?"

"You won't care then."

Before that vision became reconciled, there was yet another, they were coming in layers, and with an interconnecting awareness, as though she had seen each thing with the others as they happened.

The pond's edge, lying on her stomach on the grass, her chin on her crossed arms, watching Illis, Qalt'ici and Rinni in the water. Arranged in front of her were the stems of grass she had pulled and crossed in the pattern of a mantra she had just learned. Years before the last memory, she was what? Thirteen?

The words of her instructors echoed in her mind. "Place the fingers so .. and here... the resistance of the nerve endings to continued stimulation can be compensated for by..."

Illis had come to the edge of the pond and sat in the shallow of the water. With one hand, he had poked at the grass stems in front of her, his eyes down. Rinni landed with a splash beside him then pulled him backwards into the water. They played like otters. Dappled shade turned their skin to golden marble, and they had the scent of the water, acid and cold on the surface but with a hidden earthy warmth that caught the breath.

Qalt'ici had stood in the waist-high water, watching her watch the two wrestle. There would have been others with them: Sorensi, she never missed a chance to swim, and Karnta, and Janlise, but Ulanda didn't see them, barely remembered them. Only Qalt'ici, Rinni and Illis.

Illis. She knew the feel and the taste of him, his weight, the smooth lines of his body, the play of muscles and tendons, the feel of his hair, wet curls, dry, the clicking of the beads he liked to wear braided into the lengths.

At one time, she had thought she loved him.

And then, in all of those interconnected visions, Illis was gone.

The Copy room again. It was a warm fall day and one by one, she opened most of the windows. The loudest sounds were the crinkle of the paper and the buzz of wasps fighting endlessly against the wrong glass panes. Using her Acolyte training, Ulanda let herself sink into the form of the native Ri-pattern surrounding her, the rhythm of her work helping to carry her mind deeper. Under the soft brush, the form and shape of the words for each poem was slightly different, a small mirror of the child who had written it.

Then the last banner and the dream, with Ri-green ink on white paper: 'Qalt'ici.' In the strokes was the old form for sacrifice, a calling for death, a seeking. And the green had turned to red, and on her brush as well.

Where her feelings should be, there was only a hollow space under her breasts. Rolling the brush inside the paper, she tucked the small bundle inside her work smock and took the path through the kitchen garden and past the orchard, not stopping until she reached the pond.

She burned the paper and brush with the dry twigs she gathered, and prayed, using the Ri-common burial rite, the words that anyone could use to focus their

minds, and attempted to find the wholeness of Qalt'ici's life. Their shared lives, their shared humanity, their shared hopes. The meaning that had to exist in her death.

The light made her eyes swim, she was half suffocated by the fullness of the air. The words gave her back nothing of Qalt'ici and she found she had nothing of her own to offer.

From Temple, and again in the return from the side of the mountain, the drums roared the start of the ceremonies. There would be other instruments, flutes and three-string lyres, but only the drums carried this far. She listened until the sounds of words and water matched the drums in the distance and she fell into another dream, where images flashed at her of a leaf shaped blade and blood.

Night had fallen before she awoke, stiff and cold, one cheek marked by the grass where she had fallen asleep. Her robe and work smock were damp with the dew, and creased. There was no fire, or the remains of any, and only green ink stains on her hands and smock.

Hours later, while walking along the deserted corridor of the Acolyte quarters, Ulanda listened to the chant of the Close of the Autumn Blessing. The Priests would have just finished dancing. Looking back at the moment, she didn't remember feeling anything. And walking that corridor -- actually there and not looking from anywhere else -- she was empty of all emotion.

Niv stood at the door to her room. She attempted to reach Placement, the Net lead slipped from her grasp.

"Is he here?" she asked.

Niv's answer wasn't in any language other than that of pure gesture. Yes, but...

She brushed past him into her room. Empty. The robe she had meant to wear to the banquet, thrown across her pallet. Ribbons, green and white, smoothed over top. The same brown blanket as a cover, even in the summer, she kept it on her bed. Yes, but...

"Nothing happened," she whispered. Then said it again, turning full circle, speaking to the walls, to dawn bright sky she could see out the narrow window. "Nothing!"

"Then what is there to say about it?" Niv took one hand, then the other, stopping her almost frantic movement, drawing her towards him until his heat and scent were as strong as the cold enveloping her. "We came for the Blessing to see you and Illis dance the ce'lini. I wished to visit, that's all. I haven't seen you since..."

He left the last unsaid and the colour of his scales bleached to the colour of new milk. He was taller than she was; she had to look up to see his eyes. They were darker than the fine scales shaping the planes of his face, and unlike the

colour of his skin, they stayed the same colour always, where his skin could flush to the blue of the veswi flower. "Did he dance?"

He blinked in confusion. "Who? Illis?"

She wondered if Illis had been given another partner in her absence, or another pair assigned the dance. Wondered what he would think of her for letting him down, if he was shallow enough to think it petty jealousy over Rinni. Of all the things in her world to worry of, she worried about losing his good opinion of her for missing a dance.

And the words of her instructors echoed in her mind again as they had years earlier at the pond. "Place the fingers so... and here... the resistance of the nerve endings to continued stimulation can be compensated for by..."

Emotions that had failed her earlier, washed over her. A sense of loss and a deeper hurt that she had been deserted, twice abandoned by her friend. First when Qalt'ici had left South Bay Temple for a better chance at being offered Initiation, and now by her death. Qalt'ici was her history; she had given shape to Ulanda's life in the way the light and shadow in the Copy room had to Illis.

"Qalt'ici's dead," she whispered, letting herself be drawn into Niv's embrace. "In the spiral, last night."

He held her tightly, one hand stroking the back of her head. "Don't say it."

"I just did." She fought back tears. She didn't mind Niv seeing her cry, he'd seen childish tears from her, and tantrums, sulks and silly giddiness, but she didn't want the others to see, those who simply watched.

His turn to whisper in that soft lisp: "Don't say it again. Don't make it any more real than it is. Let Sarkalt say nothing has happened, let him create of this what is needed for others not to see it."

Hands still flat on the marble, Ulanda watched the dark sparks drip slowly from the ends of her braid, taking the memories with them. Garm's breath still warmed her neck, he knelt behind her. "I would have liked to stay in that moment," she said, her mouth to the marble, even as she knew that Garm wouldn't know what she was talking about. She hiccupped. Freedom? She shook her head. "South Bay. They'll have to notice now."

"We walked in the garden..." His voice faltered, already scarcely more than a whisper.

And with his words, another vision: she saw the placing squares of the tiles under her feet, but hidden by snow. The Simic Dance Master. With all her will, she pushed away from the images. And found it was only will that had done the moving, she still had her head against the cold stone. Eyes closed, panting with exhaustion, she let the pattern sparks burst in her mind without any attempt at shaping the form they took. One repeated then danced, blue, and she hoped it

was for Niv, but the colour was sapphire, like a polished gem with the light trapped inside the stone.

Poultat, or a close echo-line. She had seen it before. Her nose wrinkled and she felt like sneezing. Bitter oil, from the Temple baths... her brother. Illis, she thought, but was confused, he hadn't been of course. Then as quickly, came another name: Qalt'ici. But those were people from a different life. Her own face was across from her. Her brother, her twin. He smoothed the oil on her hands, warming it with his. She returned the motion. Others were there, a dizzying number of people coming and going, but she knew them all intimately. Family? Except for the man across from her, the concept fit poorly and she didn't understand why.

The frost pattern drawn on the back of each hand circled her wrists like an oath band, the oil glowing warmer where it reacted with the lines. They were preparing for their paired Initiation. Blue flame crawled on the glossy pale skin and when she looked up at him, she saw that he would be the one to die in the spiral, had known this completely.

Ulanda bent over, choking on the smell, gasping. But when she opened her eyes it was to her own hands. The light had receded and she could make out the surface she still touched. Under her palms, the marble had deep triangular cuts in curving lines and when she let her hands drop, pale blood, both amber and red, marked the shape of her palms on the stone, then started to flow slowly along the spiral grooves. Double spiral. Camerat again, not Poultat.

Garm was still holding her. The blood flowed up as well as down as it worked towards the center of the spiral. There were other images in that blue light; they formed layers in her mind. "Kill her," she heard clearly over the crackle of ice -- making her start -- and the pale blood leaped along the spiral lines followed by a darker, but both still flashing towards the center. Faces were there as well, her eyes closed or not. One she knew, Mullaki, the Overpriest of Initiates, the other a Ri-priest, native born and blond.

"It's being opened for us," she said without emotion as she watched the blood work towards the center. "I don't know to where." Or why. Somewhere else, another dance was being played out; she didn't have to wonder at the matching of the sequences, for right now, it all fit together.

But she couldn't hold, she lost her equilibrium to the bitter oil smell, and worse, to something burning, sweet where the oil wasn't, the smell choking her. Garm picked her up, and she buried her head against his shoulder, breathing his scent through the cloth. Fish and sweat, she thought, and wanted to laugh with relief. The smell's real, not pattern, not memory. Then the noise stopped suddenly and she was on the floor, her right heel inches from spiral center and from marking the ritual soil mound. Around her, drums signaled the call to Initiation.

Mullaki stepped over the threshold with a sensation that she had crossed a barrier, a feeling that stretched her mind near to the breaking point in an instant. She stopped and the procession of Temple singers parted to move around her in a double stream, the slow steady hum of the chant not missing a beat.

The Temple's Chief Salin joined her, his crest rising and falling in time to the singing, his face impassive. He made a bulwark for her as she stood there, she barely reached his shoulder. White robes crossed with blue, cobalt in the red touched light -- a careful, thoughtful man, he wore Poultat in her honor, not the lavender of Camerat or the yellow-tan of Alba. And like her, he had the High Council Seal worked into the weave of his girdle. Hers was an answer to the unasked question of what she was doing there, and had Clanny's own contribution to the configuration, subtle jokes and puns on the form that meant Alba, the species of Donotat, the Emperor. Her arrival here had been unexpected, her demands unwelcome. And Cam'lt Temple's reaction? As predictable as that of the Rigyant official who had suddenly found himself out-maneuvered.

The pulling in her mind continued, not just space but time distorted. She looked around, her eyes and mind, searching the Temple Net and the people, but all the energy lines and sources she reached for were as expected.

The three officiating Priests stopped next to the Salin, waiting for them to continue. All Camerat, the best the echo-line had to offer, one of them the dark blue of a breeding male and the other two, mature females. One of the few lines that remained fertile after Initiation, the females had the same runs of color in the scales of their throats, like jewels on a necklace, showing they shared a single Household, and the breeding male the same, but the colors in the scales on either side of his erect head crest.

"Close the area," Mullaki said, and with difficulty, took the first step into the room. By gesture, she indicated the form of the ritual -- Empire common, the local variations allowed, nothing unusual. The familiar should help to settle them all, and for all their outward composure, she could feel the others picking up on her unease.

Smoke from the torches rose gray then blood red as the stream crossed the last of Grandfather before escaping from the open top of the dome. Mullaki stayed in the walkway as Net leads disappeared, the inner spiral isolated from any exterior interference by energy sources, and with the blocked wall of Temple Net like feathers on the skin to those who passed. There were no structures within the inner Temple itself to encourage Net leads to organize into nodes or even facilitate linking systems. Only passive eyes were allowed, the Rigyant systems and her own.

The drums -- one in from each pillar -- were silent, the drummer's poised. A single dancer stood near each pillar, looking like fragments of the stone in their gray silks.

"Mullaki, would you like anything before they begin?" Clanny had Ispin in tow, the aide carrying a tea service. He poured her a bowl of steaming tea even though she hadn't answered.

A swallow only, the greenish liquid, thick as boiled honey and normally as sweet, was bitter in her mouth. The bowl would have fallen but for Clanny. Turning the motion into a smoothing of her braid ends, he murmured, "The wrong color blood would be spilled." Ispin chuckled.

Clanny's bowed head reflected the light of the torches, yellow and red, the darker tips shiny with the fragrant oil he had dressed it with. Her braids had the same scent, to ease the working he had said, and to make the silk lie smooth in the heavy moisture of the air here. "Are they testing only tea bushes?" she asked, welcoming his comfort.

"Better for them if they were, I think." He stepped back, sipping on the tea she had left in the bowl, smiling with his eyes. "Send the Rigyant'as of the High Council a chest of the sitilin leaves instead of the body of an Altasimic Priest. It would leave a better taste in their mouths." With a wink, Clanny included Ispin in the joke.

She answered him with her first step towards the center, leaving them behind. The chanting matched her movements, more perfect in the return of the echoes as she came closer to the mound. Resin from the torches and the warmth of the fire mixed with the smell of a dozen or more species, creating sensory echoes of another sort, and all familiar through centuries of serving Empire.

Still feeling the strangeness, Mullaki reached for pattern for the settling effect it had on her, for the sense of order, but not enough to force the shape of what would grow here. The singing matched the change, electric, and she could feel the three Camerat Priests in the spiral reaching in turn. Camerat and Poultat in harmony. Other noises had stopped, and the movement as well.

High-formal, words and a dancing form of the signs -- she repeated it six times in a procession around the center. "Prepare for Initiation." The drums started, one by one as she passed, a rapid but very soft beat of hands on hard leather.

Stopping to one side of where the double spiral fed into the mound, Mullaki looked back the way she had first come. The door had cleared of people, guards formed a double row, the shortest distance possible.

She tucked her hands high and repressed a shudder. Something was wrong; everything was doubled, slow and fast at the same time. When she stepped forward, the singers nearest to her faltered, many of them poorly trained young Acolytes. Cam'lt Temple wasn't prepared for what they had been asked to do, couldn't have prepared for it if given years of notice.



The drummers never hesitated, deep into their own kind of pattern. The beat had changed, the chanting following it. Almost Simic she thought, then both changed again just as she managed to place the sound. Altasimic and new.

Camerat Priest Samp d'Clivhk stood to meet her, the deep blue of his head crest frosted with distress at the break in the ceremony. "Overpriest?" he said, signing confusion. "Is something wrong? Has this Temple done something in error?"

But she was looking past him to two people in the walkway, at the pillar closest by the service area. She blinked and didn't see them. Blinked again and did. The wrongness was there, not in the music, but in the fabric of reality itself.

"You do this Temple honor, loom-master," she called loudly over the drums. He bowed as much with a mark of familiarity as with the formal acknowledgment of her words. The other she didn't know. A Zimmer.

Stop the Initiation, her mind whispered, take the time to find out what is happening. There shouldn't have been time for word to reach Rigyant that she had involved herself. Or, it was possible Anga might have already been on his way. Or, possible that he wasn't here.

"Anga," she said, moving closer. "There will be a slight delay, would you take some refreshments with me?"

From the change in the rhythm of the chant, she knew the first of the Initiates was being brought in. At the leading pillar, the dancer began the dance of welcome, the ties on her wrists, lavender and cobalt, twisted together against the pale gray of her dress.

"I don't think you're going to get your delay, Mullaki. You've joined us, not the other way around. This goes to the end though, with or without you." He turned to the Zimmer. "Fourth one down, Gennady." The other man didn't take his eyes from the door.

"You're keeping interesting company." Clan Zimmer. In Temple. "What significance does the fourth Initiate have?"

"Should I ruin your fun?" He kept to the familiar form, still smiling. Red glowed in the black of his skin and in the dense felt of hair that started at his neck.

As Anga had said it would, the ceremony continued, the flow of action seamless. Set in pattern, or in time, or both, she thought, grasping at the only possible explanation. Not simply a recreation of a time and place, but a highly complex run of pattern memory, such as a Select might draw. But what did that make her? Or the man next to her?

She turned to watch the Initiate. Supported in a kneeling position by one of the aids, the young man was unconscious, his head hanging forward, his long dark hair a veil over his face. The Bearer of the Knife had come and gone already in a brief dance to the vass'lt waiting on the other side of the mound. The vass'lt was a woman and nervous enough to fidget, her blade reflecting the fire.

Camerat, a street-fighter probably, and of a late-order birth to have been discarded by her family. Or not among the favored, and with only this one chance for the money to buy the influence necessary to get access to one of the rare breeding males, and with offspring, gain a better position in the family.

Speaking over the sustained hum of the chanting, the Warder of the Spiral reminded the vass'lt to use the extended version of the calling. No need for anyone to translate, the Initiate wouldn't know what they meant even if he had understood the words. The drums were still soft, the sound drifting, falling and rising. Even as the Warder spoke, the woman's eyes kept moving to include the d'Clivhk Priest, her thin quick tongue running over her cheeks slits to catch his scent and to taste her own. The male Priest didn't respond, she wasn't in season.

Then eyes back to the young man -- the aide had him standing, and almost awake now with the drugs wearing off, he looked around but with a bemused expression. His face said he was in a dream; he seemed unaware of the cuffs on his wrists. He would have fallen asleep in his own life and woken to this, with no idea where he was or what was being done to him.

His wrists snapped and he screamed. Mullaki took a step back, even Anga flinched. "This is a perversion," she said, speaking directly into his ear over the shrieking.

"The real you thought so too."

Then she was right, this was a pattern pull.

He directed her back to the ceremony. "This one's had it. If he was going to, he would have killed right after his wrists went, as soon as he saw the knife coming at him."

The vass'lt was circling. A clear area had formed around the young man, silent now but for his labored breathing, eyes following every move of the blade as it danced in the darkening air, the knife a language he would more likely understand. Ducking a sudden stab, he fell. The Camerat hesitated as he tried to push himself upright with useless hands. He shouted at her, pleading, Mullaki thought. The vass'lt shifted her weight from one foot to the other and he flinched in anticipation of the blow that he knew would be coming.

The Warder glanced to where the Overpriest should have been, looked confused for an instant then blended back into the sequence of events with a bow for the vass'lt to continue. Set in pattern, Mullaki thought, unchangeable in any real sense. She shivered but not from any power the Candidate threw, he died in a shower of crimson, a clean, simple kill by someone who knew how.

Clanny stood with Ispin by another pillar, within view, but they ignored her, the guards found her invisible as well. And, she found she had lost the sense of them too. And the feel of the Host, all those people who both were and weren't her. She looked back, but there was no second Mullaki in the spiral. "What

happens with the second Initiate? And how does the sequence compensate for my not being part of it any longer?"

Anga laughed. "Does it have to? Are you sure you're not part of it?"

The Zimmer broke in with, "You don't have any more control over what's going on than she does." His eyes showed yuin change as black circled the blue.

The second Initiate was being brought in, a small woman, wrinkles in soft folds along her jaw line, her face shrunken. Nestled against the shoulder of the guard carrying her, she was twitching already, and Mullaki felt a strong urge to tell the Warder to hurry, only to see him do just that.

The drums had stopped all at once, a part of the weave in a way the others weren't, they always knew first. In the spiral, another Camerat vass'lt waved her knife, but this Initiate wasn't screaming in either terror or pain. A greasy black frost rimmed the spiral, a stand of crystals topped by dark red protruding up from the deep grooves. Face contorted as she gulped for air, the woman dodged the Camerat's blade. Slow, but the vass'lt was moving slower.

A moment later, she dropped the knife, fingers still curled as though around the handle. Dropped it with a clatter on ice that was the only sound in the room. Then a groan began, starting low but growing as the fractures in the sheet of ice under the vass'lt's feet spread out like the branches of a tree. And rising from those cracks, blue and red and green. One of the dancers screamed, her thin body pressed against the pillar, her silk robe burning with color, then she fell to the marble and didn't move.

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A Zimmer pulled her away and a moment later had her on the floor, a different Zimmer than she had seen with Anga. He had the same cross mark on his cheeks. From the simplicity of the design, it was an ancient Clan.

"Stay down," he said. His hold loosened, but tightened again as quickly, his hand rubbing the back of her neck. A neural blocker, the effect immediate. It was different than the kind she usually used, much stronger.

"Clanny?" she managed to say, meaning to ask for him.

"He's back on the ship."

"Ship?" It didn't seem as important as it should. Her tass'alt was just outside, probably looking for her. A good joke. He would owe her points, or would she owe him? It was too hard to think, she thought she might sleep instead.

A frantic pounding on the door woke her. How long had she slept? She turned her head to look around. They were in one of the retiring rooms. Chests and tall

wardrobes and a bench along the far wall, a single attendant in a white waist tie sat at the furthest end of the bench, shivering in fear, her scales showing little more color than the fabric. More banging, louder, and then the smell of blood, and the young Camerat moved the extra distance to the corner, and pulled herself into a small ball.

Mullaki tried to get up, but couldn't. Another blast of sound and even through the buzz in her mind, she felt the pattern raised outside this room.

The first Zimmer squatted close. "The door's holding," he said, one hand on the floor for balance. Then to her, in a muffled whisper, "What's going on out there?"

"Don't be a fool, Gennady," Anga said. Mullaki hadn't seen him come up behind. "How would she know?"

The flat planes of the Zimmer's face twitched once, and he sucked air noisily over the hollows of his honor teeth. "Then you tell me."

Mullaki shifted and the other Zimmer helped her up as far as sitting. "I insist on being told what's going on," she said, blinking away dark spots from in front of her eyes.

Anga kneeled across from to her and let his breath out in a puff once he was down. "You weren't too far off, Mulli. A memory pull, the Empress's."

There was nothing but bones behind her, uncomfortable. "The fourth Initiate?" She hated it when Anga called her Mulli. Clanny could barely tolerate him.

"Yes."

Recalling the multiplicity of pattern rising from the ice and what she had felt moments earlier, she asked, "A Select from the start?"

"Yes. Of the ten, three pulled overpattern but two couldn't hold. This one... she's dead by now."

"And me? Am I dead?"

Anga laughed. "No one's admitted it, but you can thank one of these two for putting you out of your misery. You were on the Zimmer ship when it left Palace. By the way, that's Lord Gennady a'Genn, and his los, Simitta..." He pointed at the older Zimmer holding her.

"You haven't stayed dead," Gennady said. "Cassa's doing."

The word usually just meant 'lady' in the many languages with carry-overs from old-tongue. Something used by familiars, not a title or a name. "The Empress?" The Zimmer behind her moved his hands to support her around the waist alone. Through the thin fabric, she felt the spurs on his fingers: as a los, he'd be paltin, breeding dominant. She should have noticed before this.

"Are we all memories, then?"

She had asked Anga, but Gennady laughed and answered first. "If we're part of a pull sequence, Overpriest, then I think the entire universe we knew is as well." His eyes were glacial now, the color of frost.

His words died into silence. Then from outside the room, came the beginning of a new chant. One more, Mullaki thought. The third.

"The Empress, is she here?"

"No, well, not entirely," Anga said. She raised an eyebrow and he continued. "There is a problem... overpattern is contaminating the Unity."

So, why she died if not how. With the blocker dulling her pattern-sense, she was able to feel gratitude. Would she have at the time? To Clanny? Probably Clanny, a different Clanny. "And now? Why this?"

The answer came from the corridor to the change rooms. "The loom-master has played with Empire like a child plays with wooden blocks." An elderly Simic in soiled and rumpled clothing. With the blocker still fresh, Mullaki saw a strangely telling universe of surfaces. The Simic didn't enter the room but stayed at the doorway. "And like that child, all he sees is the toy house he's built around himself."

Anga leaned forward. Mullaki saw both challenge and interest. He didn't know everything here. And that was interesting as well.

"What do you see past those blocks, Garm?" Anga asked.

The Simic laughed softly. "Not what I see, loom-master, but what's seen in legends and myths. We're part of one now. You see only the one thing you've caused to happen and think that's all there is."

Anga snorted in disgust just as a new sequence of chanting started. There was a strained edge to the song, it had started without the drums sounding the lead, but smoothed as they built up and she recognized the form: they had a successful Initiation.

"Am I a part of this legend?" she asked the Simic.

"How couldn't you be?" He laughed. "It begins here, now. Gennady?"

The yuin change in the Zimmer's eyes was instant. "What?"

And Anga echoing: "What?"

Speaking to the Zimmer alone: "Will you help me stop this?"

"Why would I? This is a pattern pull, it won't change anything."

"There's only one reason for Cassa putting us both here at her beginning... shall we release the Change phoenix?"

Anga laughed until tears moistened the deep folds of skin under his eyes.

"You're an idiot, it's already done." Then waved the two men off. "Go, do whatever you want, it won't matter." When they had gone, he patted the floor beside him. "Mulli..."

No bones there she well remembered -- and he was even stouter than the Anga she had last seen. Simply older she thought, not another body. She hadn't asked about the time scale involved here, it hadn't seemed important. She shook her head. "Who is he?"

"Cassa's tass'alt."

"They won't halt the Initiation for him or for the Zimmer, they may not even see them in the sequence."

"Well, why not go pull tail feathers yourself? Cassa must have done some rearranging of your wits... the real you wasn't so stupid even if she did have the habit of sticking her nose into other people's business. She's tying this off -- a little differently than we'd planned, but I'm not complaining. She wanted out, she's getting out. They don't have to do anything."

"Tell me," she said. "Who else do you have hidden away that I should know about?"

"You knew about them when it mattered. The only reason you died was because you stepped roughshod over every arrangement ever made."

More building blocks, she thought as she listened, all at once seeing the analogy as something quite real. She and Anga had been friends through many lifetimes for him, and enemies as often.

No, not enemies, not really, but adversaries in determining the finer points in the slow drift of what Empire custom that Rigyant had an interest in. He did think in terms of building blocks, surprisingly static for the time scale he had access to from the loom-master memory weaves. Linear -- not the weave, but the particular gene line favored by the Net he was the Voice for, a neural-form system which predated almost any other in Empire. And, perhaps, favored for the very reason that he and predecessors added so little variability to it. He was simple to the Rigyant loom-master weaves in much the same way a Priest is to their world-pattern.

Her head pounded as she got up on her feet. Anga stood but kept the same look on his face. "Why won't this just replay with another person what started here?"

He shook his head in some amusement but stopped short of laughing, his stomach jiggling again with the restraint. "Ulanda was Sarkalt's contribution to this mess. As an Altasimic Priest and a Select, he had thought she could provide the link to Cassa that would have allowed a Challenge of Office to succeed. Oh, not on her own, but she has the native potential and with the kind of training she's had, the result could have been controlled even through the Nexus Change."

"And using her like that is still possible?"

"I wouldn't risk it with Sarkalt dead. He took a closer than healthy interest in her training."

"Did you kill him? Was he someone else who stepped roughshod?"

"He was quieter about it. Besides, I agree with Garm that Cassa made the diamond to tie off her part of this. In one way, what Sarkalt did, worked."

"You mean that Ulanda is a physical focus of the Empress?"

“Yes, and with Cassa gone...” He chuckled. “... and I think she will be gone, Ulanda will be dead and things will go back to normal. Or as normal as a Nexus Change can be.”

He was lying, not in what he said but in the result. Only a Priest near her level would know, he had the practice of millennium of lies. “If she’s capable of what you say, her death is a waste. Her birthright has been stolen from her.”

The dark eyes were cold with the same millennium as held the lies so easily, but what she saw in them now weren’t more lies, but a truth even colder. “I’d like to be more sure of that than I am.”

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Garm waited with Gennady at the door to the walkway, and watched the slow measured procession of the chanting Acolytes. No dancers and the drums were silent, only the singers wailed the long drawn out notes of the Lamentation, sounds that should have been matched by the movement of hands against leather, and the sway of subtle bodies, as though the three forms were one, sound and song and dance. Between them, he caught glimpses of what was still happening in the spiral: two bodies, the vass’lt near the end of the spiral, and, from the clothing, a guard, his body half over the mound. The Warder -- chosen for their resistance to pattern energies -- held the new Priest from behind while the medic worked on him, only the boy’s head showed. Guards inside the spiral, they would have learned the need from the second candidate. How many had she killed before they killed her? Before they had admitted the need to kill her?

The Warder’s face contorted with the effort of holding the boy, but it wouldn’t be sweat dripping from his face, Garm felt the cold from where he stood. Then another struggle, quickly abandoned, left the young man gulping air, he must be exhausted even if they weren’t using drugs to help control him.

Anga joined them. “They took a break after the fifth,” he said. “Pushed the last one close to daybreak.”

How many times had Anga watched this happen, Garm wondered. And from what records? A memory construct, a pattern pull -- or passive crystals set here? He looked down at the man. “How long until they’re finished with this one?”

“About twenty minutes. They drop even more of the ceremonial extras after this, they weren’t needed. Pattern recognition by the successful Candidates was almost instantaneous... and not knowing what it was didn’t keep them from using it. None of the original drummers or dancers survived. The chanters did, almost all of them. Being grouped near the Camerat-priests shielded them, whereas the

others have to be at the pillars, the points where the energy lines reflecting from the central mound are strongest.”

The Initiate's legs kicked out, the Warder almost lost him. An aid grabbed at a foot as the man arced his back. “Didn't anybody think that they wouldn't know to stop fighting?”

“Think?” Anga's dark eyes glittered as he looked up. “This is Camerat. They had orders, they didn't have to think.” He chuckled. “Once we knew what the diamond was, I should have figured out that we'd end up here so she could replay what happened. My bet is that she'll die in the spiral.”

Garm shook his head. He wondered what else the man was holding in his memory. Years ago he had tried for those records and finally found them in the Imperial system, sealed with Donotat's personal signature. The seal hadn't held, but pushing under the form, he had found nothing at all.

Fifteen minutes. The chanting stopped raggedly as the knots of singers piled up near the door and for the first time, he had a clear view of the center. The binding of the new Priest's wrists had started and from the way the man's head hung, he was barely conscious. Then his head turned, dark eyes empty but wide open. As they met Garm's, they focused, just an instant then his head dropped again.

What did he see, if anything, Garm wondered. His own mind had tried to close down from that look; too many memories were tied up with it.

The fourth Initiate. A number, no name. In the few records he had found, there hadn't been a name for her. Its meaning and significance would have been lost in the change in languages, something familiar substituted by those caring for her and who had expected her to die. Or be killed. And, she might not have remembered her own name, not responded to it. He had never had an indication from her that she consciously remembered her life before Initiation. A few tapestries -- patterns that might have come from a dream.

“What was her name?” he asked.

Anga snorted. “You're a bit late asking.”

Years too late to ask that kind of question. What had returned to him now was further again from what she had been. “I'll be back in a couple of minutes,” he said, already turning to leave, and signed privacy when Anga moved to follow.

Ulanda glanced up when he entered the far changing room, but her eyes were glazed from the neural blocker Anga had given her and she didn't track his movements. Bolda sat beside her, their containers and baskets at his feet.

Once through the portal Ulanda had created, they had found themselves in a twilight world. Around them: Cam'lt Temple, but faded. Their voices had echoed from points that seemed thin air, were swallowed by marble walls and stone. They had been surrounded by ghosts. Not more than what seemed like a few minutes after they had arrived, Anga and the two Zimmer had popped through



the same portal into the centre of the spiral. And their small world had solidified just that little. Music and colors and movement. The ghosts became people, flickered then faded again.

A flash of warding energy and Ulanda had dropped like a stone. And he'd found himself facing down two Zimmer rifles while Anga applied a patch of neural blocker at the back of her neck.

"Pick her up," Anga said to him, and when Bolda had stepped forward before he's taken a step, the loom-master had said to the other weaver: "You touch her and you'll die here and there'll be no one left to say how."

"No one is going to have to ask how," Bolda said.

"I'll take that risk. And you'll still be dead."

And they'd been herded into the dressing rooms. Minutes later, Li-Fu and the Spann had arrived.

Olumka was at the other end of the room, kneeling, eyes like faceted jewels reflecting the glow-globes overhead. The rug was pulled back, exposing the stone floor. In front of the Spann were three spinning tops. Amber and black stripes, white tips. One slowed and toppled, fouling one of the others, the third still going strong. Not stripes after all, Garm saw, but a complex pattern of circles and lines around the fat globes before they narrowed to a plain white point.

Li-Fu was watching the tops; he had to kneel next to her before she noticed him. Sighing, she leaned against him. "Will you start them again?" Garm thought she meant him, but Olumka reached a pincer out and with a sharp twist, set first one, then the other spinning. "I can hear the ocean on Lillisim when they spin."

She sounded like the child he remembered so well. But with Anga? He wasn't mistaken at their relationship, just bewildered.

Li-Fu was breathing faster. "An ocean," she whispered, "but I can't find the shore. It's quite strange."

Garm listened, but heard nothing. He put a hand under his daughter's elbow and stood, drawing her up. "Li-Fu, there's more here than what Anga..." He was looking into her mother's eyes.

"You see more only because you want to," she said and he heard sympathy in her voice. "This isn't one of your stories -- and I've looked at them so don't argue. This scene will play out like the pattern pull it is and then be over and we'll be back in Palace. Cassa is recreating events."

He glanced at Ulanda, her eyes were closed and a line of saliva trailed from the side of her mouth to the rug her head rested on. One foot twitched repeatedly. "It's not that simple," he said to his daughter.

"Simple?" The word broke on a note of incredulity and in the brittle sound he heard the strain she must be under. "Father," she continued in a whisper, "your interference could have ended up destroying Empire. Everything you've had a

hand in has gone wrong. Did you think you were doing Ulanda a favor by making another like Cassa?"

By the last words, her voice was loud enough for even Ulanda to hear. "Are you asking me or telling everyone?" he asked.

"Well, I can't tell you, you don't listen."

Gennady pushed past them into the room and Li-Fu's let her words die with a shake of her head, her attention more on the Zimmer than him.

Gennady stuck a foot into the spin of the tops. A couple of words in a language Garm had never heard before, and Olumka picked the toys up and put them in a pocket. Then to Garm, "There's only a couple of minutes left."

Garm walked with the Zimmer to the outer door where Mullaki had joined Anga and then a little past. When he looked back, Li-Fu was with the loom-master.

"The tops are derived from Web technology," Gennady said. "The spinning produces an energy field that interfaces with random bits of overpattern. The Spann use it as a tool for going into meditation of the Wu'loss cass. Their people don't throw Priests, but..." Air rushed over his bared teeth. "At least that's what the tops are supposed to do."

People wandered around them as though they were as solid as the pillars of marble -- and as alive. The chanting had started, and Garm felt the soft hum as a knife in his belly and each accompanying drum beat, a twist of the blade.

Gennady gestured towards the spiral. "What change would you want here? If any change actually is one, then if Cassa dies or becomes an Altasimic Priest, she never really existed, she never..."

"The original result is what happened, now and forever. You think forward in time because that's all you live, but overpattern exists all at once, everywhere, all times, all places. And as far as my wanting anything, you must understand, everything I have is from stories and those weren't ever history. Legends and trans-line myths. They come out of our contact with the eternity of the Wu'loss cass, they're our attempts to make sense of something we're incapable of understanding. They're truth of a different kind, or a shell over the truth like Cassa was -- is -- a shell over the rest."

"You were the Empress's San and all you attempted to know were stories?"

"And rumors -- they never came to me when I should have been..."

Gennady turned with a sudden shift in focus. The change in the man made Garm's hair rise along the back of his neck. "It's time."

He stepped out into the fading red light of the processional walkway, the glow of Grandfather finally reduced to a half moon rim on the dome opening, the angle wrong to see the sky. The air smelled damp, blood of course, but also a night smell of dew and wet stone mingling with the resin and smoke of the torches. And he found himself asking what he was supposed to do, or was Li-Fu right? Had his interference kept Ulanda from connecting with her world-pattern? The white

room. He didn't have answers, only Cassa. And Cassa had wanted the woman there and with him.

He should be three times his height and dressed in armor of iridescent Ol'tir scales instead of a rumbled yellow robe. "Rider of the black phoenix," he breathed. Would she take him with her? His desires had finally coalesced. Any change here didn't change what she was to him.

He shouted back to Anga, "She'll take me with her." Then laughed at the look on the loom-master's face. The sound rolled around the processional as though the space was empty of people, as though he were the only one there. I did this a long time ago, he thought. It's been written on paper and in recording crystals. And chanted with the night sky low around the speaker and the flames of a single fire in his eyes and in the eyes of those listening.

He had company: Gennady had moved around the processional to the other side of the spiral. A step into the spiral and the Zimmer went from an animal grace to a very slow struggle. Garm tried it and felt the difference immediately. Each footstep was a battle, he kept wanting to turn his head away as though from a strong wind. Bumping against a guard, he felt the man like a stone column, and no notice made to his progress. Then stood like stone himself, a match to Gennady across the mound from him. It didn't matter, Anga was right. There wasn't anything either of them needed to do.

Garm had chosen the side they brought her around to. Steps away, the procession passed by him. Except it wasn't her, not as he had known her, he had to search to find the features that told him that it was the same woman.

Mullaki was back in position; only her eyes on him said that she was still outside the normal flow. The Camerat-priests were well back in the spiral, evenly spaced around the center. The dancer by the pillar across from him stretched in a brief warm-up sequence, wearing a plain lavender robe the same color as her scales and a single tie of dark blue around her waist. Staring at the stone pillar, then the drummer, her fear obvious.

Cassa lay on her side, face smeared with blood from the spiral as she brushed her hands across her eyes. Hair back in tight braids; someone had taken time on those. Breathing deeply, she was still more asleep than awake. The short sleeves of the plain white robe fell back to show her arms, smooth and unmarked.

The Warder rubbed a patch to the back of Cassa's neck, and her breathing changed immediately and her hands clenched. The man pulled her up to sitting and two aides moved in, one to either side.

Aides fastened the cuffs to Cassa's wrists; she pulled against the handling, eyes open but with her head weaving, as though trying to get a focus. The drums started and she flinched at the first round of beats.

Gennady's knife was in one hand, but his attention was to the vass'lt, a young Camerat female. To what end, Garm didn't know, perhaps simple instinct to

protect Cassa -- and perhaps the Zimmer had less trouble recognizing the woman lying there as Cassa, despite what he had decided about how real all this was. The Zimmer made the few more steps towards the vass'lt, but then his knife hand dropped as he fell to a kneeling position.

Fighting through the few feet left, Garm reached her side. Stone was under his hand -- her flesh was like stone. "Cassa," he whispered. "Look at me." He wanted the scent of lavender in her hair; he wanted her eyes on him. "Don't leave me behind."

Time doubled around him as though it were a mirrored room. Doubled up and in one sequence only torches lit the space, yellow light, not the red of grandfather. The granite was a gray pearl, not pink. But in the other, Cassa's skin held the color of sunset. Garm held both in his mind, feeling them whole. Pattern must be like this, he thought. Having something entire, everything at once and everything in minute detail.

The click of the rings being put on the cuffs broke his concentration. Anga was right; they had dropped the ceremony, leaving only seconds now until Cassa's wrists snapped.

Across the mound, the vass'lt was terrified, her head crest speckled where the color shifting had failed. Moving her knife from hand to hand, she clicked her nails, almost the only sound Garm could hear. The drums and chanting were far in the background and muted. This vass'lt ignored the attention of the male Priest, her attention solely on Cassa, but the blue male watched her, his upper body weaving, neck crest raised, his narrow tongue licking cobalt lips.

The Warder applied another patch to the back of Cassa's neck and she moved her head, eyes still glazed, but trying to look behind her. A bad dream, that's all it is, you'll wake up in a minute, in your own bed. Would she, did she, go like that into the Initiation, Garm wondered.

But everything before had been instinct or dream. She woke with a cold snap in her eyes and a jerk that came up short, her wrists held tight by the aides on either side. Then she was on her feet, pulled there by the Warder. A moment later, he nodded towards the Overpriest.

"Complete it," Mullaki said.

The only sound was a gasping intake of air over the crack as each ring pulled a wrist back and pushed the bar in for a clean break. She almost fell but didn't scream. As she straightened there was a puzzled look on her face but that was under the cold watching. She didn't see him and he tried reaching out again and failed.

No ceremony. Waiting until certain that she saw the vass'lt -- and the knife -- the Warder signed the guards away. Standing on her own, arms held against her body, Cassa moved away from the vass'lt and the people closest to her. Still no

sound but her breathing, her mouth open, she looked around but always returned to the knife. A braid had come loose to hang down around one ear.

Anga stood next to him. "This part always seems longer than it is, it's really only..."

Moving his head through air like honey, Garm looked toward the man, and missed the vass'lt's move. The woman came around the other side and he caught only the flash of torch light off the blade of the knife.

And as fast, the flash of the blade going back towards the center and in his line of sight. The Camerat stopped with her heel in the mound of dirt, but caught her balance as quickly and stood there, staring.

He didn't have to look at Cassa to know what had happened: the knife didn't hold the blood any better than the surface marble of the spiral, beads joined into a thin rivet to form a blood line but the drips from the point were already slowing. The vass'lt flinched and had to balance on the loose dirt, but it was just nerves, her face held more relief than triumph, although that was starting. Her nostrils flared, her eyes towards the Camerat-priest now, the man standing, his crest erect and cobalt. No one else had moved.

A collective pause -- the Warder, Overpriest, guards, all waiting. Then it was over with a ragged start to the drums where they never should have stopped, the singers added a moment later, then the small noises of people moving around them. The thick air was just air again.

Gennady reached her first but to Garm's eyes, froze in mid-stride. Garm blinked away the double image. In one, a woman laid on her side, trying to hold the wound in her chest closed with a hand that wouldn't work, the other arm trapped under and caught in her robe. Watching still, but the looking was turning inwards with the puzzled expression growing stronger. The Warder came from behind to finish what was so obviously over, a single almost gentle stroke across her throat, holding her head against his neck as she started to struggle again at his touch. But in the other, time stilled around them and the red light held frost.

Blood bubbled from her lips. "Cassa," he whispered, not daring to do more than touch her cheek. Any movement would kill her that much faster.

But she smiled, and he knew that didn't matter. "Hold me," she said, the words coming in a blister of dark liquid. And against his ear, "... I've no tail feathers, I'm sorry." Another breath, most of it lost through the wound in her chest.

"You scared me out of my mind," he said to her, feeling the flesh loosing resilience as the muscles stilled.

He blinked and he and Cassa were in her study as it had been just before she had sent him away, he recognized the recording crystals on the desk and the placement of papers. Temple Court review cases. Nobody else was there, just the two of them, and with the surroundings blurred, as though they standing in a

pinpoint of focus. At the limits of his clear seeing was a child's tea service, on the floor with one cup tipped over, and Possitt root tea spilt in a tiny galaxy of stars spread out on the floor.

"Empire Law, Garm," Cassa said, breathing the scent of Possitt root tea at him. Her hair was in tight braids, but it hadn't been that day, but loose as usual. The air hummed as the warm gold of the wood desk frosted, not with ice, but stone. Pearl gray granite, in radiating lines from the recording crystals.

"Leave it to them, to Ulanda. They can all have what they want."

"And you?" she said and he saw that she was turning to stone as well with brittle silver-gray lines woven through her hair. "What do you want?"

"To come with you."

Her smile was shards of granite. Knife sharp. "What would I be without you?"

Hands were shaking him. Anga, one color with the darkness. Torches flickered around them as though seen from the bottom of a well.

"It's finished," Anga screamed in his ear. "Open the portal, I can't budge it!"

He held stone, then fog and the air shimmered. "Get the others," he screamed back, holding onto his panic to give him strength. I didn't open it last time, he thought. Mullaki did. And he remembered how.

"The sequence is breaking up, not reorganizing. If it goes while we're here, we go with it. There's no time..."

"Make time." Garm scrambled forward through blood, his legs tangled in the long ends of his robe, feeling the cuts in the surface of the spiral through the cloth. Gennady hadn't moved, not that he could see him very well, but the man was a center of stillness in the turmoil around them.

Then to Anga, again. "I won't open the portal until they're all here," he yelled, hoping the loom-master wouldn't see the lie. "And if Gennady ever could, he can't now, he's not conscious. Make up your mind."

It would break here first, in the center, he thought, watching the short dark form of the Piltsimic become more solid the further away he got.

"Gennady!" Nothing. He tried again to the same result. What was the matter with him? The man was a lump kneeling there.

Colors from the spiral rose around him, sparks in the darkness, bleeding in from the outside, moving in a double spiral towards the center mound. Then, something moved outside the curtain, and inside as well.

Mullaki. Sapphire bloomed through the dark mix of light. At the change, Gennady twisted in his hands, only long experience kept Garm's hands firm. Then, Bolda was helping him with the Zimmer, baskets swinging in the way. Garm did a quick head count: everybody.

Mullaki, the spiral was centered on her as well; she was part of the two images that wouldn't blink into one. The lights were almost to the center of the spiral;

clear sapphire in one image and part of him wanted it to reach the mound first. "Can you come through?" he asked.

"Perhaps another time." She sounded amused, but he heard peace in her voice as the lines of Poultat blue crackled in a weave around her, a pure delirious color. "Someone else is waiting for me."

In the other image, a rainbow flickered into black. "I don't know," he said, not sure of the question, just that he had to say the words. Again, he remembered the Poultat woman and the shouted prayers. The twins...

The woman laughed, as though she knew his mind better than he did himself. "Another time," she echoed as the sapphire about her spiraled upwards in a column of light towards the dome. Then he felt the portal open and they fell out.

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The nose of the Ladybug loomed beside Garm, providing an unwelcome perspective that told of the real size of the marble room. The ship was huge this close... and tiny. After several cutting words to him, Li-Fu had gone inside, angry that he insisted Ulanda stay with him until clear arrangements with Gennady had been made. Following a conversation in what Garm could only think was Spann-native, Gennady, Anga and Olumka had left with the flitter, he supposed to where the portal had been.

Ulanda sat nearby, her legs crossed and an empty basket in the hollow of her lap. Teasing a broken piece on the reed side, she worked the fine strand back and forth, trying to break it off. From one of the fish that swam on the shallow sides of the basket weave. The sedating effect of the neural blocker had obviously worn off, but she still had a hollow look to her eyes.

Bolda watched her, silent in the face of the mutilation of his handiwork. He shook his head and turned to Garm. "How about we go inside now?"

Garm shook his head. "We need to set limits on our cooperation."

Ulanda looked towards him, then to the Ladybug, her face expressionless. The effect of the drug or the blankness of pattern? Had the neural blocker worn off faster than Anga apparently believed it would? He didn't know, he was having trouble thinking at all. For a second time, he had thought he'd be with Cassa... or dead. And had been mistaken.

"Would you like something?" he asked Ulanda but didn't come closer, he found he couldn't act more coherently than he could think. In a spill down the front of his robe the blood was fresh enough to be wet. And blood on his hands in the places that wouldn't wipe away easily, in the skin along side of his nails and in

the creases, the deep intricately carved canyons grown in the soft flesh of old age. He could smell Cassa on his hands -- and not just in the blood -- and it was her after all, not the stranger who he had first seen in the spiral.

Blood was probably on his face as well from trying to force the exhaustion out of his eyes. Or from holding his hands flat to his face, or cupping them, keeping the bright light away and her smell in.

Bolda passed him a flask of water and watched as he drank. "You might try washing with the rest of it."

He splashed some into his palm. A cool, red stained pool. "I don't think it can come off."

"Hell, just clean up a bit."

A snap of teeth and a choked cough and the basket Ulanda had been holding skidded to his foot. She had used her teeth to bite the piece off and lost her grip on the sides. The bitten piece lay on the pocket of her lap, a splinter of lavender. Bright light was a halo around her hair, the contrast robbed his eyes of much of what he should be seeing. Even from here in the center, the point they had just left shone like a sun. Night would fall soon, the light eaten then spat out at the opposite point. Those few hours in the pattern pull had been a full day in the changing time scale of the diamond.

Letting the bloodied water drip from his fingers, he walked the short way to the end of the Ladybug and stood, face to where the dawn would come. His shadow reached across the vast space until swallowed by the distance. The tip of his other self might reach the point, the flyaway down of his hair, brush where another portal might be. His vision raced the focus and was outpaced each time.

Bolda had followed him. A scan swept past, raising the hairs on his arms. Again. He looked back. Ulanda was standing now, staring towards the opening in the hull. A white corridor lay beyond. The door wasn't one, but simply a hole in the side of the ship where the tiles had moved over. A Zimmer squatted just inside, making him eye-level to Ulanda. Wearing ship's dress, the plain white fabric of the tight pants and narrow tunic was one with the Zimmer's skin except for texture. Or at least to his eyes, he had only a limited and mostly forgotten idea what it would look like to a Zimmer. Stripes and bands to show rank?

Was it Simitta? Garm wasn't sure.

"Any arrangements will be made by me," he said loudly in Trade-basic.

Bolda snorted. "Not bloody likely."

Ulanda didn't turn at his voice; she remained staring at the Zimmer. The man watched back with a similar wholeness of attention.

A threat? Running back to where she was, he blocked her view of the Zimmer then placed both hands on her shoulders. "Would you like anything? Water, fish?" His back itched, thinking of the man he couldn't see.

At the mention of fish, she wrinkled her nose. "No."



Her eyes weren't giving away anything; she kept them down, focused somewhere near the tie of his robe. Apparently, he didn't warrant the same attention as the Zimmer. "What do you want then?"

She turned her head to him, dark eyes stirring memories with their intensity. "I thought you weren't supposed to be here. And I'm supposed to be dead." While she spoke, she scratched at the start of her braids, working across one palm. She seemed to have forgotten the Zimmer.

He took her hand. Just reddened, but she would break the skin if she kept it up. The undercloth was plain fabric, not meant to stay close against the skin for long and he hadn't any proper cream to use. "And everyone else back in Palace? Well, none of it happened, did it?"

She looked at him as though forcing herself to see a stranger in what was surely only his familiar features. "She died, she never was Empress, and you never took service with her."

And he had lived happily ever after with his wife? "I'm still myself, with my memories," he said, but thought 'promises', feeling the tearing apart inside almost as sharp as that morning so long ago. What had they accomplished at the Cam'lt Temple pull? The reasons that seemed so clear at the time hadn't lasted past the pull's end. The two images... 'another time,' Mullaki had said. And what were Gennady and the loom-master accomplishing now?

"All the things we remember still happened," he continued. "Our lives happened. The Change phoenix, what Cassa is, exists on the edge of possibilities, like things acted out in a dream. They matter, they're real in certain ways, important ways, but the other doesn't change or become less."

And him? Did he change?

But Ulanda shook her head. "Olumka spun the tops after you and Gennady left. Until Anga came back."

"How could you know? You weren't conscious."

"Not conscious? I didn't exist. Everything was hollow and I was the shell..." She stopped with her voice rising still and he could see the sweat beading her forehead. Then lower again, more in control, she added, "I'm supposed to be a shell, but there wasn't anything inside. At the end, only the tops, only those were real."

He looked at Bolda for help, but his attention was past the two of them. The Zimmer, closer than before, to one side where he could see and be seen by Ulanda. It was Simitta.

"San Garm, I've got some of the blocker the loom-master used if you don't."

Ulanda raised her eyes to his. Her words were cold and hard, and spat at the Zimmer. "Is that your answer for everything?"

Simitta hesitated mid-step in his advance. "It's not a bad answer around Priests."

Bolda laughed and sat back against the stack of baskets. "Sensible man."

The use of the drugs or not coming closer? Simitta had stayed those extra few feet away. Garm shook his head, not meaning anything in particular, a sharing of his confusion perhaps. He wasn't entirely sure what Ulanda was talking about but he thought Simitta did. "What did the tops say," he whispered, moving still closer. "If you heard them, tell me what they said." The hands under his still didn't resist. Well trained, he thought again, and used it to draw her down to her knees and followed so they were eye-to-eye.

He could feel Simitta watching, eyes boring into him. He turned his head. "Will I have to insist on privacy?"

"San, you have it. Ship's Net won't hold."

"What about you?" Simitta shrugged even as black spread around each iris in a corona. "Then if you won't leave, can you tell us anything of what happened back at Palace after we left?"

"Anga set this whole thing up to get himself wherever Ulanda was." Simitta told in a few words about the battle and the loom-master's involvement. Sarkalt and Mullaki's death.

Garm had heard much of it earlier but not in sequence. "Where do the Spann fit in?"

Twin rings of black remained around the green-blue but the frost color was holding. "San Garm, the Spann will accept whatever comes out of all this as having been fated but it won't stop them from exercising their options whenever they can. A'Genn is one of those options. So was Cassa; they knew from the start some of the possibilities surrounding her. If you wish to ask Olumka more, we've got a data-point translation going on the Spann language that's not as good as the ship's Net but it's better than nothing."

"Why are you telling us this?" Ulanda asked, sounding calmer, but with an edge still to her voice.

Simitta's eyes held memories as he looked at her. "I know about you and I know what is owed. My full name is Simitta los'Gennady a'Genn. Brother to Gennady's father, but more than uncle-nephew with the los oath. As a loska, she was as much mine as Gennady's."

"Cassa," Garm breathed. Simitta's tone said he didn't see any difference between Ulanda and Cassa -- or Garm's interpretation was born out of his own uncertainties. Studying Zimmer all those years ago hadn't prepared him for a Clan Lord's very plain statement of possession.

"Yes, Cassa." Simitta glanced again at Ulanda.

"I'm not her," Ulanda said.

"Especially if you don't exist," Garm said into her hair.

Simitta made an unfamiliar motion. Bolda's snort interrupted Garm's query. "Hell, no."

Simitta shrugged. "A loska is like a los, only from outside the family. Very rarely they aren't Clan Zimmer. They bring into the Clan the status they had outside it, same as a los brings their family status. Cassa had none to bring. Less than none."

"Like a freeborn has no status? So you think you owned her?" Ulanda said.

Garm made a sign asking forbearance on her part. "What he says is of no consequence. What you still are of Cassa, what use she still has of you, all belongs to me."

"Is everything at your convenience?" Her voice was thin with sarcasm but it turned to anger quickly. "That you're still here means you have nothing. Damn it, listen to me! As the tops spun, threads separated out of the pattern, pulling thin, stretching from one to the other, with the third twisting them on the spindle. Then..."

"Slower," he said to interrupt the rush.

"Then she died." Words as slowly spoken as they were cold and he shivered. "I could feel it. The threads snapped. Garm, I could feel you. And Bolda. The people on the ship, I couldn't separate them, I don't know them and it happened too fast. But everyone here. Li-Fu and Olumka... then Anga came."

"And you?"

"I could see them, not me. I didn't exist there anymore, I'm not sure I ever really had. Just here. The diamond in the reed."

"Bolda?" Garm asked, thoroughly alarmed.

He shrugged and toed a basket into line with the one next to it. "Li-Fu and Olumka were staring at the tops, then all of a sudden the third one stopped, fell over on its side, just like that." Then, to Simitta, "Did you see anything more?"

Simitta looked at Bolda, but turned to Garm before answering. "No." Tension in a small muscle jumped above the knife sharp ridge of his cheeks. Cassa had never mentioned his name, los or not, even Gennady's seldom. She shared very little of what she had been before he knew her and that little concerned mostly places and things. She had held the people back.

Garm looked at Ulanda and let his breath out slowly. "'What you felt was Cassa flying free, finishing what she had started all those years ago. Even with the blocker, the link between the two of you..."

He turned back to face the Zimmer and found himself staring eye level, Simitta kneeling close enough that Garm felt the warmth from his body across the narrow space. His heartbeat, the sound and the scent of his breathing. Cassa would have known him that close.

A roll of sound crashed against the Ladybug and back like a wave. The flutter landed with a scraping sound against the marble. "What arrangements do you have with Anga?" he asked.

Heeled boots sounded on the marble behind them and he looked. Gennady and Anga. Olumka was by the flitter, apparently intending to stay here.

"Old man," Gennady said. "Arrangements are for me to say and I don't recall being asked."

The attack was verbal at least, and he could handle that. "I thought I had asked you when I asked your los. What about your oaths, your loyalties, Gennady? Who do they extend to? Cassa?"

"They extend to where I want them to and not further. As does that of my los. And my crew. Understand that I'm not interested in superstition and wishful thinking."

Both cold and in control, Garm saw. And angry with Simitta, that last showing more from the way the other man responded, his head turned to one side, his eyes closed. A posture of formal submission.

He shook his head. "Such an understanding would have me at a disadvantage. And you as well."

The Zimmer's walk took him to stand next to his los, the man's head against his thigh. One hand just touched the crest of Simitta's hair. The fingers didn't press down in the move that would kill the other man, but glided to the back of Simitta's head.

Mirror images, Garm thought. Only the colour of their eyes differed. Then Simitta looked up. If a mirror, then one made of a burnished surface, polished metal perhaps, not clear glass. A difference in focus, in where the image appeared to the observer. He was missing something here.

"Understandings are sometimes negotiable, very negotiable, especially now." Garm continued to smooth Ulanda's braid ends. "Anga..." From watching Ulanda, the loom-master raised his eyes to him. "You've gotten the stabilization of the world-patterns you needed. Look at Li-Fu if you need any evidence. What happened with Cassa was real."

"We still have to get out of here and back to Palace," Anga said. "And it has to be before Nexus Change peaks. Cassa flying off leaves a hole of possibilities big enough to drop Empire into."

"And the way out? The portal we used was one way."

Anga eyes returned to Ulanda. "We can leave by one of the diamond points. That's what we took the flitter to check. The structure of the marble is set to respond to overpattern."

Ulanda stood and almost fell, but her voice was clear. "Why should I?"

Garm got to his feet. "Because your death here is more certain than if you oblige us." He glanced to the flitter where Olumka stood. "In a way, Ulanda is Cassa, she's every Emperor who's ever touched overpattern. She's the Spann god, captive and free. And the black phoenix."

"More stories," Gennady said.

“Yes.” With a shaking hand, he rubbed his face. “For it all to be over, the phoenix flies free, not just here, but in the greater reality as well. Isn’t that what the Spann want, a universe no longer bound by the Law of the Unity? All of us awash in the dark ocean? Gennady, I’m asking you again, why are you helping the loom-master?”

Anga laughed and answered for the Zimmer. “Because when this is over, he knows I’ll be the one left to pay off.”

Ulanda backed a little ways off, just enough that she would be able to see them all together. Bolda was the only one who wasn’t watching her. And perhaps Olumka, she didn’t know what the Spann could see; there wasn’t a focus in the revolving lights that made up its eyes. The only time she was certain of being watched was when the Spann held the prayer forms in its pincers like it would a tea bowl.

Garm took a step towards her then stopped when she backed up further. “She’s flown away without you,” she said and had to struggle not to scream it over and over, until she had a whirlwind of sound to block her own thoughts.

Her death was a question in the loom-master’s eyes. To him, she was part of the hole of possibilities that Cassa had left in the wake of her flight. Could she expect a white blade slipped between her ribs even as Palace materialized around them? There weren’t any questions in Gennady’s eyes.

She tried to reach for pattern, but her mind twisted back on itself. The effect of the blocker. The nausea had passed, the deep lassitude that had left her with barely the will to keep breathing. Now, her mind jumped and stalled, buzzed and whirled. It was worse than being drunk and hung over all at once.

Then through the whirl of thoughts, the image came yet again. The patio and the dance. And then the failed Initiation with Sarkalt where the sound of the heart of her people was built around the same drumbeats she had tried so hard to hear and had never forgotten. Except for that once. And when she had become a Priest in the diamond? Her people’s song hadn’t existed, only the white room and sounds in the flakes of snow. Overpattern.

And her alternatives here in this place? Two more steps backwards and she turned to face the white expanse. And stopped, her breath caught in her throat, her mind threatening to shut down completely. She had walked away once until in her exhaustion, the marble had reached up and taken her, and she’d woken up where she had started.

Warmth and soft hands on her cheek. Garm. He stayed at her back where she’d have to turn her head to see him. Did he think he could create a small reality where she could believe of him only what he wished? “It’s too late for that,” she whispered against his hand as he stroked her cheek.

"Ulanda, I don't know what it is or isn't too late for."

"All you have are stories. Except the story is over."

"I don't know that either. My books talk of a battle as something done between two people to an improbable end. Allegories of the struggle between good and evil, and all of them from the perspective of Empire. They're part dreams and visions and part entertainment."

"And it's your understanding makes the connections, makes them into a whole? What part do I have in them now?"

His sigh was warm against her neck. "At Nexus Change, at the climax, most Priest-Selects die, that's not a story, it's what happens. When most of the stories I have were written, the Emperor was always a Priest, there was no such thing as a Select."

She laughed softly. "Just the rin'cass wu. Does your story have room for my refusing to open the portal and take you all to Palace and my death?"

"Does it need to? I have your will, I hold it in my hand."

As he brushed the side of her face with his hand, she felt the tremor and how it was matched in his legs and knew he was at the end of his strength. And wished him dead already. She was scarcely aware that the others were watching.

"Freedom's not allowed you," Garm continued. He held her against him; the trembling hands that had stroked her cheek had become stone around her waist. "You weren't ever meant to be free."

She licked her lips. At this very moment, he did have her will. If he asked, would she take them where they wanted, even if it meant her death moments later? "You said you didn't know if the story was ended," she whispered hoarsely.

"Words free," Olumka said. Ulanda hadn't heard the Spann approach. Body lowered and supported on six limbs, the other two held a sign of indulgence asked.

"Words?" Garm sounded amused. He turned her in his arms until she had no choice but to face him, then lifted her chin with one hand when she looked away from his eyes. "Shall my understanding provide you with a story to your liking? One where the Black Phoenix flies away?"

Gennady had circled around, Simitta on the opposite side. Anga was closer, a different circle. If Garm was aware of the movement, he didn't care. She almost laughed out loud. Did they think he was a threat to her and their one chance to get out of here?

Olumka clicked something and the two Zimmer stopped where they were. Anga didn't, but he kept just enough to the back of her that she wasn't able to see him without straining her neck.

She relaxed into Garm's embrace. "Shall it be a knife between your ribs first?" she whispered against his throat. Fish and sweat and she remembered how

comforting the smell had been while trying for the portal that eventually led to Cam'lt Temple.

He didn't answer her but Olumka did. "Ocean, knife, white knife."

Garm chuckled as though he had made enough sense of the Spann's answer to find it amusing. "I've one story, or several really," he said as he stepped away even as he let her go. She almost fell before getting her own balance. "Changing them to suit you won't matter, the original languages have drifted so much over the millions of years and thousands of Nexus so as to leave room between the words for as many stories as you wish."

He had his audience and she went back to sit by the baskets before she fell over. Bolda handed her the water bottle, blood smeared and smelling of a spiral kill. "I could probably find someone to make you tea," he said. "Drinking liquids will help to flush the blocker out of your system."

"It doesn't feel like there could be enough water to do that." A sip before she continued. "Am I as stupid as they must think?" Part of her was still in Garm's hands, she still felt his touch. He had started his story and like his touch, she couldn't not hear him.

*In the last days of the Aramill Nexus, High Temple held council on what to do with the Black Phoenix in their midst. The High Priest of Forms was the sole dissenter on her fate.*

Bolda's answer came around and under the other. "Wish you were still in Kalin?" He nodded towards Garm and his theatre. "You might listen to this."

She had no choice, but later, couldn't remember Garm coming to the end of the story, only waking long afterwards with him asleep beside her and the both of them in a small room on the Ladybug. Lying there, watching him breath, the story unfolded in her mind as though she had only dreamed him speaking it and dreamed it still.

*"Are you blind to the long night?" the High Priest asked. "She is a part of the Nexus Change that grows around us."*

*"It is because of that," the others replied, "that she must die."*

*"A common enough fate," the High Priest said in turn, then bowed closure, and left the small garden in a rustle of silken robes and his footsteps were hollow on the wood of the narrow bridge that joined the pavilion to the door into Palace.*

*He spoke with her from Ri-altar, the distance between them no difference, for all the walls of Cam'lt Temple on Camerat surrounded her and the twin suns shone a yellow light through the open dome on the double spiral of the inner Temple.*

*"You're no friend of mine," she said through the rise of black around her.*

*"No friend of any," he corrected softly, seeing the fall of green leaves in the black where others saw nothing, leaves the soft fresh green of Ri-light. And saw around her, as well, in the gathering black, the loosening of the binding of*

*Empire, and the stirring of wings. "I am the Law and that makes no friends." And he gave the orders for her exile to Lillisim and there were none to say he had no right to command, not the Emperor, not the Council.*

*She was kept by people whose family had given service to Temple while there were still Priests on Lillisim, and she lived where the last Temple had been before the stone of its making had become dust. She followed her small herd of goats through the dust of Empire and watered them in the springs that rose to feed the spiral streams of the world-altar before sinking again to earth and sand. And she fed them the long grasses that grew in the narrowing paths of the spiral, summer grasses and grasses heavy with seed, and nodding to the new shoots and the wild flowers underneath, for Lillisim only knew one season and didn't know that one was about to end.*

*In the tenth year of the Phoenix's exile, the daughter of the house, a child when the Phoenix had first come there, wound the ribbons of her coming of age in her long hair and bells on ribbons around her waist, a girdle of silk and silver. Worn silk, patches carefully woven into the cloth, and the cups of the silver bells like fragile porcelain over the ball inside, but they shone with the young woman's beauty and spirit.*

*She left her parents and the woman they kept to walk into the morning on the long road that would lead to the village that was all that was left of Lillisim. Early morning had sharpened the edges of the high dunes to silver before she left, and gold lived in the shadow side, and from the small cottage the young woman left behind her could be seen white shapes of goats and their tracks of darker brass.*

*The Phoenix watched her leave then took her goats to join the others that fed on the harsh dry grasses above the altar site.*

*"Ask her," she said to the man who watched his animals as they tugged at breaks in the amber sand, the grass more below than above and needing only a few days free of the moving sands to come to seed. But years of watching had left him as silent as the grasses and he didn't speak.*

*Five times in five years the young woman walked that road, returning each time without a husband or the promise of a child and in the sixth year, she left Lillisim on the freighter that bartered for the fine goat fleeces and the cost of her passage was all the people could give who could give her no future among them.*

*When the sun was high on the day of her last leaving and the man's shadow was under his feet, the Phoenix brought her own animals out from the spiral where he couldn't go and watched as he did, the goats mixing together as old friends before settling to drink the cool water of the spring.*

*"She'll come back," she said, her eyes on their shadows in the stone dust. But the man shook his head.*

*"She will," she insisted and knew the man looked at her. "You'll be father to the child she brings back and father to the child she takes away."*



*The Phoenix looked up from the shadows into his hope and saw he had only heard the coming back.*

*"Will I do?" she asked. "Until she returns?" And the man shrugged and she took that as yes and in the evening she followed him to his hut with the shed to one side where the goats huddled in the cold desert nights.*

*When he was very old, she woke one morning to find him gone early from their bed. He was standing by the door, a water skin on a cord over his shoulder. Eyes as green as spring looked at her. "I'll see the ocean at the end of this sand," he said, his voice rough for he spoke no more now than he had when younger.*

*The ocean was a racial memory; there had been no ocean on Lillisim since before her own people's world had formed. "Stay with me," she said. "The night is long and very cold."*

*His eyes asked the same question as they had over the many years together. "Soon," she said. "She'll come back very soon."*

*When he died, she left his body in the bed they had shared and left the door of the hut open to the wind and sand and returned to the cottage near the spiral and spent her days and nights alone but for the goats. The couple who had lived there were years dead.*

*Six days alone and she took the goats to the start of the road and said the words to release them and guide them and she followed a different path through the long grasses of the spiral to the center mound and the sun directly above.*

*The day was hot, and she waded in the ring of water around the center, feeling the pull of the water as it sank into the sand, and its weight in the tunic of goat hair she wore. And during the long afternoon, she slowly wove a girdle made of grass and the small white flowers that grew in the grass, flowers and the prickly seed heads of the flowers.*

*Evening brought the shadow line of the dunes across the spiral and the night, an ocean of stars above the sand. She knelt on the inside edge of the center, hard against the mound of amber sand and in the starlight saw the ridges in the smooth surface made by the roll of the flower seeds, a roll of three close lines, a turn and a repeating.*

*She held a single flower loosely in the cup of her hands, a flower from the tie of the girdle, silver white in color, her fingers dark against the blossom and sore from the weaving.*

*"I grow impatient with this," she said to the rise of Ri-light at the center of the mound and she felt the warm night air of summer on that world and the smoke of torches like the touch of fingers on her cheek.*

*"What have you become to speak of being impatient?" the High Priest said softly, there being no distance between them now. And he saw there was nothing binding her but her own will, not body nor time nor Empire.*

*"A herder of goats. What else have you made of me?"*

*"How could I have made anything of one such as you are?" he asked, as softly again and would have said more but his mouth was suddenly full of the dark wind of the Nexus Change that rose from around her.*

*"How could you not have?" she said to him, raising wings the color of the night that choked his voice to silence. "I breathe your breath, and you, mine. We dance and I grow impatient with dancing."*

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Distracted by the movement, Ulanda glanced up to see Gennady pace between the thin stand-legs of the craft, or stalk rather, as though the portal they sought could be hunted by stealth. Each time he passed, she looked up, always surprised to find him there, without sound or warning. They had come in a fighter pod, stopping as close into the point of the diamond as the blunt nose of the craft allowed without rearranging the tiles.

"Your turn, Ulanda." A smile was in the voice speaking. Li-Fu, a game of rings and stones half played between them.

Li-Fu was playing ring's side, her voice matching the light warble of the ivory rings hitting the marble. Rings to her stones -- and right now she felt more like a stone, Ulanda thought. She didn't try with the game, or hear half of what the other woman said. Birds. All around them was the sound of birds in flight. And unlike the other portal, nobody else could hear the sound.

"Tell me some more about Lillisim," she asked, but continued staring at the game pieces. "I've never been off Ri. Not that I know of." Lillisim. Was that what Li-Fu had been talking about?

Die sat in a shallow blue bowl, the shape like an inverted sky, the counters white clouds with spots of storm on them. Li-Fu pushed the bowl until the rim touched Ulanda's knee, her other hand keeping the braid ends free of the playing circle.

Three stones mark on the dice, and Ulanda chose three of those scattered and let them drop from the center.

"You'll win in three turns."

"Will I?"

"Shall we play another?" Smiling and waiting.

Ulanda had suggested the game, bored with waiting for the inevitable explosion from Gennady. Everything she did that wasn't like Cassa had done, scraped him raw and what she thought might be similar was even worse.

Three more hours until the node. All attempts to force her to create a portal to Palace had failed and the last hope was that the way out was timed to the original portal.

"One more game, I guess," Ulanda said, not wanting to play, and with even the vague threat of Gennady gone, felt her bones soften with a deepening of the inertia, as though bones could stare and not have the energy to blink. If the push to shape her will had stopped for now, she wasn't sure she liked this quiet watching and waiting any better.

Li-Fu signed agreement. "What did you want to know about Lillisim?"

"You were talking about it."

"Was I?"

She felt herself blush. "Wasn't it Lillisim you were talking about?"

"Was she?" A shadow was standing near them. Anga. Bare feet didn't make much of a sound on marble, and the birds were flying, half deafening her.

Li-Fu answered, "Apparently." Slowly, she picked up rings, slipping them on the small finger of her left hand for safekeeping. The silk bag was near her. Worn and threadbare, from Garm's suite in Palace. Clanny had taken the set and given it to Li-Fu.

Stones were in the leather bag already and Ulanda ground the ovals together, feeling the play of her tendons and muscles against the undercloth that bound her forearm, willing herself to focus on the shapes under her fingers rather than the shapes forming inside her mind.

"What do you want?" she asked Anga.

He settled noisily and she could smell the sweat of the effort like the smell of an apple core left in the sun. "I thought I would sit here quietly and listen to Li-Fu talk about Lillisim."

Li-Fu laughed. "Quiet would be a change." With a graceful turn of one hand, she gathered a ring from where it had been pushed by his foot. Her fingers curved in to the palm from the fine braiding. Clanny's work. "I should have sticks, not rings, to talk of Lillisim. We play this with sticks and stones there. Simic mark, multiples of three."

"And the stones?" Anga asked, not so quiet, but still sitting.

"Perhaps sticks and sand, the stones just easier to handle and sand eventually." Li-Fu turned her hand as though pouring sand from her palm. "Think of sand when you think of Lillisim. Great drifts of sand that march to the ocean, waves of sand meeting waves of water. The water yields politely then swallows the dune whole, or perhaps the sand continues the same march under the water, to the far shore and around the globe. Not like in my fathers story."

The Simic-priest strung her words together and spoke them like music. Until she didn't. Ulanda was still trying to decide which meant what. "Were you born

there?" she asked, still rolling the pebbles through the leather bag and listening to the grinding sound.

"No, at Palace. Both my parents were born there though, my father in the city, on the coast, just down from Lillisim-altar and the Temple. He left while my mother was a child; she said they had never met. My mother's people have always served Temple on Lillisim but she chose a different path, a long one she said, and I had always thought she meant the distance until I returned to Lillisim.

"She arrived at Palace wearing the ribbons and bells of her comm'ita, her coming of age. My father didn't have a chance." She smiled. "She knew the Temple dances as well." And chuckled. "He was her prize, she always said that, but when she spoke I understood it as being more than just the word. She was fierce when she said it, but still laughing in a small way. When she danced, it was the same; her movements were expression and context in one. She taught me all the dances she knew, not as many as you would have been taught as an Acolyte, but..."

Ulanda let the bag drop to the marble. "No, not as many."

A ring slipped from Li-Fu's finger and the other Priest watched the fall and waited until the warble rolled into silence before turning her eyes to Ulanda. "But we speaking of Lillisim, not dancing."

"So we were."

"Well, when I was the same age as when my mother had left Lillisim, she decided to visit her family, and I went with her and entered Temple there and stayed."

"You could have done all of that," Ulanda said. "I mean, out there, where Cassa never existed. Not just from before."

"No, not all. Not quite."

Anga was very quiet now. As much stone as the pebbles in the bag, Ulanda thought. Leather over stone, skin over stone.

Li-Fu mirrored some of that, her eyes on the small man. Or perhaps it was her answer that had her eyes emerald in the cold white light around them. "The day before my Initiation, I went to Lillisim-altar, a rite of passage, I thought, and I wore the comm'ita dress. My father isn't the only romantic in the family." She smiled again, but Ulanda saw the pain. "Some say Lillisim is the Simic home-world..."

"It's not," Anga said.

She shrugged. "Even so, the world is old, the Net system that spans the one continent is buried in time and place, I don't think it can be reached now, not to be changed. It doesn't speak, it whispers. Like the sand that forms the riding crest of the dunes, I thought, until I sat by the waters that feed the spiral at the altar and heard the same sound.

"There have always been Priests at Lillisim Temple, but not often Simic-native, not for a long time, but daughter echo lines. My grandmother served as Chief Salin to an Assim-priest and lived in the woman's Household besides, in the Priest house with my aunt and uncle and their families.

"I hadn't seen my mother for some time, contact with someone who has left Temple isn't allowed an Acolyte. I didn't know my father had arrived from Palace, I didn't see either of them until the start of my Initiation."

"The difference, woman."

"I thought you were going to sit quietly," Li-Fu said, her tone easy now that she had started talking again, almost indulgent. Then looked to Ulanda. "Another game, you said?"

She shook her head, feeling strange all of a sudden, giddy. "The same one, I think." And they both laughed, rings and stones together, and the sound didn't hurt at all. "Maybe we should play where there aren't so many interruptions."

Li-Fu tossed the fallen ring at Anga. He didn't move. "Good idea. Or should we go tease Gennady instead?"

"No, but let's walk."

Anga stayed and they left him the bag of stones, the rings scattered in front of him. Li-Fu dropped them from her finger as though to start a game and laughed as they bounced, some catching in the thick curls that made a band from the end of Anga's pants to his ankles.

Should they walk out from the point or in? Or would it matter? Li-Fu held back so that the decision was Ulanda's. She'd decided on sideways, but at the wall, turned towards the point to give her someplace to return from. Veins in the marble met here, same as at the diamond mouth, and the rest of it met there as well, but all of it inside her, and she didn't have to think anymore. The birds were quiet for once, but it was as though they were holding their breath. They had brought her here for this, all of them, Garm and Gennady, and this woman and her companion.

"Was Cassa on Lillisim?" she asked when they had gone as far into the point of the diamond as was possible without stooping.

"At the altar. Or one of the springs, rather."

"Anga didn't know."

"I didn't know myself until Anga involved me in this and I saw the records that showed more of her than her signature. At the time it happened, I didn't even know that she was a Priest." Li-Fu sat, her back against the curve and crossed her legs. "Lillisim-altar isn't much like Ri-altar. A six-point spiral, each point a natural spring, and from each spring, a stream spirals towards the center mound. It looks very natural but if you climb one of the dunes that wall the altar site, you can see how perfect the symmetry is. To one side of the altar site is the Priest-

house with reception areas and rooms for guests. Away a little again is the Temple proper."

An awkward angle to talk, and Ulanda sat facing her, legs tucked to one side. "A six line spiral?" Temple at Ri had six lines but each had a smaller spiral near the outer end. And Camerat just two arms coming from the leading pillar and opposite.

"Yes, six. You can see all of them from the Priest House, but one. She was at the spring you can't see, the far one called Fuall'It, seeker of the wind. What kind of wind, depends on the inflection used: desert wind, night wind, there's quite a few, all meaning something different and varying again with the context."

The birds were holding quiet still, leaving a restful hollow in her mind, and she could think. Old-tongue was used mainly for embellishment of other languages, but it actually made more sense in longer passages, the words more concrete in proximity to each other. Most of the older dances were choreographed using old-tongue.

"Fu is wind," she said. "Or storm, or passage in the most simple mode." With an effort, she stopped herself from making the motions the joined words demanded. She could dance to the other woman's name: Cry of the wind. Or wind-song or chimes. Or a dozen other simple variations and even more not so simple ones. "Out from the beginning or..."

"Please..." Li-Fu signed a request for relief even as she laughed. The sound returned from the diamond point in a swell of music. "You were probably taught more of the language than I know even now." Eyes towards the point, she hesitated until the music passed them. The words she had spoken hadn't returned the same way.

"Old-tongue isn't used on Lillisim, not really, not by the people. The ancient world-net does and the sound can trap you in the same kind of trance if you're not careful."

"Why did you train as an Acolyte?"

"My grandmother... to separate me from my mother, I think. My mother certainly thought so. I'd only accompanied her out of boredom -- Palace and Ri both bored me, or I was at an age where everything did. Lillisim should have been worse, it certainly bores me now." She smiled. "I might have over-appreciated the welcome... I was a novelty to people who had only seen the same faces their entire lives. One Temple, one city." She sighed. "The world is almost dead."

"One city?"

"Just one, on the whole world. Along the coast, it stretches for miles, but the shell houses are widely spaced and dunes can roll right through the city to the sea. Each building is cone shaped, made of a single shell but huge, like a small village with an inner courtyard and the living quarters around and the sky a

distant point above. The Temple doesn't even have a working flitter, there's no place to go, or no place where you need to go quickly. In a way, even the city is part of the Temple; people there use the lower access levels of Temple Net.

"We don't get many freighters visiting but Cassa must have come on one, there are no ships based on Lillisim. When I first saw her, she was wading in the stream, her pack and boots on the only patch of sand and grass that bordered the water. It's mostly reeds there..."

Ulanda looked up sharply. "Reeds?"

"Not the purple Camerat reeds. Green reeds, with puffy heads that explode with seeds if you touch them when they're ripe."

"What was she doing?"

"When I saw her, just wading. She had been up the spiral; I could see the path she'd made in the grass. The fog rolls in from the ocean each night, it's the only moisture most of the wild plants get outside the spiral. The sun burns the fog into gray and silver strands that thin out as they rise, leaving white streamers in the blue sky, then nothing. You think it's barely happening then it's over. But it takes an hour or more past the dawn to dry the grass to ground level, and longer where bushes shade it.

"I couldn't understand why she hadn't been noticed and stopped but instead of calling for Security, I sat on one of the rocks and watched her. She knew I was there."

The woman had to have heard the bells on the girdle, but she didn't turn to look, not then. Bells were the only sound except for the murmur of water, slow but stronger for the stream, and faster but barely heard for her legs as they pushed through the surface leaving eddies behind. And occasionally, the crick-crick of an insect in the grass, and further, another spiral path perhaps, an answer to the small insect's call.

Even when she waded to the shore, she didn't speak. Moving heavily, she stepped out and lowered herself to one knee before sitting, again heavily, as though the dry ground had risen unexpectedly to meet her instead, and the force of the impact had knocked the wind out of her.

Pushing her hair back, she twisted it into a single long rope, but left it untied. The wind blew it out again in moments. "Are you fasting?" she asked, turning enough to see and unstick a flap of her roll at the same time. Her nose was sunburned.

"Yes," Li-Fu replied.

The woman sighed and closed the flap over a black bun, but not before Li-Fu had seen the shape of a crystal rifle, the red barrel spotted with crumbs. And saw now, as well, the wearing of cloth along the near thigh, the pant leg and on the tunic where the harness would rest.

"I've heard it doesn't help," the woman said, and her head turned a bit more, enough for Li-Fu to see a lop sided smile, or a twist of her lips that could have been a smile or part of a frown. There was nothing in the tone of voice to say which.

Li-Fu slipped off the rock in a shower of ringing bells and moved closer. "And I've heard I didn't have an option."

It was a smile, at least by then. "Is it tonight?"

"Tomorrow. Sunrise."

A shrug and the woman looked away to the stream. Water-riders skated where she had walked, the water cleared to show eddies in the sand on the bottom, and her footprints almost vanished. And one more look: "Good luck, then."

Li-Fu started to laugh. "Luck?"

The woman spoke to the water. "Luck. Hold your tongue right, whatever. Wear a charm. How the hell should I know?"

Moving onto her knees, Li-Fu looked towards the point of the diamond before continuing. "I saw her one more time, the inner Temple this time, leaning against the pillar closest to the entrance, but on the counter-way side. I suppose she was there because of Father, even if she didn't know it. I don't think she needed to know things to do them. I don't know what the guards thought letting her in, or perhaps they didn't even see her, or saw of her what they wanted to. As they must have when she was wading in the stream."

Li-Fu was looking at her hands as she spoke, at the braiding that formed ridges following the line of each finger back to the wrist. Ulanda didn't think she could move them much.

"The Simic style of the Initiation ceremony is very slow. I still don't like the waiting. We don't get Initiates from Lillisim so much as from other Simic worlds. That I survived mine draws them." She turned her hands again in a shower of silk as she spoke. The effect, with a robe that matched her silver hair, the contrast with her amber skin, should have been beautiful, and on the ship, it had been.

"Both my parents were there, my mother because my grandmother had said she could be, and my father, well... he was difficult to say no to even then. I couldn't bear to watch them, so when I needed to look away, I looked at her. She had her arms crossed and I couldn't see her hands, but I didn't think anything of it." Stopping, Li-Fu tried to flex the thumb of her right hand.

"Too tight?"

"Very. I thought I could last it out. Clanny did his best, he's pathetically eager to please. It's not having an intact Net, I can't give him the kind of feedback he needs."

"And you're not Poultat."

"No. And I'm not her."



Welcome to the club, Ulanda thought. But said, "Your vass'lt, he was Simic? And a goat herder?"

"No, a tanner. Goat leather, of course." She sighed. "And he lived close to Temple. He would have known my mother from when they were children. I found this out later, of course. Regardless of what Father invented of the story he told, some of it he made to fit what had happened. And as far as I know, it doesn't match any of the books he collected.

"As to the rest of it, once the Bearer danced and left the spiral, the tanner just stood there, the knife hanging from his hand. I heard a muffled scream from the processional... it happens but I hadn't expected my mother to fall apart, or rather, if anyone was going to, it would be when the man moved on me.

"I looked..." A fit of giggles was quickly stifled by the back of her hand against her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said, and it was the first time Ulanda had heard anything resembling fear in her voice. "Stupid, I know... no, I mean then. I looked towards the scream. I should have been deep in the threads of the ritual by then, but I still looked. Only my mother wasn't looking at me, but at the vass'lt."

"Garm was holding her back."

She nodded but her eyes narrowed before retreating back into the story. "The Warder called for a stop as soon as I turned, but it was too late, the cuffs snapped at the same time..." Li-Fu took deep breath and released it slowly. "Then the vass'lt died," she whispered, nothing in her voice to show emotion, but hands encased in bone white braids rubbed at her eyes and came away streaked gray with moisture. "And he never moved on me at all."

Li-Fu looked at her again. "Everything I thought I knew about the past changed in the same instant as my future did. I didn't see my mother again until she was dying and we didn't talk of it even then. I can still see the whole thing in more detail than I could have possibly seen at the time. Almost as though I'm a powerful enough Priest to be able to create it in a pattern pull. My mother hadn't known what he had planned, didn't even know he was there until the attendants moved away. Even as I killed him, all I got was a sense of fatalism, as though his death and my life was the best of what he could offer to her."

"Garm knew."

"Oh yes. I can see my father too, sometimes it's all him, and there's no surprise in him at all."

"He talks of your brother as being his son."

"Custom as likely, or pride. Any children belong to the marriage and any marriage is for life. It's like that even in Temple on Lillisim. Even with the Assim, they took Simic ways."

"What happened later?"

"Nothing. I survived and I was grounded in Simic pattern."

"And Anga?"

"What about him?" She smiled thinly. "Does our relationship need explaining?"

Ulanda shivered from the tone as much as the words, and from the sound rising around her, wings with a beat like a drum roll. The quiet hadn't lasted long. "I'm going back," she said, starting to rise.

Li-Fu stood at the same time. "I'm not finished," she said, coming closer. Fingers like bone touched her face, tracing a shape only felt not seen. Ulanda froze, her heart pounding rapidly. Light sparkled in her eyes, she thought she might faint.

"Perhaps I'm more like my father than I like to admit." Li-Fu timed her words to the motions her fingers made. Ulanda's cheek, her jaw, then her neck. "I may not have very deep access to pattern, but through Anga... what I give him, he more than returns."

Her breath was warm; she smelled like Garm, but subtly different. Making her mouth work enough to speak took every ounce of strength Ulanda could manage. "This won't get you back to Palace."

The length of Li-Fu's body leaned against Ulanda's and she stumbled, too stiff to catch her balance. They were both on their knees when Li-Fu whispered into Ulanda's ear, her weight still pressing as though to force her further down. "It will get us exactly that. I know what to do and I have the will to do it."

Li-Fu laughed, her lips against Ulanda's hair. "I may have come late to this Ulanda, but I've seen the spins. Everything about you. From before you were born, until you walked into my father's rooms."

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"That's enough," Garm said to Li-Fu, for one moment letting the words speak on their own, finding his hands hesitating between need and need. And the next moment, doing what he had to and taking Ulanda in his arms. When he smoothed her hair back, the icy sweat kept it back, the frizzy ends stilled and tamed.

Li-Fu's face was washed to a sick yellow. Tucked into herself, her knees were under her chin, arms crossed around them in a shower of braid ends that reached the marble. "Is she in deep pattern?" she asked faintly.

"Can't you tell?"

"Are you kidding? She's like a hole; nothing gets out." The smile twisted to a panic and she looked towards the pod before ducking her mouth against her arm. Biting at the braids, at the end nearest the crook of her arm, she chewed wildly then sobbed and her body relaxed again.

"He's never around when I need him," she added, eyes on the wet silk, and the purple mark where she'd caught flesh. She had cut the silk as well; primary cords bloomed in the release of tension.

He willed her to raise her eyes, to explain, but she didn't and he couldn't make her.

But if her eyes weren't raised, she was still watching. "I pushed her as hard as I could, trying to give her a focus, and past the first little start, I don't think she even felt it." A slow flush was marking the gray of her cheeks. "Sarkalt gave us that, not that he meant to, not in this context. The kind of training she has had was to make her strong enough to Challenge one of the Offices of the High Council. The time frame meant that certain triggers had to be learned, the actual sequences are too complex for her to use consciously. One last trick, except, I think the only reason the portal showed this time is because it had to, not from anything we did."

"Gennady," he called, knowing the man would be listening. From the pod, they had watched a six-line spiral form to the beat of wings they hadn't been able to hear until then. Green lines set in white marble, one flare of color then it had faded, and the flood of data as well. But the sound hadn't faded. Being this close was giving him a headache. "Gennady, tell Clanny to get over here."

She rubbed her nose against the tuft of unraveling silk as though it were a powder puff. "I don't want him."

"Lili, you're not a child so don't act like one. And you can't embarrass me." But you can distract me, he thought, and closed his eyes, letting his hands do what they had to by feel, and wishing he could cut off the song of the portal behind him as easily.

"How could you stand it? Cassa and now this creature. She's even worse. I know you didn't love mother after what she did, but how could you have left her? She was your wife."

Ulanda hadn't responded and he settled for holding her, head cradled against his shoulder. How much time until the portal opened? And could he protect her once they were in Palace? Would protection be necessary? He could trust Gennady to double-cross the loom-master and keep Ulanda alive -- world-pattern or not -- until he saw what advantage he could take from her.

"I loved your mother," he said to Li-Fu, feeling damp hair under his throat, and the vibration of his words. Ulanda apparently believed she would be killed the moment they returned to Palace, and he wondered if she really knew it or if the belief was combination of fear and a native stubbornness. "Li-Fu, you've had tass'altin. I know you did, at Palace at least, when Ena was dying and after. Even with them, without the bonding, you must know what it's like. For them."

"That's a bit after the fact, isn't it? Or did I miss something -- is it one of your stories?"

He shook his head as much as he was able, barely able to find the strength to move. What did he owe her? Ulanda, not Cassa. A woman he'd known for only a few days.

"Li-Fu, if you can walk, go back to the pod. If you can't, then just shut up. I'm tired of listening to you." He found the strength to shout, as if volume alone would work: "Gennady!"

And found a few minutes later that it might have. "Think she'd be as much trouble as Cassa?" he asked, looking at Li-Fu.

"God no."

"Then this should be easy." When Gennady took her face in his hands, Li-Fu kicked out and pushed away with her arms. She gasped when they connected and tried to roll tighter, then kicked out again.

Gennady was playing with her, every bit of reason told Garm so, but every instinct had him wanting to fight the Zimmer off. As if he could have, even fifty years younger than he was now.

One hand tight in Li-Fu's hair, Gennady's other pinned her to the floor, her braid ends wrapped around her wrists. Li-Fu had managed one effective shot, a globule of spit on the Zimmer's face, near the side of his mouth. A narrow purple tongue gathered it as he bent closer.

He smeared her own spit onto her lips with his and pulled back just as her teeth snapped shut. "Too bad," he said, letting her go. "I do believe she's centered enough to get herself back to the pod."

Down from pattern, perhaps, but just peaking with her rage. "How dare you!" Only the wall behind helped as she got to her feet.

"Clanny's waiting for you," Gennady said as he straightened, and something in the way he moved, the control, or grace, stopped her and Garm saw that she was thinking again. "I suggest you seek his services instead."

Garm thought it was pride more than any ability to walk straight that kept her on her feet as she left. She didn't look back. His daughter besides. "Was that necessary?"

All he got raised for his words was an eyebrow over ice-blue eyes. The Zimmer was working a sensor bead, a chorus of thin beeps following each movement. A brief pause and he did it over again. And again. "Don't ask me any more favors," he said, sounding both annoyed and distracted. "She's half screwed this sensor if nothing else."

Garm moved Ulanda's weight so the pressure was off his tailbone. Still nothing from her but that particular heaviness that came with deep pattern. "Li-Fu or the portal?" he asked. "I'm sure the sound has moved further out."

That got a reaction. Gennady looked up and around. "There's still several minutes until the portal can be opened and then we have a window of..." A hard

look back at him and the man took a different bead from one pocket and thumbed it.

"Get her out of here," Gennady said, as he tossed the bead to one side and got out another. The first hovered about three feet off the ground.

Garm tried but dragging Ulanda was the best he could manage, his muscles didn't want to work.

"Damn," Gennady said softly as he set a third bead. "The portal is moving outwards from the point." Then with a laugh as soft as his words had been: "Palace or not, whatever she connected with isn't waiting on our going to it." The blue lights blinked out and Gennady stepped back again, and again, faster, still facing the point.

Then in a trot, he covered in several steps what had taken Garm three times as many. Behind him, the beads fell, one at a time. Each ping as a bead hit marble didn't have an echo.

Garm tried to gather Ulanda up enough to carry and see what was going on at the same time. The three beads had disappeared. "Is it connected? Open, I mean."

He felt Ulanda's weight lifted off him for the answer. As Gennady ran, he shouted instructions to Simitta. The time factor had Garm running after him faster than he thought possible. The steps into the pod had already started to lift as he made the first one. He jumped and had all he could do to hang on as the steps folded into the belly.

"Hold still." Bolda's grumble cut through the darkness, but nothing else did. "Bloody idiot." And for Bolda, softer: "Not you. Well, you too."

Something was coming back, pain mostly, and a distant itch he recognized as his own skin. "I said, hold still." Bolda again. A wet cloth was on his face, he realized, and a pillow under his head. He hadn't moved, at least he hadn't by any conscious effort.

He tried to open his eyes without success and thought Bolda might have a bandage over. Then the cloth brushed his eyelashes and he realized his eyes were already open.

"I can't see!" The words were parent to the panic that had him try to raise a hand to touch his face. And grandfather to the deeper seated fear that started when he couldn't do that either.

## Part III

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Sarkalt sat a moment at the edge of the pallet, undecided about getting up. His dream persisted, the room not any more real than the images in his mind. Or less so, a flat dull light reduced everything to two dimensions.

What had woken him, he wondered as he reached for the Net. The lead slipped, then he realized he had used the wrong pattern. One of the Stewards by the door glanced at the other.

Second try and the Net lead opened to his personal link without conscious effort. The only flag was a summons from the Emperor. The room settled around him a bit more solidly. Early morning -- above the screens at the opening to the terrace, the sky showed faint yellow. No urgency to the summons, it was at his convenience, which at this moment seemed distant.

Beside him, Niv stirred with a soft moan, and Sarkalt felt the Steward set up a query in the Temple's domestic Net for service directions from his tass'alt. "Let him sleep," he said to the man and signed for him to take over.

Tea arrived moments later. Kneeling, the attendant held the bowl out, the delicate lemon overpowered by the scent of Rill oil coming from the man. "Put it down and get out," Sarkalt said.

Sunlight was across the white cloth of the cover, he must have fallen asleep again. Full daylight, a luminous green sky, the screens pulled back to allow a splash of light to reach over the bed and across the room. Leaning against the wall, the Steward dozed in the warmth.

His bath was ready in the next room, he could smell the oil, more lemon. He'd take breakfast there as well he decided. Niv still slept, his head crest feathered on the edges with the cobalt of arousal, and he smelled of musk. Sarkalt had nuzzled into that during the late morning, he had briefly woken to the heavy scent and worked his tongue into one of the shallow gland slits at the back of Niv's ears. But Niv hadn't stirred even then.

Quin'tat, Three Crescents' Chief of Staff, was waiting for him in the anteroom of Sarkalt's office. Light from the window highlighted skin the color of oiled red cedar, and tipped his black hair with the same red. A great forest tree, Sarkalt thought of the large man, his appreciation tempered frequently with impatience. Fossilized wood -- he was a stolid man, an anchor.

"I sent the flitter on," Quin'tat said. "I thought we could walk. I also took the liberty of rescheduling your appointments through Vo'San'ti. There wasn't anything that couldn't wait."

Past Quin'tat, Sarkalt's Master Scribe and two Clerks were in the office, drinking tea. Bas'ti, his Weaver sat on the edge of the low table, talking with them as she twisted a length of paper between her fingers. Vo'ti, the San of his House, wasn't with them.

He went to the window and looked out. A quilt of mountains and cloud to the start of the ocean and the curved horizon. Ri-altar was hidden in a bank of low cloud. "Walk?" Sarkalt asked without turning. "To see the Emperor?" He hadn't checked past the first summons.

"Unless you have other business."

"Apparently not."

Quin'tat didn't stop until they reached the entrance to Glasspull Common. Green and cream tiles gave way in the center to a mosaic, a ring of windswept cedars fashioned from irregular fragments of colored glass. In the center, a woman danced to the music of a single flute, the musician -- another woman -- sat cross-legged beside one of the glass trees. Around them, people ate and talked, strolled. Sarkalt felt the curious looks, more attention than he would have expected, but his own interest didn't hold long enough to explore the reasons.

"The Emperor didn't wake up in any better a mood than you did," Quin'tat said. "Although he did manage to make the Net on his first try."

The trees in the mosaic seemed to move to the same song as the dancer and he had to turn his head away. "Are your words supposed to engage my interest or provoke me?"

"Either would do. He's with the Select Ka'It'ka."

Sarkalt felt him pulling Temple Net in a tight lead. Not caring sufficiently to eavesdrop, he examined the carving of twined cedar boughs on the lintel beam, following the line to the pillar by his shoulder. Rising out of wood the color of win'tal honey were the cylindrical immature cones like eggs and the smaller male flowers, set in a bed of slender needles. The needles were suggested in bursts of knife sharp points, the dust of pollen on them, a change in texture. Further along the lintel, was another species of cedar with scale-like leaves, a different scent when near the trees, but the carving smelled only of wax. A green lace shawl was at the base of the pillar, along with a half eaten muffin and a bowl of tea, the steam rising.

"And what is the Emperor and Ka'It'ka doing?" he asked, his eyes back trying to follow the golden needles into the heart of the wood. In the depth, he found an image of Niv, lying on their bed. As he had left him.

"They're watching some fish. In a pond."

"Yellow fish." The carving swam in front of his eyes and Niv was gone. Something from the dream. The Select by a pond, but Ka'lt'ka hadn't been with the Emperor. And there had been blood on Sarkalt's white robe. He looked down, half expecting to see a splattering of red, but only saw the pale blue silk he had chosen this morning. Or not chosen, having accepted the first offered him.

Quin'tat watched. "Diagnostics on Temple Net doesn't show any irregularities, neither does Palace Net." Sarkalt looked back up, forcing his eyes to focus. "South Bay Temple ran a similar check. There's nothing wrong with the Nets."

"Nexus Change," Sarkalt breathed, instinctively reaching for Ri-pattern, a quiet reach with a minimal interface, but from the understanding look on his face, Quin'tat knew. "Nexus Change," he said again, but to himself, not feeling anything in Ri-pattern that would account for what happened earlier.

But Quin'tat spoke softly, shaking his head. "The results are inconclusive."

He gestured to the people around them. "Do they know?"

"Is there something to know?"

"Why did South Bay run a diagnostics?" He started walking, fighting against the mental dulling and reaching for meaning in this as he had reached for pattern. "Nobody there is of a level to feel early Change."

"An Acolyte at South Bay Temple. Apparently she started cycling during the night and called for help..."

"Using the same Net pattern I used?"

"Yes. She died shortly afterwards."

"Did anybody else die?"

"Nobody that stands out, not like that," Quin'tat said, accessing Net as he talked. "I've got staff tracking down though all the deaths that occurred during the last day, starting with Palace and Ri. With luck, something will show up to give a clue where else to look or even if it's significant."

Only their people were at the private Gateway where Three Crescents Temple ended and Riuni Temple in the Imperial Suite began. The much stronger unease of the Guards gave definition to the feelings Sarkalt had picked up in the Commons. It trailed after him as he passed, mixed with... was it fear? Sarkalt felt as though he walked through spider silk of emotion. None of the guard followed, the area they entered must be secure.

A final turn and they were near a green door opening into the corridor. A Warder, with Quin'tat's signature worked into the cording on her overdress, stood quietly, a recording crystal held between both hands. No guard, no attendants from the Imperial House, only a woman with demonstrated resistance to pattern energies.

"Where are the others?" Sarkalt asked.

Quin'tat spread his hands as though to ask 'who?' but only said, "Niv is still unconscious. Do you want him moved?"



Sarkalt turned his back on the question and walked through the doorway. Past the threshold, the ghosts were gone. The garden was filled with the sound of running water and birds. Pine trees and grasses, a small lawn, a stone pathway under their feet. Across a bridge -- a half moon shape painted with red lacquer -- was a pavilion of yellow wood.

"The other side of the pavilion has a smaller garden of stone and raked sand," Quin'tat said. "It's a looped pull, the path winds through pines to a gate which opens back to the same thing."

Three Wa'tic attendants, one with the badge of a Master Medic on its overrobe, were huddled together near the entrance. If the soft chittering noise they made were meant as words, there wasn't a Net to translate and he didn't know Wa'tic as he did ti'Linn.

Ka'It'ka sat against a rock by the side of the pool in the cover of a pine tree, the Wa'tic's image doubled on the surface of the water and backed by the black-green of the boughs, the Select's robe a blood red period to the sun-caught crimson reflection of the bridge. Except for the reeds growing up through the image, Sarkalt felt he could as easily walked across the bridge's image as on the wood, stepping the fine ripples in the water like planks.

Donotat was in the pavilion with his tass'alt and only two near-aides. The game of rings and stones on the table was half played out, tiny frosted cakes the prize as usual, and with Poni winning, also as usual in their games. Sugar dusted her chin.

"You took your time, Overpriest." Poni fingered the dice then rolled them in her palm before throwing.

The Emperor hadn't moved from watching the placement of players. "I have the time," Sarkalt said softly. Would she follow her Priest into death, he wondered? As a Select, Donotat would die probably sooner than later, despite the casual way Quin'tat appeared to be treating the matter. Poni, at least, appeared to appreciate what was happening. The eyes watching him showed anger, not fear. And under that, he saw fight, more than he could muster, facing less.

"Do you?" she spat at him. "From what I've seen and heard this morning, I don't think so. Look to your back. Your own people might decide their future lies with others on the High Council"

"Was that your throw, Poni?" the Emperor asked, ignoring her words. She nodded angrily and he sighed. "You're going to get fat. Sarkalt, eat some of those before they're all gone. You too, Quin'tat. Both of you sit, please. And don't mind Poni. She's in a bad mood."

The young woman's long dark hair brushed the playing pieces as she pulled them towards her, then slid them off the table into the drawstring bag. "Poni, be a dear and go convince Ka'It'ka to join us," Donotat continued. Her cheeks reddened more but she did as asked.

The near-aide who served them was Ri and wore her colors braided into her hair, pale green into gold. The Emperor smiled at her with an inviting look.

Alba born, and round both in body and face, the Emperor's beard was a curling mass spilling down his chest. Sarkalt waited, impatience sparking through his lassitude as the man joked with the attendant, chuckling as she searched out the last bit of sugar from the dark hair, his pink tongue reaching out from between narrow lips to catch the morsel.

"You're in a foul temper, my friend," Donotat said, but smiled as he pulled his bulk up from sitting. Sarkalt joined him at the railing of the pavilion. Ka'lt'ka and Poni were together, the girl sitting on the rock, shredding a length of sedge along the veins. The Emperor sighed and Sarkalt had the image of Donotat scratching his belly with both hands, then he looked towards Sarkalt and behind those dark eyes was overpattern and no humor at all. A moment later, the awareness blurred.

"Do you know this place?" Donotat asked.

"I dreamt it," he said. "Last night." The Emperor's dark eyes were surrounded by creases from millenniums of smiles. The human part of the man held laughter like a fountain, but for the first time, Sarkalt found the flesh stronger than the ice behind. He looked away. "Yellow fish and Ka'lt'ka."

"I wasn't there." Not a question, another sigh, and Sarkalt felt him start to fade.

"No. You weren't." Just an archived sequence of pattern memory, he thought, but didn't say it. That was from the dream and he had been wrong. "Where is it from?"

Donotat shook his head slowly, the sunlight reflecting from the gloss of his beard. Blue lights in the black. He seemed to focus with the movement. "The Empire name is Altasimic. Cross Simic."

"And its importance?"

"The beginning and the end, I think. Simic and... this." Poni waved at them and Donotat waved back, his braid ends drifting. "There, she's got Ka'lt'ka up." Then to Sarkalt: "Have you reached for the world-pattern that shaped the garden?"

"There's only what I see. The stones and the plants, the birds, the water. What of the people?"

"Poni, there." A chuckle. "I know you don't find that encouraging." His tone had become distant, but he chuckled again. "You're not required to like her. You're not..." He looked up, his eyes as distant as his tone. "I wanted the experience of her; I felt the coming of this like an itch."

"Which world?"

"You don't need to know which one, it's none of the Office of Form's affair."

"Yet, I'm here," Sarkalt said. "And my people surround us, not yours."

"And I wasn't in your dream. Is that the next step? If I ever leave this place, do I face a Challenge of Office?" Provoked, Donotat's attention had sharpened, but faded quickly, his attention back on Poni as completely as though his words hadn't been said. "She's from a breeding colony on a protected Gate Station, generations away from her world. Pure Simic-pattern has been pushed at them for a half a hundred years now with no success. And Altasimic isn't just one world but a sector with variations on the echo line."

Basic human in appearance, but that could be deceiving. "Are they so close you'd expect them to shift to the parent line?" No answer came from the Emperor. "And why push Simic pattern? And what of the failures?"

Quin'tat came from behind them. "What was before Simic?" he asked without expression. He held a shallow tea bowl in one hand; Possitt root sparkled in the amber liquid, bursting where the sunlight struck the surface of the liquid. Sarkalt hadn't heard the servants come or go. Poni was still with Ka'It'ka.

Donotat answered without turning, speaking softly. "Before Simic was before the Unity." Then, stronger: "There was a testing. Ten people were selected over several generations for certain attributes and kept in stasis until it was time. We exposed them to their own world-pattern, or as close as we could determine it would end up being. Enough to trigger them. The results weren't what we expected."

"The Initiation wasn't entirely unsuccessful," Quin'tat said.

Donotat watched them without expression. Sarkalt pushed his awareness out again, only to hit a wall of disinterest. He turned back to Quin'tat. "What happened?"

"Completely unstable access to a variety of pattern lines, not just their own. Two of them had no world-pattern at all, only overpattern."

The Emperor had returned to watching Poni as though the two of them with him in the pavilion didn't exist. Or the other way around. Sarkalt had the sensation that the man was only an illusion in the pull sequence around them. When did this start? Certainly not just this morning. And his place in it? Had Quin'tat's prompting of him been as obvious -- and unnoticed -- as with Donotat?

Quin'tat sipped at the bowl of tea, his eyes on Sarkalt, his other hand holding the relay crystal. He shook his head at the questions he must have read in Sarkalt's face and signed indulgence. Net residue hummed around him, faint, but still an alien sound in this place of quiet.

Sarkalt moved closer until the blue heart of the crystal started to hum in his mind and he could feel the path and flags that Quin'tat had left. Three Crescents Temple Net, no direct Imperial leads, not even to their allies, and even the general Palace leads were heavily shielded. Everything was being filtered by their people.

Yellow fish circled in the water under the reflection of the bridge, the dark red period of the crimson slash was back in place: Ka'lt'ka sitting against the rock.

"What is Ka'lt'ka's part in this?" he asked.

"The Select is cooperating."

The Wa'tic's creation was more than the world-pattern made solid around them, then. It included a subtle weave that had Donotat reciting his lines like an actor on stage. And himself? He let his mind drift over the salient points, resting on one without consciously choosing it. "Who else died?"

"A Law Clerk -- Palace Administration, not Temple or Imperial -- name of Garm, apparently of old age. A Simic, with a daughter Priest, that was the only thing that tipped us off. He was old and Simic's aren't long lived."

"I'm aware of that. You could have simply told me about this."

"You were part of it, and at the beginning, as responsive as Donotat."

Before his eyes was the analysis, and through the relay, the Emperor, back playing rings and stones with Ponì. As the girl looked up at him, he shook both images clear. "Anything else with this Law Clerk?"

"His daughter is also dead. Same time, no cause of death on the record." Quin'tat hesitated a moment, offering the link, then continued when Sarkalt didn't take it. "She died on Lillisim. Details are sketchy and what little we have cost a triple Gate line-up for the transmission."

"Is the cost a factor?"

Quin'tat smiled briefly. "We've been as obvious as possible. One cost we can't afford is to take our time in finding out who counts in this on the High Council."

Who would have taken his place if he hadn't woken from the dream? If the Office of Forms had been left open as the Office of the Third Concord was with Donotat dying? In Quin'tat's quiet gaze were too many answers.

"A bound Sector and a Nexus Change focused on it. A world-pattern that wouldn't take, leaving a direct link to overpattern. If one of the candidates had been allowed to live..." The dream... the images of the dream garden came back to him with more substance than those both recent and physical. "There's a danger here beyond Nexus Change." That hadn't been in the spins but he knew the truth of the words before they left his mouth.

"We can't confirm it is Nexus Change. We don't have enough information to begin to know what else it is."

Everything was possible. His awareness felt stretched, as though he was in deep pattern, but it was the lack of solid reference points. He shook his head. Dreams and conjecture. "The focus is on Altasimic so concentrate on that. If the Sector is warded, the warding would have to have been configured when the sector suns were formed, the narrowing allowance of access would have been after that." A very long time ago, even for Empire. Not Palace, there wasn't need to keep those kind of records here. "Temple Archives on an elder Trans-point

world might have the references. And the border of the sector, or at least the warding points, would have to be maintained. A Piltsimic loom-master?"

Quin'tat nodded. "Probably. They do most the Simic based lines."

"Rigyant, then."

"It's likely, especially given that our Office hasn't been included. By crossing Donotat's movements, and checking the most likely worlds, we should find what we need. Do you want the High Council convened?"

"No."

"We need answers. More mouths..."

"No," he repeated. "High Council politics runs too deep in time, and that's something I don't think we have. We'll go forward on our own and let the others catch up as best they can." And he doubted his ability to shape the future he needed. The future that Empire needed. There wasn't the time needed to refine the expression of dozens of Priests, each molded and shaped by their people, and their people each with their own agendas.

One thing he did look at: the young woman who had died. Poss a'Itlic, born and bred on Ri-surface, her initial training at South Bay Temple, service as a senior Acolyte at a secondary Temple inland before returning to South Bay only days before her death. Nothing at all significant in her history, but she died cycling more into Simic pattern than Ri. "Simic. This Nexus Change... I'm not wrong."

"About what?"

"Their deaths, the Acolyte and the Priest. The facts of their deaths, feel like an open door but there's nothing beyond. They should have simply died, and yet they didn't. They're as unreal in their deaths as I was this morning. Let me know anything else about Acolyte and the Simic Priest, the Law Clerk's daughter. Their families, details of their training,, their associations, everything."

"I'll flag the information to Vo'ti."

"To Riltic first."

"Any particular reason to involve your Second in that way instead of your San?"

"None except I said so." Another door. But Riltic was alive; he knew it from Quin'tat's reaction and didn't need to look. "Ask him about dreams," Sarkalt added. And his own... if he took a step would it be into nothing?

The first of the Emperor's seals dissolved at his touch, fragile as cobwebs or ancient lace. But underneath was solid enough information, and better still, a

name: Anga, a Piltsimic line-weaver and most likely a loom-master and Voice for the Archives, although the reference didn't use either term.

If he's a loom-master, even a Rigyant based one, I should know him -- some incarnation of him -- but I don't, Sarkalt thought as he let the flow of data run through his mind.

"Find him," he pushed into the Net. The results took an hour to come back from Quin'tat. Dead, a flitter accident, the information dredged out of a forced Net dump. The Palace-based arm of the loom-master Council wasn't cooperating.

"Did you know him?" he asked Bas'ti.

The woman looked up from her cording loom but her fingers didn't pause in the braiding. "Not too likely I would."

"Is that what I asked?" He stood and stretched. "What are you doing?"

By touch, she repositioned the weight on the completed portion of the braid, leaving a kink where it had been. "You've got eyes. What does it look like I'm doing?" A quick glance toward the medic with Niv and she continued working.

Did something pass between the women? "Did it?" he asked. Bas'ti only grunted.

Walking onto the terrace, Sarkalt attempted to shed the room like a garment but his escape failed. A Steward brought tea to the weaver, asked the medic something and left. Another brought pastries, the same man as this morning. Rill oil.

His feet at the edge of the terrace, he felt the mild prickle of the shielding against his forehead, could see the faint glow. The wind beyond that barrier was more expectation than it was sound, of feeling how the shielding responded to the gusts. "Leave me," he mouthed, but put the order into the domestic Net and defined the privacy he wanted. The medic stayed with Niv.

During the long night, another summons came from the Emperor. Sarkalt let it settle around him. Breaking his search for a moment, he watched Niv sleep, willing him to live. There wasn't a connection to Niv yet, but this was a part of it, he knew, his tass'alt who wouldn't waken and the Emperor who had no power left to give commands.

Daybreak had cooled the room to silver before he found another nest of hidden records. Those seals tore as easily as the first. Shunting them to his staff, he pulled out, more tired than he had thought possible. They still hadn't found any of the older references they knew had to exist, much less the originals. These were current to this Nexus. Donotat's private Archive.

The medic got up to adjust the crystal at Niv's head. "No change," she said and knelt back down beside the bed.

Sarkalt focused on her movement, needing something more than the cold surfaces around him. Her hair threw the light back; it was silver-gray, thick and very short, a brush standing straight up. "What's your name?" he asked.

She had started to smooth an already perfectly smooth sheet but looked up at his words. Dark eyes slanted under silver brows. Her hands signed rank automatically, as though the crest on her over-blouse didn't say the same. More silver showed in the narrow rings, at least one on each finger. "En'talac, Overpriest."

Still, he asked, "A Master Medic?" She nodded. "And bored?" he persisted.

The smooth sheets were tucked in now. "No, not really. Doing nothing is hard work."

A patient smile came with the words, she would have talked out others who had waited as he did. And captured other's interest as she did his. Movement and words both had waited until he had focused on Niv and was likely to notice.

"I'm afraid we bore our attendants. It's an occupational hazard of serving Priests." He flexed the muscles in his legs and winced. Then cut through her reach into Net. "Not yet." No attendants, no tass'altin, not yet.

"May I help, then?" There was no pleasure in her tone, just duty. But no surprise either.

He shook his head. "Where are you from?"

"Ona system originally. That's Bothi'net."

He shook his head again. The name meant nothing to him.

"It's about as far as you can get from Ri and still be in Empire."

"Why did you leave?"

She shrugged. "If I had stayed, the best I could have hoped for would be a forth in a marriage group and being stuck inside the compound walls as a nursemaid for the rest of my life. My family aren't high caste or wealthy and there were two older siblings to dower off first."

"I don't know Bothi'net customs. Why did you run away? Was it pride that made you leave?"

"How could I have had any?"

She did now, he thought. He made it to his feet and she let him without moving to help and he was glad of it. Sitting back down on the edge of the bed, he was bathed in the scent of his own sweat. A blend of Net and deep pattern let him feel for the 'right' places to look, but there were too many paths, too many dead ends, too many open holes with nothing beyond. At those, the other searchers pulled away, even Riltic and the one step further that Sarkalt always took was back into the dream of the night before. The garden. Yellow fish.

Trailing braid ends, Sarkalt drew a hand over Niv's still form. Would he, could he, find Niv in that garden? The medic crystal hummed and with a light touch with his mind, done almost without thinking, a stream of information he didn't care to understand poured out. Except for the essence he already knew: Niv was alive. Then a short burst produced a status report that had nothing to do with Niv.

"Would you rather be elsewhere?" he asked. "Should I have sent you away with Bas'ti?"

A small smile. "Your rank requires the attendance of a Master Medic."

He pulled away from the crystal, threads of Net forming around him, real ones, not echoes. Flags from Vo'ti, Quin'tat and from Riltic. He ignored them. "Did you want to be here? Have you given up leaving what you are?"

Rubbing her back, she walked over and stood beside him, next to the bed. Scanning him, he realized, feeling the energy field pass over, annoyed that she hadn't asked.

"You haven't answered me."

Concern showed in her dark eyes. "I didn't hear a question that made any sense. If I told you to rest afterwards, would you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." Another sensor pass. Ready this time, he caught the readout and she laughed. "There's nothing wrong with you except mild pattern sickness and exhaustion." She wrinkled her nose. "And you need a bath."

He could feel her wanting to be gone but she came closer, her warm fingers on his shoulders, kneading them slowly. She reached into the Net as well in a subtle pull of data that he allowed. "You don't have to do this," he said, repressing a shudder as she found the pressure point she wanted.

"I know." Her hands moved slower, getting used to the feel of his skin, but her mind read the Net constantly, one step ahead. Then a gasp, "We can skip that." But she dissolved into laughter and lost the rhythm. "Wrong species anyway... and the wrong sex. I couldn't."

He felt that she was tired and worried, the laughter a thin shell over top. But hands like moth wings fluttered against his face and along his neck, then smoothed his hair back into a thick rope, separating the strands, twisting and braiding. Awkwardly done but with a semblance of order, the last image he had seen of Ri-pattern was in it somewhere. Sensitive to pattern energies, a useful trait in a Temple medic, and probably reading him the entire time she had been there. Him more than Niv, and he hadn't noticed until now.

He felt her frustration, this was harder work than she had expected. Strands of his hair unraveled, frizzing out almost as soon as she let them go. "Leave it," he said, not sorry when she stopped altogether.

"The longer you put this off, the harder it will be to get you settled enough to sleep. Let me call your Stewards at least."

Cool all around except for her, she glowed with heat, a source of warmth with sunrise still to come. The ends of his overbraids brushed the floor as he lowered both arms to his thighs. "I think that's most of it. The warmth after being in pattern. When you're there, pattern is all that matters, but afterwards... it's so



hard to remember who you are.” Niv was no warmth at all, and reaching for him felt like falling.

She pulled for a Net lead and he cut her off, and again when she tried routing through the medic crystal. Effortless, Net leads sang in his mind, easier than his own thoughts.

“Have you ever seen a Camerat make love?” he said softly, looking at her now, noticing how her eyes flickered to Niv before she could help it and how her jaw was tight with fear, tiredness burnt away with knowledge of how isolated this one room had become.

Her fear excited him and she saw that too. Then, as suddenly, he was just tired again and wanting Niv, needing him. He followed her gaze to the sparks of Ri-pattern skittering along the floor, embers of pale green, only now the residue of the interface showing.

But she walked into that, stepped through the light, and knelt by him. With narrow fingers, she carefully picked at the braiding. “No,” she whispered, breath against the cup of one of his palms, and so quiet he had to concentrate to hear. “Never even saw one of the breeding males before Niv.”

He lost the reason behind the question, then the question itself, but she kept talking.

“Not many Camerat are involved in long-haul shipping and that’s where I learned to be a Medic.”

“And where you learned the rest of it? Not in Temple?”

“No, not Temple, not originally. Many of the larger merchant ships have web pilots and they like their medics to be able to sense changes in the pilot’s pattern access. There’s another universe outside Temple, even if no one here seems to know, or to admit to knowing it. I’m not part of this, Overpriest. Whatever it is.”

A long breath gave him the smell of her. No fear now. “I can’t know you’re not a part.” But he was almost certain, even as he said the words.

She sighed, tickling him with her breath, and his wondering at the limits of ‘almost’ vanished. “It would be simpler if you needed blocker.” Overbraids were loosened on both arms; a tangle of braids fell to the bed and floor. Red on the white cloth and the dark green tiles. “I could give you some, then call the attendants while you were too drugged to notice.”

“But I don’t need it.” One hand raised, the edge of the hand only, he touched her cheek. “You called me, I heard you. Aren’t I what you expected?” The simple winding cords and then underwrapping slipped off his arm, he felt exposed. Ri-pattern, from wrist to halfway up his forearm, was a silver-green tracing in a shape as old as the world itself. With her, he didn’t feel what he had sensed with Donotat but there was something.

“You still need more than I can give you.” Wrapping a hand around his, she took the weight and eased it down. Dry skin against moist, then the feel of the

silver rings against his fingers as she continued to hold his hand. Sensor rings, he felt the minor fields around them.

Calling in the flag from Quin'tat, he let the summary filter through. His eyes didn't leave En'talac's but he felt Vo'ti enter the room. "Did I allow this?" he asked his San.

"I'm already here."

Behind the ti'Linn was a human man under escort by one of his guard. Tass'altin, Sarkalt pulled from the Net. Experienced. And not Camerat.

Small, the top of his head might come to Sarkalt's shoulder when he stood. Slight in build. Brown hair and eyes. Even in how Sarkalt perceived him, and using a Priest's senses, not just eyes, he had the aspect of being very young. He appeared to be of little mind or thought or consequence. Expendable.

The tass'altin didn't bow, but stood watching Sarkalt back, his face impassive.

"Temporary service for this one," Vo'ti said in ti'Linn-native, a rush of clicks, then motioned the guard to withdraw. And in High-formal: "Tass'li Pidalo Mislin a ril." Professional level and full name, but in the Tass'Holding style, not that of any particular people.

"Do you exist?" Sarkalt asked him.

"Do you need assurances that I exist, as I did that you exist?" A soft voice. "If deficient in existence, may I borrow some of yours? I understand it goes beyond our universe."

That caught Vo'ti's attention. "Where did you hear that?"

"It was whispered to me. Vo'San'ti..." He paused a moment. "Whispers that speak of dreams and of people dying. Of the ti'Linn Temples in the Gate Stations of Bilo'pan Plain and of Rigyant. And in the Tass'Holding, promised cording is overdue. *Apprentices* answer the queries about this to the Piltsimic loom-houses in Palace."

Clicking from the ti'Linn. Just noise Sarkalt knew, but the tass'altin seemed to take some meaning from them and nodded.

"Vo'ti, I want to assure you, I don't dream of such things."

Slipping from the bed to the tiles, Sarkalt stayed on his knees, both underwappings off his arms. To the medic as she returned to Niv's side: "No, you stay with me, another can see to Niv."

"And me?" The tass'altin knelt before him. "Do you wish to put your existence to the test by having me go, or would you test my existence by having me stay?"

Green sparked from his arms, rolled to his palms. He knew how easily he could slip into violence and kill the man in front of him. A fine separation that started in the Temple spiral: two ways to center back into the body. And harder either way as the body stops wanting to live. For too long, it had been duty more than desire. Until Niv.

Except he didn't need centering, he already was. And was surprised to find himself quite simply angry at the tass'altin's persistence, where only moments before, any emotion had seemed past him. And Vo'ti? The ti'Linn had arrived already worried, but, from the barely audible clicks and the colour of its eyes, was now near frantic.

"I might have been mistaken," he told the tass'altin, still not seeing more than he had at the start, but beginning to believe it was a talent in the other man, not a lack. "The ti'Linn Temples? Gate Stations?"

The tass'altin's voice as soft: "In Bilo'pan Plain."

An area of space that was predominately ti'Linn and which included the ti'Linn home-worlds. And the San of his Household hadn't been in attendance yesterday morning. And no ti'Linn in the corridors during his walk to see the Emperor.

"Vo'ti?" Sarkalt asked.

"Shape doesn't define loyalty," Vo'ti said. Sharp claws scraped against the floor and the ti'Linn rose to full height.

"No, it doesn't." Sarkalt sat back on his heels. "What should I call you?" he asked the tass'altin.

He gathered Sarkalt's braids into his lap. "Pida."

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Watching Sarkalt pace, Quin'tat remained seated, his back against a pillar, the remains of their breakfast spread out beside him, one of the books from the Law Clerk's library in his hands. Three books out of the hundreds found there.

"I've never been to Camerat," Sarkalt said as he turned his back to the spiral, then, looking as though he might wander off again, finally knelt across from him.

Where did the comment about Camerat come from? The Priest seemed centered and had been sounding sane. "From what I understand, neither of us has missed much." And thinking he might as well get the worst over with, asked: "Have you thought any more about what to do with Niv?"

"A concern of my San, not you."

New information had slowed to a trickle, most of what he was getting was spin. The original data on the sector was apparently on Lillisim, the Simic germ-world, and they hadn't been able to reach Lillisim. The message that gave the Priest's death was the last one out.

"Then give Vo'ti your answer if you won't give it to me."

Softly, "Leave the subject."

Quin'tat put the apple down on the tray before continuing. Yellow-green skin and crisp white flesh; the moisture bled onto the dark lacquer. "She's using him in some way, a link to this reality perhaps. He's dangerous. Every spin we've done comes up with the same conclusion."

"We're only a few hours past having enough information to even try an analysis, and you're talking conclusions."

Most information wasn't from the hidden nodes after all, but dreams. Fragments of dreams most often, but building layer on layer until a different reality emerged. One in which Niv could not have existed but had. And in their reality: the fourth of the Altasimic candidates, her vass'l't and the male Camerat-priest.

Quin'tat looked at Sarkalt through the image of the kill. Again, over and over, he saw it end with the single stroke by the Camerat Warder that should have been the finish but was the beginning instead. And behind the woman's eyes: pure overpattern. Even as she died it was there.

"We know what we know," he said and tossed the book he had been thumbing through onto Sarkalt's lap. They smelled of leather and dust. Recent fingerprints showed on the tooled surfaces as dark, oily smudges. Only three of all the books found, but he had wanted to see and feel at least some of them. The Law Clerk's tiny room had been mostly books and dust, a rat's hole of neglect tucked in a dead end passage -- the more rare books stolen, borrowed or taken and never returned. His wife, an Archivist, had left him soon after their daughter's Initiation and the Law Clerk had lived alone, his isolation a matter of choice and temper. His contemporaries in Palace counted him an unpleasant man.

An attendant placed a tiny bowl of tea in Sarkalt's cupped hands. "I became a Priest with the Emperor's mark woven into the girdle of my Initiation robe. For luck perhaps." The Priest smiled. "What I think, is that we'll find this Nexus Change really started at the Altasimic Initiation."

"Given the degree of disruption we're already experiencing, the time frame would be about right. Are we assuming parallel realities then? Have they settled that argument?"

"Not that I've heard." Sarkalt took a sip of the tea, his hair a dark curtain as he bent forward.

Quin'tat picked up the second of the books. "I'd like to know how the Simic managed even to steal these on a Law Clerk's wages. This is supposed to be a copy of the original still in the Wisquil Archive on Gantil Rentilla IV. It isn't a copy, the original was never for sale, yet the book ends up in the hands of a..." The crystal strip on the inside spine winked in the light as Quin'tat flipped the top book open with a sigh. "The black phoenix," he read from the title page. Old-tongue, not a translation. "Chaos. Law Breaker."

Sarkalt shook his hair back to look up at his Chief of Staff. "You think of her as an enemy."

Quin'tat stretched his heavy legs out. "Of what we know of you in the other reality, you thought her one." He started to pick at a scratch just above his ankle, the tendons in his hand rippling. Then noticing Sarkalt watching, he pulled the robe down and crossed his legs. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

From the entrance, Riltic started towards them. He had Koisen with him. He stopped a moment to talk with Pilvir at the start of the near spiral. Three Crescent's Chief Salin was assisting the Emperor's. With them were two of her aides and Dal'itin.

"We've just had official word from the loom-master Council here in Palace," Riltic said. Reference flags were offered and refused by Sarkalt.

Koisen knelt close to Sarkalt -- pushing the books away first with a foot, a look of distaste on her face. "Tell me," Sarkalt said to her. Flags were offered again -- Sarkalt would often take them a second time and more often from Koisen, Quin'tat had noticed -- but not this time.

Koisen shook her head, fingers making a sign of acquiescence. "Sarkalt, the later analysis was correct, the refusal to cooperate does come directly from Rigyant and does not have the support of all the Piltsimic families with members on their Council. Rigyant maintains that the Office of Forms has no need to be involved. The Council in Palace has made the Rigyant message quite public, a more open move against Rigyant than our analysts had expected."

"Perhaps there were Piltsimic Weavers in Palace who woke to dreams of a different reality." Sarkalt kept his eyes down. "Koisen, do you dream?"

She straightened Sarkalt's tea bowl, letting her hand linger against his fingers. "Did you refuse those spins too? Buttered tea... I'm quite off the drink now. I wonder if in the dream I had brought Poss a'ltic pastries instead of tea, would I be dead like the Simic? What did it take to be involved enough to die? Perhaps we should ask the Piltsimic."

Koisen offered the spins again, and they were taken this time. As Quin'tat made a mental note to thank her later, he felt a return on what Sarkalt was doing with the spins. Not the messages themselves, but the security parameters established by the analysts. The spins spoke of limits in their shape, in their balance. What could be asked, where it could be asked. Of whom.

And through the Net from Sarkalt: "The weavers' Council gives more than cooperation. Leave Rigyant to them. Two days.

Even as Quin'tat wondered at the time frame, he felt a change in the analyses. Sane? Rational? Where were the human limits? Where were the limits that defined reality when reality could be broken so profoundly?

"Does Niv dream of this Empress?" Sarkalt asked Koisen. Her answer was silence.

Getting to his feet, Quin'tat motioned to Riltic and the two walked a little away to discuss the impact of the changes.

"Leave it to the staff whose concern it should be," Sarkalt told them both.

Riltic returned and squatted beside Koisen, leaning against her very slightly. She put a hand on his knee. "Do you want me here during the Examination?"

Sarkalt's looked to Dal'itin in the spiral, then back. "Koisen...", he started, but the rest of his direction was made by his fingers. Dismissal.

As the two left, Quin'tat shaped a formal Opening with both hands. "Are you and En'talac lovers?" Sarkalt asked.

That wasn't the Opening he was wanting. "A strange question." He kept his tone easy. No matter. No significance. Could he make it so?

"She doesn't belong here."

"She does as much as I do." Sarkalt was waiting for more, Quin'tat knew for all he seemed as distant as though he were pulling pattern. "We're married with two children, a boy and a girl. My line doubled, Bothi'net isn't genetically compatible with c'Vann and there aren't any other Bothi'net at Palace."

Quin'tat reached forward and took the tea bowl. After Koisen left, it had tipped and Sarkalt hadn't noticed. "I've never known you to show that kind of interest in Three Crescents general staff. Why now?" Pouring more tea from the pot, he filled the bowl half full and put a cloth square on Sarkalt's lap before balancing the fragile thing between his hands.

"She doesn't belong here."

"So you already said and it doesn't make any more sense now." The spins still coming in bunched around him, ignored.

Sarkalt looked at the surface of his tea. From Quin'tat's vantage, it was a shiny pool of light surrounded by translucent clay. Reflections on the liquid surface; a confusion of images. He had caught the Overpriest's concentration, traces of what he saw, what he felt.

And through the foreign senses: "Would she have made love to me?"

He tried again to answer casually. He didn't want the Priest's attention focused on En'talac. "Can I assume you're talking about this morning? Someone as sensitive to pattern as she is doesn't as a rule make very a satisfactory lover for a Priest even if they manage not to make the pattern sickness worse instead of better. You need someone who's paying attention to you as a man."

"That wasn't my question."

The focus deepened, Quin'tat felt himself being pulled into it.

"A door," Sarkalt added. "A growing sense of order. Silver hair in the dawn. Should I take the next step?"

Quin'tat lifted Sarkalt's face, raising his gaze from the tea, and felt a lessening of the draw. Green eyes searched his. "You're running me in circles. I'm not a

Priest like Riltic to know your intent without having to hear it. And I don't have Vo'ti's patience to wait out the real meaning here."

"Then answer my question."

"Ask her." Would anger work? He let his voice deepen. "En'talac makes her own place here, regardless of my position."

"Was it your position that put her in my room last night?"

"It helped. She wasn't born of a family traditionally affiliated with Temple."

"Your family has served the Imperial House and related Temples at Palace for six generations and the Citi'vannti Temples on Cosni for generations before that. The pattern of your life should have been predictable and yet you took service here, in Three Crescents, a Temple affiliated with a rival Office. There are what, a dozen other c'Vann at Palace?"

A lateral shift in focus. He would use that. "Slightly more. Two families in Cilcom Temple in the Imperial Suite. Yes, all relatives, and none connected to the suspect ti'Linn Temples or Rigyant."

"I don't doubt your service any more than I do Vo'ti's. There is a woman who would have been your wife, not simply a brood animal for your children. What do you think of the choices you gave her? And the choices for your daughter... how many c'Vann are there even on Cosni?"

And his son? "Where is this leading?"

"Your people are dying out. Have any of you noticed?"

"And I ask again, where is this leading?"

"What do you know of En'talac?"

"Make a point, please."

"Would she?"

Quin'tat hesitated then with a nod, withdrew his hand. "I think this morning told you that she would if it came to that and you needed the help. Common sense doesn't require oaths of personal service and one thing she possesses in quantity is common sense."

"And the Emperor?"

"What about him? The Overpriest who was the Emperor is as good as dead." Quin'tat shook his head. "I mentioned something about you running me in circles."

"And the Altasimic Empress? What of her?"

The look in the eyes of the fourth candidate, Quin'tat saw that again.

"If she challenged one of the Offices and won?" Sarkalt asked in the face of his silence. "If she gained ascendancy in the Council as she must have in that other reality?"

"What if she did?"

"Quin'tat, look at me." He was already. "Those yellow fish, in Ka'lt'ka's pull sequence..."

"You and your damn fish."

"Yes, my fish. Damn fish, very probably. Think of them as Empire Law, one of them anyway. A small fish and always a fish, it can't be anything but a fish, ever."

"Like the Unity?"

"Like Ri-pattern. The Unity is a made thing, there's nothing sacred about it. People made the world-patterns, or started them at least, like a loom-master shaping an echo-line."

"A pond full of fish."

"An ocean, not a pond. And full of life, not just fish. Have you ever wished you were a Priest? Able to go into pattern, not just see it?"

"No. I'd rather stay human."

"Too high a cost?" Sarkalt nodded towards the young Acolyte. "He's human, his name would never have shown on any List for Initiation. And yet he's going to kneel in the spiral here and willingly allow a ritual that ends with his death. All so I can reach a depth of pattern that I can't on my own. What kind of cost is that?"

"Sarkalt, I can't help that and I can't see where you are able to be concerned by his death. He'll provide us a window into the other reality and, hopefully, give us a reason for the focus on this happening."

Sarkalt shook his head. "I said two days."

Quin'tat closed his eyes a moment. "So you did. Did you mean more by it than any of us have seen?"

"Yes," Sarkalt said. "No. Something." He shook his head and laughed.

Sane? Quin'tat wondered again. Or terribly sane in the face of events no human mind could encompass.

"Two days," Sarkalt said again. "Piltsimic Weavers who may or may not be dreaming of cords and cloth -- and more -- they might have woven for an Altasimic Empress."

"That change, at least, I understood."

"No, I don't think you did. Each step I've taken has been into nothing. Quin'tat, we don't need a window, we need a door."

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"Do you understand what is we're doing?" Sarkalt said to Dal'itin.

The boy nodded and signed honor, using High formal. "I am honored at being allowed to serve."



They faced at an angle, only a groove of the Spring-tuff spiral separated them from the Emperor's Chief Salin, the woman a third point to their triangle. Riy a'Gitin, a gaunt Mistna of late middle years, her formal motions of acquiescence had a jerky bird-like quality. The last motion of Riy's sign specified instance: now, and occasion: this Examination, and Sarkalt allowed the insult. Especially with Riggant withholding the information, they would need all of the Emperor's staff who could be trusted and who had knowledge of Altasimic. Riy a'Gitin did and her word could be trusted.

He turned to the spiral center where Ri-pattern was raked in the soil, a medley of joined rings, a child's puzzle, the pale green fire a mist rising all around. Even at midday and close under the opening to the sky, the area held shadows from the torchlight, faint but enough to cause the rings to flicker.

Sarkalt let the green mist spread out from the spiral and from him, it was all the same. Fear sparked in the pale green, he could feel points of it all around.

The flames licked at Dal'itin, stronger with a focus, but still a slow caress over the boy's pale flesh, lighting his eyes from teal to a green the shade of dark jade, and his hair from white-blond to the color of spring. None of the others would see this, even the other Priests, they held themselves within their bodies, guarded and very still. Riy a'Gitin would only see the Overpriest entering pattern and using that as the sign to start the ritual.

"The form, Overpriest?" she asked.

And start he must. "As is needed," he said and dropped to his knees on the marble. A single drum voiced as though his knees hit leather instead of marble. Time rode the sound, a measured mark of time. If he trusted nothing else, the beat of a soft hand on hard leather would bring him back. Dal'itin felt the drum as much. With a single blow on stretched hide, his body had known what his mind would not allow.

Beside him, Riy a'Gitin bowed. The bundle of allipalli stems was passed to her, matched lengths of plain, unadorned stems, and a part of any Examination since before memory. A sharp sound, stems against marble, a single tap to even the ends, and Ri-signature rose in a sheet of green above the central mound. The throw of the stems and the sign of Temple power was all that most would see or understand.

Sarkalt let the woman wait and moved his arms to rest against his thighs, feeling the continuing beat of the drum as though the musician's hands were on his flesh. Quin'tat, with En'talac beside him, held Temple Net like a promise of obligation. Duty, Sarkalt willed. Willing it, and taking it far past any desire, he formed the linking interface between Ri-pattern and Temple Net. Quin'tat pulled back as though burned, but it was done: a bundle of leads to the Net and to the drumbeats. Tying him in time.

But time has a way of playing tricks in pattern, and his earlier question ran back along an emerald thread. “Do you understand what it is we’re attempting?” he had asked. And was given an answer that wasn’t an answer: “I was born for this purpose.”

“Perhaps we all were,” Sarkalt whispered. Riy hesitated, the bundle of stems raised in her hands; she was about to slip them free of their tie. The boy didn’t react to the words, eyes glazed and his body weaving. He had followed into pattern as deeply as he could and been pulled further than he would have been able to imagine.

“There’s a doorway,” Sarkalt said, words and thread, winding the boy in a braid made of Ri-pattern. Moving through him like a burning sieve, pulling a scream of anguish. But it wouldn’t go deep enough into his essence, flesh like stone was between them, the only fire was that of the blood in a thin rivulet where Dal’itin had bitten his lip.

Fear enveloped the boy now in an automatic reaction from the body, the mind babbling anything that surfaced, but the fire dripped clear and simple. Grass sprang up as pale green blades from the blood, roots digging into the marble, cracking the surface. A meadow of green. A high meadow, Sarkalt thought with the dust of a summer day in his mouth. Pollen: the allipalli and wa’ti were in bloom, white and yellow, green in the stems and leaves. A wide sky above, it was breathlessly still.

Allipalli stems. Cut and loose in Riy’s hands, held for rolling, the woman waiting calmly. Sarkalt had walked back to the spiral from the meadow as though by a short path, sufficiently deep in pattern that he held his body like a thought.

He wasn’t sure if he spoke the third time but the effect was the same, and if the others didn’t hear, the Salin could and Quin’tat in the Net. “A doorway,” he said again, hearing now the rustle of long grass, seeing it all around him. Yellow leaves, the flower heads brittle and dry, then crumbling to gold-green dust in the torchlight.

No answer came; there was silence in the darkness. When had it become dark?

Quin’tat finished the apple in a couple of bites without tasting it. He motioned an aide out of the way so he had a clear view. Net was fine, but he wanted to see.

En’talac sat beside him, where Sarkalt had been, but on a cushion she brought with her. “I had enough of kneeling on marble last night.”

“I thought you’d be in bed, not here.”

Pouring herself a cup of tea, Sarkalt’s bowl, she grinned over the edge. She knew whose it was. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Hadn’t tried, more likely, but he was glad she had joined him and chuckled when she grimaced at the first sip.

"I didn't think mortification of the flesh was a Ri custom." She spoke through the piece of bread she had stuffed in her mouth.

"He's not Ri." Still chuckling, he signed an attendant for a fresh service.

"Close. I can't think of a viable gene shift that would make any people think this tastes good. Or is it part of the ritual?"

"He likes it." Looking at her closely, he brushed a crumb from the corner of her mouth with his thumb. "You've been monitoring us."

"What's the use of having Master rank if you don't use it?" She sounded as though she was joking but there wasn't a smile to go with the words.

Sarkalt was just starting to go in now, a slow, very quiet entry; only Quin'tat's training let him know the Examination had actually started.

He moved his feet so the aide could put the tray down. Tea and a plate of small tarts, lavender custard from the smell and still warm. He hadn't ordered those. "Is Pida ready?"

En'talac slapped his hand away from the tarts. "He says he is. And those are mine."

Just as Sarkalt knelt, the drum started in a wash of sound that barely faded before the next strike. The voices of the singers matched it. This should proceed more quickly now, he thought with some relief. He tried for another tart and got one after all, she had her hands full, tea and tart. This was usually the kind of game they played in bed where the contest could be private. Butter crust around the filling, he nibbled at the fluted edge, and followed the obvious by saying, "Do you think he's ready?"

Yellow-green from the torches showed in the silver of her hair as she shook her head, not looking up. "Kis't from Tass'Holdings is handling him, but from what I've managed to pry out of her, I don't think so. Pida is trusting to his experience but he's not letting himself even think about the kind of power Sarkalt can draw and how little he is capable of caring past the abstract. He did very well this morning, but..." Her brown eyes were slits over a larger tea bowl, thick earthenware with a mottled blue-green glaze. "If Sarkalt comes out to the point where he responds at all."

"He will." Quin'tat didn't argue about the rest of it, she was probably right. It wasn't in his field of knowledge to know more. He felt the tug at the Net for the interface to open and dropped the tart even though he had expected the surge of pattern energy.

En'talac picked it up. Then through a full mouth, said, "You can't really enjoy tarts and monitor deep pattern-Net interface at the same time. It's a physical impossibility."

"Like talking and eating at the same time?" In control now, he felt the deep Ri-pattern coming through the interface as though he were watching music being

played without hearing the sound. En'talac would be getting the crumbs of that like all he was going to get of the pastries.

"Will he come out of it?" she persisted.

He looked at Sarkalt. Pattern fields were a fire around him. "How many ways do I need to say yes?" In his voice, he heard the regret that he sensed through the interface from Sarkalt.

Ri-signature mounted the center; the Searching had begun in earnest. The seal reached half way to the dome opening, a match to the pattern in the soil but in shimmering light, the Overpriest's signature beside it.

People moved forward to see better. "Keep them away from us," he said, most of his attention on the interface link, the rest on what he was seeing. But the small crowd was moved back by two guards.

Then he sat back on his heels, letting his breath out in a long sigh. Sarkalt had stalled again. The chant doubled the harmony then tripled, the voices woven together around the single drumbeat, without a need for words. Then they kept it at that level, waiting.

Others started moving again in a hum of conversation, but the clear space remained around them. En'talac passed him her bowl of tea. "Weren't other avenues explored? Other than killing someone?"

He sipped the taste of her fingers along with the lukewarm liquid. "I'm considerably more aware of what has been explored than you are, and the reasons why or why not." How many additional shapes rode out from the first his fingers made? Regret and reluctance made the base of the form -- they could stand together -- but the steps spoke of power and rank and not a little of custom. He had taken them in the same temper as she would have taken the lavender tart.

Her eyes narrowed and he felt her gathering threads of Net, weaving trouble probably, and he wondered if their marriage would survive his publicly ordering her out of the Temple center.

But all she said was, "Why is it taking so long?"

"I don't know." Another sip of tea and he attempted to push the conversation back before the danger point. "What were you and Sarkalt talking about this morning?"

"He asked me if I had wanted to be there, looking after Niv. About choices, I suppose. He said something about my running away from home, which matches what he was saying to you about my not belonging here."

"What did you say?"

"If he had said it as plainly to me as he did to you, I might have agreed with him. All I said was that I wasn't part of what was going on."

"Are you?"

"Which one?" She shook her head. "He didn't say so, but I think he knew I wasn't, the same as he knew Pida wasn't. Either I didn't exist in that other reality, or I wasn't a player." He saw her look at Dal'itin, her face not betraying any of the emotions he knew she was feeling. Then back to him. "I don't think you were either. No dreams."

"I've seen so many spins, I'm not sure any more."

"I am. Sarkalt knew right away, as soon as I said it."

He almost spilled what remained of the tea, then put the bowl down with shaking hands. "Did you get that?" Then told her when she shook her head.

Moving closer, fitting against him, the silver crown of hair was just at the right level to tuck under his chin. "That's what I'm talking about," she said quietly. "They were born for this. If he comes down, and I'm not as certain about that as you are... all that talk about Law and fish, he's right in the middle and it's going to get worse before it gets better." She hesitated and he wondered again why she rambled when she talked with him. With colleagues, she was direct and always brief, often rudely so. With him: lavender tarts and circling.

As though she had read his thoughts, she straightened and looked up. "We're players now."

"He might have mentioned a certain interest in you."

She looked at him hard. "Don't be an idiot. Other than that I'm alive and breathing, I don't interest him in that way."

"I wasn't going to suggest that you did. So, tell me what you think then."

"You were raised in Temple, I wasn't. That we could be sitting here drinking tea and waiting to see someone die.... "

"What we deal with in Temple doesn't care very much for individual beliefs, and one life doesn't matter in the scale we're dealing with. All our lives don't matter except in how the outcome is affected."

"Does that excuse the blindness I see around me?"

"But as you said, you are here."

"Seems I let someone talk me into..."

She hesitated when Dal'itin screamed and Quin'tat put a finger against her lips when she started again. No time to listen now, no matter what the subject, he needed all his concentration as he felt the rise in Sarkalt through the pattern threads. Keeping the necessary distance, he held his reaction in a bubble, checked and separate. Analysis would come later, when the danger was over.

Sarkalt didn't take the next step in the Examination, he didn't have to; it was done without his will. A stroke of a different fire this time, a single stoke of pattern energy like a falling leaf, a minor thing for the amount of blood. The power blade followed the earlier trail of blood, leaving the boy trying to breath through a ruined mouth.

"Your vass'lt died like that." The thought mounted in a spiral to circle his mind until he almost spoke. But would he have said it to himself or to the boy? The original had been a small pattern burst that almost left both him and the vass'lt dead, the vass'lt still working the knife for minutes more.

Then coming through the Net interface, "Don't waste his death." He sensed the pain and regret from Quin'tat after all, along with the strength. He had followed closely, more so than the woman beside him gently rolling the allipalli stems between her palms, nostrils flared at the smell, enjoying the release of power.

The boy was past fear now; he had escaped into the greater pattern forms that Sarkalt provided. All that remained of his body was instinct and blood, and that pooled at his knees where the white robe held it, breaking free at the low point in a run along the spiral arm. Thin blood, red, but with a dance of green fire in the cells.

Sarkalt focused again, feeling Quin'tat like an itch. He released the woman next to him and released himself with a double strike at the wrists, where it should have been the first time. Sarkalt heard the flare of Ri-pattern over the click of the allipalli stems hitting the marble and a soft bubbling sound as boy took his last breaths.

Stems and green grass, rings of it were around them, the smell of cut grass, woven into rings, seeds like foam and leaves like shards of crystal. "Where do I go?" Sarkalt asked once more, but he asked it of himself now, there was little difference left with the body gone. But a difference after all when he felt the twist of pattern thread in answer.

Faint as a dream, it vibrated slowly, out of step in the familiar dance of the rest. He recognized in it the Net call from the morning before, and the Emperor's game of stones and rings and fish rising through a reflection on the surface of a pond. His face in the water, features lost in the ripples.

Dropping back without warning, he almost lost his anchor as overpattern rushed to fill the void, utterly alien. He felt Quin'tat again, stronger, like a hand holding him steady, and beside him, En'talac. "Yes," he heard, the word and the echoes from earlier, and grabbed them like a lifeline and held them like a gift. One more step, he thought, one more step into a thread that ended with diamond tipped reeds under a lavender sky. Camerat.

In holding his wife tighter with the stroke of the power blade, Quin'tat acknowledged his own need. The chanting changed, building until it had reached six levels of harmony. The sound filled the dome and washed back on them and in the resonance, he suddenly saw an image from very long ago, a twist of memory pattern he shouldn't have been able to see even with the interface. Sarkalt's Initiation.

"Don't waste his death," he breathed and closed his eyes at the pain. Both Sarkalt and En'talac responded, one as real as the other, pattern and warm flesh. He felt his wife follow him in the Net, the interface allowing her Command Level access. And the authorization: Sarkalt's.

Then the rest of Temple faded at the double strike. Everything was Net and a window where a drama unfolded, played in the murmuring echo of the fall of allipalli stems and in colors seen as through a dark glass.

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Quin'tat looked around with distaste. Boxes and mounds of furniture had been moved out of the room they were in but the musty smell remained. The wooden shutters -- plain wood, not reeds -- were opened to the late afternoon sun, the walls glowed in a blaze of green silk. That much was the same. Not the floor though, this one was laid with narrow strips of dark wood. And there hadn't been any rugs or a bird drawn in silver thread on the wall.

Several attendants waited in the processional outside, only he, Pida and Sarkalt were inside the room. Sarkalt had insisted on seeing it in person. The spin analysis of the dreams had finally given them this, without Dal'itin. They just didn't know what it meant. Priests had been over and over this room and found nothing, less than nothing. There was no feeling in these rooms for people ever having been here.

The surrounding rooms were as empty of life as this one, a large area in the Imperial Suite blocked as though it didn't exist. "Not much of a prize," he said.

Sweat dampened tendrils of curls reached to Sarkalt's waist, his hair tie undone and unnoticed. Pida had done his best with Sarkalt and that had been better than anyone had expected. The wonder of his survival was on the tass'altin's thin face along with the exhaustion and the remains of the stimulants that kept him awake but which made his movements disjointed and jerky.

"It's here," Sarkalt said, his eyes on Quin'tat. "I want the portal found."

"You'll know as soon as anything shows up."

"She's here." Sarkalt looked back at the wall, tracing the outline of a bird with his eyes as another would use their fingers. "We're just not looking for her in the right way. I wondered that I hadn't the extent of dreams the others have, only the fish and the pond, the dark ocean. Perhaps dreams aren't necessary between us."

When it didn't look like Sarkalt's legs would hold him, Pida helped him to the floor. "The Phoenix has contained the focus of Change into that one place,"

Sarkalt added, barely moving the air with his words. He still stared at the wall. Wood the color of amber bordered Simic-green silk. Vertical lines showed in the fabric when the light hit at an angle. "All possibilities are in there."

Dal'itin's death had given them what the dreams couldn't: overpattern in fragments, each fragment containing the whole -- broken but indivisible. "And the possibilities? An Acolyte who was cycling into Simic pattern." He knelt next to Sarkalt. "An old Law Clerk with a hobby of collecting stories about Change legends. His Priest daughter." He shook his head. "An odd assortment of people, Sarkalt. Who else? A Zimmer escort pod with crew." Except in the other reality it had been a Zimmer ship. "A battle. On Three Crescents Temple orders, apparently." Quin'tat still hardly believed it or the result.

Sarkalt smiled. "Rooms without life in them." Then laughed, sounding stronger than he looked. "You thought I wasn't listening? And don't forget the loom-master. His flitter jumped at the same time as the Zimmer ship."

A moment's quiet, then Sarkalt tucked his arms high and shivered. He was riding Temple and Palace Net both, adding pattern to the Net links again without any kind of interface. "I want an small armed ship capable of setting Web jumps, not just using the Gates, supplies, a Zimmer web-pilot, freeborn but not Clan affiliated. You and En'talac. And Niv in a stasis field."

"We may not get the coordinates the Zimmer pod used." But he knew they would and that they would be what they wanted. The ship was already being outfitted. Very well armed. The small size gave them more options, not less. "Who else? I'd like to bring En'talac's and my children. I'd rather they be with us regardless of what happens here or where we're going."

"The ship isn't a nursery." Sarkalt dropped from the Net and leaned back against Pida, his eyes closed, fine lines radiating at the corners. "They have a birth mother here. Your people were generous in the face of your indiscretion."

"So you keep implying, except I can't see how it concerns you what arrangements I make. Why the focus on this?"

"Did I say it was a focus?"

Quin'tat shook his head. Was Sarkalt's refusal simple temper? He would try again later. He smoothed Sarkalt's overbraid ends, feeling the discharge of energy catch the hairs on the back of his hand like tiny claws.

Sarkalt opened his eyes to watch the movement of the silk cords. "Pida should be doing that," he said, but smiled at the small attention. He turned his head slightly. "You still think of the Altasimic Empress as your enemy."

"Your enemy at least." A day and a half of this and he had moments when he wished he'd left Sarkalt with Donotat and Poni, playing rings and stones instead of running this same question over again.

Sarkalt wasn't finished with the matter. "No, not enemy. Lover, I think. Oh, I know who I am in those stories the Law Clerk has. I'm a fiber in the thread that is



Hero. Her fabric -- the diamond as the focus, the shuttle carrying the thread. Leaving us about to be woven in."

Quin'tat brushed a curl of hair from the Overpriest's face. "And anything could be in the diamond. What if we stayed here? What would happen?" The Priest's skin was cool under his fingers and damp, almost clammy.

And still that infuriating smile. "But we won't stay, the twist is set in the fiber. Like Dal'itin's death. How could we do other than what we have to? And don't fuss, Quin'tat. Your children will remain behind regardless. Your wife is the phoenix's gift to me, I don't see it includes any offspring of yours." Sarkalt made a motion of dismissal. "I want oaths first, personal ones as members of my Household. You won't answer to anyone but me. You and En'talac. Arrange it with Vo'ti."

Quin'tat nodded slowly. He owed his wife a week of back rubs and half suspected he had been set up by the two of them. Or three. He could suppose Vo'ti already knew about it. Did she know about Cam and Evae and how far this had gone? "Under the circumstances, it's a sensible precaution. We've discussed it and we both agreed."

"I'm sure she did." Another laugh almost made it into Sarkalt's smile with the soft words, and Quin'tat was very sure he had been maneuvered.

Sarkalt closed his eyes again. "We'll stay in these rooms. Bring the others who will be going with us, I want to see them together."

"A Net mirror would be more practical."

"No." Sarkalt straightened, shifting his position. Pida moved with him, giving what support he could. "This room and the anteroom. Have pallets brought in, whatever. Let Vo'ti know."

"Or apartments near here can be..." Or Simquin Hall if he wanted everyone together.

"No."

With a sigh, Quin'tat looked around. Tight quarters but they could manage for the short time necessary. The Overpriest and Pida could have the smaller room with the bath. He flagged Sarkalt's sketchy orders over to Vo'ti. The ti'Linn was welcome to them. "Will it make a difference? Our being here?"

Sarkalt narrowed his eyes to the orange light of the sunset. "Do you know we're where the reeds fell? Where overpattern started bleeding into the Unity."

Quin'tat did know, but had forgotten, and he saw again, the analysis like a veil in front of him. Broken reeds on a carpet, diamond eyes winking among the woolen flowers. The smell of wet animal. And an old man writing at a high table.

He breathed slowly, quelling his frustration. Sarkalt was circling him the same way En'talac did. "Will it make a difference?" he persisted but Sarkalt just shook his head slowly, eyes back towards the wall. 'No', or 'don't know', still the restriction hummed around him, the air alive with Sarkalt's orders.

Walking Evae and Cam to see the ship was stretching orders, but Quin'tat didn't care. He and Pon'tek swung the three-year-old girl between them. She kicked high, squealing with delight, and just missed one of the Stewards as he turned into the corridor.

Squeezing by them, Cam rolled his eyes. A very serious twelve and already starting his final growth spurt, he was slender now, but would be solid and heavy. The lack of c'Vann at Palace limited the genetic variability, Pon'tek, their birth mother was his cousin doubled. Sarkalt was right about the next generation having to have to look away from Palace and probably away from the Temple families.

"I've been told I'll be going directly to the merchant ship from here," Pon'tek said. "Cilcom Temple has formally released my service to Three Crescents Temple." With a glance at what little of the ship was visible through the entrance to the terrace, she motioned back to the escort following them.

The small ship was docked at the terrace nearby, but they would jump from where Anga's flitter had, well away from the Palace shields but within the protection of Web disrupters and Justice Cruisers. Ri-Gate was the only source of ship traffic -- and closed to commercial use. Two ships that he'd heard of hadn't heeded the distorted fields and had attempted to come out of jump near Ri, bypassing the Gates. And had been destroyed. He hadn't known such things as Web disrupters existed.

Thank you, Quin'tat wanted to say to Pon'tek but as usual, the words stayed in his throat. She smiled at his silence as she had smiled at Sarkalt's when introduced. The Overpriest had asked to see her.

Squatting child-height, she said to Evae, "You behave now."

Evae turned away and hugged Quin'tat's thigh with both arms, her face pressed into the folds of his robe. He stroked her head, feeling the sobs that were threatening. Their people were dark haired as a rule, as Cam was, but Evae was red haired and freckled like her mother. He hadn't seen her or any of his family since Evae's birth.

"Pon'tek, I'll walk you back to the flitter," Cam said as he moved to stand next to her, his fingers making a shape of apology. He had accepted the change too quietly, Quin'tat thought. Not a lack of spirit, he had plenty of that, but something else he saw in the boy sometimes, and more as he got older: a sense of the order of events, of what was inevitable and what could be changed.

"No, stay with your father," Pon'tek said. "There'll be time to get to know each other later."

Cam watched her as she left, making Quin'tat wonder what he saw. The question stayed in his throat as his earlier words had. Their going to her made him feel his loss more keenly than if they had been going to strangers.

Picking Evae up, he swung her onto his shoulder, making her squeal again at the familiar play. He had to duck to get through the doorway.

"I want to go with you," she said, her tone urgent. "I hate her."

"We'll talk about it later."

"Is that the pilot?" Cam asked, nodding towards the Zimmer standing next to a stack of bundles at the side door. Arguing with three techs, her voice carried, her words punctuated by waving hands.

Dark gray eyes so like his, widened in surprise. Cam had glossed over the standard translation from the Net, then dug deeper. Quin'tat felt him hesitate at the meaning contained in those flying hands and a slow blush marked his cheeks. "She's the pilot. Why doesn't she pull rank to order them to do what she wants?"

Arasima, a freeborn Zimmer and a junior pilot under life contract to a Pinnet merchant ship. No Clan Zimmer marks showed on her cheeks. "She's used to different customs. Ordering people only works if both sides already agree."

His other hand held a squirming three year old. "I want down," Evae said as she wiggled and reached for her brother. Cam grabbed her hands and whirled her around in a flash of kicking feet before dropping her to the paving stones, for a moment too surprised to react. Then she gathered her breath along with her injured dignity, apparently decided it was worth being upset over.

Quin'tat picked her up before the first yell made it out. "I want you to meet someone," he said, tweaking her nose between his fingers, distracting her into giving a giggle instead of a shriek.

A small ship, but there still wasn't much of the terrace left empty. "Pilot Arasima," he said in Trade-basic, using the Net for a translation. "I'd like you to meet Evae and Cam."

"Yours, sir?"

She didn't appear to notice his hand motions; they were a different language than the one she had been using. "Mine for a little while longer," he said, watching the black-rimmed irises fade to a dark muddy gray. Then to pale gray with flecks of red. "They'll be going to Cosni, that's a c'Vann world. The ship you were on will take them away from Ri."

"Gate's closed." Arasima was watching Cam, her nostrils spread as though there were something to smell other than a twelve-year-old boy.

"It will open for them."

"You've bought them luck then."

"I'd have preferred to bring them with me," he said then realized she might have meant the crew on the Pinnet ship. They would be outside this tightly controlled area of space, free to go where they wanted. The evacuations had

started, those able to afford transport to Ri-surface and who had contacts on Ri who would take them in. The civil authorities were insisting on documentation. Any port, even the larger flitter bays, were a press of bodies, the crowd threatening to become a mob with each vessel that left when so many weren't allowed to.

And that Evae and Cam had passage denied so many? Fairness had nothing to do with a Priest's decision. Necessity. Balance. Whim, even, although not so often with a Priest of Sarkalt's level.

Keeping the Gates to Three Crescents Temple traffic only, and that generally limited to message capsules, meant less danger of a ship or a weapon slipping through. And because of it, millions would die in Palace and the Gate Station. Palace wouldn't survive; none of the Gate Stations would either. Too old, too tied into the fabric of Empire to survive even the start of the destruction if overpattern fed into the world-patterns. People would survive. He had been assured of that. Survive the end of their way of life, survive the mass starvation and accompanying epidemics as the technology failed and most of what people did, didn't exist any more.

And all of their fears were based on dreams, not reality. There was no evidence of anything happening other than the even now barely perceivable disruption of Nexus Change. And Rigyant had no lack of company in believing them wrong and that the Office of Forms was creating the danger. Creating the destruction of Empire by weaving an insane reality into their own.

"How long before the installation is complete?" he asked the pilot.

She dragged her eyes away but didn't look up at him. "Done. Only the checks left. May I go now? A few hours only. If the ship is leaving, my things..."

"Are being brought. There's no time and besides, your going back to the Pinnet ship would only draw attention to it."

"Could you show me how the Web controls work?" Cam asked, edging close enough to the door to peek inside, using Trade-basic with a thick accent, but speaking on his own. One hand traced the scale outline of the tiles around the opening.

Arasima looked at Cam, then to him. "If you don't mind," he said.

"I want to see!"

Quin'tat picked Evae back up, set her to straddle one hip, and allowed her favorite story lead to fade in from the domestic Net. She didn't take it.

"You have a strange idea of what 'no time' means," Arasima said. Cam was watching and listening, his head tilted slightly, a distant expression on his face.

"Call me Quin'tat," he said softly. Only ten hours until the node and their best bet for using the portal.

Arasima ducked her head at his name, like she was ducking scalding water. The eyes that slid sideways to finally meet his were glacial. The smell of stone

and sun warmed hull tiles was tempered with something sweeter. "Will you take Three Crescents Temple rank, in Sarkalt's service?" he continued, but he could see that she had understood him the first time. He had taken her set point with those first three words -- what he offered destroyed everything she had known. "In his Household."

"No keep to Temple. No Zimmer does." From the Zimmer cultural spins he had reviewed, he recognized the difference: her voice had changed to free-born cadence as though he were Clan Zimmer.

Quin'tat gave the Zimmer pilot honor again, bowing slightly in recognition of the consequences of her decision, either way. He had gone deep enough into the cultural spins that for a moment, she appeared to him as she would see herself: at the edge of a precipice. Freeborn, barely human to a Clan Zimmer, but with a place and a people.

"None of us know what we'll come back to." He resisted the urge to reach out to his son, to hold him close as he did his daughter. Cam hadn't taken his eyes off the woman as he swallowed the sight of her whole. "Or even if we'll come back," he added. "The obligations of service go both ways, and to everybody going on this ship, what or who you were before makes no difference. And your people wouldn't take you, you know that."

He watched the effects of his words on her as she struggled to find the equilibrium inside herself. "I'll show your boy the web controls. Quin'tat." She looked down as she spoke, then eyes towards Evae, she appeared more certain. "The little one too. Won't hurt her to see."

Arasima took Evae in a more practiced grip than Pon'tek had and he wondered again about who she was leaving behind. Nothing of her personal history had come from the other ship and she gave a flat 'no relatives' to each inquiry.

He watched the three of them disappear into the ship. Then through the Net, Sarkalt said, "I want her marked. Before we leave. Arrange it."

"The oath bands. Vo'ti..."

"No. Her cheeks, where the Clan marks would be. It must be visible."

"And before that? Despite what she's said, she'll have good-byes to make. Will you loosen your hold or at least allow her people through?"

"No. They don't exist anymore."

"You mean that figuratively, I hope," he said but Sarkalt didn't answer, giving instead the latest information from the Zimmer pod. Registry was a'Genn and that had narrowed their focus, but they hadn't been sure until now that the head of the Clan was the web-pilot at the Web controls when the ship had died. "The portal opened to him," the spin gave with every analysis. But they had their coordinates and it would take a combination of Web and Zimmer pattern to use them.

A few minutes walk brought him back to the green room. Sarkalt was in the anteroom, curled on his side on a pallet, a heavy wool blanket covering him to under his chin. Black hair was arranged in a fan over the white pillow. Pida sat cross legged on the edge of the pallet by Sarkalt's legs, using an im'bt stick to toy with the coals arranged in the center of a brazier set on the floor. His eyes were as blank as the Overpriest's.

"What possible link could this Gennady a'Genn of a small, obscure Zimmer Clan have with the Altasimic Empress?" he asked Sarkalt. The Simic Garm, yes, even if it was a stretch to imagine that sour, bitter man as the San of the Empress's House and especially as a tass'alt, but at least they were from compatible species. But Zimmer?

Sarkalt almost focused. Pida glanced around to see, then went back to the coals. The Net was quiet for once, at least here.

Quin'tat sat down close by and stretched. An attendant brought a tea service, poured a bowl and passed it to him without asking. After a slow look towards Pida, she left. A tall heavy woman, the trained grace of her slow movements was just as heavy. He tried to get a look at the crest on her robe but it was lost in the blousing. Was she going with them, he wondered, but was too tired to link faces to names. She reminded him of Pon'tek, the red hair perhaps, and he was simply too tired to look past the obvious. A medic from the Tass'kin ici Holding was the last he had heard of the choices -- not the Master Medic who had been with Pida earlier, but still an expert in the effect of pattern on tass'altin. Jinuyte il'Hun, a monumental, slow name. This woman would fit that. And checked after all. She was. And not c'Vann, despite the resemblance. A close species, a daughter line.

Sarkalt had changed his mind many times after telling him to handle the appointments. Filtering through the possibilities, he knew, but didn't have to like the change that put a d'Palvan medic with them, not when seen in the light of Sarkalt's focus on En'talac.

The bowl Jinuyte had given him held roasted honey-leaf tea and he sipped it gratefully despite his feelings. The woman was competent, graceful and thoughtful. She was probably even nice. But she wasn't En'talac.

"Will you join me?" he asked Pida. The tass'altin shook his head without raising his eyes. Sarkalt rolled to his back and pushed the soft folds of blanket down. One hand touched Pida's arm. "I am assured that it is possible," Sarkalt said in a whisper but sounding vastly amused. For a moment of blinding panic, Quin'tat thought he meant him and Jinuyte and that he had seen the shape of the future, when Sarkalt added: "En'talac spoils you."

He shook his head tiredly, unaccountably exhausted by that brief moment of fear. "What are you talking about now? What's possible?"

But he still heard the laughter from Sarkalt. "How much of this is chance? Inside, that's where the choices start, Quin'tat, not here. She made this."

"Choices are being made. People are being left to die. If we fail, if..." He stopped. Fail? They didn't know the contest. They didn't know what they might have to do, should do. "I want Evae and Cam with us, the families of any of the others as well. Or take it as a privilege of our rank if you don't think there's space on the ship for everyone."

"Drop the subject, Quin'tat. Your three stay behind."

"My two. My children. Mine and En'talac's."

"Do you assume she has asked for the same things you have? I hear words from her... always words, but they say nothing of children."

Pida took Sarkalt's hand in his, turning as he did so to face his Priest. "I'm not surprised you don't hear those words. Not one of you speak the same language."

Sarkalt's eyes were on his tass'altin. "What language would you speak to me?"

"We only speak one in common." Pida brushed the braid ends to one side, his touch lingering, then parted the opening of Sarkalt's sleeping wrap.

Pida's caresses were expert. "I might as well leave," Quin'tat said as he got up. "I don't need language lessons."

Pida turned his head. "Then take another lesson instead and don't bring this up again if you don't want to hear what he has to say."

I don't understand it when I do hear it, Quin'tat thought. "And En'talac, does she want to hear it?"

But she was there. "Hear what?" she asked as she led him into the other room. She didn't throw a shadow in the light coming through the window. A Net image, a secured link from the Tass'Holdings, one touch told him so, another allowed him to be there instead.

A pungent smell made him cough and he put a sensory filter into the link. A large room but stuffy and overly warm. Only the link told him where he was. "I thought you would want to be with Cam and Evae."

"I can't change that we're leaving," En'talac said. Arranged before her were jars and bowls of dried herbs, measuring scoops, scrolls. Books of drug patches. An elderly Scribe was at her elbow, his eyes on what he was writing. "Or that they are much safer going where they are. You of all people should know better than to argue with Sarkalt at any time much less when he's like this."

An aide came in and knelt on the other side, her bent form surrounded by orders as she began to bundle the herbs. The ends of her Tass'Holding oath braid was tucked into the band to keep it from dragging in the mixture. She didn't appear to notice him either and he wondered if En'talac was blocking.

"And what of you?" he asked his wife as he checked. She was. He existed only in her eyes and the physical En'talac hadn't spoken. "He said you didn't speak of children."

"Just what is you're accusing me of?" The part of her that existed in his mind stood and took his arm as her image had earlier. "I saw Evae and Cam this

morning and I'll see them before their ship leaves. To want them with us is an act of selfishness, not love, even if you discount the physical risk."

"We don't know it."

"Then count that you want to put our children into the focus of a Priest-Select who may very well destroy us, Empire, even the Unity. You don't have to believe the danger from overpattern to understand that much. We are the players Sarkalt has chosen to fight her with." She sighed. "Or not fight her."

Quin'tat remembered Sarkalt's words: *the thread that is hero. Lover.*

He and En'talac walked into a ghost image of Palace: colored lines, placement references, and sidebars of statistics flashing then dying as quickly. Swelling red areas were blinking cancers around the ports. Multiple aspects of each: Control domestic Net, Administrative Command, and Temple, the changes in what he saw of Palace between them subtle and mainly of perspective. Then Three Crescents Temple Command and a part of Palace appeared which hadn't before. Solid appearing borders surrounded the area, then disappeared when he tried to see them more clearly but he couldn't get through. But then they were inside, standing on the terrace, the ship before them but with hull tiles as transparent as the placement references had been. Cam sat in one side of the Web couch, his knees bent, Evae balanced on them and bouncing. Arasima worked a data point nearby.

His wife's arm was around his waist, he felt her at his side. "If we're his chosen players, then why were you allowed full Net access while I've been restricted to what is filtered into this place."

"Don't ask for reasons. Sarkalt's allowed what he feels is necessary. Look at what he's done so far. All your answers are in his actions."

"And your actions? Will you say your good-byes on the Pinnet ship?"

"While you're kept here?" She held him, her face against his chest. His hand against her hair, the fine bones of her skull under his fingers but he didn't take his eyes off his children.

"Yes."

"Here or there," she said, her voice muffled, "I'll be saying good-bye to them for the rest of my life."



## Part IV

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Sarkalt cleared the hull tiles in the nose of the ship so he could see Ri: a great green pupil in a dark eye. Water. The outline of the South Chain Islands under light cloud. And Palace directly below them but invisible to the eye, it was a chameleon soaring over the planet's surface.

Pilvir was beside him, looking at the same view of Ri, the planet reflected in the ti'Linn's eyes, green amidst the slow moving and predominately red facets in a mahogany ground. The ti'Linn was almost as invisible as Palace was. A chameleon masked in deep thought. The spins continuing to arrive from Three Crescents pooled around its feet.

Riltic and Koisen stood near the web console where he had been sitting. With a word to his wife, Quin'tat left them and joined him and Pilvir.

"We could be before everything here," Sarkalt said. No evidence of Empire showed on the planet's surface, there were no monuments on Ri as could be seen from orbit on some worlds. No evidence that the world wasn't as it had been before Empire created the people who became the Ri. He saw the lack as silence, as an absence, and wondered why. And to answer Pilvir's query, added the lesser silence: "No other ships."

"What are you seeing, that you don't see them?" Pilvir asked, pulling a direct Net feed in plain-tongue while his clicks sounded a chorus in ti'Linn-native, saying: "You swim in ships."

And in the Net spin offered were the present location of each ship, the weapons available, possible, if unlikely enemies, and various strategies if attacked. And then riding the spin in, Vo'ti, the ti'Linn taking a shadowy shape against the tiles.

"From the loom-master's Council," Vo'ti said as another lead materialized and the ti'Linn's form vanished.

To his Household, to his San, not Three Crescents Temple. There was a single image in a tight lead: a dead Piltsimic woman, a cord wrapped around her throat. Their Net hadn't any information on her, not even her name.

And the message: "Our interests are the same. You won't be followed."

Quin'tat looked at him questioningly and Sarkalt shook his head. This was what he had gotten for his cooperation, a split between the Palace weavers Council and Rigyant... based on dreams. And a change in parameters, his changes, and as

based on dreams as the other. What change had existed in the reality where the fourth candidate had become Empress?

Sensing his questions -- he had remained in the Net -- analysis were offered, but he refused them and pulled out entirely. Quin'tat took the offered spins. "There still isn't any evidence of overpattern in the world-patterns," he said quietly.

"Did the Piltsimic ask for evidence?"

All the leads were becoming ragged from the building Web energies, their ship's Net unable to spare the time to refine them. Pilvir, Riltic and Koisen were starting to look nibbled around the edges as the link that brought their images here suffered the same fate.

Sarkalt let the tiles go opaque and returned to where he had been sitting near En'talac. For an instant, the world before him had been different. Not Lillisim -- he knew that world from the Net spins -- but another.

He passed the image to Arasima and felt an immediate protest. "A world as nameless as the dead Piltsimic," he said to her. "Is it our fate?"

Preparing for the Web-jump, she was feeding in Net from the ship, watching back -- watching him -- with a small portion of her mind. Three interconnected rings barely showed on one of the woman's cheeks. Not simply a tattoo, the capillary growth had been stimulated, and when complete, the effect would be similar to a Clan mark. With his words, the marks had colored a faint pink. A Zimmer would see them more as points of heat from the blood than a difference of color, and only a minor part of the heat bloom that they could raise.

Moments now until the portal could be accessed. He looked back to see Riltic, but his Second was gone, Pilvir as well. Closer to him, Koisen was little more than a shadow. A smile, her breath scented the air he breathed, the scent of regret or loss, or both and he wondered if all or some of it was from him. Then nothing.

With the image, the feeling was as gone. Loss for what or for whom? He turned his attention to the pilot. The Web gave him access to Zimmer that he couldn't have otherwise separated out of the Unity. He could feel it at a distance, like seeing fabric from across the room, without the drape of it over his body, the weight and the scent. The moments to the portal opening passed and suddenly the cloth turned, warp to weft, and back.

Sarkalt pulled back as data flooded into the Net from Arasima, but he rode out on the crest of her fear, not the information. No white diamond, but a star system and high on the plain of the system was an overpattern tear, a window that opened to something that showed in the Net as a coalescence of stars and as quickly, their absence. Then as a simple blaze of light, the other ship a dark speck drifting towards it.

"We've jumped to Lillisim," Quin'tat said sharply, losing his disorientation almost instantly. "Pull us away from the other ship."

Arasima already had in a course that would put them well to one side, and was stripping out, leaving the Web as quickly as she could.

"Stay in and read it," Sarkalt said through the Net, but leaned forward until his face was inches from hers.

Pida stood beside him, one narrow fingered hand resting against his arm, nails painted deep blue and trimmed to a point. "Is it the Ladybug?" he asked.

"The Ladybug," Sarkalt whispered, then again to Arasima this time even knowing she could only hear the Net through the Web interface, not his words. A name from a dream. The ship hadn't existed in their reality.

Layers of information came back from the pilot, words and without words; she was still in pattern as much as in the Web. Acceptance of his first direct order to her permeated the other answers, obedience, as she would yield to a Clan Lord.

More than an oath. Am I still male enough for this one, he would have liked to ask Quin'tat, to be amused by his reaction, but thought to save the question for En'talac. Another universe outside of Temple, she had told him. A universe where a pilot could connect to their world-pattern to a degree even a Salin wasn't allowed.

He was Priest enough at least and that would do. The Zimmer-based patterns she wove proved easier than he thought they could have, not a harmony, not quite, but both Zimmer and Ri more alive for the differences.

"Lord Gennady a'Genn," he said to his pilot's question. The other web pilot. The ship's shields were faltering but still they had the feel of the man woven into the energy lines. Pattern and Web both were in those lines, and he could feel, even second hand and at a distance, the residue of that ship's first jump, the same as theirs had been. And see the scars of the battle that had forced it.

"What about the diamond?" Pida said and the fore hull tiles cleared as they had been to see Ri. The overpattern tear was to one side, the other ship too far to simply see it. Most of their vision was the world they approached, they fell into a blue and gold mouth.

What they must have passed through wasn't there at all. Quin'tat had the Net searching the jump records, Arasima enhancing them from the luxury of the Web time distortion.

The white diamond was like a breath of frost on their passage, the only solid information came from the Ladybug in the same way as they could read the jump residue. That ship had come from the diamond and they had followed but a step behind, their jump had been directly here. Now they looked for it, that second trip was as plain as the first -- the residue hadn't been seen because the form of it was cousin to the overpattern tear mounting the system. The Zimmer hadn't so much jumped through as been overtaken by the portal and the portal had been created by someone with access to overpattern.

Sleep wandered through Ulanda's consciousness, or swam rather, her body a swirl of water in its wake. And dreams, ordinary ones, were small bubbles rising.

Patyin sat beside her in one, both of them cross-legged on cushions, their bowls of tea untouched.

A Wa'tic merchant pulled a Net link without attempting to speak plain tongue or use a translation. Except there were no Wa'tic in Kalin that she knew.

"Calltinkill ink, dear Scribe." The small creature bowed to Patyin. "Our very best, prepared to your order, in stick form, paste or liquid. Or redi-stylus, as you wish." Arranged between them were three inking stones, an elongated and elaborately molded stick of ink crossed the holding bar of each.

"The red perhaps," the Net said from a point above the appropriate stone, and offered a selection of base types and supplementary ingredients, catalogue numbers and cross references ready on a side pull. The numbers went by too fast for Ulanda to make sense of them.

"Sample on display is a frosted-petal type, rose scented, crimson iridescent base, drying to vary three degrees reduced intensity between core and periphery for each tenth of a millimeter in stroke width when using sub-category A1 to C12 unsized cotton paper." Paper fell like leaves through the air only to disappear before reaching the ink stones. Calligraphy in the promised shades filled the pages.

"I didn't get to say good-bye," Patyin whispered. The whispering was for effect; they were the only customers, in body at least. A bird sang far off and someone was clipping a shrub.

"Love is colored lavender," she said. "Lavender, it must be."

The merchant obliged, returned immediately, and folding four legs under, used the other four to rearrange the display. "Lavender for remembrance, for poetry, for braiding." Brown pincers held an ink stick shaped like a stem of the tiny flowers and rubbed the tip on a stone the white color of a winter sky.

"It's an acquired taste." As he spoke, Patyin slopped lukewarm Possitt root tea from his bowl onto the ink stone's hollow, splashing stars like an image in water of a night sky, the ink a winter mist.

It wasn't Ri, not with stars. "Are you still there or is everything changed?" Ulanda asked, pulling her mind back from the image. "Did you ever know me?"

With her last words, the ink stone snapped across the middle, gray-blue ink spreading across the floor. Then that bubble popped and Ulanda was sliding on the next, trying to hold to a shimmering surface, sucking bubble skin as she breathed. Iridescent colors in a black ground, sunlight on oil -- light in a shifting current was all around her.

“... black rose, color and scent, blood based, crackle finish, suitable for love letters and pattern killing...”

Patyin smiled widely, the smile becoming a slash. His face split with a popping sound. “More blocker,” he said, the words dripping off along with fragments of his lips. His skin showed a crackle finish of black lines bleeding red.

And that bubble burst as well.

“Your answer to everything,” Ulanda said as she struggled to find some part of herself free of restraint, then stopped abruptly with the feeling she was falling off the bed.

“So you once said,” Simitta replied. His breath was heavy and sweet in her face and she turned her head away as far as the webbing would allow.

Her room on the Ladybug and her bed -- the restraint webbing was new. She turned her head back towards Simitta's clear green-blue crystal eyes, there was too much blood the other way, streaks of blood on wall, drying to black. Clanny's handprint reached through one streak with a sliding and falling print, his fingers screaming narrow paths cut through with white by his nails. Her memory of him was less real than the dream she had just woken from.

“How is he?” she asked.

“How is who?”

She saw the blood on the wall again and she could taste it on her lips. “Don't.”  
“Don't what?”

“Just don't,” she whispered. He wanted anger from her; she could read that in those pale eyes, those measuring eyes. She blinked and the ship was around her, a small insect crawling on a leaf and it was dark out. Full dark, the stars were black...

The middle fingers of each of Simitta's hands had ridges along one side, near the nail. They cut like the white bone they looked to be; the red flecking them was hers. “Stay with me,” he said calmly as his fingers stroked her face, gently this time but she could feel the knife-point spurs. Both honor points showed between his thin lips. He ran one of those two fingers into her mouth. Sweet and salt and bitter. “There are glands under each ridge. You're blood marked like a cub with her Clan Lord first time, but the hormones won't work on you, and you don't fuck as good as one.”

“I was hardly allowed to.” She had found a frame of reference: her own fear at how familiar his touching had felt. “Or maybe it's the man, not the hormones. Maybe Gennady wouldn't have...”

“Gennady's busy.”

“Too bad,” she said, twining sarcasm into the brief words and tried to move again. Her heart was skipping, hammering in her throat. “Did you mark Cassa like this? Did you cut your loska to taste her blood?”

He pulled a corner of the sheeting loose from under her and held it against her cheek. "She was marked."

"Like this?" But he shook his head and she knew he wasn't going to say more about Cassa. Trying a relaxation mantra, she linked the beat of her heart to her breathing then slowed that, making the other follow until each hard thump felt as though it was in the hollow of her lungs, and steady.

Simitta started to unhook the web ends, his body all hard angles over hers as he leaned. "Don't move yet." From the webbing left over her, she felt a scan, and tried to pull the Net thread that would give her the spin. And felt it slip, the Net unfamiliar.

Trying to sit up, she would have fallen except that Simitta held her steady. Through the heat of his hand, she could feel her own bones and the movement of her muscles. And felt too, his hand stroking her, moving as though there was nothing more here than simple pleasure of skin on skin. And somehow that was familiar too.

The sensations were overwhelmed in a rush of surprise. "There's Net!" Pulling in from the surprise, she found herself instead in the Net, following the earlier medic scan at a level she couldn't consciously touch, and then further, into a space where all the Net leads and links and nodes wove a cloth and...

And flinched as Simitta's hand stopped just short of her face. "Stay here," he said again, and calmly ran a razor edge along one of her cheeks, stopped just below the eye, crossing the mark he had made earlier. "There's been Net since just after the portal crossed us. It's ship's Net."

"Then we're orbiting Ri. Why am I still alive?"

"Not Ri or Palace. We're over Lillisim now."

"How..."

"How do you think?"

"I don't remember the portal opening. What happened? What did Li-Fu do to me?"

"You'll have to ask her. All I know is that the pod raced the bow wave of the portal opening. A doubling expansion with a short pause phase and no reversals, like the inside of a sector Jump-Gate, only you're supposed to follow it, not lead. It would have cracked the pod, but we slipped under the wing of the Ladybug with just enough time to link to the main systems. Even then, Gennady had to go deep into the Web to gain time to set the shields. The wave shut us down hard, when systems came back, we were out of the diamond, and there was Net again."

His right knee pressed against her thigh, braid ends as much on his leg as on hers. She moved her hand over. Through the cloth of the pants, she felt skin as warm as his hands. Could she make love to him as a human does? Would it be as familiar to him as the other had seemed to her?

Would you, she mouthed but the words that came out were different: “Garm’s story.”

“We don’t know that.” He pulled the cloth loose from her cheek with a ripping sensation, refolded the cloth and pressed again.

She drew her hand back from his thigh, trailing blood stained braid ends, feeling her own skin under her fingers as though it was more distant from her than his had been.

“And the Nexus Change? Is it over?” Had she created that along with the portal?

“We don’t know that either.”

“Damn it, check with Lillisim, link with their Net.”

“Is that an order?” Another pulling of cloth from her face, then something wet touched her cheek and she pulled her head back as she looked. “I can taste the l’blatin and the blasti in your flesh, the chemicals form but you don’t have receptors in the right organs. What a waste.” There was a gentle laughter in his voice where there never was with Gennady when he spoke with her. Or would there be, she wondered, here, like this?

And Simitta... did she really know what he felt? She took deep breaths through the crest of his hair; it rose and fell in slow ripples as he nuzzled against her neck. It wasn’t so much white as colorless, borrowing the color from his skin and the reflection of the light, to be almost silver.

“Will you...?” she started but found she couldn’t ask. Simitta. A dance for two, human or Zimmer but she obviously needed more. Her skin was very far away, she was falling still and she couldn’t see bottom for the dark.

She closed her eyes a moment. Or flying, not falling. And she’d never hit bottom. I could just fly away, she thought, starting to lose the will to fight the drawing, the form in front of her a vortex now, small but growing. A small bird flying into a storm. What was happening now was to the other times as a song is to a single word, but was it pattern sickness or Nexus Change peaking?

Whichever, she needed more, or she’d die here right now. “I want to live.” She repeated the last words.

“You will.”

Almost imperceptibly, she shook her head. She couldn’t afford the pride that kept Garm away from her. Resting her chin into Simitta’s moving hair, she called into ship’s domestic Net for him.

And had the call return empty.

A race with the portal opening, Simitta had said. An old man at the point -- with her. He would have gone out there, she knew it. To maintain his claim on her if nothing else. “Where is he?” she asked, her incipient flight into the storm tangled and stalled in panic.

"Ship's Net is Spann based." Simitta's words were muffled against her skin. "The differences take some practice. Try again."

Black sparkled off her braids and she was panting. "He's not there," she gasped, barely finding the air. "Damn it, I need him."

She felt the blocker go on, a full circle at the back of her neck, and then Simitta's hand warming the round to speed the absorption through the skin. But he was brushing ice with the other hand.

"He's here and he's alive. Ulanda, listen. He'll need you later, like you need him. Stop this."

"Alive?"

"He's been hurt. Bolda and the ship's medic are with him. He's alive."

"You're orbiting a Simic world, why isn't he down there, or a medical team up here? What does a Zimmer medic know about Simic?"

"A Temple Web-ship came through behind us. Small but armed. All this is from the passive sensors, we were still down. They weren't. Came from behind the portal wave, from the node opening, easy as silk. They could have taken us, or killed us, but they landed instead."

"They could have done that anyway. Come here, I mean. Used a Gate, or made one. They could."

"If we're where they came from. Not the place, the... the same reality. And if they knew where to find us. They came through the first portal and the second, directly from Palace. You're not thinking."

"I'm trying, I've other concerns."

He pulled her over to give easier support. "I know," he said softly. "Except they couldn't have jumped here, even with all the rest of it counted out. And we can't jump out. There's an overpattern tear high on the plane of the system, angling down as though to circle. No Gate will open near something like that and you can't set for a Web jump either. Not anywhere near."

The something wrong had a shape now. Break point of Nexus Change. It wasn't over. Legends and stories of a Lillisim that didn't exist and of the dark wings of a black Phoenix raised in flight. "One tear?" she asked. The tear had been there all along, shape and feeling. She had been the one without shape enough to give it a name.

"You want more?"

She wasn't falling, but flying. She heard Li-Fu's laughter again, as much an offering as the memories Li-Fu had shared with her and no-one else.

"More," she said. Cassa at the spiral of the world-altar on Lillisim. Li-Fu's Initiation where she most probably should have died. "Five more tears and not circling, spiraling." She tried to sit up. "This time, any terms will be made with me."



"Ulanda, we know who to discuss terms with. The ship that crossed us bears the Overpriest Sarkalt's signature on the tiles."

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Stepping through the last remnant of the morning fog, the moisture unpleasant against his skin, Gennady walked the spiral path towards the mound. His Placement link with Temple Net showed the world-altar complete, he could have walked double: on grass and sand and in his mind. The records were real-time; he saw the wind move the same leaves. The Overpriest was waiting for him near the center.

Not Ri-bred, Gennady thought, as he stopped in surprise and released the Net map at the same time. This man couldn't be native Ri, not with black hair and skin the color of roasted Vii tea.

"In this place I can feel the beginnings of Ri-pattern," Sarkalt said without turning or rising from where he knelt. "I wonder if I will find Altasimic as familiar. Do you mind meeting here?"

Mind? Spoken plainly enough, but something older rose up with the man's words. Something that spoke in the light that glinted from the water and in the reflection from the grains of amber sand. The world-net, not Temple Net, had echoed the Priest's words.

The mound was little more than twenty feet across, the water surrounding it much less, and looked shallow -- where the bottom could be seen from the surface -- but was not. The same here as Li-Fu had remembered from her Lillisim, not the story that the old Simic had told in the diamond where the Phoenix -- where Cassa -- had waded as she wove the girdle out of grass and flowers. She must have told him about the girdle, the real one that she had buried here. The old man stole bits of lives and wrapped them in his lies.

Ragged tufts of short grass poked through the sand on this side of the water, sand and grass both dry already, the hot morning sucking the last of the night's moisture into the air. The Overpriest's robe had been wet; it had dried in soft wrinkles with sand caught in the folds. Almost transparent white silk with a loosely tied paneled over-gown of a lace weave, heavier, showing linked circles in white.

Gennady didn't answer and he didn't kneel.

Simic green eyes turned towards him, but not up; the Priest stared straight ahead. "What were you to her?" Sarkalt asked. "We don't know."

White braids as well, wrists and arms, and in his hair. And his sleeves tied back to show brown through the pattern of the braiding where the overbraids covered skin alone. A fluid motion and the Ri-priest was on his feet. "Did I know you?" he asked softly, eyes on level to Gennady's now. "I don't remember you from any dreams. Fish in a pond and the Select Ka'lt'ka."

Dreams and deaths. And an overpattern tear that was now two, and definitely spiraling. "We never met," Gennady said, distracted enough to speak where he had intended to let the other man run out of words. Man. Nothing about him said male except what he was seeing. And spinning what seemed to be native Zimmer, not Ri. Then, in self-defense, he added: "What are you?"

Sarkalt laughed and the spin broke, leaving little more than Gennady had sensed before. "A man."

"Man?"

"I was. And a female Zimmer on my ship still thinks so."

"The web pilot." From the passive sensors, when the ships crossed.

"A freeborn, now with Temple rank. In my Household."

His turn to laugh. "I wasn't intending to claim her," he replied, signing indulgence with his words, but found the world-net whispering more than that.

And finding ears that were hearing more. "Weren't you?" Sarkalt said, his laughter stilled. All of him was stilled, and around him it was as though the moving air was motionless, and the water the same. Then he spoke again, very softly, and Gennady had to listen carefully. "You have very little here, Clan Lord."

A reality without Cassa. And without what Cassa had brought from Temple, without her, this other him had spent too many years working ships not his own, as pilot, as mercenary. His juvenile sisters had been claimed by Clan Gant following the raid that decimated the paltin of a'Genn, then were bred to Clan Gant and lost to him forever. And the man he had been had died as, in another time and place, the Cam'lt Temple pull dissolved. What he had been in his own life was only a dream in this one.

"I have as much as anyone of us in this," he said coldly, and saw those green eyes widen slightly. Green traced lightly with black, a web against the color of Ri's ocean. The dry breeze picked at the Overpriest's curls, rolls of black hair moving softly. On the surface, he looked like a young man just into his final growth and even alien, he had the beauty of perfection.

Gennady turned his eyes to the sand across the water and blinked back yuin sight that had everything around him colored in silvered violet. "We came here from one of the four points in the diamond, Overpriest," he continued roughly. He wanted to kill him for the truth he had spoken. A'Genn had died in the reality this man came from. "This place isn't more real than any other we might have gone to. Your reality? A piece of it perhaps." And not for long, he thought.

"I see no diamond." Sarkalt was looking to the water, as though he might see a diamond in there.

"And in the diamond, we couldn't see this. Until the portal was opened. It's not over."

A sandaled foot tested the surface, breaking through into the liquid. "And the way back?" A side look through a fall of hair.

"Overpattern." Hoping his answer held anything of the truth, Gennady glanced up as he spoke, as though he would have been able to see the tears, as though they were something as plain as clouds in the sky. But there were no tears and no clouds in the clear azure sky above him.

"And the way here, as well? Is the Altasimic Empress with you, Zimmer? From another point in the diamond, perhaps."

"She's dead. I watched her die."

"I would have liked to have met her. This time, that is."

Gennady didn't reply, finding that he was the one to run out of words first.

Sarkalt squatted at the water's edge, braid ends floating loose, like water skaters. "She died here. Did you know that?"

"Who?"

"The Priest Li-Fu. She was found here in the water. They buried her in the mound. An old custom, perhaps the origin of the mound. A burial site."

Days ago, Gennady thought. Her body would still be there, drying, not rotting, the hot sand drawing the moisture out. A reason for the meeting to be here -- or had they found anything in the mound? "How did she die?" he asked, willing himself to remain calm.

"Drowned. She was following the mist, or a dream perhaps, and slipped. Or walked, and never saw the water, or felt it." Sarkalt moved one hand to pour sand into the water, a graceful move for all the stiff braiding. Gennady had seen it before. Li-Fu. "I was here that early," the Overpriest said, speaking very softly, the words not much louder than the hiss of the sand. "About the time of morning it must have happened. It could have been any place, any time. Dreams would be easy here."

"Make your point."

The man looked at him. Man? Sarkalt was silver skinned now -- Gennady was seeing again by yuin sight, the change as instantaneous as the flooding anger. His eyes must be full black. Most of his mind was clear and very much here, but a portion of it drifted in a violet haze and the smell of sugar made his nostrils flare.

A sound behind made him turn -- an explosion of a reed had sent puffs of cotton into the air. Flecks darkened the center of the soft masses, he watched them change from violet to brown as the yuin sight failed. Catching a puff as it floated by, he pinched one seed in half. Softer than he expected, it was moist inside, and smelled of grass and stagnant water.

Sarkalt watched as Gennady let the mangled handful drop to the sand. "They found something in the mound. Do you know what?"

A blend of tones colored the Priest's voice, Gennady recognized impatience as a good portion of what he heard. The Ri-priest looked up and the same blend flickered across his face as though the emotions were reflections of light, and his skin, the still surface of a pond. I can talk to surfaces, he thought, wanting to laugh all of a sudden and felt the last of the tension drain. Sarkalt reminded him of Cassa and it had taken this long for him to realize it. "A girdle made of sun-stones. Shaped like Li-Cassa seeds and the ties like the flowers."

A breath released. "Is there something you want?"

"In payment for what? You have the girdle." He touched with his tongue to feel the hollow point of a filed honor tooth. His arrangement with Anga and Li-Fu had died when the universe he knew had died.

"I told my people that choices began once we entered the diamond. If you are correct about this being another construct, then there will be choices here as well. Am I wrong?"

"Which part?"

"Your choice, Zimmer."

He shrugged at what might have been a joke. "I don't know." Another noise from behind and Sarkalt's eyes went past him. A man and a woman had stopped about thirty feet back, as far away as possible and still be seen in the curve of the spiral.

The Overpriest rose. "Quin'tat and En'talac. Of my Household also, Lord Gennady."

The Net said as much and more. The man was Three Crescents' Chief of Staff. The woman, a medic, Temple certified at the Master level. In her hand, held loosely at her side, were fragments of starlight.

Gennady looked back at Sarkalt. "I think this is a kind of probability pull." Formed around six overpattern tears, Ulanda had said, when there had been only one. She had created it, she should know. Or Cassa had through her. At her death. "It might become real, or parts of it might." Like Cam'lt Temple had, or the consequences of what had happened there had. And that damn Simic's story.

"What would make it real, Lord Gennady?" the man asked. "Or keep it the same, rather." He took the girdle from the woman and tossed it half the distance between them in a flight of crystal, green and amber and blue. The sheen of the waters first then mostly amber sand with the sky a haze, like mist on the surface of the crystals. Then the colors of the grass were added, with the last moisture of morning still on the blades. The sound of the fall circled in, a spiral of sound. It made his ears hurt.

Sarkalt walked to where the girdle had landed and knelt in front of it. What had been human in him disappeared between one step and the next.

The grass cushioned the soles of Gennady's boots, there was hardly any sound but his very presence screamed a difference in this place. Crystal became liquid silver in his hands as he picked the girdle up. "I want what these two here want, Overpriest. Our past and our future. Can you understand this?"

Green eyes looked up at him, but the woman spoke first. "He can't. It's not fair to ask it of him."

"Understand or give?" Sarkalt asked, but continued before any answer could be made. "I remember a story from the San's books, of all of them, this one speaks truth to me in an immediate form. Or the story was from the Law Clerk's books rather, but I don't think they would be different. Have you seen them?"

He nodded and the Overpriest continued, "At the breakpoint of Nexus Change, the black Phoenix set her goats free, with a path for them to follow, and water and food on that path, and a home, much as they had always known, at the end of it."

Garm's story, but the one he had told in the diamond. Allwyk had found only isolated similarities in several of the books. "And of the rest of it?" Gennady said as he let the girdle fall again. The crystals were cold, but then the girdle always had been cold.

Sarkalt smiled through the sound. "This is most of what you need to know."

"What?" The goats? Of the entire story, just the goats being set free?

"A path, Zimmer. And perhaps, at the end, a home. What more concerns you?" White braids floated across the girdle, leaving a shimmer of a different green in their wake, but impossible to say if only a break in the reflection of the grass or trails of Ri-light. But green sparked in the Overpriest's eyes as he looked back up. "How was the portal from the diamond to here opened? Who do you have that can access overpattern?"

Gennady didn't answer.

Quin'tat stepped closer. Black hair, but the sun glazed the breaks in the tips to red. A strong face, Gennady thought. From the lines around his eyes and mouth, the man was as used to worry as to joy. "All the spins say that the Simic and the Weaver went through the first portal -- the silver bird -- from Palace to the diamond. All the spins beg the presence of a third person without being able to supply a hint of their identity. Who?"

Gennady remained silent as he stared at the play of lights on the sunstones. When Cassa had brought the girdle with her, the central stone, where it would fit against the small of the back, only that one had been a sunstone. A banded Li-Cassa seedpod. She hadn't known what that was, the flower or the girdle, hadn't known its value, or the value of even the shaped glass with the girdle so obviously a thing only a Priest would wear in a ritual dance. "It's mine," she had said.

How much to give, he wondered? And wondered as well, how much was his to give. But he knew it wasn't time yet, feeling a strange sympathy from the man who knelt on the damp grass by his feet.

The first time he had seen Cassa had been in Cam city, the old sector where the marsh met what passed for dry land. He and Simitta were serving as guards on a merchant ship, watching as Camerat laborers loaded bundles of reeds into the open belly. It was a swamp, the place stank. He had sensed her before seeing her. A crawling sensation across his skin, then an itch of his palms. And then she was there, by the hatch, watching him back.

Sarkalt was still watching him. "Lillisim world-net speaks of the girdle if you care to listen. Before the Altasimic sector was created, the suns whose deaths created those systems, when they were made, the record was made. Only in the birth of a sun can a sunstone be deliberately shaped. Only in the death of one can it be harvested."

Sarkalt's eyes returned to the mound. "That power is a part of Empire, Lord Gennady. The kind of power that can see so far ahead, that can hold a world like Lillisim almost suspended in time." He looked back at his people. "Not constant, but a slow spiraling, Change to Change."

He began to touch the meanings in the Overpriest's words then drew back, not wanting to know how old this world must be and how it was held, and why. "Spiraling into what?" he asked, mostly to cover the insane whisper of the world-net.

"Lillisim is the Simic germ-world. Not the home world, but the one used to set the world-pattern lines. From this? Altasimic, I think."

"And it's purpose?"

"The Altasimic Sector is warded. The girdle would be both key and power source for loosening the warding."

"And Cassa? What has she to do with this?"

"Cassa?" En'talac asked.

"Her name," he replied shortly. A path and a way home, Sarkalt was right about that much, it was most of what he needed. Wanted. "She's no black Phoenix."

"She was and she will be again," Quin'tat said. "This is happening over and over, and just once. Like paper folded in pleats to one thickness. Time doesn't exist to overpattern."

Quin'tat walked to stand next to the woman. Mated. Gennady saw the union in the small movements between them. Children, he wondered? The possession in those movements said more than just the two of them, it spoke of loss as well. En'talac turned in her man's arms and her dark eyes curved higher as she smiled. "He means that we'll do it until we get it right, Lord Gennady." Her voice was husky.

"Will we?" he asked.

"Someone will," Sarkalt said as he stood, the girdle hooked over his wrist. White fire was in the crystal, the color from his robes. White like the flowers. "Lillisim and Altasimic are linked, the original keying was done from here. With the breakpoint of catastrophic Nexus Change this close to Lillisim, the linking won't hold."

"And if it doesn't?"

Quin'tat answered. "The energy lines making up the Warding boundary will release all at once. The entire Sector will implode, taking Lillisim and most of the Simic worlds with it."

En'talac took the girdle, Sarkalt's eyes following the movement, and his hand touching hers longer than was necessary. And what of Quin'tat? Gennady wondered. The man's utter stillness was more telling than anything he could have said.

"Who do you have that can access overpattern, Zimmer?" Sarkalt asked again. "Poss a'ltic?"

"No." She might still live, but what she might become was too far in the future to do them any good right now.

Quin'tat broke the silence that followed his answer. "Was Poss a'ltic the one we can't see in the spins?"

He shook his head. "Ulanda." The world-net howled with the word. He flinched as the world turned color and would have drawn a weapon if he had one. He blinked the yuin sight away. "No dreams on that one, Overpriest?"

"The dreams are of a new creation." Arms folded and tucked, braid ends floating -- beads of moisture showed on his upper lip and stray black curls caught in the runs of sweat at his temples. The startling green and black eyes narrowed as the Overpriest faced the sun. "Altasimic. Do you see the truth of her people in her?"

No shade, just reeds and grass, and the water. Mid-morning and getting very hot, it wasn't a time for dreams, Gennady thought. He shrugged then looked back along the spiral path towards the spring. The stand of trees near it were a tall plume of green in the distance, shimmering in the hot air, less real than the dunes behind, and those danced as though seen through water.

"The old Simic tells stories," he said. "I don't know what's true and what isn't. Or how much it matters. As for Ulanda, if you need power, she has it. Can the snapping be prevented?"

"Does the story question it's ending?"

"Ask the Simic, not me." Gennady took a step towards the shade, or perhaps towards his flitter beyond that. He kept his mouth open to get what cooling he could that way and turned his head slightly to catch the movement of the air

against his raised crest, shaking his head to help the heat dissipate. Sarkalt matched his step and the other two followed them.

He had left his honor blade on the stone between the stands of reeds, the trees a short distance now, and more real that close. The same stone near where Cassa had waded in Li-Fu's tale. And carried a crystal gun in her roll, if the Simic-priest could be believed. Probably she had carried it up the spiral with her, not caring about such things past avoiding obvious trouble, and Temple Net, any Temple Net, ignored her as much as it was able to, and if challenged, let her do whatever she wanted.

"I can give you Ulanda," he said as he strapped his blade sheath onto his leg. "Cassa's death stopped the invasion of overpattern into the world-patterns, but Ulanda could easily start it again. I'd say your greatest reassurance is that Cassa has set this up to an end that almost certainly includes the survival of her people. You'll get your sector Opening on her terms, not the loom-master's..."

Sarkalt stopped. "Anga."

He turned to face him. "He's on the Ladybug. And Ulanda. She's facing certain death regardless so you might take some care in her handling. She's no fool... and Cassa had a temper that didn't always take consequences into account." What he had to say didn't take long and he was glad of it. It wasn't any cooler here; perhaps the trees would be better. Dusty things, they looked like green sheeting, the edges frayed by the dry wind.

And the last: "Cassa said the girdle was hers. I understand why now." The second time, she had taken the girdle from a ward-sealed pouch in a Minik wolf-ship. Salvage work she had said, and laughed, even cycling, she'd laughed. Salvage by the time she was finished with it. They had been apart -- one of the longer times, several years -- she had worked a few weeks at most at each job. Pay was good leading a soft-entry team against raider ships and the time scale fit her moods. He always found her.

"It's mine," Cassa had whispered against his arm as he held her, feeling more than the rancid sweat that rolled off her face, smelling the fear and the drugs that helped keep her body alive while too much else of her reached out for a place where nothing human could live. He had thought she was dying, seeing something in her that he hadn't before: a surrendering. A weakness he had thought then.

The entire back of the girdle had been sunstones she eventually told him, only the ties were still glass. There had been no way of knowing where the girdle had been in the years since they had sold it, whose hands it had passed through. No record existed on the Minik ship of where they had bought it, or stolen it more likely; no mention that they even had it on board.

And the Spann? A Voice for one of the High Families had been involved in the original negotiations for the Ladybug, but indirectly, the connection mentioned as



a bargaining ploy by p'Lith^yin, the Pinnit Clan Cruz merchant they had dealt with. Even if the Spann had suspected something of the girdle's purpose, or potential, they would have let it go. Fate and luck. A Voice of that people would have believed in both. And Cassa -- the Spann had let her go for the same reason. He had used that faith then and many times since.

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Ulanda stood by the doorway, the three Zimmer spaced in the corridor so that no matter which way she looked one of the triad was in sight. Her escort. They shadowed her without ever quite appearing to watch. From Simitta, she had felt what? Passion? Each time she tried to find a less inclusive word, the word was wrong. Everything from him was clear except her understanding. What each of the triad watching her felt was different. If fear were a taste, this would be of stone wet with acid. An Empire priest? They didn't see one in front of them. A god? Their god?

Inside wasn't the bedroom she had expected, but a large hall, empty except for the pallet and rugs in the center. The walls were of tiles made to look like white shell, but the floor was painted in geometric designs, colored from red to violet to black.

Bolda looked up as she walked in -- a signal for the others to turn and look -- all but Garm and a white haired woman kneeling next to him. He appeared to be asleep, but the warding field around him made it difficult to be certain. She stayed by the door, the nearest of the triad close enough to touch but still in the corridor.

"Prayer marks," Gennady said.

She hadn't sensed his approach. "Lord Gennady?"

"The patterns on the floor, Lady Priest. "Zimmer warriors prefer to wade in the Wu'loss cass while waiting for battle. This is a holding area for assault troops. The wall here..." He gestured. "... opens to the biting mouth of the ship." Amused and courteous. There wasn't the challenge of earlier in his voice, when they had been trying for the portal. Something had changed in the hours on Lillisim.

The toe of one white boot touched a zigzag line and he smiled, showing a sharp honor tooth. "Perhaps the prayers have helped San Garm."

"Or the Temple medic did."

He bowed his acceptance of her opinion. "Master Medic En'talac, of the Overpriest's Household."

At her name, the woman beside Bolda finally looked up and nodded to her. Ranking was prominent in the Net link offered at the same time, and was all Ulanda took from the first curious touch before dropping it. The Medic turned back to Garm almost immediately; Ulanda didn't think she had ever had her full attention.

Two of the others with the medic were Simic, from Lillisim. She could see Garm in how they moved. And Li-Fu if she thought about it. The image of the other woman tried to become real, an attempt at using the uncooperative Net, or a strong memory, she wasn't sure. And wanted neither.

"May I be of service, Lady Priest," Gennady asked.

"I presume too much on your service. I wonder you don't tire of me." She turned her back on him -- if challenged, to simply see Garm better -- and willed him to vanish as he had arrived. Without her notice.

So, go see Garm, she told herself. Or insist on the level of Net that would let her be next to him as easily and with more privacy than if she actually walked over. Or pattern... and not have to ask anyone or be seen. Gennady wasn't the only one watching. Could she create a small place just for the two of them?

Cold that had nothing to do with the frigid air made her shiver and rather than think about options, she stepped through the prayer shapes. The colors made her head spin and if she looked too long, or more than necessary to set her feet, the people came, those who had drawn the marks. And most of those were dead. They were whispers in her ears, insistent: remember me!

One of those from the group around Garm blocked her from getting closer. Her head was to his shoulder; he was a heavy, solid man, wearing Temple dress, with a narrow braid on one wrist to cover the Household oath marks. Sarkalt's man. Quin'tat.

Half into his introduction, she asked, "How is he?"

The medic spin hovered within reach, evolving as the information was fed in. All of it was from the globe of Lillisim Temple Net they had brought and Ulanda didn't touch it again past knowing it was there.

"The damage has been repaired," Quin'tat said. Neither his voice nor posture showed the wariness she could feel in him. "The immediate problem was the head injury from the impact... and the easiest to correct. What is complicating his regaining his strength is the disruptive effect of pattern on his system. The damage is progressive as long as he is exposed to overt use of pattern energies. His age, of course, slows any recovery."

"He's an old man. He was already dying." Her throat tightened, not from tears but from the anger growing out of uncertainty. Would this room whisper with Garm's voice as well, one Simic among all the Zimmer? She laughed suddenly. Not this small place. Not for him.

The warding lights flared at her laugh and Bolda looked up again. Warded against her, she realized, and saw how fragile they were. At the same instant, Quin'tat tried to block her again in much the same way as he had stepped out in front of her. Heavy lines creased downwards from his wide lips and deepened as he seemed to shrink into himself. Under his eyes was darker worn looking skin, looking like crumpled silk or dried fruit.

"I wouldn't recommend doing that," she said, keeping her voice low, as though it would prevent every eye from being on her.

"No." His hands trembled as he made a formal motion of apology.

"I didn't know you before," she added, just to say something to cover his reaction to her.

"No." The word was breathed as though he were one of the ghosts here. Then he seemed to gather himself, becoming solid again. "We don't know very much about you, but... I know that much. The Overpriest I know, my Sarkalt, he didn't know you either. Or rather, who you might have been in our reality. The Emperor and some others went to great lengths that he didn't know about Altasimic." He looked towards the medic and she returned his look but easier.

Bolda got up, brushing the knees of his trousers as he straightened, and the man looked at him next, not at her. "And in everything we could find out about the alternative reality," Quin'tat continued in his slow manner, "you were conspicuous mostly by an absence of something that should have been there. Lord Gennady couldn't give us much more..."

"But he gave you me," she interrupted, angry again at hearing the Zimmer's name. She looked back. He was gone. "Or sold me."

"A poor bargain if you're the goods," Bolda said shortly. "Don't let her push you around."

Quin'tat coughed. "An interesting suggestion."

"Yeah, well." Bolda puffed, getting rounder, then his eyes narrowed, seeing her close up. And he snorted. "Having fun, were we?"

She had forgotten about the cross-marks. They didn't hurt. "Not much," she said, feeling her face burn, knowing that the marks were more obvious for her embarrassment.

"I wanted to suggest," Quin'tat started then coughed again. "We have access to..."

Bolda snorted. "She seems to be doing just fine with Simitta."

"We were thinking more of..."

"No," she said. All the 'we's' this man threw out as though diluting the authority could hide the Overpriest. Sarkalt. She'd be used again. The portal opening and now this. The dance she had learned -- meant for her Initiation -- was the germ of Altasimic pattern and would serve as well to trigger the Altasimic Opening. Using her power, her link to overpattern.

“Lady Priest...”

And then she would die. “I said no. And I would suggest you remember that I haven’t said yes to anything.” Saying no like she was two years old. Except she probably hadn’t then. I’m defining myself again, she wanted to say and then laugh in the man’s face. She could draw a line and dare him to cross. Would she be... what? Three years old now and stamping one foot?

Then the wards flared again. And held. “One more,” she whispered, finding it her turn to be a ghost. Most of her watched the new overpattern tear join the others, the spiral shape growing as fast.

It was nothing to the others here, she realized as she blinked the image away. The two men heard the words and that’s all. She lost the will to play games; the spiral had its own rules. No one here believed she would survive Nexus Change, and too many of them were willing to make sure she didn’t. Use her, yes. Use her link to overpattern and her training in the Altasimic dance. You don’t form an emotional bond with an animal you’re leading to slaughter.

“Let me know when there’s any change,” she said, already turning to leave. The small medic was the only one not to watch her go.

The walls of her room were clean, the blood gone. On the blanket covering the bed was a writing case. Full grain black leather, smooth and soft. Freshly polished, the scent of the wax would stay on her hands. The fine knit mitts she wore hid the stained braids but had a good portion of the finger ends cut off so she could feel what she handled.

She ran her fingers over the leather. In the box portion of the case, the thickness of three fingers held together, was a white ink stone in a crossed support and a row of tiny boxes underneath that held the ink sticks. A flask of water. Pens and brushes, each in a separate tube. Small squat inkwells, three of them, made of glass with deeply cut lines from rim to bottom. Green, blue and black ink. A hollow silver tube. A roll of felts and several folded cloths. Hard waxes. A seal, Garm’s Signature worked on the surface.

Shaped like a ring and cold, the seal felt like ceramic, but smelling a sweet odor, she thought it might be a kind of wood. She could have followed the scent, the world beckoned her. And suddenly, instead of the cold white light of the ship, there was sunlight. A bird filled her vision, colors in a blinding swirl, then she saw it whole and as quickly, it was gone. The bird was all the colors of the Zimmer prayers but the forest surrounding was dark green, the light in broken threads never reached the surface. Dust blinked in and out of existence, crossing the beams, riding the current left by the bird’s flight, no other wind broke through the canopy of leaves.

And she was back on the ship. The air had burned her eyes and lungs; she couldn’t stop coughing for several minutes. Ammonia? The smell lingered but

might have been in her throat. How real had it been, she wondered as she wiped her eyes on her sleeve. A pattern pull? Obviously of some kind -- the ability teased her mind with possibilities. Could she re-create the moment when Gennady met with Sarkalt in the spiral? Hear first-hand what had been said?

Except I don't even know how to begin, she thought, and let the ring fall off her finger to the bed. Her wrists ached from supporting the weight. If she had known how to control her access to pattern, she never would have ended up orbiting Lillisim. It wasn't too late, she thought and smiled. Carefully, I'll begin carefully. She could try using something associated with a specific event.

In the flat side of the case was the spare sheet of the gold-faced paper Garm had been using for his story. She remembered the mess he had made of the first sheet, the crosshatch game, and how she had found the paper in a crumpled ball on a chair.

Could she see him there? Holding the paper, she let her mind drift. Nothing. Only what she saw in front of her was real, she couldn't make it past the details and on closing her eyes, saw only the last image. "Does what I want matter?" she whispered to the gilded paper. The Altasimic Opening? They had gone from need to need and still there wasn't a place for her. Her life depended on what she could do for Garm, for Sarkalt, Anga, Gennady... and her death depended on as much. A sense of inevitability threatened and she took refuge in a hope she could control the details. Or one detail. Like surviving. She had a long habit of survival.

Putting the gold sheet down, she fanned the white cotton rag paper underneath, feeling the different weights, then pushed them aside. There wasn't anything there that drew her. Last were sheets of other samples, a tiling of fiber types on each page to make a basket weave. All that was under the samples was a display surface the size of a standard sheet of paper, the accompanying recording crystal hidden in the fold of the case.

Instead of a pattern pull, she wanted to write, suddenly needed to. Garm's story, the one about the black Phoenix. And his books, Gennady had them, or Allykh did, the man had been talking to Garm about the stories, checking historical points for some analysis he was doing. Perhaps all she needed to do was write the difference. What did she want? To be an Altasimic Priest? To take the ending Cassa hadn't by dying in the spiral? To be what she was supposed to have been, would have been, except for Garm and Cassa.

She could try writing and seeing what future evolved under her pen. She wanted to know what the other stories Garm had told of possible futures. Could she ever be free of him? He was right about one thing, the part of her that was Cassa belonged to him, and him to her. She knew it from the panic she felt hearing he was injured, in the lack of alternatives that had had her trailing Zimmer escorts on her way to him, needing to actually see him alive.

"Ulanda..." Li-Fu spoke the word softly, then once more but Ulanda didn't turn to look or acknowledge her. "May I come in?"

The woman was fiddling with the lid of a tiny wooden box that didn't want to open or she couldn't get the right grip on it. Then, when Li-Fu was about to repeat the question, she looked up.

"Did I invite you here?"

"Why should I think myself unwelcome?" she answered harshly, then regretted the tone. "I'll be going back with the Overpriest's people." Three steps took her to the bedside where Ulanda sat with a writing case open beside her. "To the surface. I wanted to see you first, to apologize, or to explain."

Efflin started to follow her in, but stopped with a look. No need to use the ship's Net, her aide knew her. The same woman, almost. And if she found the sameness unnerving, what must it be to Efflin who had seen her mistress's body, had dressed it for burial.

"Will you talk with me?"

Ulanda didn't answer, didn't look up from working the small box.

"If you won't talk," Li-Fu began, and turned around in the first movement of the Blessing dance, letting the flare of the skirt at the hem ripple in six folds. A floor length gown in dark green with a slightly paler pattern, a watered angora with vines and flowers stamped during the dying, not woven in, long amber ties down one side, the whole thing very loose. Her hair was covered in a twisted scarf, amber and green stripes, the green seeming to rise in a spiral shaped crown about her head. More formal than the usual, but Cassa at least had liked textiles, and they had thought this might help.

Ulanda's eyes followed the wave of the cloth. "Why?" she asked.

It had helped, gaining her attention at least. Li-Fu laughed but spoke more quietly when the woman flinched at the sharp sound. "Why do I want to talk? I think that's obvious. Or why am I dressed like this? I'm ranking Priest there. Regardless of what else this place is it's still Lillisim."

Ulanda's thumbnail finally caught under the lid of the ink box, flipping it from her fingers. A gray-blue ink stick fell out onto a sheet of white cotton paper. "And the people there?" she asked as she picked the narrow stick up carefully.

The ink was shaped into a stem of tiny flowers. "The same. Nothing ever changes on Lillisim."

"And you came back as well."

How much did Ulanda remember? "We talked of many things. At the diamond point, that is. I suppose Lillisim wasn't the wisest topic. Or it was, considering what would have happened if we hadn't come here." She sighed. "Or not

happened if the reality had been so much different. We had to use the triggers Sarkalt had built into your training, and Sarkalt had far too close a link to the Empress."

Ulanda was biting her lip and frowning, staring at the ink stick as though it might sting her.

Li-Fu waited. The silence dragged. How had her father managed, she wondered as a wave of exasperation flowed over her. She wanted to keep that feeling rather than the one that would grow if she let herself think about what this person really was.

She took a slow breath instead. "Were you going to write something?" The color would hardly show on the white paper, if the ink were opaque, then something dark would be better. "My aide could help you set up, act as a Scribe if you like. She isn't up to Scribe Hall standards, but I wouldn't think the Zimmer here have anyone you could use." Efflin poked her head inside the door, watching now as well as listening. Her expression was carefully neutral but Li-Fu could see her distaste for the idea in the very familiar drawing in of her lips.

"I want to meet him," Ulanda said and put the ink stick back in the box. "The Overpriest. Sarkalt."

The offer she had been working towards. There was no chance involved in the request, the pattern lines -- such as she was capable of sensing -- vibrated in harmony with each word Ulanda spoke. Vibrated and then sank without a trace, leaving a void that gave her the same feeling as those hours at Cam'lt Temple had. Nerves in her skin tingled then progressed to the sensation of pinpricks. Being near Ulanda made her physically ill.

"He'll come," she said, keeping as much of what she felt out of her voice as she could. "If you ask it."

Ulanda shook her head. "On the surface." Then shuddered, and what little Li-Fu could sense of her shifted again and she pulled back into herself.

"If you wish him..."

"Can you feel them?"

Her skin crawled harder. Another overpattern spiral? "Not really. I can... feel something, but I think it's through you more than anything."

"Why did you go to Palace? You were with Anga."

Li-Fu sat down on the edge of the bed. I'd like him here now, she thought, shaken. Not still in that box of a room the Zimmer had given them. Anga had laughed at her raging and written a poem about patience. He had laughed harder at the news about Sarkalt and the Altasimic Opening. He had an easy confidence and had no doubts of their ultimate success. She used that part of him, feeding off the rock-solid surety to quell her own doubts.

"I was there to help force the issue with Sarkalt," she said, looking down at her hands. Her braids had been changed, the overbraids in the same muted blend as

the paler greens in her gown. Silk though, not goat hair, and a luxury on Lillisim, even in Temple. Efflin didn't usually do the braiding but the result was more familiar -- and more comfortable -- than what Clanny had managed.

"The Overpriest Mullaki was there for the same reason," she continued. "My Temple ranking is negligible compared to hers but what I am makes a difference. Being Simic. Not just in what we're doing here, but in Temple as well." And Garm's daughter -- that had taken her there instead of some other Simic-priest.

"Sarkalt and Anga..."

"Were reluctant allies. Or friendly enemies. With a game as long as the one they play, the two things aren't always easily distinguished." She turned her head, feeling a smile just starting around her mouth. "And now Lord Gennady."

The smile bloomed; she couldn't help it, coming a good part from a wry embarrassment. She'd like to try that contest another time. If she understood nothing else about Cassa, she understood the woman's attraction towards the Zimmer. "Lord Gennady was picked up by Anga as soon as the Empress made a move. We wanted as many avenues open as possible. He was at Palace at the exact moment she returned, out of all moments. He had to be important."

"And me?"

"You were dead, that's all Anga thought he needed to know about you." The smile was gone as quickly as it had come. Before getting involved, she had insisted on all the spins, had used everything she knew to make sure nothing important had been left out and still hadn't known about Ulanda's existence except in the most general of terms until it was too late and they had access to Sarkalt's records.

Ulanda dropped the tiny wooden box and the ink stick rolled out. She picked at the knit of her mittens, her finger nails rough, one obviously torn and chewed. Except for what her eyes told her, Li-Fu had lost all sense of her as human. Only overpattern remained.

She crossed her arms, tucking up tightly as though the fear was a small animal she could hold still and keep from burrowing. She remembered the Cam'lt Temple of the diamond, when she had been in the walkway and what little she had seen but more, felt. More than she ever had before, or wanted to again. Overpattern in the Simic world-pattern and in those small tops that Olumka had spun. How she had been drawn to them. She glanced at the doorway. Efflin was still there.

"Simitta," she mouthed, not daring anything in the ship's Net that Ulanda might respond to.

But it wasn't Simitta who arrived, but her father, blinking rapidly as though not certain of his vision, and pale, his face a muddy yellow. En'talac and Quin'tat right behind him.



He stopped next to her; the three of them and the bed filled the small room. En'talac and Quin'tat blocked the doorway. "Shall we use Lillisim Temple Net to sort out the ranking here, then?" her father asked them.

En'talac looked as though she would have liked to, but Quin'tat gathered her in. "I think we want to avoid that," he said firmly and signed honor as he spoke. Then, his eyes on Ulanda, he asked Garm, "Do you need our help?"

"No."

The man nodded. "The flitter won't hold everyone so Lord Gennady is sending the pod down instead. We'll wait for you there." Efflin pressed against the side of the corridor to let them pass, caught her eye and shrugged an apology.

"Are you finished here?" her father asked in the same cold tone he'd used with Sarkalt's Chief of Staff.

His face was difficult to look at. She got up and he moved back the same measure. She saw none of the man she had known -- the father to her and the husband to her mother. Tass'alt. She never thought of her two tass'altin past the pleasure they gave. There was little need on her part for their more specialized services -- certainly nothing requiring the level of trust that produced bonding -- but they were a luxury to have on Lillisim, like the silk cords she preferred from the Danlin cluster, and the incense sticks from Vinsin. She had taken what luxury she could.

"You'll kill yourself for nothing," she said, more than matching his cold.

But he shook his head then looked away from her. "I died a long time ago. I fell from the colonnade at Palace, to the rocks on the mountain below. I thought I could fly."

He looked at Ulanda as he spoke, and she looked at him, the frown gone, and the worry. Amused, a little anyway, a small smile touched her lips. The ink stick was out of the box again and cradled in the palm of one hand.

"Have you decided, then?" Ulanda asked softly. "Who I am?"

He took the ink stick from her hand. "I can see who you are."

Her attempt at a tight link failed. "Father, if I might see you in private..."

Boot steps in the corridor produced a flurry from Efflin, then Simitta was leaning against the door as though he had been for some time. Threads of ship's Net drifted around him, Command level, where the feeds from the passive eyes led.

"Best you go now, Simic-priest," he said, his tone a mirror to what Gennady's had been in the diamond. "You'll get your Altasimic Opening. She's set this up so that happens."

Ulanda or the Empress? Li-Fu ignored the Zimmer to try her father one more time. "I've staff at the Temple on Lillisim. They can do whatever needs doing, at least for her just talking with the Overpriest. Will you stay here?"

He held the ink stick in his hand still, running one finger along the surface. Something important? An ink stick? She couldn't pick up anything from him, with Ulanda around it was like trying to see stars in the day sky.

"Father..."

He turned eyes towards her that were as expressionless as his words had been earlier. "Simic and Altasimic. The beginning and the end. I had thought the stories meant you. I don't think so."

"You have someone else in mind who can set the Simic portion of the Opening?"

"Opening?" His questioning tone was mild, but at least some tone showed in a welcome change.

"What are you talking about then?"

His eyes blinked back to just tired and he shook his head. "I go with my Lady," he said in High-formal, with signs that a tass'alt would use to one not of that Priest's Household, and of lower rank.

Simic-green dripped from her braid ends to scatter across the floor, startling her. Efflin shoved into the room past Simitta, elbowing him. He laughed at the boldness, she could feel him now, but not her father or Ulanda

"Lili, come out of here," Efflin said softly, taking her arm, pulling to get her attention. And with the diminutive of her name, gained her father's attention as well. The blank look on his face edged close to collapse and the hand holding the ink stick shook.

"Lili, I'm sorry," he whispered. "Your mother..."

The green had sparked out and she was past being embarrassed at the lack of control it showed. "She wanted more than a life of Temple service on Lillisim," she said.

"Yes."

Only the one word, she didn't think he had the strength to nod. Ulanda hadn't moved, wasn't there except she made an effort to see her.

She was past caring about that either. "So did I," she said, turning away from her father as she said it and allowed Efflin to lead her out. And at the door, to Simitta: "I'll expect Anga at the pod. See to it."

Niv liked the reeds and the water and the heat, and liked that the wet of the morning was still rising about him. Voices surrounded him, in the wind and Temple Net both, and each called for his attention. He willed the sound of the

wind in the grasses to be louder than both. Splashing water, he flexed his scales, reset and smoothed.

The wind was softer, or was losing out to the voices. Sarkalt and Ulanda. Or he had momentarily forgotten it was a different Sarkalt, one he didn't have to hear.

I died, he thought again as he splashed water. Ri-altar. And saw as though reflected in the drops of water, the curtain of Ri-light. Trying not to think didn't stop this thought, nor did squeezing his eyes shut stop the vision, and it came as it had, over and over, since he had woken in this place.

I died in my Priest's service, he thought later, watching the other Sarkalt at the near turn of the spiral arm. Ulanda stood by him, her eyes to the water. The others spoke of her as though she would be different than he remembered, but he couldn't see the difference where he could in Sarkalt.

From the other way: "Niv. I've had the Stewards set out tea for us under the trees."

"San Garm..."

"Just Garm, Niv. We don't need titles between us."

Leaving his robe behind, he reluctantly followed the other man, wearing only the draped skirt around him and that still wet. The narrow serpentine pleats twisted as each sipped the moisture from the next and released it unwillingly.

"They're talking over long," he said, feeling nervous, dreading equally the finish of the talking and the waiting for it to finish. "What need do they have to talk?"

"Something to do." The man smiled as he knelt and motioned a spot opposite the tray. "She's agreed, by the way."

Coarse grass was under his knees and he let the skirt tangle with the long blades, white pleats fighting with the green. "San Garm, what else could she do? She's alive now, so she has to hope she can live."

"Please, call me Garm."

Threads of Temple Net surrounded the other tass'alt, and if he cared to look, Niv could see a tiny Ulanda and Sarkalt, their forms surrounded by the signatures of those of Sarkalt's staff who also pulled the lead. "Them too?" he asked. "Do the rest of his staff call you Garm?"

Garm's eyes sparkled green as he laughed. He didn't remember that from this man.

"They don't want to challenge me, Niv. In case they challenge her. Unless you want them here..." He swung his legs out and leaned back against the tree, a sigh concluding his words and the question they asked.

Niv clicked his nails, splitting a blade of grass in two. "I don't know them." He wiped his fingers along a pleat of the skirt leaving green stains. Let the waiting take forever. "I don't know him."

"He won't accept that, Niv."

Looking up, he saw the truth of the words in Garm's face. He had watched this man grow old in brief glimpses. A measure against the slower pace of his own years, he had thought, where Sarkalt could give him no measure at all. He had been drawn to this man's age, as he had to other older tass'alt, envying them past the usual honor due them. Their very existence was a measure of their success, and with their lives almost completed, still successful.

"I should have stayed dead."

Garm had the teapot and was trying to pour. The hot liquid spilled on the tray. "But you're not dead. What do you intend to do about it?"

Niv took the heavy pot from the older man, his free hand signing his disinterest in discussing his private affairs. "What I will do has nothing to do with what I won't."

He might as well not have bothered. Garm chuckled. "Do you think to go back to Camerat, then?"

Camerat was his brother's blood on his hands. Washing hadn't removed the color, only replaced it with the dark blue of a breeding male. That same Son-rise as had seen his brother's death, had shown the blue like a corona on the scales on Niv's palms.

He shook his head when Garm repeated the question. "Feuds between Families on Camerat are a bush with deep roots but few leaves. Right after I was captured on a raid, I started coloring in dark. The Mothers of my family shrugged and said to keep me. If you lose something valuable, how can you expose yourself by saying you want it back? Those who had done the capturing, in order to out-do such disregard, clipped my neck ring, making me a slave of the lowest kind. They went too far."

"The tree threatened to sprout too many leaves?"

A dangerous thicket of bushes as other Families had gotten involved. "I was given to Temple with the understanding I would be sent off-world. Tass'Holding offered me the training and I accepted."

Using both hands, Garm lifted his bowl with more success than he had the pot. He took a sip and rested hands and tea bowl in his lap. "The teachers in Temple would have encouraged you to chose the tass'alt training."

"Yes," he said. He had been easily encouraged.

"And with a certain attraction as well." Garm slid a flat plate towards him. Under a tea spotted cloth were small butter cookies spiced with pemt'ka algae and a single bite each.

Yes. A certain attraction which didn't replace what he had lost. Poss a'ltic shouldn't have brought him back from his brother's death; the memory would have consumed him as the Ri-light had consumed his Sarkalt.

He picked up a cookie. Golden brown at the edge, the colour of the Simic's skin in the shadow of the tree, the dark flecks showed best in the cream center.

Pemt'ka algae? On Lillisim? He hadn't known he was hungry. The last cookie and he took the time to savor the taste.

"Niv?" Ulanda whispered his name and she knew he heard, but he didn't turn to her. The Overpriest waited where she'd left him.

When he didn't answer, she knelt on the grass next to Garm, across from him. "Is this a private party or may I join," she said as though she hadn't said anything before. Eyes of turquoise, without whites, blinked at her.

"Do you see three tea bowls?" Garm asked in a fair imitation of Bolda. "Or any cookies left?"

"I'll use your bowl," she said and sat with her back against Garm's legs. The hand that smoothed her hair was scented with lemon tea and the algae Bolda had packed the dried fish in.

Garm's hands went from smoothing her hair to a quiet check of her g'ta points. I said yes, she wanted to tell him, but knew he had been following the conversation such as it was. Besides, she wasn't sure. The word had been said, but she had no sense of what had happened other than that. Besides, he would check how she was anyway. And did with a gentle rubbing at each of the energy points, her neck to her shoulders, and she shook him off, then sighed and leaned back again. The rubbing felt good although a scratching would be better. The robe was itchy against any place it touched skin.

An almost clear membrane flickered across and back Niv's eyes as he watched Garm's hands move against her skin. "They said you would be different," he said all at once then signed an apology and a negative form confused together.

"I thought you would be different also," she said, resisting the urge to move closer. He wasn't different at all. She hadn't believed Quin'tat. And her? Perhaps what had changed wasn't the part Niv cared about. "Are you sure you're remembering the right person? It's been close to fifteen years since I saw you last."

"I can see who I remember." Niv watched her, not the pot as he poured the tea. "A child who grew up one afternoon while walking the path to Ri-altar. A woman who never stopped walking that path." He passed the bowl, cradling her hands until she had it steady. His hands were warm and as he drew them back she could feel the tiny scales that covered his fingers. The first sip of tea had the taste of him in it.

"Walking that path will take my entire life," she said over the top of the bowl. The membranes stayed over his eyes as his nostrils widened. Shared memories. The very same Niv. Cassa's then. Like her, like Garm.

Garm's breath was close to her ear, blowing the loose hair. "You might show some of the manners I remember you knowing. You talk over and around me." His hands were around her waist now and he had gotten to his knees to hold her

better. Twisting the tea bowl from her hands, he turned it and held it to her lips. "What Niv would give you." The words were harsh with anger. "Can you feel it?"

More than she could what Simitta had given in the cuts. She felt like laughing but the air was suddenly too cold to breathe that deeply. "Would give?" she managed, the tone as harsh as Garm's had been but not from the same anger she felt burning in him. Has given. Trying to push his hand away, she only succeeded in bumping her teeth against the bowl, pinching her lip.

Garm let the bowl drop, splashing hot tea on her leg. Suddenly gentle, his fingers brushed her mouth and she had to close her eyes to keep from deliberately biting him. The bitter and sour scent of age accompanied the fragrance of lemon on his breath as he turned her face and kissed her cheek with parchment dry lips.

Muscles protested being relaxed, but she let herself lean into him, giving him most of her weight. "The Overpriest is very fortunate," she whispered to Niv when she had the breath. The carefully neutral signs worked with her hands were for Garm's benefit, not Niv's.

Niv's crest had paled to almost white and was flattened to his skull. She could feel his misery like she could feel Garm against her.

"Niv," she whispered. "I don't know if there will be an after, or if an oath made to someone else..."

His head rose slowly. "He is different. You do see?"

"He's who he has to be. That you're here, means you're who you have to be too."

"And you? Once Sarkalt told you to do something and you said you were, but you didn't. Now you do and tell me you're not."

"I tried then, I'll try now. My failure wasn't from lack of wanting what Temple offered, regardless of why they wanted it."

"And what the Empress offers?"

"I don't know what that is, none of us do. Niv, you have to go to him."

An echo. I've heard that before, she thought, and as suddenly, knew Niv had also. And with those words, more: "Kill her." Overpriest Mullaki. Kill who?

The portal that led to Cam'lt Temple. Someone else had been drawn into making that portal open. The smell of burning flesh and a different color of blood in the spiral...

Then the sixth overpattern tear seared across her mind, and there wasn't room for anything else but that.

The curtains of her room were drawn against the afternoon sun when she awoke. A line of light at the bottom undulated as the heavy fabric fought the wind. Scorched smelling air, incense, and the smell of hot goat hair from the curtain.

She had to peel herself from Garm, her tissue-thin sleeping robe was soaked where they touched silk to skin, the bright greenish yellow deepened to gold. The same yellow she had worn to meet with the Overpriest -- green and yellow were the Temple colors and Li-Fu wore green.

The yellow looked good on Garm where it didn't with her sallow complexion. He was deeply asleep and didn't stir when she moved but his breathing was regular. He was born on Lillisisim, his body remembers.

She had slept for over an hour and woken to a green twilight. Dark green curtains made the room look as though it were under the ocean, a quiet that appeared to be real, not due to barriers set around the room. Perhaps everyone was asleep.

The bed was a thin mattress on a frame of open webbing; legs raised the structure a couple of feet off the tile floor. More goat hair was in the mattress, she itched at the pressure points. It was naturally lumpy or shaped to someone else through long use. On a table nearby was a brazier, a shallow bowl with sand and a stand of long narrow sticks in the center, incense wood from the scent that competed with the smell of goat. Brought in while they'd been sleeping.

Bolda's work. No one else would have dared arrange the sand in the brazier in a two tone spiral, six arms of black on an amber ground. She stood next to it, shivering from the quick drying of her robe, and ran her hand through the rise of smoke. And started laughing. Bolda, for sure. He had as good as made the brazier into an altar and the altar into a joke. Not just one kind of incense wood, but green, pale and dark, blue, yellow, red, or as close as she could tell in the green light, an opal white, and one stick alone in the center: black. The line of ash on the sticks had grown to half way.

"You should sleep until it's cooler," Garm said as he stretched. He did look better, or the light was kind.

Cooler, then cold, he had said. Nothing held the heat on this world when the night fell.

Her nipples were rising, the delicate silk of the still damp robe brushing them. It was so easy not to stay angry with him. Or it was the same familiarity as the first time he held her. She hadn't meant to wake him but she wasn't sorry.

"We'll go through the center of the spiral like those sticks," she said, drawing his eyes to the brazier. He got up on an elbow to see better. "Maybe we'll be

ashes as well." All the sticks were black where the line of burning had passed, and from them, a fine ash drifted to roll free on the sand, away from the breeze coming along the floor.

"I'm burning now." He patted the mattress beside him. "But not ashes, not yet."

She sat on the mattress in the cool of her own sweat and then turned to face him as she lay down. Her silver colored braid ends dragged along his skin as she reached out to touch his face.

As he kissed her palm where the full woven braids made an open circle, his tongue traced the lines on her skin. Fresh braids or nearly so, done before her meeting with the Overpriest. The metal embedded cords Garm had brought from Palace had served as a simple underbraid. He had insisted and they had been quickly washed and hung to dry, and were still warm from the sun when they were wrapped around.

"Salty," he said, his lips still against her skin. "You need a bath."

"And whose fault is that?" She pulled her hand away and scratched the palm against her robe. That had tickled, and more. She sat up in the bed and brought her knees up to under her chin. "After the meeting with Sarkalt, I thought En'talac was going to kill me. Or you. If she could have decided who she was more angry at."

With a fleeting touch, he pulled her robe down from her shoulders and then kissed the back of her neck, his lips barely touching her skin.

Despite everything, she did want him. The need of a Priest, of a woman used to having a man in her bed. And in a way, the force and singleness of his purpose had its own appeal despite that what he wanted took nothing of her as a person into account.

And, in showing her own singleness of purpose, the medic had been right. He needed to rest. "Garm, please..."

"We can give her more reason still to be angry." His voice was suddenly rough and his fingers matched in how they traced points down her spine, his nails digging into her flesh. She gasped and he pulled her to him, capturing her mouth with his, sucking on her lips. Then his mouth was on the cross-mark Simitta had left on her cheek, and his teeth as he bit at the barely closed cuts.

With a twist, she was off the bed. He didn't try to hold her back or follow, only watched with cold green eyes. Backing up until stopped by the wall, she touched her cheek. No blood, the cuts hadn't opened.

"You can have this room, I'll find someplace else." She looked around for her clothes.

He sat up on the bed. "For you, for the rest of your life, there's no place that I'm not there with you."



With the lavender ink stick in her palm, she hadn't questioned his coming to her, or the words he had spoken to Li-Fu. Or when Niv had left them. The fight had re-ignited, but hadn't lasted longer than the walk here.

"Then I'll make one. Niv said I was creating this."

"Did he? I didn't hear those words."

"He said I was moving even as I said I was sitting still. He knew her too, didn't he?"

"I won't fight with you about it." He patted the mattress beside him again. "It doesn't matter what he said. Come back to bed. Regardless of anything else, you can take this as a comfort willingly given."

"Didn't he know her?" Her voice came out near to a shout.

"Shall we fight again? From the end result of the one earlier, I wouldn't mind."

Their shouting match had ended here, in this bed. With effort, she lowered her voice. "Please tell me."

He pulled his legs around so he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his bare feet on the floor. "Of course he knew you. Didn't he say you hadn't changed?"

Shaking her head at the irony she heard, she spat out: "Damn you."

In a moment, he had aged to the old man she had first met. Or it was the light that had changed and was no longer as kind. His skin was gray. "Niv was quite right," he said, his voice stronger than he looked. He laughed soon afterwards like he didn't intend to ever stop. And easily took the Net lead from her as she called for help. On the link were two aides waiting on orders. "A bath first, then you will sleep until dinner, it's going to be a long night."

The bath was a bowl of water not much larger than the brazier and having to stand on towels to be sponged. Simic aides, of course, but she was surprised each time to see them, they looked so much like Garm. Two old men like twins; they didn't talk or even pull the Net to work smoothly together.

Garm laughed at their shyness in front of her and with the sound the aides hid their faces behind both hands with their fingers spread. Ulim, a finger taller than the other, had dropped the robes he had been carrying. "I'll finish here," Garm said in that strange version of old-tongue the aides had used instead of Simic-native. Apallim, shorter and wider, if thin can be called wider, grabbed the towels and bowl and they both ran out.

"What did they do?" she asked, still angry with him, but also amused. "Play a game of stones and sticks, and whoever lost got this job?"

"Several games, probably." He adjusted the robe he had just put on her, the white girdle still in his hand. The robe was yellow, an acid bright angora that itched already. "The worst in four out of six. They'll play more for avoiding this honor." He called into the Net for different clothes, not angora, and not yellow. Silk.

He laughed again as he slipped the heavy robe off her. "No goats."

The robe went on the floor to make a yellow rug, then her underrobe was flipped to cover it, a white cotton-like fabric, and he pulled her down, the cloth making a nest. The tiles were cool through the fabric.

Ulanda curled on her side, her back to where he knelt. His silver hair brushed her face as he bent over her, the strands moving in the breeze coming under the bottom of the curtain. "Sleep for a while longer," he said, his hands stroking her arm. Then softer than before, his fingers against the cuts on her cheek, he added, "I'm sorry about earlier."

She turned her head to see his face. "I'm not her."

"A part of you is. And that part is mine just as I'm hers."

"And after this happens? What part will be left?"

His eyes were gentle. "Would a lie from me change the truth? Nexus Change is peaking. The dance you'll perform will control the release of energy you're capable of linking with. There's no place in it for your survival."

She shook her head. "Li-Fu's story says differently. Niv, my Niv, being here says differently."

"If it helps, believe anything you like."

His eyes stared through her and she looked away. Luck. Should she hold her tongue right, burn a joss stick?

"This is the whole of creation right here." Garm pulled her closer until her head was tucked in the crook of his arm.

Ulim finally brought the change of clothes just when she had fallen asleep again. He coughed, waking them both, and knelt at the stand of beams where a door should be but led instead to a double-ended corridor lined by cabinets. Sleeves in various colors of silk hung like scarves from the bundle in his arms.

Garm pulled a heavy black robe from the bottom of the bundle, sending Ulim scrambling for the sliding underrobes. Holding the cloth at arms length, Garm turned full circle as though studying it in different lights. Without a word, he threw it down beside her on the makeshift bed.

A plain even-weave cloth but with the threads varying in thickness. Interesting in the hand even when the depth of the black colour kept the eye from seeing it properly. Where the cloth had been folded showed in the stubborn bending of the fibers, the black silk faded to dark green along the crease. While Garm sorted out the rumpled pile of underrobes, she smoothed the black overrobe on her lap.

"The pearl-silver silk matches your braids," Garm said. The underrobe fell on top of the other.

A satin weave, it was cool and would feel good against her skin. "If you say so," she said, and pushed it to one side to smooth out the black robe again.

Garm pulled the heavy robe from her hands. In the same movement as he let it drop to the floor, he knelt. Taking one of her hands in his, he turned it, showing

the same concentration as he had the robe earlier. “By the time you finished, your braids wouldn’t have matched the underrobe at all. The dye must not be fast.” As he had before, he kissed her palm, then not stopping, sucked on the tips of her fingers, one by one. A knee spread her thighs apart, he straddled one leg.

Her other hand was on his sleeve although she knew she didn’t have the strength to force him to let her go. Or the will to use the power she did have. And found she had no will against him at all, only for. His lips tasted of the cream from her hands.

Ulim coughed again and Garm turned his head. “Is there some place you have to go?” he asked coldly.

“Lord...” The old Simic’s voice cracked.

“Don’t be cruel,” she whispered into Garm’s ear, then bit the lobe. “Besides, I’ve never liked an audience.”

He laughed as he turned to face her again. He must have signed the aide leave to go, she heard him run away.

He didn’t call the aides back to dress her, but did it himself. The heavy robe moved with a solemn sweep of the tiles which she magnified into a small dance by twirling in place. Stopping with a curtsy to Garm, she asked, “Is this better than the yellow?” She had hoped to see him smile, but his eyes were a mirror to hers and she was suddenly terrified. “Black’s not my color,” she said hoarsely. He had said so.

For his answer, he pulled the curtains back: a wide terrace overlooking the spiral with the dunes behind. Sunset was over the world-altar, a single sun setting in a cobalt sky. A few stars showed; she had never seen real stars, only Net images.

She walked out onto the terrace to the sound of Temple drums, the large i’sin, capable of a deep throaty sound but barely hinting at their potential now. They would have brought them down while she’d been sleeping, one of the drums at each spring, under the trees.

Li-Fu would be at the center mound. Two of her, living and dead. Ulanda shuddered and crossed her arms, loosing her hands in the wide sleeves. I didn’t exist here, she thought, but the others, their bodies were in this reality, and pieces of their different lives were still here.

Garm entertained himself by directing the Stewards in setting up the dinner on the terrace, with Bolda moving most things that had already been placed. Three tall tables were set a little apart, each surrounded by spindle legged chairs, similar to those in Garm’s Suite in Palace.

Time passed while she listened to the drums and followed the matching evolution of the sound and how the lines of power were growing. The Simic portion of the Opening. They had pushed out the world-net as best they could,

one layer of the warding was just to do that, but she heard it all around, testing the barriers.

"The two Li-Fu's can manage it perhaps," she whispered to the air. The living and the dead. Garm glanced at her, but she thought he hadn't heard.

She could feel Anga here; most of Temple Net past the domestic levels had him in it. A core of something in the way the Net felt, ancient, part of the original setting of the wards, she supposed, and yet it was still the same man. Loom-master. Standing here, now, she saw no future but the one he was weaving. No hope, only an extended present, and with it, as though it were something residing in her bones, anticipation. The same feeling she always had before a dance, even if it was only to be a practice session.

She walked a little ways further, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Altasimic is my birthright. This is my dance, my fate." Only the drums answered her as the sunset deepened to a line of gold atop the knife-edge of the closest dune. Layers of dunes behind showed variable colors of gold and bronze depending on the light and shadow.

The world-net moved through them in whorls like clouds of sand the wind has caught, rising and skittering, flattening, and always whispering. Did Anga listen to what it said, she wondered, drawn to the sound.

She looked at her feet and then the tile under them. She concentrated on the hardness, and the grout lines, the irregularities in the glaze. All of them made by one person. Ulanda blinked the image away. Not Simic, but Assim. The artisan had come as part of the original Household of the first Assim-priest and died here a long time ago.

She didn't have control over what she could feel from pattern. Or see or the depth of the seeing. The dance would provide what control was needed, much as it would have during her Initiation.

A few more steps brought her to the edge of the terrace with the sand below and to one side. The terrace was raised, the bones of the Priest-house underneath. The sand kept to its own rhythm here -- not like at the world-altar -- and the shifting had exposed two of the legs. She looked back at Garm. Could you fly from here, she wondered suddenly, opening her mouth in the laugh that tried to escape through the curve of her smile. Could we fly from here?

The rhythm of the drums changed, a complex six count sounding from each drum, and repeated in how they wove together, each drum set slightly off from the other. Not fly -- dance. The tiles were the same as at the Temple at South Bay, sized for keeping count and setting feet, and with off-color tiles in the right places for the lines and rings of dancers to watch their placing. The Simic dance-master. A snow covered terrace.

The drum from the Fuall't start of the spiral -- she didn't question that she knew which it was or that she could feel it best and stronger than the others. Alternate beats minor and doubled, and she dipped on those.

In a small difference, she didn't use her hands to weave the old words that spoke of stone and flight. She didn't have to. Pattern worked better. From outside the warded area, she felt the world-net move along the sand in time to her movements. Circling the world-altar.

The drums kept on, but she broke off where the dance she had first learned as a child had, frozen on the edge of possibilities.

Garm sat with En'talac and Quin'tat at one of the tables, elbows on top and a plate of food under his nose. "If you don't come now, there won't be any of these left," he said mildly, through a full mouth. He reached for another of what he'd just eaten from a large platter heaped with the things, eating it in one mouthful to the start of the legs: lavender spotted with a darker blue and with flat yellow shovels at the end of each.

En'talac watched him between inspecting another of the small creatures, the legs pulled back to separate the body from the coating of bread crumbs. She put the thing down and wiped her fingers carefully on the moist towel next to her plate.

Quin'tat was next to his wife, awkwardly sitting on a chair that appeared about to collapse under him, leaning forward slightly and sparing part of his weight with his legs firmly planted. A Zimmer woman was next to the medic, the marks on her cheeks almost as pale as her skin. Niv and Gennady and Simitta weren't there, and except for Sarkalt, the other the people seated at the tables were strangers to her.

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Gingerly, Poss a'tlic reached again and ran, as she had each time, against the warding shields. A room within a room.

"A prison is what it is, Zimmer." Her words came out in a rasp; she was speaking up to him at an awkward angle from where she was lying. "You seem to have an affinity for prisons. Walls or ignorance, or both."

He was just beyond the first warding barrier and she could only hear and see him. "You're alive," he said bluntly.

Which was better than she had hoped for, or for a short while had wanted, waking to the pain that the drugs didn't touch and with the ship's medic not wanting to use very much of anything else in case it was too much. Baltin had

come in on Lord Gennady's boot heels but was keeping to one side. She didn't expect any help there.

She tried to breath more deeply and stopped short when the pain flared. "At least you can tell me where we are. And what's going on." The last was only mouthed; all the air she'd taken in was used up.

He shook his head. "Two of my people are dead and you're alive. You'll find out what you need to know when I take what I paid out of you."

"I had nothing to do with..." She was talking to the walls. She'd lost him again and didn't know how to make him listen.

As Baltin came closer, the skin of the warding shivered but didn't break. Twice she had tried pushing through and both times hadn't made a dent. The effort had left her retching and she couldn't afford to waste the energy.

"Please, who died?"

The Zimmer medic ran his scan without answering then checked his work as he always did, trusting fingers more than the disk. Sometimes he would talk and she found herself hoping just to hear a word or two.

Another breath and she felt as though her lungs were being torn apart. "Offer prayers for them, that much..." And remembered that Clan Zimmer didn't follow Temple customs.

Baltin didn't react to her mistake. "Pull in," was all he said, his voice expressionless.

She stripped out of pattern, hardly realizing she had slipped in. With a minimal entry, the hours passed without her having to be really aware of them. Simic and Ri -- the changes were part of her now, no longer strange, but she had no access to what she knew she was capable of. The warding prevented her from going in far enough to do more than dull the pain. The effect was like the strong blockers the medics had put her on immediately after her Initiation.

Watching the small round sensor, Baltin ran the scan again, concentrating on her hands, forcing each finger straight before letting go. She had to clench her teeth to stop from crying out.

Who died, and how? The possibility that she had killed them sat heavily in her stomach. And how many others had she killed? In her mind's eye now as it always was, was the look on her vass'lt's face as he died. Screaming, burning.

And Niv. And now others? Lord Gennady would have said so, she thought without dislodging the sick feeling. He would have. She couldn't remember anything.

"The names at least..." she started and gave up. Baltin wasn't going to talk. Poss a'ltic could see the shell of him, and like the room, nothing got in or out.

Instead, she concentrated on what he was doing, hoping to take the memories and use them in the hours when nothing happened. Feeding and cleaning, he wouldn't let her do anything, or even try. Finally, she felt the prick of the badge,

her back this time just under the shoulder blade. I've got skin on my back, she realized suddenly, a memory surfacing at last. The Zimmer who had brought her in had been holding her against him.

The urgency of the thought died in the slow changes in her body as Baltin fed the drugs in, scanning the whole time. Then he dressed her in a clean robe, soft where she could still feel, and warm. After a patch of blocker on each arm, he changed the arm wraps, no braids, just the cords looped around the undercloths and long knitted mitts over, covering the mess of her fingers at the same time.

She fell asleep after that and didn't know he had gone until she woke when the layers of warding changed again. Her elbows still worked and had skin, and she was able to lift herself far enough on them to manage sitting up. The middle of the room with nothing to rest her back on except the mattress or the floor. Where the badge had been still stung and she supposed that she could feel it was progress of a sort.

The shifts were more complex this time than the last. Even pulled in as far as possible and with the blockers still fresh, her mind and eyes twitched trying to follow the shifts. She thought they must use what they got from Baltin's scanning, and she didn't know what to do about that either.

His price, Lord Gennady had said. Drawing her knees up, Poss a'ltic used her teeth to arrange the robe, and rested her arms there and then her head. Three layers of pain.

Her death, she knew. He couldn't risk keeping her alive. He was breaking Empire Law, one that cut across any customs a people might have. Temple's power was inviolate.

Poss a'ltic closed her eyes to hide from the lines of blue weaving through the warding. Purple and green flashed as after images. Eyes closed, she could still see the shape of the lines but it wasn't as bad and she could think again.

Two Zimmer dead then. And Tissa. Maybe one was the Zimmer who had picked her up. She had thought it was Lord Gennady but the voice had been different. They all looked too alike. She remembered from the spin she pulled that the High Clans often line-bred. Not from the Net biography, this had been after the meeting. Only the dominant adults bred, the paltin. I could have killed whomever it was, she thought, and squeezed her eyes tighter. Hurt as bad as she was, she wouldn't have had any control. And the other?

Then why keep her alive?

Blue and green, red, purple, brown and a blue-gray. Keeping her eyes squeezed shut wasn't working.

The small terrace near the San's suite. She had been blocking the Net from placing her and Tissa, a new trick she had learned on the run. Creating a small reality, that to the Net at least, didn't have her in it. At the far end of a corridor, they had passed a group of Poultat, walked right through them without notice.

Net and people -- was she even there? A more human instinct had taken over and she had started to run, Tissa chasing after her. Simquin Hall, the far end of it on fire, but closer to them, an opening to daylight. The terrace and the Zimmer ship in front of them. Just through the entrance, Tissa had stopped, bent over and holding her side.

Strange how those few images were so clear. Flashes of color, even sound, the smell of the smoke... but the ideas, what she'd been thinking, even why she was there, she had lost almost all of those things. The connections. Most of what remained was a memory of feeling an overwhelming sense of danger.

Images then: a single file of Zimmer appeared through the entrance to the terrace and she saw herself step out to meet them. Relief. She remembered feeling relief that they could see her.

Another image, one she wished she could forget: she felt a pop in the air in back of her, like ears popping after swimming, and turned to see. Tissa didn't have time to scream before the shielding barrier hit. Green and red splattered on the rock side of the terrace, tough ropy brown stems and pink bones resisted slightly longer, then crumbled as the liquid was pushed out.

The closest Zimmer had his knife in his hand, and was moving at her quick as a striking snake. Apparently he had changed his mind, she was still alive. Her last complete image was the knife as though it were stopped in time.

But she'd been burnt, not cut. And the Zimmer, she hadn't killed him then, there were tiny fragments from later on. Was it an attack from the Justice troops?

Temple troops? Almost an image -- a girdle mark, gold cords knotted over blue. Were they ti'Linn? Yes, and with the loom-master's signature over the ranking marks. Things still didn't want to connect. Memories or reasoning. Or there weren't answers.

Careful of her fingers, she rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, feeling the softness of the mittens and the start of the braids and caught herself trying to feel how much damage had been done to her face. I was never that good looking, she thought, and tried to smile, but the amusement was that such a thought could surface at all. Did she need justification to want to live?

The distortion was worse and closing her eyes wasn't any difference at all now. She wanted to put her head between her knees and scream but she didn't have the breath. The wards were spinning, she felt like she was suffocating. It was as bad as when she'd first woken up in this place.

Breath, she thought. Just breath. In and out. Then: I know this, the colors, she thought and forgot to breath.

I first saw Gennady through colors like that. Once, by a tapestry and he was in the cloth as well, a white animal with black stripes...



"Just the results, Allykh," Gennady said.

The man glanced down before answering. "Not directed overpattern, lord," he said, showing submission but managing to keep his composure. "Simic and Ri, but with a high degree of accomodation to the presence of different pattern types."

"Olumka?"

"Inconclusive." Trade-basic without embellishments. The Spann wasn't happy.

He pulled enough of ship's Net to see Baltin working on her. The medic's spin analysis said she'd live. This time.

"Is the Net still free of outside pulls?"

A reminder of the danger was all he wanted and let the spin glide past; the nod from Allykh was enough. Constant real time checking doubled their work, a small drain on their crystals and Net systems once the threads were set but one they didn't need. Watching the overpattern spirals ate most of what wasn't plain domestic Net and this playing with Poss a'ltic used up the rest. The tap had stopped after the jump through the portal into the diamond. They had torn what was left of the loom-master's flitter apart, finding nothing but warded Archive crystals, but Anga had had hours already on Lillisim to rig something new.

Then, to Simitta: "Keep the wards at that configuration."

The warding pattern set hard. His los didn't turn around from the console to speak. "She's no good to us dead."

No good to them dead at all except it solved the problem of what to do with her. Any good to them alive? Was she part of the puzzle, he wondered as he watched the woman struggle weakly against the restraints. Or just a stray?

"Let her fight," he told Baltin through the Net when the man would have stilled her. Instinct, the medic spin said. She wasn't conscious.

His stray at any rate and he appreciated the strength this fight showed. He had waited until the others had left for the surface before trying this. Hard to say what Ulanda could pick up on, even if she wasn't looking for it. He was gambling that her awareness couldn't make the leap, not yet. There was nobody on the ship now but his own people.

Except for Clanny, he reminded himself. He found it easy to forget the tass'alt. The man looked near death but most of it was superficial peeling, he probably wouldn't even scar, and was well enough already to be picking at the seal around his room that kept him from accessing ship's Net.

To Simitta: "Keep her alive for me." As mild a tone as with Allykh. The bleeding of Simitta's pride that had started with the failure at Palace hadn't stopped. "Do the analysis again. Compare Poss a'ltic's reaction to the pattern

feed-in with what we have on Ulanda.” What they tried was similar to what Anga had done at the meeting in Cassa’s Audience Hall, but with overpattern included. Using resistant crystals, they recorded fragments of overpattern translated into whatever their equipment could understand. Not anything like what Cassa had done at Palace and not even the direct link that Olumka apparently managed with the tops while in the diamond. The things were back to normal here, the tops more toys than anything else, no matter what the Spann thought of them.

“Utilize what we picked up when Ulanda opened the portal to Lillisim. Twelve level compounding variance on the spins. Put some imagination into it.” His gaze included Simitta along with Allykh and Olumka. He’d be a break on the imagination of the other two and that was needed as well.

The Spann chittered. “Fly with that one, fly here, not the dark ocean. A bird now. Not the Priest Li-Fu.” The facets of its eyes were swirling.

“My bird, my luck,” Gennady said. “Not the loom-master’s or Sarkalt’s. She’ll fly from my hand or not fly at all.” With a mask over her face to help her breath, the woman was finally asleep. Her lungs had taken the worst of it and if she had been Zimmer, even a freeborn, she would have asked for a clean death and he wouldn’t have denied it.

Olumka chittered, the sound added to the movement of four hands. “A bird. A falcon.” Or a sting of Spann words that pulled a translation image of a bird of prey. A creature with four round blue eyes set flat and forward on a scaled head. And a long neck ringed with gold scales twisting above a round body with a double pair of bone edged wings.

“When that one flies, careful not to be the prey,” Olumka added. Not only a translation with the words: a sending in the ship’s Net. A red striped white snake twisted in the birds long talons, red holes where the serpent’s eyes had been. And the garbled clicking that passed for laughter among the Spann.

Simitta grinned, honor points sucking air. “With or without her, we’ll be flying soon enough.” On the screen over the data point he worked, was the world they orbited. Inching over the belly of the globe, the shadow line was nearing the land. A black arc swallowing a cobalt ocean, reaching towards a silver-tipped shore and the sun-locked land. A continent of sand in a blend of gold like watered silk. Late afternoon at the world-altar.

As he watched, over top of the image came a flood of data, filtered by Pallin in the Web hookup, using the time spread to watch for any tricks. “From Sarkalt’s people,” Simitta said, taking the accompanying spin. “She’s agreed to go through with it.”

His los had said she would. After the meeting with the Overpriest, he had asked his uncle, “What do you owe now?” Bleed that pride some more, he had thought. If he had little here, Simitta had less. There hadn’t any sign that he had even existed.

He had gotten the reaction he'd expected. "My loyalty is to a'Genn first and always. To you and your ambitions, my tie is by blood oath only and has been since you were little more than a boy. I can shed that blood. Do you wish it?"

Instead of saying yes, his anger had died as though the rage was Web he was stripping from the ship after a jump. They would have died together on the escort pod in this reality. Or possibly, Simitta had been already dead. He could see the start in the thinning of skin over bone and the tightening in the muscles. The difference of a generation.

"Do we fly then?" he asked softly.

"Two ships," Simitta said. "Ours and the Overpriest's. Ulanda and Li-Fu will remain at the world-altar."

Two of Simitta's people had arrived, working data points to categorize the information filtering in from Pallin in the Web. A feed from the Overpriest's ship, everything they had on this, legends and stories included. Even that originating from the Temple Net on Lillisim. What else will he give to keep his end of the bargain, Gennady wondered. For what he had given: one woman delivered and no promises. There had been none from her at the time and no way to force any, and he'd had none to make.

Promises had been made now. "And what then?" he asked. "What do we fly into? A dream?" According to Sarkalt, the Simic-priest had walked into the water at the world-altar and drowned. Early morning and she should have been sleeping, her tass'altin had been, and undisturbed at her rising. I don't want to die in a dream, Gennady thought, feeling his lips draw back and Simitta responding as though to a threat around them.

Pallin yelled a warning through the interface. In the Net, an image like a band grew, stretched, and formed words, the whole condensing out of the feed like salt from cooling brine. "The Simic portion of the Opening will happen here, Zimmer. When the overpattern spiral crosses this world, it won't be this world anymore. The Priest Li-Fu will stay behind, holding her end. Ulanda will go through and so will the ships, linked to her, not to the Simic-priest."

"The loom-master. Anga." Even through the Web interface, Pallin's agitation was apparent. "The filter wards are intact, I can't find any feeds going out." Simitta nodded agreement and Gennady let himself breathe again.

To Anga: "What world then?"

"The world that holds the Law for the Altasimic sector. The peaking of Nexus Change will break the warding that holds the sector. Ulanda -- or the dance -- will provide the control that will prevent the warding energies and the world pattern threads from spinning out of control. For the Altasimic, the moment of climax will be past and future."

Which past, and whose future? As easy to ask Cassa, babbling about Lillisim and the girdle of sunstones. And talking of Simitta at the world-altar as often as

she talked of him being there. He thought she had meant her putting it there.

"Our part in this, loom-master?"

Anga laughed. "I rather like Sarkalt's spin. The goats go home. We don't know what you get, but you get a chance."

"Being there makes a difference?"

"It always has."

"And if Ulanda can't hold?"

"Then none of us will have to worry about Nexus Change."

They would never know if they failed. Death would come too fast.

On the world below him, the line of night just touched the land, darkening the gold of the sand to brass. Twilight at the world-altar. He broke the line connecting him to Anga. Priority flags sprouted from Pallin, they were being buried under data, all of it going through the Web first.

"Leave this mess," Gennady said to Allykh. "Do those analysis I ordered. This happens regardless. You can have Pin, but I want Kori up here. Sim, you keep track of anything that looks like it might help once we go through and tag it for me. Keep your people on it, use Kori for backup. She'll add a different edge."

Simitta waited until Allykh had gone, Olumka following. "And you?"

"One of us was at the world-altar when this happened. Will happen." Simitta knew. "Choices, Sarkalt said. This is one."

His los leaned against the con, finding something of interest on his boot.

"You're hunting luck." Dreams, the spins were saying. Stories. More salt, the brine very cold now, but not tasting anything of the loom-master.

"The original portal was keyed to me as well as to her San. The girdle means that Cassa intended the Opening to happen all along, and the way she wanted it, not Rigyant. Would you rather go instead of me?"

Kori arrived at the entrance to the bridge and stopped, her eyes down. He remembered how she had moved between Chanko and the Overpriest Mullaki. Simitta's two staff on the data points shifted position slightly, just enough to prevent her from joining them directly.

"Kori, read from the off point," Gennady said. With a glance to Simitta first, the man handling it moved to let Kori take over. Simitta didn't comment on the break in the command order.

Gennady moved past them to the corridor and signed his los to follow. "You didn't answer me," he said.

"I was never Cassa's first choice. If she wants me, she knows where I am."

Gennady laughed and answered in the prayer form of Zimmer. "I take your blood with me and you keep mine here. Will you burn a stick after I leave?"

"Do I need to?" Bluntly said in Zimmer-common.

"Would you be different?" he asked in the same language, but signed as though he were speaking in the older tongue, making the meaning include both

actuality and desire. “Do you have dreams of a different future?” He had never asked, had always assumed they shared the same dreams.

Simitta didn’t answer, and Gennady found he was the one to turn away first. The walls instead, smooth and white like those of the a’Genn Holding on Zimmer. Shell like the inside of an egg. The two of them were heat shadows against the cool of those walls, not people.

Then seeing an egg again, and Simitta breaking out, the egg tearing along seams of translucent crystal.

Or walls as smooth as the fingers that pulled his face forward. Clear nails and the hard ridges on the spurs pressing just enough to be noticeable.

“Let Palin do the next web jump,” Simitta said. “Each time, you take longer pulling free. I thought we were past this nonsense. Or is it Zimmer pattern? Am I going to lose you to that? A’Genn would be a long time living that down.” Then he shook his head, one point showing in a wry smile. “I don’t think the other Gennady, the one who died here, could have asked these kind of questions. Besides an over-sensitivity to pattern, this is what she’s left you.”

“And you?” Seeing in his memory, the Net that showed Simitta with Ulanda while he had been talking with Sarkalt. And saw, however imperfectly, that Simitta had no need for dreams or prayers. “What did Cassa leave you?”

“Only what the woman had to give.”

He pushed the hand on him away. “And what did you give her?”

“What was owed a loska of my Clan.”

“Would you want to lose me? Do you think you could? I became Clan Lord with your help; I wasn’t the only one with the breeding necessary to be accepted by the Mothers. Why me?” Gennady shook his head to stop Simitta’s answer. “Cassa creates realities at a whim... you were the perfect los for an ambitious stripling: older, experienced, and having off-blood so that you were conveniently outside the paltin game. So I could trust you.”

The reference hadn’t raised the challenge from Simitta that Gen had expected. His los smiled thinly. “You changed that. Perhaps that was the sum of my ambition.”

“Circumstances changed that, not me.”

“Suffice that it changed.”

“With the near extinction of a’Genn? A heavy price for the privilege of passing your genes on. I look at you and wonder what she wanted. I wonder how many times we have lived until she had what she wanted.”

Garm loosened the waist tie on his girdle. Too many fried avipp, stupid thing to do. The salt and pepper taste made him thirsty and six bowls of tea were contributing to the bloated feeling.

He took another. They were fresh and as good as his memory had made them. Just the right amount of breading and no spices except in the flavor of the avipp themselves -- and somewhere, almost, the taste of the seaweed they would have been kept in.

Bolda leaned close to refill his tea bowl. "You eat one more of those things, and I'm going to throw up."

His plate was piled with shovel tipped legs and breadcrumbs. Even his salad had a few flat yellow ends peeking from between the pieces of greenery and Ulanda reached for one of those, looked closely, then dropped it on her lap with a laugh.

"They tickle when they walk on you," she said, her words filling the sudden silence her laugh had caused.

Where had she picked that up? She was barely holding herself here. The tiny spines and broken end of the avipp leg snagged the coarse weave of her robe and he had trouble pulling it away. The silence dragged on, they were watching him now. "Yes, the avipp tickle," he finally said, letting the tiny leg drop to the tiles. "If you don't want an avipp, how about some beans?" Reaching across the table, he scooped a spoonful onto her plate next to the fish casserole she hadn't touched. "You don't want those either? When I ask you to sleep, you don't. Then you don't like the clothes I pick out, and now the beans..."

Resting one hand on his arm, she leaned towards him and smiled. Something private for his joke, he thought, but when she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "Are these all the same thing? Or is it like in your stories, where your understanding makes them so?"

He had mistaken the smile, or at least its source; her eyes revealed an emotion past anger. "Did I misunderstand the answer you gave to Sarkalt? Did I misunderstand your return to my attentions? Any understanding of mine won't save you from walking into that spiral in a very few hours. You have to eat now because you won't be allowed to later."

Her eyes dropped and it was as though she had gone through a door and closed it behind her. "Some tea, then."

He spilled as much on the table before Bolda took the pot from his hands. Garm called Apallim through the Net to bring fresh. Ulim was busy setting out globes; using manual coding so as to spare what was left of the domestic Net. High on the wall, the globes made an arc of daylight on the terrace.

Taking a flat cream colored bean from Ulanda's plate, he held it to her lips. "Tea isn't enough. You need food for strength."

Again, she moved against him, her hand more of a weight on his arm than it should have been. Anyone watching would think she was making love to him. Her lips held a soft pout, or as much as narrow lips can, or it was that the strain that showed her age so clearly, was gone from her face. "I don't need anything."

He wanted to lift her small chin so he could see her eyes, but was afraid of what he would find. She continued the dance-like motions against him, felt mostly through her hand on his arm and almost but not quite in time to the drums. Coquettish, he thought, but overly studied, a caricature of attraction like seen in the common dances. Something for a tavern. He felt his momentary anger die, smothered by a rising sympathy, and he wondered that he could loose it so fast. "Try them regardless. So small, they're a delicacy. They wouldn't have ripened for half a year."

En'talac asked, "How large do they get?" Her eyes never left Ulanda.

Garm looked at the bean he still held. "More than a mouthful."

"I didn't see any fields near here. Are the beans imported?"

"No, you landed in full daylight, so you wouldn't have noticed them. Each plant spreads over an area as large as this terrace, the leaves the size of this tabletop. The leaves have long hairs on the upper surface to trap the moisture in the night fog, but roll up into thin tubes during the worst of the heat of the day. The beans pods grow underground, exploding when ripe, shooting the seeds away from the parent."

A trick played by children was to take the almost ripe pods and bury them in the sand near any house opening that had a dune rising around it. It would rain beans on a world where it never rained water.

Ulanda looked up. "Did you have a garden with them?"

A start at any rate, he thought and mentally thanked En'talac. "There aren't any gardens on Lillisim. The beans grow wild, encouraged perhaps by leaving enough seeds to grow new plants, but that's the extent of the cultivation. Nothing grown here is forced and most of it is left totally wild." Except the goats, he thought, and was about to say that the goats couldn't be left wild, but watched her instead, how she looked past him to the dunes. As though she was hearing something besides the drums from the world-altar.

He started to put the bean back on her plate, then reconsidered and ate it. Delicious. Soft and slightly nutty in flavor. A waste really to harvest them so small. The Priest-house kitchen was pulling out all stops for this meal, too bad he was so full.

"My mother would take the largest and after steaming them, would make a hollow to stuff with goat cheese. Velt weed wrapped the beans and kept the cheese in." A pan of them was baked until the seaweed coating was crisp and dry

on top but melted into the soft filling on the bottom. And what had been removed from the bean, she mixed with sugar and butter to make a paste, wrapped around a little of the bread dough that had been his father's specialty and baked that as well.

Perhaps Ulanda would like a filled bun, he thought. Something sweet might appeal to her...

"He can't land there," Ulanda said as she stood up. Then to Quin'tat: "Tell him not to land there."

Quin'tat frowned and Garm caught the Net link he was using. Nothing useful came from it. Then plain ears were enough: the whine of a flitter, the direction impossible to determine, the sound coming from around them, bouncing off the dunes.

Sarkalt hadn't moved, hadn't even looked in their direction. A tiny bowl cradled in one hand, he was sipping tea.

Then Temple Net placement had the Zimmer at last. "Where do you want him to land," Quin'tat asked Ulanda while blasting into the Net to find out why it hadn't picked Gennady up before then. The incipient spin was flagged over to Sarkalt only to run into a blank wall that Garm could almost feel the big man hit.

Quin'tat took a quick breath and rubbed at his forehead. En'talac grinned but ducked her head to hide it, then shoved her husband in the ribs with her elbow to get an angry look in return, then a start of a smile. Garm contained and pinched out the bubble of loss he always felt seeing those two together

"Ulanda?" Garm said. He pushed the chair until the edge of the seat touched the back of her robe. At the prompting, she sat down but he didn't think she was aware of the fact. "Where do you want Gennady to land?" Or to move to, if she didn't hurry in her answer. The whine was focused, and close to one side of them.

She pushed the answer into the domestic Net, a poor fit that left no room for anything else, but it showed the whole of this area like a picture. And the landing place -- well out from where Sarkalt's ship was parked -- accompanied by a shrug, as though it didn't matter anymore.

The whine faded without an argument from Gennady and it had to be him. A long walk on sand, Garm thought, then saw in the placement image a road and the flitter like a toy at a far bend. Then two images and in one there was a road but it cut across a deeply marked land to reach cliffs above a river, then turned to follow the river to the ocean and there was no Temple at the near end. Shadow lands, both of them, but the shadows were of nighttime and scale, not lack of substance.

The toy flitter landed on the high side, well away from the river, on a rocky bluff overlooking the fingering of the delta in the distance. There was a smell of salt, the river was tidal to that point, broad and slow, he felt the water backing and sliding forward in shuffle of fresh and brine. And from a thread of higher level



Temple Net focused on the flitter, riding the domestic link that Ulanda used and still carrying the hiss of native Zimmer: "Pull in her, old man." Then repeated, more under control with a standard translation from the Trade-basic Gennady preferred.

Garm stood to hold her better, leaning over her, her back against his middle. He felt the small movements in her, the flexing and easing of muscles. Another dance but which one? And why? He started to counter her movements, checking points automatically with a slow circling of his fingers, feeling the slight prickling in the soft flesh of his fingertips. He wasn't sure if this was helping -- both images were still layered in the Net and he could see the river in one, the stronger one. A fine mist was rising over the water, a drifting haze of pearl in the moonlight, softening the brilliance of the silver line trailing across the water. Lillisim didn't have a moon.

He looked to Sarkalt to find him watching her, but only that.

Quin'tat got to his feet slowly as though he had forgotten how to stand. "Maybe we should be going." He looked to the next table and got the same lack of reaction that Garm had. "Sarkalt..."

Looking amused, En'talac tugged on his robe but her eyes were on Ulanda as often as her husband. "Sit down and finish your dinner."

The Zimmer pilot had scrambled up at the same time, knocking her chair over, her eyes darting to Quin'tat, then to the way off the terrace and back. Her name? Garm had forgotten and went to touch the Net to find it, and finding only the placement images instead.

"Arasima," En'talac said, answering his question and laughing at him with a flash of her dark eyes before turning them to the Zimmer woman. "You sit down too." She spoke in Zimmer-native without a translation. The woman's flight stopped, the physical part, both the man and pilot still looking as though their minds preferred to envision escape. In the light of the globes, the pilot's eyes were the color of white tiles. No challenge, even at En'talac's sharp tone. Her legs were shaking but she straightened the chair and managed to sit without falling.

"Ulanda!" En'talac snapped her fingers in front of her face, silver rings flashing. Ulanda started and blinked. Two rings clashed again in another snap of the medic's fingers with something like a spark.

Garm bristled. "Leave her, woman," he snarled, surprising himself. Bolda snorted and he turned at the sound to snarl at him as well.

Then Ulanda took a breath deep enough that he wondered if she'd been breathing before and ended with something between a sob and a hiccup. The placement images disappeared at that moment, both of them.

And a moment later: "You were telling me about the beans," she said calmly, back to looking at her braids.

En'talac was still staring at her. "The story will go better if you eat some of them first. This is one thing at least, where I agree with your San. You'll need the energy later."

Ulanda stiffened. "I'm a little old to be treated like one of your children." Garm's hair rose at the sudden power surge, her braid ends were dripping black sparks.

"My children are better behaved."

Then the fight in Ulanda died. "I sorry."

Quin'tat took his wife's hand. "There's nothing to be sorry about. They're a long ways off and safe."

But En'talac shook her head. "Just on their way to a C'vann world where we thought they might have a chance to survive if what we thought was happening really was. If overpattern destroyed the Unity."

"Does chance exist here?" Quin'tat asked. He glanced towards Sarkalt, but the Overpriest was back to sipping his tea, with Pida next to him preparing a fresh pot, acting out a private ritual as though he had to coax each leaf to perform. Niv still hadn't come out.

"Of course chance exists," Garm said softly as he sat again, allowing only a mild note of protest to cover his reaction. A protest at the loss he heard in En'talac and Quin'tat's voices. Loss for each, just different ways of telling it. He had watched his only child walk into the spiral and had spoken comfort to his wife with much the same tone of voice. And that Ena was pregnant with Rolf's child? Had he known? His memory played tricks on him, he thought he had, then knew he hadn't... or he had been of the same mind then, knowing and not knowing, not wanting to believe what his sight told him, what the feel of her skin while he lie with her told him. Her turning away from him never penetrating his blindness. He hadn't let himself know until Ena cried out and Li-Fu had woken from the ceremony to look. He had the answer in his daughter's eyes, then in his hands as his wife struggled against his grip. And in the blood, Rolf's blood, the only thing he must have felt he had to offer her: her daughter's life. A last gift. A pond, a skim of ice and sunrise.

And this time Li-Fu had gone into the spiral? He'd had no one to speak comfort to except for her. And he'd had no more words for her until it was too late.

"The major shape of the patterns can be determined," he said, concentrating on the sounds, "but most of the details, the things we see, fall by chance more often than not. What may be pivotal to the end result can't be seen when examined solely on its own by someone involved in it. Only from the larger pattern, and then in hindsight and most often, not the events you would think were important." The words helped. That stupid, stupid man. "Or if something small is deliberately controlled, what results from that control is less predictable than you might..."

"Spare us," Bolda growled. "Next thing you know, you'll take up weaving." Standing, he had a bun in one hand and was stuffing it with cheese. Taking the bun with him, he wandered off a little ways to stand at the edge of the terrace, facing the world-altar.

"Beans?" Ulanda said, a giggle in the shape of her voice where the pain had showed a moment before.

Smoothing her hair back on the side closest to him, he used the distraction to check her points. The distraction turned into nothing more than a chance to arrange her hair. A long night to go and the fog was going to cause the shorter ends to frizz and bother her, the sides should have been braided. He would suggest it, but knew she would twist his kindness into another excuse for being angry with him.

Garm took a deep breath and continued. "As the loom-master pointed out about any of the possible Opening point on the Altasimic world we end up on, that there wouldn't be people settled near there... even if that is a high probability result, how it came about is open to chance."

In the placement image Ulanda had pulled, the seams in the land looked as though the area had been taken in a giant's hand and squeezed. Anga had said that people found such places 'uncomfortable' and the round man had chuckled. Haunted might be a better word, Garm thought. A sifting through of possibilities, becoming more and more certain, all working to a single end at a single time. Other things -- entire lives or something as small as the germination of a single seed of grass -- taken out of the flow of chance around them and twisted to accommodate.

As he had taken the story of the Phoenix and twisted it to fit... what else would turn to match? His understanding? He sighed. "You could think of it as a medley of chances, an end pattern that is predetermined but derived from small chances, quite random at any one point, but..."

"You were telling us about beans," Ulanda interrupted, leaning against his shoulder and looking up.

"Beans?" he asked, looking into her face and only seeing somebody asking about beans. Then he blinked and almost saw the images, the river and twin roads. Nothing in Temple Net, domestic or otherwise, he checked and felt Quin'tat follow his lead and shrug when he found nothing either.

Might as well be beans as anything else. And tea. He put a reminder into the domestic Net for Apallim. Both he and Ulim had vanished.

He thought back to where he had left off. "We used to play double-dare on the leaves. We'd get on them just as they started to roll during the heat of the day. If caught, you were trapped until late afternoon. A very hot, uncomfortable wait, but there's no real danger in it and even the rolling up is slow." Beans? Beans and

memories he hadn't brought forward in his mind since before he left Lillisim the first time.

"The hairs go the wrong way against your wiggling out and the stem's at the other end, blocking it." An adult could, but a small child, no. He hadn't. And he'd never forgiven the two that held him there until it was too late. A shell house made a very small community in which to avoid two of your age-mates, but he had managed by losing himself in school and extra studies. Those two were part of the group that had seen him off, talking of friendship and shy with pride for their house and for Lillisim that he had earned a position on Rimnic. A few years more and he had sent word to his family from Palace that his work had taken him there and the return message had mentioned them as though they had been close friends with a natural interest in his fate. Were they alive now? Did they wait even now to hear from him?

"The ones playing were old enough to know better," he continued, "but the stories our parents told us when we were little... well, they were tales of young children disappearing in the dunes. No trace of them would ever be found, the wind masking any tracks they might have left. But a year later, the time from the start of the forming of the beans until the harvest, strangely formed beans in the rough shape of a child would be found. Taken from one plant alone, usually the largest."

Arasima laughed, surprising him from the memories that were running parallel with the story. "Well fed," she added to the laugh and clapped her hands.

"Yes," he said, trying to calm his heart again. His nerves found Zimmer laughter to have much the same effect as Zimmer smiles. "Very well fed, or so the stories say." He'd certainly believed it, thinking his legs were dissolving when he had just lost the feeling in them from the angle he was lying at. He had thought he had known better. And found that no comfort when faced with the reality of his fears. "When beans like that were found, our parents would show them to us and shake their heads sadly. And the bean would sit on the table for days, and as it dried, every day look just a little more like someone we might know."

"And you didn't wander off to get lost." The Zimmer pilot had forgotten her shyness to lean towards him.

"Not for a while at least." He'd been sick afterwards, a rash from the leaf hairs and half poisoned from the gas leaking from the almost ripe pod at the base of the plant under the sand. That's how you knew the age of the bean pod when you couldn't see it. The smell.

Ulanda trembled against his hands, her earlier laughter as suddenly gone as it had appeared. "He died in the sand, the second night. He was so cold. He's still there."

"A long time ago," he breathed into her ear. Then to the stares from the others: "A cousin, not close, almost everybody is a cousin of a kind here. He lived in the same community but he was three years older than me and I was only five when he disappeared." Garm shrugged but couldn't dislodge the horror. A very long time ago. "It happens. It's the reason behind the bean story. The warped beans always looked like him, to me anyway, and his was the name my parents whispered just loud enough for me to hear."

"But Temple Net..." En'talac began.

"Only goes as far as the buildings and maybe a mile or so until the world-net eats it. And asking the world-net anything is like asking riddles of the wind."

More questions were about to spring from the woman, the mother, but he shook his head as he picked up another bean. Ulanda ate it. And another.

The area that Ulanda had called to be kept clear was well out from where the Temple Net went easily without a strong focus or feed. He wondered if any of Sarkalt's staff had noticed the extended area. And was the reason the flitter or the man? From this table at least, the others wouldn't have been able to hear much of what they had been saying over the sound of the wind and drums. They had the 'seeing' of Ulanda that Quin'tat had wanted and probably a better time than the ones sitting here and listening. And Sarkalt? Sipping tea.

He wiped his fingers on the stained towel. Tea, and salad dressing and crumbs from the avipp. "Tea," he shouted. His order through the Temple Net was obviously being ignored. Arasima laughed again.

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The world-net hadn't been blocked out after all, but had gone under and around Temple system. Ulanda had used it to form the placement maps before feeding them into the domestic Net, bumping everybody else off. She couldn't quite make the overpattern pull real enough to see without Net as a filter and framework. She couldn't quite... condense it, or more accurately, pick out what was needed and leave the rest. Too much rather than too little. Or too little control.

Would that matter, she wondered as she ate another bean. Terrible mealy things and the oil they were smothered in smelled rancid.

"Why do you care?" she asked, her mouth opening with the question before she could stop herself.

Garm wiped his hands on his napkin. "About what?"

"Why does that one boy matter where all the others who will die because of the Opening don't?" Because the boy was a part of his life, she thought. He had known him. And fearful whispers of the boy's name had led him eventually to Palace.

Garm nudged his chair until the seats touched. "How can you care?" he asked quietly, his long fingers checking her g'ta points for the second time in a very few minutes. "I was a child then, the people around me were family, their loss was simple and understandable. What do you loose by the weaving of lives that will make up the Altasimic world-pattern? With or without you, they will die. Without you, the entire Sector will die when Nexus Change crests and breaks the warding."

Ulanda bit her lip rather than continue the argument she hadn't intended to start. Woven lives? What he became had little relation to what he had been. Garm wasn't the one who would be killing them. Did Li-Fu know? The Simic-priest was a point of focus at the center of the world-altar, but none of the power was coming from her. Anga was the one walking the spiral paths to weave this, with slight changes in the drumming each time he reached a spring, stronger each time, more complex and more simple all at once. Ulanda didn't think Li-Fu was capable of realizing what was happening here.

A small boy. Almost morning for him, the sand caked with moisture but even his slight weight pushed through to the loose dry sand under and he half fell and half skidded down the dune. The fog was rising around him, bringing the smell of the sand, bitter and metallic, and then sweeter from the plants that lived more under the surface than above. The sound of the world-net was rising around him, always in his ears now. Always almost morning for him.

I should talk about something else, Ulanda thought, trying to focus back on the people around her. Small talk -- Garm was back at it, chatting with En'talac, he had the medic laughing and telling stories of her own, mostly about the merchant ships she had served on. She felt incapable of joining in; it would go wrong as soon as she opened her mouth. She felt exposed, and foolish in her silence, and pulled her attention away from the people in an attempt to escape from their notice. And pulled it back to them just as fast. The overpattern spirals were closer, fingers of black seeking this world, moving in time to the beat of the drums.

Another bean and she felt Garm's approval all out of proportion to the action. He scooped more from the bowl onto her plate, adding a spoonful of fresh relish that Quin'tat passed him. The beans weren't bad, really. The bad taste was fear; her mouth was stone dry with it even as a part of her felt only impatience to be in the spiral, walking through to the center and another world.

Garm was still talking. Sarkalt still deep into Ri-pattern, giving Anga what little the Piltsimic couldn't access directly, she supposed. His ship would leave after her

part in this had started, the loom-master with him and she would stay here until it wasn't Lillism anymore.

"The dance will take you to the Altasimic world and control the birth of the world-pattern as Nexus Change crests," he had said to her at their first meeting. "The girdle provides the key and you provide the link with overpattern to supply the power. There's nothing else you are required to know."

"But what of the will to do them?" she asked faking an arrogance she didn't feel, had never felt when confronted by this man. "What binds me?"

"Your word binds you."

"Will I be me while I'm dancing?"

Sunlight on his white robe made her squint and move her eyes to his face and the warmer skin. He had looked to where the spirals were, far enough away still to make a single point of looking, and that through the greater bulk of this world. "You are that word and the girdle is the promise. You and the Zimmer-priest talk of probability pulls... your universe was one, a playground for happenstance. Somewhere she could shape and choose those she wanted for this, here, to happen. Everything has led to here."

A part of it, she thought, uncertain where the knowing came from. But only a part, and she knew that too. "From what I've heard..." And felt. "...I don't think she was aware of what she was." Did she have the same flashes of certainty just before, the sick hope after?

She pushed her foot at a clump of the coarse grass, spreading the long stems to show the yellow center. She looked up again. "And why would she care if she had known?"

Eyes the texture of faceted green stones, looked at her in the same way they had looked at the overpattern spirals. "Why do you?"

She lied: "I don't."

He looked away.

She had knelt two days ago at the point of the diamond and listened to the beat of wings from a place that swallowed words whole. She knelt again at what must be the same place she thought, and watched the heated air rise in liquid waves from the mound of sand in the center of the world-altar.

Change after Change. Wings brushing this place. Who had Cassa been this time? Before Initiation. Family? Friends, certainly.

"What did the original makers of Empire trap here?" she asked.

He turned his eyes to her. "You."

She shook her head.

"What has become you. Overpattern in the same way as I am Empire Law."

Bolda looked back. Ulanda was listening to the drums, he could see her move to them like she was dancing under the skin while that little bit of her body stayed put. She was moving like Cassa had and with the same kind of look on her face, mouth slightly open and her eyes focused on nothing.

He scratched and yawned as he thought about that last bit. Ulanda was watching her lap, he couldn't see her eyes. The mouth would have to do and that was like Cassa, exactly like the last he'd seen of her. Damned if he was going to start fancying up the stories like Garm did.

He followed the edge of the terrace away from the others for the space to breath then on the edge, dangled his feet over, his eyes on the bobbing torches. The drumming was changing again, getting simpler. Ulanda would be feeling them stronger, she'd be weaving under Garm's hands and the old man would notice that. Almost ready to tie off the threads, he decided, the weaving completed. Almost ready for her to shed that skin.

He chuckled and stretched muscles made stiff from being in the wind, enjoying himself immensely. A double weave, that what the drums sounded like, he thought suddenly, mid stretch. Summer and winter, the sides showing as one predominately light and the other dark. Except you'd need six sides, not two, and six colors. Three pair? He tried to see it and went cross-eyed. Probabilities then. Or maybe sequential would do? No, he decided. Cheating. Pretty, but nothing at all the same.

He listened some more. For a world-pattern, it wasn't bad. More complex than most he had heard... not the surface beat, but the different layers of sound. Not six sides. Twelve. Each drum wove a summer and winter. And the pattern? He closed his eyes to shut out the distracting stars. That part was simple. The Li-Cassa flower, six petals with a pistil for each pair and a single seed for each pistil. Six and three. The flower opened, he thought, leading in and out with the seeds and a hole in the center of each. Pull through to the other side and have it repeated, opposite but the same.

His fingers were twitching, wanting the feel of silk threads under them and not the plain cotton even-weave of his jacket he had automatically reached to feel. I could do that, he thought, feeling silk and cotton at the same time. One drum's worth in white and dark green to keep true to the flowers and seeds. He looked over his shoulder at Ulanda. Or just the seeds. Ul^anda. Bitter seed. Damn Cassa.

Getting up took some effort. A mention in what was left of the Net brought Ulim running.

"Master Weaver, sir?"



"How far back does the storage around here go?"

"Sir?" An attempt by the aide to harness a Net inventory twisted out of his grip.

"Keep this between ourselves."

"Sir, there'll be a list in each storeroom. On resistant crystals. If you could tell me what you..."

"Just take me to the oldest."

The oldest storeroom was down one of the legs of the priest-house, a spiral step with cabinets lining the wall sides and chests making a break from anyone falling through the middle and very far down.

The first few chests had the contents listed in the inventory, the rest, simply as contents unknown. Ulum was checking them even though Bolda had told him not to bother. There wasn't anything in them remotely resembling what he'd heard in the drums.

Calling one of the glow lights from the wall to follow him, he took his beer down a few turns then looked back up the spiral. All of a sudden, it was noisy.

Im'olim and Paltirin were at it now, arguing loudly. Hard enough to understand the lingo at the best of times, harder with Li-Fu's tass'altin both having heavy accents. Eavesdropping wasn't worth pulling a translation but he wondered what they thought of this mess. They weren't in the spiral with their Priest at any rate, just here bitching about his nosing around.

A couple more turns down and the noise receded until his footsteps were louder. Lots of dust and except for his light, it was pitch black. It took him a while to reach what passed for bottom. Sand dotted with half buried chests, probably more hidden under the surface. A bit behind on their house keeping, he thought, taking a pinch of the stuff. Not sand, it was sand-colored dust.

Starting back up, he hesitated at a small chest sitting on top of a larger one. Ollowin wood, the scent was unmistakable. Remains of third chest surrounded it, it must have been inside. Putting his mug down, he brushed away the crumbling fragments of wood.

The Ollowin chest was a perfectly plain box, beautifully crafted. He ran his hands over the sides, feeling the silken grain and the tight joinery. From the way the wood had held up, it was probably the tough innermost core of the mature tree. Rare, even for Temple, and not too likely to be used for ordinary storage. He had used fibers from the outer bark lots of times. Carded and spun for weaving, it had the same smell.

A pair of blankets had been his first effort with it and had worked up surprisingly soft and then had gotten softer the more they were used. A natural blend of pale browns, the bark didn't take dye very well. Cassa had liked the blankets, kept them on the outer terrace off her bedroom. Cold and moisture didn't bother the fibers.

Or heat and dry the wood. He wiped the rest of the dust from the sides, then his hands on his pants, the amber dust rolling between his fingers into tiny moist balls from his sweat. Hot down here still, this must be one of the exposed legs and there was enough junk to absorb and hold the heat well into the night.

The lid fell back when he opened the chest and landed about twenty feet down, raising a billowing cloud of dust. From how the box wanted to open, he'd been expecting hinges but the lid was a fit-in style.

He leaned over the edge. When the dust was almost settled he went and got the lid. No damage, just more grime to add to his pants. Burnt out stasis strips ran around the edge of the lid with more leading down at each corner of the box when he pulled the wrapping away to check. Not part of the box originally and from the yellowish flakes that scrapped off under his thumbnail they must have been glued. The glue at the back had spots that were still sticky, which explained why he had thought there were hinges.

Then a loud crash rolled down the stairs. Someone had shut the door.

"Hey!" He started back up. His yelling had been as much through the Net and a moment later Ulim had the door back open.

"Master Bolda?" he called hesitantly, as though he didn't know.

"Down here. I've found something."

Ulim puffed his way down. "Master Weaver, what is it?"

Bolda lifted the top layer of the yellow wrapping cloth. "When was the last time you guys cleaned this place?"

"I've never." Ulim used the bottom edge of his robe to wipe his face then fanned it. "What a disaster." He sounded defeated. "Never go past the top few steps. Opening the door at the top sweeps most of the dust down the steps, why bother with where it goes?"

"Waiting until the dust reaches all the way up?" A white cloth was under the yellow, breaking at the folds where the yellow hadn't but he had the sense of it now. Diaper folding, keep turning them back and something will show up eventually. "How long do you figure it will take?"

"Longer than I'll be around so it won't be my problem." The Simic sat heavily on the large chest next to one Bolda was busy with.

A layer of black cloth now and crumbling, same as the stasis strips had. He was going from good to bad to worse.

Ulim coughed weakly, then spat a gob onto the dust covered floor. Dust streaks were on his face from being rubbed with his hands. "I've never been down this far. Would it be presumptuous for me to ask what you're looking for?"

Another white cloth or it had been once, just flakes of fibers were left, but there was an intact dark colored lace weave cloth under the flakes. He lifted it out and shook it, sending Ulim into a fit of coughing.

"I've never seen that dress," the Simic said sourly as soon as he had the breath to do so. "Li-Fu will want it. Old Simic green. Very rare now."

"Is this green?"

"In the right light."

He gave the robe another shaking. Green like the seeds were green. The colour he'd been thinking of.

"It's filthy." Ulim lowered his head, coughing again. "Might be easier leaving it here. What she doesn't know..." Disgust and defeat mixed, Bolda recognized again. He knew the feeling.

"She won't know. I'll be taking it with me." He hadn't seen this particular weave before, but recognized the family it belonged to. Piltsimic, of course, but owned by Temple. The set was based on a spiraling non-linear regression with a random snap-back to the un-split fiber. Wind in the Branches. Most of the patterns in the set were restricted -- including Summer and Winter -- he had only seen old family records of those until ending up with Cassa. A closed variation for the blankets, one of those on the list that said: 'no-no, don't you dare'. But who was going to say boo if that's what the Empress wanted -- which she had, after he'd already done it. There was an overbraiding pattern to match what he did for the blanket, if you didn't mind wasting a great deal of someone's time. Cording too, both primary and secondary size.

His cousin's Initiation robe had been an adaptation of a minor unrestricted pattern, the exact same regression as the restricted weaves but with a different base shape and a set snap-back. Perfect diamonds repeated ad nauseam on both sides of the fabric but the inside weaving was more interesting with silver added to those threads. Something for a Priest to appreciate... and later, Cassa had with the blinds. He had been very young to think he had known what he was doing.

Wrapping the robe in the yellow cloth he put it back in the box. I'll take both with me, he thought. He liked this box and Cassa owed him for almost forty-five years of putting up with Garm. "All done," he muttered as he followed the aide up the shallow steps. The man had a bum shaped patch of dust on the backside of his dark robe.

I can do the overbraids to match the robe, Bolda thought. He sat on the edge of the terrace, the stair side, past the sleeping rooms and closest to the kitchen and took a deep pull on his drink. Time enough left for doing braids if not the actual cording. And the robe she'd gotten is the robe she wanted. Whoever

wanted, he added to himself. Cassa for sure, same as the girdle but she wouldn't have brought it here herself. Storage inventory had what was likely the box the chest had been in, as having sat there as far back as the crystals set in the bones of the Priest-house legs went, the same blip of information getting more and more distorted through the Nexus Changes. Sealed, contents unknown.

Well behind him, the party was breaking up at last. The hot beer in his mug was an improvement over the tea everyone else had been served. Ulim sat next to him drinking the same, but with the difference of the aide watching domestic Net just enough to know when to tell the Stewards to handle what ever needed handling.

"I didn't lose by that much," the old man said between sips and after the last protest from someone who should have known better.

"Didn't lose at all."

Ulim chuckled through beer, blowing bubbles. His third mug and he was showing it. "They're just kids, we figured they'd do something dumb. Get themselves killed." He had sent his cousin to bed an hour ago. Apallim had been near falling apart from nervous exhaustion. The old Simic drained his mug. "You wouldn't believe the stories that are going around."

"I would."

"True?"

"Hell. Some of them." He poured another mug for the other man from the big jug that was keeping at least one leg warm then topped his own mug off. "She wouldn't slice you up if she could help it, but you might end up as an avipp next Nexus."

Ulim frowned at him through a mound of foam like thick cream. "I meant San Garm."

"Garm?" He'd burnt his tongue, gulping when he'd meant to sip.

But another voice answered him. "You aiming that, Bolda? Or was I just lucky?"

Then Ulim was up and bowing, weaving, but going deep.

The Zimmer was standing where the steps disappeared into the sand.

"Sit down," he said to Ulim, tugging him off balance then had to grab his arm to keep him from falling over. "Drink your beer." Then to Gennady: "You want some?"

"Have I missed dinner?"

Bolda touched the remnants of domestic Net long enough to see everybody gone except his team and Sarkalt's Chief of Staff. Still jawing. Then Ulim pushed in with more, stone cold sober on the Net lines even as he hiccupped. En'talac was waiting ambush on Garm in his room. "Food we got," he said to Gennady. "People we're short on."

A laugh and the Zimmer sat down, dropping a small white carry bag a stair further down. "If any are still there by the time I get all the sand out of my boots, I'll fight them for the leftovers."

Gennady took the mug that Bolda offered him. Apallim's, but rinsed with beer. Then they were flanked. "Lord Gennady," Quin'tat said. "I hope you weren't too inconvenienced."

"I was, but little you had to do with it."

The Zimmer had half risen and Bolda wanted him down. "Hell, it's a nice enough night for a walk." Then to Quin'tat: "You want some beer too?"

He sighed. "I could use some." Ulim wasn't the only one pulling domestic Net. En'talac and Garm had just tangled. "I don't know who of that two is the more stubborn."

He drained his mug, swilled it out, and passed it full again to the Warder. "I think Ulim could tell you."

Ulim was trapped and looked it. "Stubborn?"

Gennady had relaxed, back to sitting on the steps again, his mug steaming beside him, and going as far as to undo the top banding on his boots. Bolda couldn't see how sand could have made it up that high. "Well, maybe stubborn isn't the right word," he said. How about scatterbrained and obtuse? What stories?

Quin'tat stuck a finger in the beer and tasted. "Not bad," he said to Ulim. "What do you use for the base?"

Ulim twisted around, blinking. "Roasted beans. Roots of the pamp grass for flavoring." He was sounding very relieved with the change in subject. "The aging is the secret, it's got to be kept cool."

Gennady had one boot off, and a small dune of sand tapped out. "Kegs?" he asked, still tapping.

An eager nod. "About the size one man could carry."

The other boot now, the first draped over the white bag, almost hiding it. "Maybe I could put that to the test."

Quin'tat sat close enough to check the level of the contents of the jug without having to overreach himself. "Carry it to where, Lord Gennady?"

"The spiral."

"Like hell!" Bolda said, startled at the thought. Then: why not?

"Your intention, Lord Gennady?" Quin'tat said softly, but with an appraising note in his voice that he couldn't entirely hide behind a swallow of beer.

Gennady shrugged and raised his face to the night sky. "She didn't mention the stars. I thought they'd press me into the sand on the walk in. Different in space with a ship around you."

"The Empress. Your Cassa." The last word spoken with some bemusement.

"Yes. She didn't mention the fog either. I watched the start of it coming, silver in the starlight, off the ocean I suppose. Be here soon enough."

"We'll be gone by then, I think," Quin'tat said as he reached for Temple Net placement. In it, a line of fog advanced, silver and gray behind, the land ghost-like under the layer. And not complete, the 'seeing' was in shreds, like threads from a spider's web. Flickering, the web spun in to cover bare ground and was gone elsewhere just as fast.

"An hour until it reaches here, more-or-less. The world-net is breaking Temple Net up as fast as we re-focus it. It's a reminder of how old Empire is, that Temple Net is 'new' compared to the world-net on this planet. Incompatible and we can't spare more of the Net than we have already. Your flitter came in between the flickering, Lord Gennady. An interesting trick although perhaps related to... Ulanda not requiring the Net to see you."

Gennady didn't respond past raising his eyebrows, and after a moment, Quin'tat continued: "If the Empress didn't mention stars or fog, what did she mention?"

"That I was there with her."

"At the spiral." Quin'tat sighed.

"If I was twenty years younger I'd join you," Ulim said, speaking to his beer, then looked up. "Or eighty. Ena, San Garm's wife, was my cousin. We grew up together here in the Priest-house." He offered the words slowly, as though having to search through memories that disturbed him. The slur that had dragged into his speaking of plain tongue with the second mug of beer had vanished. "Ena always talked about getting away from Lillisim. I talked too, but it was just copying her. She was like that, easy to copy her. But she left and I didn't. I wonder..."

Quin'tat looked impatient. "Lord Gennady," he said, interrupting the aide mid-word. Ulim stopped immediately, and shrank back into himself, his shoulders hunched.

"Let the man finish," Bolda growled.

And was ignored. "Do you require anything?" A smile appeared as he poured more beer into his mug, and he included a generous nod to Ulim, "Besides a keg of..."

"Listen to him," Bolda interrupted. "You don't know what's important here. Beans. Weren't you listening earlier?"

Gennady filled the sudden silence. A hiss of air over exposed honor points, then words spoken quietly. "Do you think it matters?"

"Oh hell, I don't know."

Gennady pulled one boot back on, then the other. "Beans?"

"You really want to know?"

The Zimmer strapped over and smoothed the banding at the top of his first boot. "Probably not. Probably as bad as goats." Then smoothed the other boot. "What's your story, man?" he asked the Simic.

Trapped again, Bolda thought with some sympathy. Ice blue eyes had the aide pinned.

"I... I just wondered if I could have done something." Pinned, but wiggling.

"Like what?" Bolda asked, draining the jug into Ulim's mug.

"Made her want to stay here."

"More than friends?"

Ulim took a long swallow and wiped his hand across his mouth. "We were supposed to be. Close related, but we had cleared the genetic screening."

"But she had the hots for this other guy?"

A hiccup. "He wanted her."

"And her?"

"Ena... she wanted to be wanted. But she always wanted more."

"Sounds familiar," Gennady said before Bolda could.

Ulim nodded. "They shouldn't have made her stay here. She wasn't happy."

Quin'tat's turn: "Who?"

But Ulim wasn't going to be sidetracked with something as minor as identities. "It went wrong from the start but the Assim-priest wouldn't see it." He was trembling.

Bolda steadied the man's mug. Garm had told him what Li-Fu had said to Ulanda about her Initiation. Lying in bed, unable to move, there hadn't been much for the old man to do other than talk. "Thought I'd left Lillisim for good after that," Garm had whispered from the side of his mouth that could still move. "Now I keep wondering if I saw Cassa then. Was it all her and not Ena or Li-Fu even a little?"

Gennady was pushing the sand from his boots into narrow ridges, looking like he was deep in thought. But this wouldn't be new to him, Bolda knew he would have heard at least a recording of the original. Quin'tat just looked confused.

Ulim stared at his beer without adding anything more. Lines around his mouth and along side his nose had deepened into damp fissures.

Then Quin'tat sighed and bowed to Ulim. "My apologies. We don't know what's important until it happens. None of us do..." He looked at Bolda. "... except perhaps the Empress." He shook his head then got to his feet.

"Efflin -- your wife?" Quin'tat continued, speaking again to Ulim. He got nod back. "She's at the spiral with the Priest Li-Fu. Do you wish to join her and your Lady?"

The old man nodded. "We're her family. Most of her life."

"Then, happy or not, living or dead, she has been well served."

Ulanda kept her eyes on the path -- conscious of each stone through her sandals, the shifting of the looser sand, the grasses -- she felt as though she were barefoot. Sand crossed in abbreviated drifts but the way was mostly dirt and stones and tough grasses, their flat stems in a yellowed mat hard against the surface. There weren't any signs that others had been this way before them where the shadows of any footprints should have been accented the glow-globe Bolda had lighting her way.

Gennady and Bolda walked behind, she heard the swing of the weaver's packs, his rambling stride, each footfall accompanied by a grunt made deep in his throat. And Garm? At her side, but he drifted in and out of her awareness, he glided without sound then broke through with a harsh rasp of effort and an arm around her that gave more weight than it took.

Her meeting with Sarkalt... she had flown this path earlier, the way had taken moments for all she had tried to stretch the time out. That it was dark now was some of the change, she thought. The stars were a different measure than the blue sky of the day. Or the drums forced her walking into a different rhythm. And the fear was gone, she didn't know what she felt, the emptiness in her wasn't a feeling but a state.

At the top of the final rise, Ulanda stopped. Just below her was one of the springs, framed by taller plants, even a few spindly trees. Torches set in the sand illuminated brush and trees, the dancers cast grotesque shadows against them. There would be the same number of dancers at each spring. From here, the other drums were an echo to the first, the round barely complete before the stronger banished them again. The sand under her feet shivered with the beat, shifted like the sound was water flowing over it.

She knelt and Garm knelt at the same time, falling against her. "We can wait here," she said into his ear. "I don't want to go closer until the loom-master and his people have gone."

Ce'Itahm was the name of the spring, or the Mouth of Winter. On a world that had one season. Or as likely, words meaning Ice on a Mountain Lake or Darktime Speaker. The drums were slower again than when they had left the terrace. The sandy soil was pounded bare under the feet of the dancers with dust like a mist rising waist level and which drew the flickering into itself. It hurt her to watch them dance, the women and their shadows, and she tried not to only to find her eyes returning to them.

To escape them, she turned her face against the soft yellow of Garm's sleeve, smelling angora and washing soap. And fried aviipp. His hand moved to around her shoulder and she nestled into his side.



Something bitter intruded, the smell bit her nose and then Bolda shoved against her arm to get her attention. “Drink this,” he signed and passed a mug to her, holding it until both her hands were around it. Warm unglazed earthenware. She cradled the mug to her chest to help support the weight, breathed in the fragrance then blew against the surface, sending cream foam sliding in drifts away from the dark circle growing under her breath. The sides of the mug warmed more as the beer reacted to the air by heating.

Kimp beer -- the same as at South Bay Temple. A treat on winter days, even the youngest got a mouthful after the ice dances for the Winter Turning festival. And pretended to like it although most didn’t until they were much older.

This was hot to the taste now and spicier than the drinks she had become used to. The flavor was different than she remembered, but as bitter and it warmed her all the way down. An acquired taste perhaps.

She looked at Garm. Gentle concern showed on his face layered over top a deep tiredness and she smiled over the foam to reassure him. His cruelty wasn’t a constant, when she wasn’t reacting to it in temper, she could remember that -- and its source -- and even feel sorry for him.

“I might as well change here,” she said. And to Bolda: “The white robe...”

Bolda started to untie the bundle, then turned his head to look at her. “Are you planning on jumping through every hoop?”

His expression changed what might have been a question into an attack. Ulanda blew on the foam again, harder and a bubbly cream blob drifted over the side of the mug and onto her fingers. The foam was left standing dry on the braids while the moisture soaked in.

“Does the colour matter?” she asked him.

For an answer, he pulled the robe out and shook it. White gauze and silk. Lace. Several layers of cloth, all white.

Leaves of white, clouds. And with the white, surrounding her was the smell of metal.

And she was in South Bay. It was the Winter Turning, the public dances in the town, set at the large grassy common between the Civil Justice Courts and the market, the open area flooded with water and sculpted with ice. A snowy day and white flakes frosted the carvings and the dancers both.

For that instant only, she recognized the “otherness” of the vision. Her history, her memory. It had happened. Had happened. Past.

“Hurry, get into the pavilion,” she heard herself say. She had two children by the hand, four others close, apparently with her. Who they were, what they were to her, was coming in bits and pieces. Missing, then suddenly there, then gone again.

“I want to stay and watch,” one said, one of those whose hand she held. His thin high voice was rang loud in the cold air. They all wore white, their robe ties

and hair ribbons were Ri-green, colored like the leaves when they first uncurl on the apple trees, like the leaves in the spring rain.

"Your six did well," the Simic Dance Master said, turning from the pair of dancers she had been showing points of movement to in a float of hands. The woman's long white hair was tied with the same green ribbons as the children's and she wore a crown of ribbons with the ends floating against the white silk chenille of her robe. Green underrobes, layers of them, showed at her neck.

For all her stern manner, the Simic Dance Master had a reputation for liking to be with her dancers both while they were getting ready and after. She would dance later tonight in South Bay Temple, and the Priests would dance in their turn for the seeing of the Turning. Snow would dust the central mound, and ice, not blood, would fill the deep cuts of the killing spiral.

Noise rose and fell all around them, chattering and laughing, people dressing or changing, and she gave her thanks with a bow in addition to the words the Master might not be able to hear.

"And the It'ici child... will he take the vocation of an Acolyte trained dancer, do you think? What do you think of the quality of prayers he might dance?"

Loud prayers if nothing else. She had the child in question finally dressed, always the last, and his robe tie knotted double or it would be off too soon. The boy was breathless with excitement and stumbled over his words, interrupting the Dance Master as he described his dancing and how they had all looked at him. And that he was too hot and didn't need an overrobe and didn't want hot cider.

"Child," the Master said, softly into the bedlam. And squatted, child height to speak. "If you're warm enough, I know a peddler's cart with lemon ices." A Temple c'in coin appeared as though by magic between two fingers and the boy's eyes grew round. "Enough for all six?" she asked, as softly and her eyes smiled if her face didn't. The boy nodded, speechless for once although his mouth was open.

Enough for six, doubled and the merchant would be happy for the Temple coin. A shift of emerald green eyes and the Master's personal aide appeared from the chaos around them, already starting to gather the children out.

The Master took Ulanda's arm. "Rinni will take the dance with Illis." She gestured to the far corner of the pavilion. Illis and Rinni were being dressed in wraps and ribbons, more bare flesh than clothes, their skin shiny with sweat. Rinni twitched to the rhythm she'd soon be dancing to.

"Master?" Ulanda asked. A change in position this late was unusual. And the final warm-up shouldn't be so advanced with another dance slated before theirs.

The Dance Master didn't answer, the cici drums for the la'cellini dance did. Early by a good half hour, the beats heavy as though meaning to crack the ice. Rinni and Illis were gone in a flurry of ribbons and most everybody else followed to crowd the entrance and watch what they could from that small shelter. Ulanda

went to pour a beer from the seal-flask on the table next to the pile of folded robes, using her eyes to ask the question and getting the answer in kind. A small wooden whisk brought air to the liquid and raised the foam, and she took the quickly warming bowl to the Master.

The woman held the bowl but didn't drink. "Your actions three months ago showed that your training would never be to this end. And showed that the training was successful towards the end more desired..." She paused. "...and your survival since, that your control is as successful, if late in being so. For you to dance in front of townsfolk does you no credit." Her words were as much seen as heard in a roll of drums that made the fabric of the tent shiver and snow slide from the sharply pitched sides. She took a sip of the beer, leaving foam on her upper lip. "Or credit this Temple."

"Dance Master." Ulanda bowed.

"The Roll for Initiation will be announced tonight and your name will be on it. There'll be one dance more you'll make as an Acolyte, and it won't be in public. You have three months to prepare yourself for it."

She had bowed again, deeper still.

And straightened to find herself back on Lillisim. Her memories of what she had just seen felt borrowed, the seeing like looking through frost, the images distorted.

The conversation had flowed around her. Spread on sand were clothes and containers as Bolda sorted through things. The white overrobe that had triggered the vision was thrown to one side, white ties tossed on top, already in butterfly loops, ready for knotting. She inched close enough to touch the cloth. Like touching starlight, and the smell, touching it brought back the metallic smell to her. Like ice, but more complex. Bolda grabbed it away.

"You won't need that," he said as he bunched it up. A shallow hole quickly dug in the loose sand held it, handfuls more sand pulled over top to bury it.

The smell was like the tainted ice taste of buttered tea. She shivered and took a sip of the beer to cover her reaction. "Why does it smell like that. Is there something in the weave?"

Bolda brushed sand from his hands, his eyes hidden in the shadows cast by folds of skin but she could feel him watching. "How should I know?"

"Anga?" Garm said, the name coming in a whisper she couldn't hear over the drums, but she saw it on his lips.

The dancers before her stopped and she was on her feet. Six women suddenly still like a held breath, between one drumbeat and the next, their limbs twisted, their grace gone. The loss of the drum at the spring below slammed into her mind, deafening her to all other sound. Other senses rushed to fill the lack: all at once, she could see the woman's names in the twitch of their muscles, their

families in the heaving ribs, children in the rivers of sweat coursing through the dust on their bodies. She had known so many like them, had always stood outside their lives, seeing them best through what she touched of their men.

A step took her forward. Dancing, she saw them dancing again -- the drums still silent -- and saw them now... and tomorrow on this same world, she saw that too. They wouldn't be the ones to tell the stories about this, but would become silent when the talk started, feeling for memories they can't ever quite reach but can be seen in their eyes and they'll hold that vision until they die.

"No!" she screamed, arms pressed over her ears. Her skin felt like a bell. Then she knelt again quite suddenly, almost falling. Six times six, all the dancers had stopped now. And, despite her not hearing them, she knew each instant when the other five drums had stopped. They stopped like a heart is stopped, where the stopping doesn't end but is felt a long time.

Bolda dusted the mug off on his jacket sleeve and filled again. "Drink it, I said, not wear it." He pushed the beer into a nest of sand in front her.

Garm settled back down beside her then drew a line in sand that was the same color as his finger. "You put yourself to shame with such a display," he said, bringing his hand up, making a form that started with the line. "Concentrate on the line. One breath now, feel it..."

She coughed dust out of her throat, still feeling the rawness of the scream. "I don't need that," she said, pushing sand over the mark with her hand. A simple focus, a child's trick. "I don't need..." You, she had been going to say and knew it was a lie. "I'm sorry, Garm. The robe, get me the white robe."

"Don't be an idiot," Bolda said after a glance to where he had buried it.

She felt like giggling, felt the laughter start to bubble against Garm's hand as he smoothed her hair back off her neck. Or pulled it free from the beer foam and wet she had spilled down her front.

"I might need it," she said. "If there is something in the robe, it might be necessary." She twisted her neck to see Gennady. He hadn't moved from where he stood near the beer keg. "Can you sense anything from the white robe?"

With his foot, Gennady cleared where Bolda had buried the robe, stared at the crumbled cloth for a moment, then squatted, took the cloth in one hand, put it to his lips and breathed in, honor teeth showing. Letting the robe drop, he stood then shook his head. One hand made the sign that allowed her the right to answers from him.

"Don't depend on it," Bolda whispered in her ear.

"He means it," she said out loud, not taking her eyes off the Zimmer.

Bolda snorted then went over and lifted the robe up. "More your style this way." He looked up from smoothing the folds. "Speaking of which, you about ready to go?"

"When the loom-master comes out. The dancers and drummers are his, part of his weaving." She could feel what he was doing in its entirety if she tried, it wasn't growing anymore but still changing, settling against the fabric of the world-altar like a veil made of lace, modifying the expression of what already existed. She drew her attention back to a smudged line in the sand before her.

Bolda snorted. "He's taking his own bloody time getting here."

The drummer reacted to Bolda's snort and curled into himself on his side, close against the round of skin he had been beating. His hands were burnt claws cupped one in the other and from looking towards Bolda, or towards the sound rather, he looked at his hands, his face full of wonder.

Garm shivered beside her, then she realized it was laughter. "Taking their own time at anything is a common Piltsimic trait. Bolda, if you want to be of better use than usual, pour me one of those beers. Or Ulanda another, I'm half finished this one already."

He wouldn't have seen the drummer, Ulanda thought. But he must have. Bolda looked past her to Garm, a worried look on his face, but he shrugged and pulled another mug from his pack.

Gennady was sitting on the keg and he moved one leg enough to free the spigot, then his attention changed and he stood in one fluid movement. "He's coming," he said softly, and a hand dipped to the knife sheath on his leg. But he managed to hiss a laugh over hollow points as he pulled the arm back and crossed it with the other.

A line of torches moved towards them from up the spiral. Ulanda stood, Garm supporting her, her knees felt as though they wouldn't hold her weight. Fear sprouted in her belly, then dropped as fast to her knees. She took the emotion like a gift and shook Garm off before walking down the slope to the spring on her own.

The moving torches didn't look any closer; time seemed as distorted as on the walk here. As she stood waiting, Bolda walked around the circle of dancers, stopping to stare at each woman, then to the drummer in the center. "Bloody hell," he said.

Garm pushed at the back of her knees and she knelt. "I don't know," she said to Bolda.

"Did I ask something?"

Of course he had. Garm only saw her, she thought, or what he wanted of her, not the others at any rate. And Gennady didn't care. Past getting the beer for Garm, his attention was on the shapes approaching. They were points of heat in the cold, fire and people. And individuals in their scent, the Zimmer's lips were parted, the sharp tips of his honor teeth bright as his dark tongue flickered out to taste the moist air. He would know who they were, their order and grouping, same as she did but in a different way.

She found her head cocked to listen better, straining to use the senses that belonged to her body, hesitant to deliberately use the other within Anga's weaving, especially as she had so little control. Soon enough, the cresting of Nexus Change wouldn't leave her a choice and then, the Altasimic dance would provide the control and the girdle the key.

A hiss of fire from the torches. And water over sand and a bubbling from the spring. Wind. And something else, something that vanished when looked for, like the almost seen stars in the night sky on Ri. And a metallic scent, the same as the white robe.

There had been stars on the senior dancers skin for the la'celini, the fire-ice dance. Silver powder rubbed into flesh, beautiful if the sun had been shining, and still pretty in the opal glow of late afternoon and snow clouds. Silver as well for the Priests to see, or feel, something more to attract their attention to the dance.

"Gennady," she started, wanting to ask him what he could hear, but stopped at the look on his face. Turning her head back was almost more than she could manage. Bolda stood in the center by the drummer, as before, but his face was open and listening. She couldn't reach him with her pattern-sense and went to move and couldn't do that either.

"You can stay here, cousin," Anga said, facing the short round man like a mirror, dark to light. He had led the small group with him and stopped with the others pushed up behind but not passing.

Cousin? Little resemblance. Of race, some, but what else she couldn't see past the snarl of even trying to look. "Let him go," she said, fighting the hold on her, feeling the start of anger. "He belongs to me." A web was being woven here and despite her caution, she was caught.

"He can still stay here on Lillisim." A calm, reasonable voice. "This Temple could use a weaver with something more than Simic skill."

Too many threads surrounded her -- the web of the Opening -- and she couldn't find... what?

"...safe here, doing what he should be doing..."

Her jaws snapped shut with a click of teeth as she fought to spit out words and failed. Then she blinked. And saw Bolda safe, here.

"...stay here safe." She hadn't noticed Anga's concern before, it filled the man, it was a warmth in him. He was right, she thought as he continued speaking in a familiar voice, rough and slightly over-loud. "You have the two you need for..."

But En'talac arrived just then, coming from the direction of the Priest-house. "What's wrong with them?" she asked, gesturing to the dancers and with the sound Ulanda could feel the medic try to reach Temple Net for a scan. And fail.

Bolda jerked as though falling from a string. Then sneezed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "I've been insulted." He stared at her. "After all I've done, are you going to allow that?"

Ulanda wanted to laugh with relief. She could move and feel Garm beside her, breathing now and she felt his confusion as he stared at the mug and the puddle of beer next to his knees. "Allow what?"

"Allow what?" Garm echoed, shaking his head slowly. A bubble popped by his knee, a reflection of yellow fire dying in dust turned from amber to gold with the beer.

Bolda stared at the both of them. "Cousin!" he sputtered, putting all the affront he could manage into the one word.

En'talac looked at him as though he was insane, then back at Ulanda. "Lady Priest?" she asked her, speaking the words slowly and firmly. "Will they live?" Silver rings flashed yellow from the torches as she signed her status and right to ask.

"I don't know."

"Any of your bloody business if they do or not?" Anga said.

"We're going to need another keg of beer if this keeps up," Gennady said softly, stretching his muscles in a ripple of barely contained threat.

There were lines, leading to other lines... not Temple Net, she couldn't use that, it was all Anga's, but the world-net, the whispers that cut under and around the web this man had woven...

Gennady kicked her leg. "Whatever he tried didn't work."

She turned her head to see him if nothing else. She would have preferred Simitta here instead. Or neither. She hadn't needed to question his sudden helpfulness. "And you? What do you try?"

A hand touched her shoulder. "Later," Garm whispered, sounding like an echo. Then his fingers brushed where the cross hatches remained from Simitta's spurs. She had to lean into his fingers to feel their trembling. He was panting but there was no strength in his breathing. She moved a hand to touch his.

"You need do nothing here," Anga said. Too close and she stiffened, and pulled away from Garm. She hadn't seen him approach that close. "There wasn't time to get elaborate with the weaving so everything is controlled by triggers. Once you pass through to the Altasimic world, it will be a few hours, a day at most, for Nexus Change to start to crest, it's that close. As it does, the warding points will release, they won't hold to the end. When they release, the world-pattern will begin to unfold. Fast or slow, the timing will be driven by the crest of overpattern. You don't have to do anything, just be there. And don't wander off from where you end up or you'll face the full brunt of Nexus Change."

And she would die, perhaps with the Opening not danced. "I've been over this with Quin'tat, loom-master," she said, wishing she could see the other man's face better but glad he was no closer. Less than five feet away, with his back to the light, all she saw was the gleam of yellow off the black of his skin and a golden halo caught in the tight curls on his head. His face was in shadow and even with

his trap broken, it was as though there was a wall between them. She wondered if she'd ever really seen him.

"I know what is to be done, I've agreed already, there's nothing left to be said. If I can do it, I will." She didn't tell him of her hope that she would imprint with Altasimic world-pattern at the same time. It would be a fulfillment of the second choice in the Cam'lt Temple spiral.

"Just get dressed. The dance may not start as soon as you pass through but that doesn't mean nothing is happening."

Ulanda tried again to feel the loom-master. The dancers were statues but the only movement came from them, a gray and yellow flickering around their forms. As though following the loom-master, fog had rolled to cover them and the torches set nearest flared in the sudden damp, leaping out with tongues of flame to burn the moisture. Instead of Anga, she reached a wall, not of fog but building blocks. Or stone perhaps, the scent of stone in the rain...

"I find myself spending valuable time arguing instead of changing my clothes. Do I have the time to waste? Do you?"

"He doesn't," En'talac said. She had methodically checked each dancer in turn, moving one to breath easier and another to ease the pull of muscles unnoticed by the woman. Standing waist deep in swirling mist, she was looking to the next spring, concern evident in her posture. Then to the loom-master: "You've got about ten minutes to get to the ship. I was supposed to tell you to hurry." She looked back at the dancers and frowned as she tapped her teeth with two fingers. Metal rings made a clicking sound.

Gennady was suddenly between her and Anga. "You had best leave. Anything can happen can happen in the fog. A time for dreams."

Ulanda shivered, seeing a wall of building blocks tumbling around him. And her. Ice, not stone.

Gennady took another step towards Anga, crushing blocks of ice under his boots. He didn't see them and she knew he wasn't really aware of the honor blade in his hand. "Loom-master," he said, "take your people and go." Zimmer without a Net to translate, but she understood every word. "And you..." His attention had shifted to the medic.

"I'm staying here," En'talac said, putting her hands on her hips. And took another step at the same time as though to cut off any protest. "Or to be more accurate, I'm going with you."

The blade wove in a dance. "You'll leave with him..."

"No!" Ulanda said sharply. Garm's fingers dug into her and she looked at him. She didn't understand his expression, she didn't want too. She licked her lips and pushed her attention back to the Zimmer. "She can come with me. It's not your decision to make, it's mine. And I can use a medic."



En'talac made a formal sign of thanks, her rings flicking torchlight. "Sarkalt's agreed. He told me to tell Anga that they would leave without him. Is he as welcome with you?"

"No."

The other woman's thin lips curved into a smile. "I didn't think so." She turned to Anga. "He said you were welcome to try that route, or something to that effect. He said you're a good weaver but a poor dancer, and if he thinks that's funny, I suspect Ulanda will think it's hilarious."

Garm chuckled. Ice on ice. "She would. Cassa would."

The wall retreated as Anga stepped back through the fog without making a sound. Silver tipped fog darkened to gray where starlight failed to penetrate. The torches were points of yellow, flaring then dying one by one. The fog surrounded the five of them now, leaving an island of clear air.

Then Anga's voice: "You've agreed to this." The words weren't a question and they came from no direction she could tell.

"I've agreed," she said. Something of the web the loom-master had spun to trap Bolda surrounded her and then was gone.

En'talac patted at the wall of fog as though expecting something solid. "Did he leave?" she asked, sounding puzzled. Her fingers touched moist air and disappeared. She pulled back sharply.

He had, and hadn't. Temple Net was him as well. "Yes," Ulanda said. And repeated it for Gennady, signing as well. The Zimmer would have attacked if he had a target he could see, or feel. His knife wove a complex pattern in the air. White bone handle, white ceramic blade. A design ran along the blade, part of the knife, she saw just as he slipped it back in the sheath. From when it was formed, not carved later. A six-petal rose. Zimmer primary.

Bolda stopped to catch the glow-globe as though it were a firefly. The light hadn't heard his call to it. "Can't see a damn thing," he grumbled, and set it to shine brighter, turning the fog into a white wall. Then to Gennady, "What the hell are you staring at?"

The Zimmer moved away, white against the white fog, like an etching on frosted glass.

Bolda snorted and turned back to her. "I've got a different robe here." From a small box, he lifted a dark cloth. Light from the torches sparkled through the lace weave as he tossed it on her lap.

Black again she thought then looked harder to see the blend of silk-spins in the cords. No, it was green, dark green. Startled, she looked up.

"Green?"

"Cassa's doing," he said, throwing a look to Garm that contained a threat. Garm didn't react; it was as though he hadn't heard.

"I don't understand. She planned this from the start?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're enjoying this."

He chuckled. "What's the robe look like to you?"

"It's heavy. And ugly. Are you serious?"

"You're asking me? Damn it, look at it."

She was. "A spider web thing..." She hesitated. Then slipped past looking without meaning to and the world-net swarmed in. Overpattern. The net gibbered then sang as she allowed it space in her mind to expand. "A Wi'alt loom. It's dust now." It had been ice mostly and what little of it wasn't, had been stone. Then sand, then dust. And a familiar taste in her mouth.

She couldn't see how you could weave with ice and stone and then she could, quite suddenly. And was very glad it was dust. Her throat was dry with shock and she could hardly breath from the time that had passed since it had been stone. She would wear lives on her back, she had already killed -- the robe was hers, only hers.

"Is this a good idea?" En'talac asked, moving to squat closer.

Past a scowl, Bolda ignored her. "The pattern." Then his fingers snapped. "Look, damn it."

Garm checked her g'ta points and she lost her concentration. Black sparks spread out over the robe like the wing scales of moths battering against a lantern. She shivered as her mouth opened: "Wind in the branches weaving." The words started coming in a timed chant, some of the words, the ones that surfaced, dragged memories with them. The memories weren't hers, the lives weren't. "Spinning the dark line coming." Nexus after nexus, the dark line always came. The people were dead, the echo-lines dead. Their stars had become dust and new worlds. She started to move in time. She knew this dance, knew it in her bones, in pain and fear. "Ice in the..."

"Stop her!" En'talac shouted.

"Not now, you idiot!" Bolda screamed in her face. Silver rings flashed into her eyes, then En'talac was sitting down where Bolda had pushed her. "Keep out of it," he growled. Then to her: "Still want the white robe?"

She shivered again. "Is Cassa's choice safer than Anga's? I could have been an Altasimic Priest on Ri if not for her. Or Empress. How can I trust her?"

"You tell me." Bolda's tone was cold.

"You want me to look deeper than I already have?" Ulanda asked hoarsely. "I don't think so. You can't know what it is. Not much shows to the eye, but it's layers of the same pattern inside, set slightly off."

Gennady laughed. She could feel the sound mix with the pulse beat in the crosshatches on her cheek. Clan a'Genn marks. "Like folds of paper."

She nodded. She felt like she could throw up. She might be safer wearing only an underrobe. "But the robe is more like flowers pressed in the paper."

“Li-Cassa flowers,” Garm said or whispered rather, his hands done with butterflies for now. He was holding her around her waist and rocking slightly as though to comfort her. The heavy weave of the bunched up robe was between them.

“What flowers?” she asked almost in unison with En’talac.

“Sea-foam.”

She nodded again and then laughed with his arms around her, suddenly, mindlessly, feeling safe for the first time since that morning when she had wakened in his arms. “I’ve got scars on my feet from walking on the seed pods. At the beach, in the long grass...” She stopped suddenly when Garm started to falter. But En’talac had him down almost at the same time she had realized something was wrong.

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The fog didn’t hold steady, they walked into and through tendrils of mist as delicate to see as torn gauze and pushed through walls of what felt like heavy wet cloth. How much time, Ulanda wondered, stopping a moment to see around her. And to rest from the strain, her spine was being compressed with the weight of the robe. She wanted to sit, to fold up as small as she could but had an image of the sinking continuing until there was nothing left of her. Bolda had produced silk cording, only slightly lighter in colour than the robe, and redone her braids while En’talac had tried to work around him, stripping the black robe off and getting the other on.

Lines of Temple Net were in the same spiral form as they walked but all the usual linking points were gone. Nothing else of that system, domestic or Command remained, just the pure Net, and the old world-net had wrapped itself around and gone to whispering very softly indeed.

En’talac pulled a scrap of cloth from a shrub, almost stumbling into the first of the branches. Red cotton was wrapped around a finger then tucked into a side pocket of the pack slung over the medic’s shoulder. “We’re almost to the center,” she said. “I marked the way. It’s not like you can get lost, a spiral, I mean, but...” Her eyes narrowed still more as she tossed her head back. “I pulled some of the Records of past Blessings from the Net before Anga took too much of it over. This fog isn’t bad, it can get much worse. We could have ended up in the water or turned back towards the springs.”

“You had planned to come with us all along.”

The medic looked back at Garm before answering. "It was a chance I had considered."

Garm had walked this far as though in a daze, but he had walked it. The short rest while Bolda completed the braids and the warm beer seemed to have revived him. "You could have asked," Ulanda said, starting to walk again. She had no sense of distance and little of time in this place and worried about it. Mist completely surrounded them now, they moved in a circle cast by the light of the glow-globe, the long grasses beaded with white stars touched by rainbows. But the light was being licked away by tongues of gauze.

The other woman put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her. "It would have been worse than useless to ask. You would have said no before even thinking about the possibility of yes. I decided to trust to the moment, to trust the Priest, not the woman."

Ulanda pulled away and started walking again. Was she going the same way? Garm, with Bolda and Gennady on either side of him, was ahead of her now; they must have passed without her realizing it. How long now, she wondered, forgetting already what the medic had been saying and faintly puzzled at the remnants of the anger she felt. She clutched at lace with fingers stiffened by new braiding, more conscious of the layers of weaving than she was of the other woman. Each division led into probabilities as much as threads and they tried to draw her in as they had earlier. An important part of her knew the weaving too well. She pulled back just as the medic started talking again.

"Damn it," En'talac said loudly. And glanced to the men, her tongue darting out to moisten her lips. And continued speaking in a softer voice, although Gennady was obviously listening. "Regardless of what Anga says, you're a Priest now, even if you don't have a world-pattern or a vass'lt."

Little of what En'talac said reached her. "Didn't I..." She shook her head, confused. She must have... then remembered she had asked Garm, 'Why aren't you dead?'

"Ulanda, listen to me. You think you have a chance of surviving this, of imprinting with Altasimic pattern..."

Gennady was closer, the other two still walking the spiral path, Bolda glued on Garm's elbow, his packs swinging around him like weighty pendulums. "Bolda?" she called, the word out of her mouth before realizing that she could have called Garm.

"Leave her alone," Gennady said.

"Shut up," En'talac spat. A quick look at Gennady with the two words. Just that. Then, putting her hands on Ulanda's shoulders, said, "Ulanda, the breeding of your people went wrong. Your bloodline and bloodlines like yours won't be allowed to survive, nobody who can directly access overpattern. And you... you won't live long enough to do anything about it."

The thought was a bubble in her throat. "I..."

Gennady pulled En'talac's hand away, and held it as he pushed with his body to separate them. White skin over plates of bone glittered in the starlight. Then Ulanda saw instead, skin the color of crushed rose petals melting in shades of what must be red except it wasn't a red she should have been able to see. Then the world became silver and violet, the leaves of the grass burned with light, the fog danced like a cold shroud, an alien thing... and from him, a state of feeling that was frozen in absolutes. He owned what he offered: he was the offering and the acceptance.

Ulanda didn't remember moving but her arm blocked the knife, the white blade cutting through dark green cloth and cord to bone before stopping. But she remembered falling and rolling away as though it had taken a long time, and that spent mostly listening to catch a sound just beyond her hearing.

"Shall we try this again, Zimmer?" En'talac said from behind her.

She looked. The woman was between her and Gennady, the knife still in Gennady's hand. She had felt it pull from the bone, she realized, a tugging sensation. But it hadn't hurt.

"You would die easily," he said, staring at the medic. Ulanda felt him blink -- his eyes were black -- and her seeing changed back as fast.

"Would I? I'm not dead."

His eyes flickered and he backed up a step, sheathing the knife in the same movement that had him looking past the medic to her. She looked away first.

En'talac turned her back on him.

"It doesn't hurt," Ulanda said. She sat up on the wet ground cradling her arm, rocking. "Why doesn't it hurt?"

The medic shook her head, kneeling close as she tore a cloth taken from her pack into strips, using her teeth to start the tearing. "Don't you ever do that again."

She didn't think she had the first time. What Gennady had felt in attacking the medic was as alien to her as the fog was to him. "You're here with me," she said.

"My oath is to Sarkalt, not you. Worry about your own people such as they are."

"What you said..." Ulanda looked out. Gennady was gone. The mist opened around her, shimmering gray and silver from the stars and forming a funnel to the sky above. And very far away, the light that Bolda carried. She blinked and it was gone, then there again as suddenly. She could hardly see En'talac at all in the dark. Silver hair and silver rings, both of them moving as she worked.

"You've been trained to depend on others. A Priest has to be dependent and not simply for their physical needs. They have to be responsive to the thoughts and desires of those closest to them; they'd be too dangerous otherwise. You have to fight it, that kind of dependence will get you killed."

And her bloodline as well? Ulanda swallowed to moisten her throat. "I've had a life outside Temple. No one looked after me, I depended on myself."

"I can't say how true that was, but I don't see evidence of it here."

The white light was much closer and she could see the thick cloth En'talac had wrapped around her arm, close to the elbow, and tighter than the braids. Where it had been cut, the robe bled, more than she had, but she didn't think the medic could see it, she was working through the gore, her clothes streaked with it. Her face as well, along with some of Ulanda's blood.

En'talac looked up. Bolda was alone. "Get the others together," she told him. "We shouldn't be separated."

"You picked a great time for this," Bolda said in a growl to her, not En'talac. Besides the glow-globe, he had only one pack, the large one he carried on his back. He tossed it down then released the glow-globe as though he expected it to float. It dropped like a stone and he kicked it out of the way.

"I don't need the warning," Ulanda said to En'talac, ignoring Bolda's comment. "I know I can't depend on Garm. He doesn't see me, not really, not the real me." The other woman was looking at her but she couldn't read her face, it almost smooth of expression. Listen to me, she wanted to scream.

"Garm does his best," Bolda said. "What he can." He was untying the bandage that En'talac had just put on. "There are more cords in the bag. By your feet. Move it!"

The medic gave him one searching look and complied. Then to her, Bolda said, "Damage?"

"The robe's cut."

He swore as his fingers found the ends of the lace. "Can't do anything about that." She didn't think he could see the blood, but from the way his fingers followed the weave away from the knife cut, following certain shapes in the lace like he was tracing arteries, he felt something. "It will have to do," he added and wiped his fingers on his trousers. "Still better odds than wearing the other one."

Cords from En'talac were instant butterflies around his fingers. Splicing into the cut ends of her overbraids, he started braiding backwards, pulling off the damaged cords as he worked. Six secondary strands, and six primary for each secondary, the cuts twisted from being tiny pompoms to a sleek perfection in moments. He left the underbraids cut, just fitted them in place over the wound where En'talac had pulled them away and wrapped a single silver impregnated cord tightly around. She felt the metal like a buzz only for a moment before it faded, but it was the first thing she had felt that she could be sure of.

"It's just that he can't...", Bolda started again.

She shook her head. "I know."

"She chose him. Maybe more than just chose. He's what he is, like the girdle is, like the robe."

"Bolda, I know. When I'm not angry with him, I know."

With the braiding finished, he rubbed the cords down hard. Except for the pressure, she couldn't feel that either. "I suppose you do." He puffed his cheeks out round with air and let it out again in a pop. "Let's go then." Gathering the braids, he threw the cut pieces into the box, then the box into the backpack to make an awkward square bulge in the heavy canvas.

She stopped him with a look. "I'm not though, am I?"

He snorted. "Not what?"

"Like the girdle. Like Garm. I wouldn't feel like this if I was."

"Try thinking why you're not and then use the difference."

She tried to stand. Off balance but she was up and able to walk. En'talac was half supporting her. "Cassa."

Bolda shook his head as he threw the medic's backpack at her. "If you're both finished, I'd just as soon not leave Garm alone with..."

The medic slipped the long handle of the pack over her shoulder. "Ulanda, what I was leading up to is that you're not expected to survive and I'm not talking about that damn story of Garm's. What happened here is just one of Anga's tricks, there'll be more."

Bolda snorted. "What? Gennady going after you? You can blame your own mouth for that."

"I mean what Anga was setting up when he tried to get rid of you. Don't you know?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you that we weren't part of what was happening with Altasimic, but others at Palace and elsewhere were, and not just Anga. In your reality, best as we can tell, it was an alliance between two principal Offices of the Imperial Council and Rigyant. And then you and whoever you count on your side. In ours, one of the Offices was that of the Third Concord, the one Cassa Challenged in your reality. Something else we had was a split in the loom-master Council in Palace, a split away from the Rigyant faction. I think yours probably did too. As to the rest of it, like you told Quin'tat, we don't know who counts for what." Her mouth twisted into a smile. "Sometimes, well, he doesn't always think. You took him by surprise."

"Just ragging him about Ulim. Who the hell knows."

Another smile and an appraising look. "Anga probably should have tried it earlier but he's been having to play catch-up even with the records we supplied him in place of those he lost in his flitter. No one, especially from your reality, was expecting to have to face the Altasimic Opening with Nexus Change cresting around them. And no one, even a loom-master, would ever think they would have to handle it alone. And in one day. Except that Lillisim is where the keying was originally set, I don't think Anga could even have attempted it."

Ulanda slipped the carry loop of the glow-globe over her fingers. "He's not alone, he has Li-Fu." She started towards the center of the spiral. "And the Temple people here, he's not alone." And Sarkalt? And this woman? She was having trouble thinking. She knew she had been telling her and Bolda something, but she couldn't remember what. There wasn't much time left, she could feel the pull now where she hadn't been able to before.

En'talac shook her head, keeping pace, not following or leading. "Li-Fu stays here regardless of what they've set up in the pattern."

"What about Sarkalt?" Ulanda said.

"In our reality, he never was part of Rigyant's plans, and as for balancing the loom-master, it's not what he knows how to do, not really. We're more blind in this than not and we're limited in what we can throw into the analysis. People, resources and time. We weren't expecting this either, we were following dreams and they said nothing of the Opening. The overpattern tears drive the timing, not us. One day, less than a day since we arrived here. One chance to save Altasimic from destruction, Ulanda and that's it. If you had gone from the diamond to Palace as they wanted, Nexus Change would have destroyed the entire Altasimic Sector and the Simic worlds, not just Lillisim." En'talac hesitated. "We gave the Zimmer ship everything we have..."

"Part of the price?"

The medic pulled in front and stopped again. "Yes, it was. But it was also backup in case we don't make it, in case Sarkalt's ship... in case Anga has planned trouble for us as well. We need the Zimmer, he's smart and he's tough. And hungry. If our ship doesn't go through, you're going to need him too."

"He sold me."

"Look, all Gennady did was give us access to you. Access, that's all. And all he gets out of it is a chance to influence the outcome by being involved. To get back some of what he's lost. Why are you angry at what he did? Did he owe you anything?"

Not her. She shook her head and the anger drained, leaving an empty feeling the same as when she thought about Garm. "No," she said. Again, the memory and the anger wasn't hers but Cassa's.

"Would you two stop talking and get moving," Bolda said, puffing as though winded although the ground was level and they had only traveled a short distance. A wall of silver surrounded them, pressing on them.

En'talac looked at him. "Go about three more feet into the fog there and you'll be getting very wet. How close do we have to be?" She rubbed her chin and looked around, her eyes narrow slits against the glare. "Li-Fu and her people are at this end. They've got the girdle. Would they have gone over to the central mound?"

"How the hell should I know if you don't? Ask herself."



Ulanda shrugged. Li-Fu was here, but not in the way En'talac meant. "I can't separate her from the weaving. And the other two... nothing. Or the girdle." She edged around the small clearing away from the woman, the heavy robe brushing the wall of mist, lighter swirls of white moving in as though to surround the cloth, then dying in silver drops of rain that sparkled on the lace.

Two people with Li-Fu. The aide who had brought the robe to her, she forgot his name but could feel the cloth as he held it in his hands, then Garm's hands as the robe was passed to him. "Garm?" she called. She had reached the water, the mist parting before her. "Gennady?" The central mound of sand was like a dome. Starlight illuminated it, a golden color or bronze. A wall of dark gray was pushing in from the sides and behind. Pushing her towards the water.

She turned. Bolda and En'talac weren't there. And no light.

"Bolda?" The solid bank of gray swallowed the sound.

Time. All the lines set here hummed. She could see them without trying, like the white veins in the diamond that had finally converged on the portals. The spiral overpattern arms surrounded Lillisim now and in a smaller way, surrounded the center of the world-altar. Moving slowly up the spiral cuts of water was an image of the greater thing that was eating this world. From the water that the springs fed, the broad slow moving streams nearest the source, lights rose into the sky, diffused by fog and distance. A spitting sound reached her, a crackling, like crisp paper being balled up in a fist to be thrown away.

"Garm!" she yelled. Then thinking she heard him answer from behind, she twisted around and slipped on the loose sand, landing heavily, tangled in the lace robe. One wrist hit hard, her right, the injured arm, but she couldn't feel the pain that must be there but she rolled and tucked the arm at the same time. And felt her foot catch against a clump of grass, then slide off too soon and too fast as she compensated.

The water was cold and she welcomed the shock as her mind cleared. Trying to kick didn't work, her legs were trapped by the robe. She couldn't even find bottom to push against, but kept sinking. Lungs burning, her heart thumped loud in her ears with a rushing sound and dark sparks blinded her. Overpattern, she thought crazily, but the sparks were in her eyes and she knew she was losing consciousness. The braid ends settled slowly around her as her struggles died. They brushed her face like seaweed and bobbed from the rise of bubbles.

I'm supposed to do something, she thought, feeling the cloth and bubbles against her face. Not seaweed, they were like fish. Fish with long tails and fins that moved like veils in the water. A dance of fins and tails and sleek bodies. Yellow fish. She took a breath...

Then hands grabbed her and pulled. "Dig your elbows in," Bolda shouted into one ear and spat water as he shoved one of her arms up and onto sand. She couldn't see him, just sand under her nose and a moving swirl of fog over the

water and up to her chin. Water dribbled from her mouth. Something about breathing... her head buzzed so badly that she couldn't think.

Then he hit her hard between the shoulder blades and she gasped and started to choke.

Bolda yelled and splashed. "Just breathe, don't try to get out!" He was still in the water, she felt him hauling heavy cloth and piling it over her head as though to drown her in it. She slipped back every time she moved.

From above her now, En'talac on the other side slipping and pulling cloth, splashing water. Then the heavy robe was off, over her head and most of the underrobe as well and she could move, inching forward on the sand with her elbows like a turtle coming from the sea.

"Slow down," En'talac said, supporting her around the shoulders. "Take slow breaths." She alternated her words with coughing.

The medic rolled her over and pulled the rest of the underrobe off, the silk sticking to her skin. "Is there anything dry? Bolda? In the packs?"

Ulanda could see them both clearly, the stands of light over the water were closer and there wasn't any fog on the dome of sand. The three of them were on the slope of the center mound.

"You think there's time to get the packs?" Bolda asked, already peeling his jacket off. Wet and he didn't offer it.

"Don't go," she whispered and turned to see him. She started to cough again.

He was standing straight up, looking at the lights. "Shit." Very softly. "Get the robes back on her, quick, both of them." And he was gone, sliding down the sand, and splashed a moment later.

All her strength was needed to keep breathing. "Please," she said, biting sand between her teeth. "Hurry."

En'talac wrung water from the overrobe then slid down along next to her, cold cloth next to her skin, then warmer hands. "The underrobe too?"

All she could do was nod. She didn't have to look. The light coming up the waterways cracked and bubbled. Bolda, she couldn't feel him, then she could, and concentrated on maintaining that feel, ignoring everything else.

Cold rings sparked against her skin, she felt them as En'talac fumbled, pulling thin wet silk into some kind of order to get it back on her. Silver rings. She would feel those. She started to laugh and couldn't stop.

The backpack landed close, spilling water in a pool next to her side. "Sorry about that," Bolda said, opening the bag to show the top of the wooden box. More water splashed when he tipped it.

"Do you mind?" En'talac said. "And you could help." The clinging opal silk was insisting on closing any space she shook out. "Forget the ties, they're knotted."

He had the lace robe over her head with the lighter one not pulled down yet. Ulanda tried sitting up to help and only made it because he caught her.

The light was in a ring around them and still growing, the sound deafening, she couldn't hear the other two speaking, just knew they still were.

The light was eating at the sand on the dome now, she watched it coming, burning a path, grain by grain.

"Can you hear me?" she yelled. A hand closed over her mouth. Bolda's. "Hold onto me," she said softer, almost biting fingers before he let go. "I can't hear you, just hold on. I don't want to lose track of you, both of you." And whispered, "Please." She couldn't see or feel them, either of them, just the line of fire reaching for her. And the roar.

Snow, she thought. It was snowing. The light was almost to her feet and she drew back. "The top," she said and kicked with her heels to push backwards. "The top of the mound." She still couldn't feel them, but she was moving faster than she could have managed on her own, the pack following like a well-trained dog on a leash.

Snow fell on her face and the fire ate that as well. Snow and face.

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Bolda sifted sand between his fingers; the grains were different feeling. It was still too dark to see. He kept one leg hooked over Ulanda's and a part of his mind concentrated on feeling that contact.

"Cold but she's breathing fine and her heartbeat is strong." En'talac hadn't let go once. A death grip on Ulanda's arm with one. Her voice held the barely contained fear that the dark kept him from seeing on her face. He couldn't blame her. Damnedest thing.

"I could use some of that hot beer right about now," he said. And dry clothes, maybe a warm bed and someone to share it with.

"The stars are different," En'talac said, calmer already. He hadn't noticed. "No moon like in the map Ulanda saw, it must have set. It smells different than Lillisim too. And the horizon, it's getting lighter, the wrong direction, no, maybe I'm turned around."

The brighter part he could see. And her, a little better, the pale hair mostly. About the same length as his own. He tried to remember what she was but couldn't. Not Piltsimic, though she was short enough.

"So it's different." He rummaged in the large pack. The box took up most of the space. He found a couple of apples by feel, and put one in his pocket. Then something sodden wrapped in cloth. Right. Biscuits. Bean biscuits with cheese slices sandwiched in them. If this place proved as hot as Lillisim, he could dry

them, or eat them re-baked by a fire if it didn't. Damn if he'd eat them as a porridge. Might be hot later. The air had a cool tang to it, but spicy under that, a dry spice smell like sage or minpani brush.

The woman wouldn't let up. "Do you feel anything?" she asked. "A band stretched, Anga said, the linking, perhaps..."

"How the hell should I know," he said, a mite too loudly and Ulanda stirred. "About time you woke up," he added, just as loud.

She struggled to rise. Guts, he had to give her that. "I couldn't see you," she said, shaking her head as though to clear it, tried to lift a hand, then gave that up as a bad job.

"Can you see us now?" En'talac asked.

"A little. I can see you a little." Ulanda's head swung back and forth as though she wasn't sure from one look to the next.

Bolda took his leg off hers and waited a moment, half expecting her to disappear. Or something. "Guess Anga's trick didn't work, you're still alive. Or was it just clumsiness?"

"I'm going to kill him," she said, but there was humor in the tone.

"I'll help." He got to his feet like he was twice his age.

En'talac laughed, then stood now that he had tried it and nothing happened except the creaking of wet cloth and stiff muscles. Listening to the two women laugh was almost as good as a hot beer. Almost.

Then Ulanda sucked air, and held it. "The link is holding," she said letting it out again after a long moment. And looked around like she was seeing more than scenery. Lighter still. A deep yellow glow to one side of the horizon and blue rising from that, leading to fading stars.

"Where are the other two?"

"They slipped through in a different... he did something..."

"Try making some sense."

She rubbed her nose hard with the back of her braids and sniffed noisily. Her hair hung in wet matted strands around her face, sand stuck to everything. "Like the robe is more than it looks, how we got here, the passage through... it was more." Words appeared to be coming from deep inside her. "Anga set it to start breaking into streams of probability while we were still in the spiral, not grouped in the centre. I could feel it, at the end, as the lights came up the central mound. Any asymmetry and it jumped into another probability. Not like the diamond, but it would have pulled you both away, I think it had already, a couple of times. I think it might have, even holding onto me, but further away it would have for sure. At the top, we just slipped through together easier. No place left to split off to. It's still..." She moved her head as though listening for something, her mouth hung open like Cassa's would have. "... no, not splitting, it's collapsing now."

He looked around. Nothing. "The lights weren't there yet when Garm and Gennady went missing. Where are they?"

She appeared to think, rubbing sand off her cheeks with bare fingers. "The lights were overpattern, but the linking was happening over hours of time, setting up. Like the ships... they're here."

"He said the ships were linked to you," En'talac said. "The differences you saw would have been the different places on all the worlds we could have ended up at. Images of them, really."

"No."

"No?" Bolda asked. "Just no?"

"They were more than just images of places," Ulanda said. "What is collapsing around us is more too. Lines, fragments of realities, blending, borrowing, forming...." Her voice broke off, she sounded like she might be ill. He could see her plainly now in the cold light of pre-dawn. Her skin was dead looking, even where she had rubbed it, as though she had drowned in the water instead of just breathed in a fair bit of it.

He couldn't help it, he looked around again. What he could see in the growing light, looked like all one place to him. And before? The lights, a dusting of snow... and the worry that the overpattern being released might not have ended with just snow. But it had. A few flakes, a crackle of sound, a feeling of disorientation that had him hanging onto Ulanda... and the night sky above them, the feel of the air, the smells, were that of a different world.

"What about Li-Fu and the girdle?" En'talac asked.

"The girdle..." Ulanda hesitated. "It's everywhere, I don't know where. Somewhere. Anga might have woven it in, it might not exist as a girdle anymore." She looked around. "I've pulled Garm here, I think, I just don't know where he is either, he may not be quite here yet. Gennady's with him. And the ships." She blinked at him, stone faced. "Cassa wants them both, she gets them both. Then I take what's mine."

He grabbed the braid ends to shake the sand off them. As though there wasn't sand on everything. She was close to babbling, starting to repeat things she'd already said, but adding shades... creating shades that might have more result than any of them needed right now.

She pulled away from him, then winced and dropped one shoulder when the pulling got her where it must hurt.

The medic caught her before she fell over. Should have left her alone, he thought, and was about to say so when Ulanda pushed the other woman away with a snarl deep in her throat.

En'talac would have gone back in, but he grabbed her fast. "She needs help, she can ask for it. She's just working the dregs of this out of her system." He had to hang on but it was just momentum, not fight. To his relief, she nodded. He

wouldn't want to fight her, there was more strength there than he would have suspected just from looking.

"Do you need help?" she asked Ulanda.

Ulanda looked at them, or En'talac rather, and didn't answer. Blanking out. Going, going, gone. He tugged En'talac's sleeve. "Cassa did this all the time," he said and was surprised at the jerk of her body, her eyes wide open and staring at him. She came a few feet at least, her face thoughtful.

"I keep forgetting she was real."

"Is real."

En'talac kept her eyes on Ulanda. "Is real."

"Whatever," he grunted then puffed his cheeks out. The morning was getting brighter. Blue sky for sure and a single sun coming up fast. How long would they have to wait until Nexus Change crested and she had to dance the Opening?

Ulanda was concentrating on breathing, staring at her feet otherwise. Ragged breaths as though she needed the sound to reassure herself she was alive. Maybe she did. Despite what he'd said, it made him nervous listening. Hell, Cassa had made him nervous too. En'talac kept twitching like she wanted to get in there again; the medic back after the rest had been put firmly under control. He shook his head. "No way. Right now, I wouldn't try to separate out whether she's Cassa or Ulanda. With Cassa, you push her, she pushes back. Try it again, and she does it harder. Or, sometimes she wouldn't do anything, and you'd start to think maybe you could get away with it. People got themselves killed making that mistake."

En'talac hesitated then started pulling things out of the pack, wringing cloth like she wished it was his neck. He gave her a big grin to get a scowl back, then a twist of her mouth that was at least half a smile despite herself.

Shadows were visible already; sunrise very soon. They were on a nipple of sand on top of a small rise. Land fell away on all sides, rising again to mountains on the setting side of the sky, and leveling out the other way, with a narrow band of extra brightness that might be the ocean. Sunrise in that direction, opposite from Lillisim if he remembered rightly. And from the map Ulanda had pulled into the Net, there should be a delta at the end of a river. Gennady's flitter had been on a bluff. Would it be here or on Lillisim? Even if it were here, it was too far away to do them any good. Out of the way of the Zimmer crystals interfering with the Opening though. Even sitting at the dinner fighting with Garm, she had been deep enough in the weave to know.

And the thought occurred to him: she had been deep enough in the weave to know which world out of who knew how many, which world and where on that world, they would end up. Possibilities? Realities?

Interesting. He scratched his nose and stretched again. Ulanda's breathing had settled down, and he turned his head to see. Not that she'd remember knowing,

probably never had consciously known why she had ordered the flitter away or why she'd chosen that place on that world out of all the ones possible.

She had gone from standing to looking, turning slowly, having to kick the robe when it didn't want to follow. Sand caked in the lace weave, some from Lillisim, amber where it was drying, dark gold where it was wet. More was pale gray or opal when the light hit it directly, darker where it had borrowed the moisture from the robe.

Her face was getting more human looking again, from a grimace of irritation at the drag in the robe, to squinting at the growing light as though she'd like to chew it out too.

Fishing for the apple, he took a bite without looking first. Sand ground between his teeth and he spat the piece out. The next piece didn't taste much better even though he picked the obvious grains off.

The mound they had landed on must look like a child's pail of sand dumped wet, he thought as he slid more than walked off. Piled wet, then left to dry and crumble at the edges. The land around them was a waste, rocks and dust, his wet boots muddy after the first step. A few shrubs, gray leafed things, or they just dusty as well. Yellowed grasses. Trees nearer the mountains, purple in the distance. More than one mountain, layers of them, getting paler the further they got, but all of them smooth topped and worn looking. Clouds rolled skyward in back of them, rose and gray with the dawn. Anything could be out there but he didn't see buildings or signs of people.

He thought Anga had had a pretty good idea of what world was on the other end of the overpattern tear -- as the Sector developed, the lines of power, even such as they were here, tended to organize much as planets do out of dust clouds -- but the exact location on the world depended on the interaction of too many variables, many of them probably affected by the passage through the tear. He supposed he could be grateful they weren't in a swamp like Kalin where he had found her.

A few more bites and he was looking at an apple core. From Ri, he decided, not Lillisim. He had bought this type in the markets, Palace and Ri-surface both. Here? He picked the seeds out before letting the rest drop.

## Part V

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The curved outer wall of the room was a single thickness of ceramic scale-tiles, as were the two inward walls that joined to make the ceiling. They had been set to continue the image seen more directly through the hull. The sunlight was gold cut into facets by the embossed tiles, burnished copper in the joins. All the limited intrusion of energy was in his visual range and Sarkalt enjoyed the play of sun across his skin and the subtle changes it caused in the fields in his body. Only the floor had been finished in other than tile: a pale wood.

The loom-master read with his lips forming the words, most likely as an anchor for the multiple translations he pulled from the ship's Net. "Stories for children," he said shortly and tossed the book on the low table. An excess of noise. The man appeared fond of excesses.

Sarkalt slid the book closer, motioning Pida away when he would have helped. The tass'altin settled back on his heels, a somewhat removed third to Anga's and his pairing at the table.

"Stories," Sarkalt agreed. For children? He tried to reach a memory from when he was a child and failed past a tentative stirring in his mind. "From dreams most likely, but I wouldn't disparage such. They brought us here."

"Brought you here." Pleasure was obvious in the tone of the words.

"I find you forced," Sarkalt said. Or was molded a better word? Loom-master. Voice for the Rigyant loom-master Archive. He let the book drop the short way to his lap, feeling the tooled leather under his fingertips. Blue dyed leather, it took some of the color from around them to darken in an uneven shading that changed again as he opened it. No -- forced, not molded -- although he thought he might have spoken the second word as well. He had the image of a juvenile Piltsimic -- Anga's features under smoother skin -- held between great lips like a child holds their tongue while concentrating. And the related image? He laughed.

Anga snorted, then glanced at Niv curled on the pallet. "Might as well get Niv up, maybe he'll make sense. I feel like I'm talking to myself."

"No," Sarkalt said plainly.

"About getting Niv up or that I'm talking to myself?"

"No," he repeated and meant more this time, or he answered the second part of what the loom-master had said.



The Piltsimic was a black stone against the glow of the tiled walls. Loose pants and tasseled short vest that didn't close over his rounded belly. "If you say so."

Say? Had he been talking? Or was the loom-master speaking again about the book? No, he would have been talking; he saw it in the look Pida offered. 'Shall I remove him?' the look said. 'The discomfort of him.'

Sarkalt shook his head before turning to the book. "From the White Horn Nexus." A line of wobbly script near the title on the first page. From the spine crystal came an offering he ignored, letting the tiny sputter of energy tease against his finger. Niv stirred, nails clicking, but his sleep held.

Anga poured himself a second bowl of tea and offered the same, holding his breath as he leaned forward to fill the tiny cup. "Any of half a dozen recent Nexus could translate by that name." He exhaled a puff of air, lemon tea and something more like over-ripe fruit. "Who the hell knows what he meant."

Sarkalt closed the book then tugged loose a braid end caught in the pages. He had a pull on the San's books, asked from Simitta with a carefully worded request based on analysis of Zimmer custom and what he had felt from Arasima. Most of what he asked for had been given.

The same book had come through the portal with the Zimmer. Rings stamped in Villet leather with gilding on the edges of the pages to make more rings when the book was closed. But in the other, the cramped writing of the Nexus name had a complex form drawn after it, with the spine crystal offering more. Li-Rintillium Nexus, and not recent at all. Empire had covered four galaxies then.

Subtle changes, he thought again as he shaped his fingers around his tea bowl. From the Law Clerk to the San, negligible in any one thing, but all together offering a difference in what the man behind the writing and collecting had been. And a look at the Altasimic Empress in the changes.

"You've seen the others, I presume," he said after a sip of tea.

Anga fidgeted. "I looked at them, or the spin flags rather. Stories, like I said. We had other concerns."

"So I understand." Not concerned then but the loom-master was now. All their information about the books was in Command level ship's Net and he didn't have access to even domestic. "Did you talk to yourself with the other Sarkalt?"

Past a grunt, Anga ignored the question as he poured more tea into his bowl. The last drop lingered on the spout and he looked pointedly at Pida who didn't move. Sarkalt signed to his tass'altin that he wished tea. "You didn't come to my suite for tea," he said when Pida had gone.

"Better than what I was served earlier."

Sarkalt smiled. "We had other concerns."

The man stretched his legs out as he scratched at the thick band of hair around one ankle. "Told you you'd slide through easy. The Zimmer ship too. This ship's not worth a damn here." Anga laughed sharply, but his words were softer

when Niv uncurled and stretched. "I don't know what was going on in your reality, but Nexus Change made a second major leap forward the moment the portal in Garm's room opened. Our plan of opening the Sector became impossible, leaving Ulanda the only viable option. We still didn't anticipate a problem with the Altasimic Warding or we would have had ships waiting at Lillisim and Bistaskillim as well as a couple of other likely worlds."

"Alisim."

"Call it what you want."

He smiled, amused at Anga's reaction, and let the play of what came through the tiles of the hull progress until the planet bloomed to one side and the star field wrapped around them. Of what a moment before had been a faceted surface of gold and copper, nothing could be seen. "Alisim. The word the people there use for their world, an old form as they measure old. Most of their present languages incorporate... "

Anga kept his eyes to the table, noting the change of view only by clenching his teeth. "Is there a point to this?"

"The word means seed."

"So what?"

"What is unleashed here isn't what was set by you. It's a creation of time and chance, then recreated again only moments ago."

"Probability lines that have more to do with what world we ended up at, not different realities. I'd have noticed."

"Would you have?"

The other ankle got a quick scratch. Curly black hairs littered the wood floor. "Maybe not. More interesting this way really. Forces us to be more creative."

"Us?"

Black eyes looked back up at him. "When you're talking sense, you want the same thing I do. This Sector may bump along with Nexus Change happening right on top of the Opening, but it will survive. And with Ulanda dead we don't have to worry about her acting as a focus for overpattern to start bleeding into the Unity either." He picked up several stray curly hairs and placed them on the table and rolled them into a ball with the tip of one blunt finger. "I'm not worried about Lillisim getting the backlash of Nexus Change. Simic won't last much longer anyway; it's taken way too much effort keeping the echo-line going as it is. Others come and go, but not Simic..." He snorted then laughed. "The last Simic dies and Lillisim, hell, all the older Simic worlds, the ones tied up with the world-pattern, they'll just sort of go pof. Lillisim in particular, there'll be a hole there so deep in time that those overpattern tears will think they've pupped."

"Haven't they?"

"In a way." Anga laughed again. "A very long time ago."

Sarkalt started to follow the memory back, seeing it form in the loom-master's eyes, but stopped. It was and wasn't the mind of the man here with him. "It never happened," Sarkalt said.

Small black eyes -- they had been the same then too. "Oh, yes it did. I recommended that Al-Lillisim and the other suns nearby be let go from the Unity in such a way that the deaths were controlled. The warding-point crystals, not just the key or girdle, would have been shaped from the birth of the new suns and harvested when they died. The binding would have been tight enough to prevent the kind of genetic drift we've seen. And the warding to survive even catastrophic Change." He turned and scowled at the image of the world beside him. "Even without having my Archive links with me, the memory hangs around like a toothache so don't tell me it never happened."

"You are and you aren't."

"Well, from the sounds of you, you're mostly not. You've gotten as bad as the last Sarkalt. And ancient history doesn't particularly interest me as a topic of conversation, what's happening now does." More hairs were arranged to form a curving crosshatch design, then Anga looked back up but it was the Zimmer ship set in a field of stars that caught his attention this time. The effort to pull his eyes away was obvious and he ground his teeth together. "I want access to Command level Net and staff assigned to help me, Bitilan for one, and I need..."

"You don't have it."

The man looked back at Alisim, his notice following the pattern threads. Narrow bands of opal light in a mesh pattern encircled the globe beside them, the lines melting into the haze of the atmosphere and the blend of blue and white on the sun side, but bright as Kintil spider silk in the crescent of the night. Still using the pattern energy from when this sector was formed, like a sprout uses the food stored in the body of the seed. The color would fade.

"Well, I trusted you about as much as you trusted me." Anga laughed. "You still need me."

"Ulanda is all we need," Sarkalt said. "The girdle is the key and will provide any pattern she requires beyond the Altasimic dance."

"She's already trapped. There's no way I'd let her use the full power contained in the girdle. The last of it I can trigger after we land, but it can't be too much later or the weaving of the Altasimic into their world-pattern will run out of control."

Lives woven into the growing threads to form their substance, but more, they would flavor the evolving world-pattern with the essence of what the Altasimic people were rather than only what had been planned. Sarkalt shook his head.

"Out of your control, you mean?"

"Out of any control. If you want widespread destruction, then keep me isolated here. If you want a people capable of being assimilated into Empire, then I need

to use the Opening to narrow the breeding. It will be much safer that way, believe me. You didn't know Cassa and for all our Sarkalt's careful molding, Ulanda is very much the same. Willful, stubborn and stupid."

Sarkalt looked past the man to the world they orbited. "I had a dream yesterday."

Black eyes grew round with amusement despite the man's obvious discomfort at the open space around him. And when did you sleep? they seemed to ask and he didn't look deeper to see more.

"A dream, loom-master," he repeated. "Over tea, Possitt root tea. Something drew me to the stars that bloom in that particular tea, and I wondered if it might be from a dream. In the heat of the long afternoon, I fell asleep with my tass'alt holding me. And I did dream, not of tea, but of a small bird caught in the toss of a fisher's net, a small bird drowning in black water."

"Burning might be more accurate."

"Yes, it might if there was a difference in the meaning of the words we're using. Shall we continue this conversation in old-tongue?"

Anga's enjoyment was obvious. "I think not. Lillisim was bad enough. It's not like it's a real language anyway."

Pida arrived with a teapot wrapped in a red warming cloth, the light from Alisim turning it to the shade of an autumn leaf as he unfolded the elaborate topknot and poured the clear liquid. A dusting of ground Vi't root floated on the surface of the liquid in Sarkalt's cup and the scent of the tea anticipated the taste. "A useful language," he said, ignoring the loom-masters words, touching his tongue to the frosty cool of the root in contrast to the heat of the tea surrounding each granule. He signed thanks to his tass'altin to receive a bow in turn. "A language to give flavor to poetry with a judicious seasoning of words, or well sprinkled in an official proclamation where obscurity is desired. I don't see what intelligence has to do with speaking the language."

Anga snuffed loudly and banged his bowl on the table. "That hasn't changed."

From fast asleep, Niv was kneeling beside him before the loom-master's words were finished. "What?" Sarkalt asked, hiding his amusement with another sip of tea as his tass'alt smoothed the cords of one braid where closing the book had creased them. Fingers working on the cords, he watched the loom-master with unblinking eyes, his lips drawn back to show ranks of pointed teeth.

"Besides the vile taste of this stuff, every time I try to make sense, you start to ramble off in half a dozen different directions at once." He glared at Niv, then back. "The Archive may be immortal, but I'm not as young as I used to be. If this has a point, you might get to it before I'm considerably older."

A longer sip, but not from thirst, he was drawn to this tea in the same way he had been to the Possitt root tea earlier. "The bird broke the fisher's net in her struggle," he said after a while and noted how the other man became very still.

Dreams? The loom-master was quickly growing very interested in dreams. "Under her wings as she flew, I saw a white room, glowing white marble with veins of quartz, and the veins led to a point filled with the sound of birds taking flight." The bits of root were bitter now and the tea sweeter as it cooled. "How many birds to make that sound, loom-master? How many times have you done this already? Or are they possibilities only, folds in the paper?"

"Me? Only me?" Anga asked.

He smiled again and turned the cup in his fingers to feel the shape before tasting the liquid. "Yes, I think so. The diamond is new, if not what it contains. You might ask why."

"Why don't you just tell me?"

"Why did you change your mind?"

Anga hesitated. "About using Lillism's sun, you mean?" He scratched his nose. "Hell, I don't know, probably wasn't my decision, not all of it. You'd do as well to ask Bolda."

"Did you hear her whisper to you?" he asked softly. "I'm sure he does." Niv moved against him; he could feel his tass'alt's anger. Most of what he knew about this Anga, past a well-chewed bio in Temple Net, had come from Niv and from the same reality as the loom-master did. Sarkalt let one hand drop to rest on warm flesh, tracing the shape of the broad flexible scales with his fingertips.

"Not a chance," Anga said as he lifted the tea bowl to his lips before apparently remembering his dislike of the taste.

The taste of home... the tea was sugar on Sarkalt's tongue as he balanced the small cup in one hand. Was he being drawn to it? "Am I?" he asked. "And to what end?"

"Niv, maybe you can make sense..."

Sarkalt shook his head when Niv would have answered. "Your understanding of what constitutes sense is too limited, loom-master. Still, I have an advantage you lack on your own."

"What?"

A fall of sugar had crystallized in a haze against the thin porcelain. Fortunetellers in the market on his birth world told the future in the pattern of cracks in the sugar haze, he remembered suddenly. A long life, he had been told as a boy. He smiled at the loom-master and shedding some of what he had become over the many years, let his delight at the memory show. "I am Empire. The Phoenix may have whispered in your ear but I've with danced her many times."

Anga slammed the tea bowl to the table, splattering the liquid. Worlds formed in the splashes of tea, facets of reflected light and dark, all tied with strings of opal. "You're slipping over, Sarkalt. Your people work too hard at keeping you alive. Niv was a mistake."

"A suggestion of yours?" he asked after signing Pida to remain still and giving a command in the Net to Bitilan to do the same.

But he wouldn't command Niv in the matter. "A very long mistake," Niv said, the words in plain-tongue but Sarkalt heard Camerat-native in the way the words were softly worn on the edges and he thought again that this Niv spoke differently, held the accents longer and his voice dipped further after the greater breadth. "Here and there and likely before. You suggest..."

Anga had suggested the opposite, in both realities. Dragged from the hidden records in his and gossip among tass'alt to reach Niv's ears in the other.

"The Change Phoenix is a story, an archetypal myth at best," Anga said as he leaned forward, ignoring both the tass'alt's words and the reflection of the world in the tea. Huffing with the effort, he thumped a finger against the wood of the table as he made his points. More worlds, tiny ones, splashed out with each blow. "That we didn't let Al-Lillisim and the others go nova so we could form the warding-point crystals was because of an excess of sentiment about the Simic, nothing more. And Cassa is nothing more or less than a Select with entirely too much power for anyone's good and no world-pattern to keep her sane."

"A rather limited view, loom-master," Niv said.

"One I subscribe to occasionally," he grunted, leaning back, absently scratching the mat of hair on his chest. He sounded bemused at his flare of anger. "Most often when arguing with Priests. See if you can't do something with yours."

Anga's eyes finally noticed and then searched the pattern of splashes on the table. "We're a day away from when they can catch enough thread with the Zimmer pod to land safely," he continued as he took the red cloth from the teapot and wiped it over the mess. He frowned and sighed noisily, puffing his lips out as he folded the moisture to the inside of the cloth. "And more than a day before this ship will do much more than burp." He stood and let the cloth fall where he had been sitting. "Sarkalt, with or without Ulanda, you need me in on this."

Quin'tat watched her and Arasima watched him back between working the margins of her limited pattern sense, and both things out of time with the feed-in from the other ship. Warded linking, pilot to pilot, but with a filter set up that broke contact every few moments. Both ships were being careful of each other, relying on the other's suspicions to determine trust as much as not. She certainly didn't trust them and felt helpless in a ship that didn't work. A check on the spin

and Quin'tat's comment showed an improvement over when they had first appeared here, but the ship was still missing lines like a stone skipped over...

Water. Arasima clenched her teeth at the image of the ocean that Quin'tat had pulled in the Net, then forced herself to smile. "The stone has found a friendly wave for now. We'll stay here without falling." A smile was given in return to hers and she wondered if using a water image had been only ignorance on his part. "There aren't enough threads yet for me to land. Kalord Pallin also, he's not happy." A less forced smile grew at the memory of how unhappy he really was and how little he cared if it showed. With luck the link would be as close as she ever need get to a Clan Zimmer. She scratched her head with both hands with another hiss that spoke more of pleasure despite her tiredness. Her hair arced up in a strip from the peak just above her nose to the back of her neck. The dead ends needed trimming back closer to capillary rich crest or she might ask Pida to braid it for her.

The Ladybug was nestled close. Web sensors, even doubled using her and the cyber-pilot together, brought in only enough to show how thin the base-threads were in this sector. It would be a very long time before the new threads stabilized enough to use in setting a jump.

"A long way home," Quin'tat said.

She shrugged, still stretching her muscles after being in the chair for hours. "The records show the pathways and the base-thread lines from here match. Not so far, just boring. Or maybe other ships will come."

She knew his opinion of that happening even if he hadn't just restated it by tagging the spin for her. There weren't going to be Temple ships until sign of what was happening here reached the Warding stations.

"Don't make it real," she said as she made a form to counter premature conclusions. A joss stick and an altar would be better, but they didn't follow that custom and she'd have to wait until she was in the room she shared with the tass'altin. Quin'tat chuckled at the form she drew, but she shook her head, showing teeth. "Bad luck to reduce the probability that far down."

More sober eyes looked at her and he settled solid like the flank of a mountain does with the cloud rising around it. Red in his black hair, like the edge of a storm cloud in Zimmer primary, the image from what she saw when in the web or from images in the Net. She had never been to Zimmer.

But he went from sober to wary, and then worried. Ship's Net unfolded an image of the link site: the Lady Priest Ulanda's pull at the dinner taken from Lillisim Temple Net and the limited scan the Zimmer ship had managed, and both matched to the Temple records of this world.

"You'll wear that out," she teased, bringing the three layers out on a data point screen. "They'll be there. The Priest is, so En'talac will be also. Where else?"

She laughed to see his worry so constant; his courage was a mountain's courage. Then her laughter died with the change in light from the curved hull of the ceiling. From opaque, in an instant the sun showed through the barely seen tiles above them. Then came a slower alteration in the taste of the air as the surfaces absorbed and reflected the additional energies.

"A good place for the first Temple," Sarkalt said. He leaned against the carved beam that framed the entrance. Faces in the wood appeared to change expression as the sun warmed the dark surface and the heat penetrated. "There is already a city to one side of the delta, between the ocean and the mountains, just below the cliffs."

Quin'tat dropped his end of the spin only to have Sarkalt pick it up. The flavor of Ri-pattern was added. Ruins of a city showed at that site too, much larger than the cluster of intact buildings and the stone docks. Half tumbled down towers were laid flat all in one direction, as though a giant child had tired suddenly of playing and swept them to one side. From the Temple records kept on Lillisim, Sarkalt had taken the image of what had been and held it over the most recent, and then what they could see now. Images of cities lay over ruins as though their existence had never been more than a rendering in transparent inks.

"A city of ghosts?" Quin'tat asked.

"There are people there still. And in the marshes of the delta, what are most likely cultivated fields. Roads through the mountains." Sarkalt walked in further. The pull had tags waiting for her to touch: the peoples, the languages and customs, bare bones of information at any point, but stretching back to when these people first left the plains where they had evolved.

"We won't find them so different than ourselves, being used to differences and thus seeing first the similarities. But they might think us the ghosts. Or monsters. Demons." He laughed, looking back at the wooden beam, then to her, his lips curved into a smile. "Or gods. Do you feel like one, Arasima? Would you like to be a god?"

She dropped her eyes. The face leering from the center of the arch had winked, a shift in the set of the hull tiles for an effect only she could see.

Sliding into the seat of the double Web couch that she had just gotten up from, Sarkalt sat on his braid ends to trap one hand. "Ri feels distant here, as though I'm reaching for it through a thick layer of mist. As thick as yesterday morning at the center of the spiral on Lillisim. I almost hesitate, as though I'm not sure what I might touch."

Quin'tat leaned over from the opposite couch and pulled the braid end loose, and with the distraction, called for Niv. "With talk like that, I'm not surprised."

Sarkalt crossed one leg over the other, and kicked his foot in the air. "Do you agree with Anga then?"

"About which point of contention?"



"That I'm dying."

He glanced at her. "I've been advised not to set opinions too firmly into place."

Sarkalt chuckled. "That's why I sent En'talac through the spiral and not you. She'll handle Ulanda better. She's considerably more ruthless in her subtleties. She would have said yes if only to shock me with her bluntness, then she would have said no, to confuse me as to her capabilities to judge, then said maybe, just because she can't admit to any death."

Quin'tat crossed his arms. "Yes, I think you're dying."

Green eyes with a brindle pattern of black lines in them stared up at the sun calmly. "You're right of course," he said just as calmly and looked at her.

No challenge, wrong echo line, but she had started to duck her head to show submission before thinking at all. That those eyes never changed.

Then the ceiling was a layer of cream scales. Niv had arrived, the change pushed into the Net with a barely suppressed anger. Sarkalt didn't react to his tass'alt's presence. "And the other points?" he asked, looking over at Quin'tat.

"Which one now?"

Sarkalt smiled. "Ulanda asked me what the makers of Empire had caught in the setting of the first world-pattern. The world-net sang with answers, as many answers as there were grains of sand in the mound we were looking at. That many Nexus Changes to have the answer slightly different each time." He swung his legs out, forcing Niv to move, and sat upright again, his arms on his thighs. Arasima tasted the heat rising from the pain of his effort to move his fingers.

"Little by little, what we trapped there has become ourselves," he said, his voice as remote. Niv stood next to him, his hand on the white clad knee, but the tass'alt was only watching. "And ourselves...." One brown fingertip reached a sharp blue-flushed nail. "Something that the Voice, that Anga, hadn't anticipated." He looked up. "A balance, Quin'tat."

"I don't see it."

"And you Arasima?" Sarkalt asked with the start of a movement that spoke of possession and suddenly not remote at all. Niv countered the movement with one of his own.

She hesitated, not sure if the tass'alt had meant to help or to insult. And not sure what her reaction should be either, only sure that Sarkalt at least was enjoying this exchange. "In the web, Zimmer pattern tastes different here," she said reluctantly. "Weaker and further away, as you said."

"And what do you think we'll touch in the mist, Arasima?"

She didn't answer. We?

"Do you have dreams, Arasima?" he persisted. "Perhaps what the Zimmer Lord asked for? A chance to get back what he lost."

"What chance are you talking about?" she said, giving into the anger she felt rise. "I've taken Temple service. I wear your mark."

“Your echo-line is bred to respond to dominance.” He stood, weaving slightly until Niv steadied him. “How could you not do what I asked?”

She felt Quin’tat do a deep scan on the Priest through the Net at the same time he was monitoring the ebb and flow of pattern. And a scan on her as well, she realized, startled. He linked the two of them, Sarkalt and her. Arasima pulled away, and pushed past Quin’tat and Sarkalt to leave the bridge.

The rounded stones at least were from Zimmer, or so the merchant she bought them from had sworn. The small mound of pebbles sat on an irregular square of pottery, the surface of the bowl slightly concave, appearing to be a fracture of clay from a dry sea bed. Red colored, unglazed but burnished to a soft glow. The records she had seen of Zimmer looked like that -- the wide flood plains that drowned when the sasi rain fell, the low lands with the freeborn Holdings washed by storm as the surrounding volcanic peaks forced the water flow. Records... story lines really, that’s all she knew of Zimmer but for what she felt when in the web.

She placed a single joss stick over the stones and lit the end. Pida sniffed, but more at the color of the stick, she thought, than at the pungent smell. He was eyeing the narrow box she had on the table next to the altar. An incense box made of a single segment of dark brown grass, thick as her arm and hollow, and wrapped with a black cord, knotting along the top in a design you could more feel than see. The Empress’s Weaver had had dozens of boxes opened, a rainbow of sticks about him like a game without the stones. She had watched him assemble the brazier with a spiral design and set the joss sticks, and had laughed with him at the looks on the faces of the Simic aides.

“Bolda give you those?” Pida asked. He had been there too, had seemed to be everywhere, just arriving or just about to leave, always with polite words to the Simic.

When she said yes, he went back to reading without another word. An elongated recording crystal was to one side, a redi-stylus beside it. She could smell the fresh ink, he must have been writing the words he now read. Actually putting the meaning into the shape of the forms on paper.

Shapes like the lines of ash that grew from the burnt joss sticks at a large altar. After a festival, bundles of joss sticks were let to fall with a prayer, and with only a single one lit to ignite those it touched. Each supplicant would add a palm full of sticks, most touching one or more of those already there. Or if the supplicant was unlucky, too many sticks fell away from the others to lie unburned when the dawn came.

The curtain that made this area into a room was pulled back. “Am I disturbing you, Arasima?” Quin’tat asked in the High-formal that she was beginning to

understand without having to use the Net. He held the cloth of the curtain as though he might retreat before coming completely in.

She bowed to the altar before motioning him to sit. The floor or her pallet, Pida's bed was occupied. "Everything I try to touch has the feel of what he laid on me."

He chose the floor and not more than a step in. A short laugh at his shyness then she looked to the altar as a cover to his obvious embarrassment. She never knew what was proper to do here, didn't even know enough to ask. "One simple stick," she added, looking at him again. "And I'm not sure it won't burn in that shape of his."

Pida closed the book over a finger and coughed. "You want some privacy?"

Quin'tat's kneel turned into a cross-legged sit. He still looked puzzled at what she had said, but that turned quickly to resignation. "You might help Niv with Sarkalt."

"If Niv can't handle him, what makes you think anything I can do will make a difference?" Pida had gotten up on one elbow, the book closed beside him. Using plain-tongue, his voice was as neutral as his hands and as free of any expression.

"I'm trying not to think too much about some things," Quin'tat said in the same language, but with a tired chuckle in her direction, not the tass'altin's. He rubbed the back of his neck, the large hand working hard. "If Ulanda survives whatever traps Anga has set, she'll need Niv. Sarkalt won't, not in the same way. If he doesn't start cycling, and there's no sign of that thankfully, then he'll slide over quietly. It will happen when he's in Ri-pattern. He won't come out of it and his body will simply stop living. He won't even notice."

She was surprised at how she felt. Like Sarkalt had said about pattern, about reaching into mist and not knowing what you would touch. He was like mist, what she could see of him. She might never touch him, would have thought she'd never want to, but did now.

"You don't sound like you care much," she said, her voice breaking with sudden anger, raising challenge that she couldn't with the Clan pilot.

"Care? I care, but only as much as is human in him and there isn't very much human left. I could worship him, but care?" He gestured to the altar. "Did you mean a taupe colored stick for the Emperor, but only had black? Or would you have preferred Ri-green?"

And when she started to get up, added gently, "Please stay, I don't mean to offend you in saying this. Caring requires seeing something of what we are in the other, a mirror, either a real seeing or an illusion. I think love is much the same thing. Arasima, I don't have many illusions left."

Pida picked at a blue cuticle, the color from the dye that had come off the nails far easier. "What do you make of what he was saying about dominance?"

"I don't. Sarkalt's been spinning Zimmer since before we left Palace. Add to that his being a very old, very powerful Priest, and..."

"Arasima sees him," Pida interrupted flatly as he looked up at the Warder. "A mirror, like you said."

She looked from Quin'tat to Pida and back. A new look showed on Quin'tat's face. Surprise? That the tass'altin had been pulling Command level ship's Net to hear what happened on the bridge?

And also knew that he had responded as though challenged by the tass'altin where he hadn't with her. Another kind of mirror, she decided, but didn't dare laugh at him.

But Pida did, the rich sound at odds with his slight frame. "I've been spinning Zimmer too. Ever since I found out whom I'd be rooming with. I prefer floating, most tass'altin do some right after training, especially with a Tass'Holding as large as at Palace and with so many Temple sites in a compact area, but I like the variety. That was part of why Vo'ti selected me." He shrugged. "You don't have to be a Priest to get to know what to look for in the spins when you change species. Sarkalt's setting her up for gin'tala."

She thought he might have seen the form in the burning joss stick, but her eyes saw only a simple line over the curved pebbles from the ash and an even simpler line in the smoke. Pida saw her looking and made a sign she didn't recognize.

But she thought Quin'tat did. "She'd end up Clan a'Genn. From what I understand, even in the rare instances when they bed freeborn females, Clan Zimmer dominant males wrap the spurs to prohibit transference." He blinked. "I seriously doubt Gennady or Simitta would accommodate her in any case."

"It wouldn't simply be the gin'tala," Pida said with another long look to her.

"You're frightening her," Quin'tat protested although she hadn't moved.

Arasima hissed, her tongue pushing against her flat edged teeth. Freeborn flat, they didn't file them to mimic juvenile feeding teeth as the Clan did. "Pida is correct," she said, then shook her head as she realized where the conversation had gone while her mind had raced in another direction with what had been said earlier. "Sarkalt. I do see him even if not much. I do see Zimmer-pattern."

Quin'tat frowned and opened his mouth.

"No," she said quickly. "You're from Temple, you deny anything that doesn't fit your reality. Merchant ships like to have a true web-pilot to add pattern to jumps and they'll take the rest of the family on as crew. Some Gates respond easier to any sort of pattern, sometimes even allowing priority."

She pushed at the unburned end of the joss stick and the pattern changed. Not so simple, but then it never had been. "The Clan Zimmer will do this if Sarkalt asks." She looked at Quin'tat. "They must agree, or Sarkalt wouldn't think to ask. The Overpriest wants a better mirror, and the Clan Zimmer, a more sure hand in

deciding the future. Another mirror." She did laugh at him, then. Her mountain -- he shed illusions as poorly as sand does rain.

Pida sat upright and crossed his legs. "I don't know about the Zimmer, but Sarkalt is looking past the Opening... well past. It's part of his loosing the center. I've seen it before in dying Priests, not personally, but as part of advanced training. To their senses, the structure of time breaks down, swinging them very far back into their life or pushed towards their death." He looked at her, but again, she didn't understand his expression. Then to Quin'tat, he said, "Have you examined the spins on the people around the Opening site?"

"I don't see what that has to do with Arasima or the Clan Zimmer."

Pida patted the cover of the book he had been reading. "I've been taking notes from the spins we have on this world, you might want to have a look. Lady Ulanda is woven into the religious prophesies of at least one of the people there. For any of what the Xintan nomads believe to come true, she has to survive the Opening, despite Anga."

"I agree with her survival but only because Sarkalt insists. But the rest... it's only one interpretation and only one people, besides being very out of date."

Picking up the book, Pida fanned the pages. "Taken in the context of what we know, the legends start to make sense. This doesn't end with the Opening any more than it did at Cam'lt Temple. And Arasima... in addition to what she said, I think that he means her as a link to the a'Genn Clan Zimmer and their connection with the Empress. She'll take his image with her through the gin'tala. It's the other side of what he said to Lord Gennady, that he gets a chance at influencing the outcome."

Quin'tat turned to her. "Would you?"

Which? The gin'tala or taking the Overpriest's image? She stood and went to the curtain and held it open. The tiles knew her better than they knew Sarkalt and she made the world grow until she could have touched the ocean that covered much the globe, or sifted the sand of the coast through her fingers. Then she put the Zimmer ship over top, the a'Genn registry marks as prominent as the heat stripling on a lover and as close as though she were lying with him. And then image of the Zimmer Clan Lord, then Sarkalt. And wondered if she had imaged doing all four things as the tiles became simple clay again.

"Will you?" she heard them whisper.

In the course of her life, she seldom had questions of what to do. What custom didn't tell her, her pattern sense did. Any hesitation was most frequently the time it took to form the whole of it in her mind. She couldn't form this into one piece, not even her part in it would take a solid shape -- she thought the rest of her life might be spent even doing that much.

"I have no family," she said to the tiles. "Those who were my family on the ship have forgotten my name. They would have said the death rites as soon as

they heard I had taken Temple service. I didn't dare say good-bye to... to any of them for fear they would be considered contaminated by my bad luck."

"Would you agree to do this?" The words were from Quin'tat standing behind her.

"You asked me what color joss stick I would burn. Where the Lady Priest Ulanda comes from, the phoenix was the Empress and those who knew me would have burned black sticks in the prayers for my death, just as I did here. I wonder if my prayers weren't for myself. If I am a mirror of Sarkalt, then he is of the phoenix, or that part of her he dances with. A pairing. I'll take his prayers..."

"It's not a Temple custom to pray to the Emperor in particular, but to what part of the Unity your people are."

"I will take his prayers," she said firmly. The words had their own shape, one she could keep as a comfort where she could find no comfort in the rest.

"Whatever else it is that he sees me doing... in this reaching back and forth that Pida says he does... I'll do this much for him willingly."

Pida touched her shoulder and suddenly, the tiles showed another world, one she hadn't added previously but should have. Zimmer. The upper limits of the veil that obscured the surface boiled, plumes rising in the curtain of air, looking as though they would strip off into space.

"As much the freeborn's world as it is the Clan Zimmer's," he said. "You'll take that with you too. Another mirror."

He was talking about her dying and she couldn't feel a lie in his words. "And the others with a part in this?" she asked. "You talk about prophecies."

"Have you checked the spins?"

He knew she hadn't. "Tell me," she asked.

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Garm had been in the water at least twice before deciding to sit it out, to watch the land change around him instead of moving to end up somewhere he hadn't been a moment before. Occasionally, very far from where he'd been a moment before. A flickering instant of a change was all he saw sometimes, sometimes a pause that seemed to last a minute or more before the world decided what to settle into. Better this, he thought as he pulled his robe up from the muck he sat in where a moment before had been a soft layer of dust. Better sitting anywhere than being in the middle of a step only to land well down and sinking. Most of the worlds were Lillisim, he was sure they were, but different than where he grew up, added to or some essence stripped away.

A moment later, reeds surrounded him and he heard running water and birds and he wondered if Cassa... if the reality where Cassa had walked the spiral of the world-altar on Lillisim was one of these. And time, would it matter, or was it as much a probability as site? She might be here, had he called her... he stood... and the world changed again. A different scent in the air, flowers, he saw a meadow in the glow of the dawn, rolling as the dunes but in a gentler sweep... and that was gone as quickly.

"Ulanda!" he shouted and was somewhere else before the sound died. He felt like fool but kept calling, turning only to sit abruptly when the worlds began to flow past him in a dizzying series of images too fast to separate. By the time they slowed, it was near sunrise and the promise of a clear sky. In all of them -- the changes minor now and with more time before something else until he thought each might be the last. Each transformation was a heat shimmer, if he blinked he might miss it.

Garm leaned forward and drew a line in the dirt. It stayed; the only shimmer was from the floaters in his eyes. He drew another line. Pale dirt, gritty, but with a fine dust that stayed on his finger. He focused on a pebble further out, staring until his vision faded at the edges. The pebble in the center stayed. Knees shaking, he got to his feet and walked a tight circle, panting by the time he finished. Hills, trees. There were narrow shadows across his footprints, both stayed, prints and shadows and he stared them into a blur, blinked and they were still there. He allowed himself to stretch, the new warmth of the sun welcome on his skin. A few deep breaths and he looked around, taking the changes in where before he had concentrated on what remained the same.

He was in a small clearing with the land rising behind him. Stands of small evergreen trees competed with rocky outcroppings on the slope, trees with fissures in the bark deep enough to have wedged his hand in, the surface coming off in irregular plates of bark, a reddish cast to the pieces on the ground. There were more needles on the ground than on the branches, a mat of them under each tree, straw yellow and brown with clumps of dry grass growing through and different in shape rather than color. Only the ends of the limbs had bristling growths of the narrow grayish green leaves. A big hill or a small mountain and another to one side. Only the top of that one showed and at a level not much higher than he was. Pink over dark green and gold with the sunrise, then deepening to an uneven mauve for the further mountain.

More trees down from him, all the same kind, and a tumble of huge boulders to one side, blocking his seeing anything that way. Pine trees, he thought but wasn't sure.

The clearing was made by an area of fallen trees, each lying in the same direction. Old, the bark was gone, leaving the bleached wood of the trunks and stubs of branches. Skeletons of the broken branches were scattered all around.

Narrow collars of gravely soil surrounded the rocks and pieces of wood where water had obviously flowed. It must rain hard when it did at all.

A black squirrel, or something close to those he'd seen on Ri, chattered at him from the boulders, flicked its bushy tail and vanished. A few birds. One as large as the squirrel, flame colored, he saw only for an instant in the yellow grass, then heard it as a rustle before it was gone. Two more, tiny things with butter yellow breasts melting into to a flecked brown on their backs stayed where he could see them -- the tree closest to him -- picking at the clusters of small purple cones near the tip of each branch.

No one else, he was alone. "Ulanda?" A whisper was all he managed. She wasn't here, he would know if she were. Not close at least and he had no idea where to begin looking. An attempt at a wider circle around his starting point had the broken branches tearing at the hem of his sodden robe and he took it off, leaving a waist tie of thin silk. He wrung the heavier cloth out before laying it over a stump to dry. The packs were next, everything was soaked.

When had it stopped being variants of Lillisim? Had it ever been? Pine trees? He picked up a dried needle. Lillisim didn't have pine trees although Ri did. Long thin needles... they might be pine or a type of cedar like at Ri-altar although the smell was more pine-like. "The grass is the same," he complained to the needle before letting it drop to pick a blade of the grass instead. Did it smell the same? The same as what? The only ordinary grass on Lillisim grew near the world-altar.

Is there as little left of me, he wondered? Is that why he had lost Ulanda well before they had reached the center of the world-altar? The lights rising from the water... that was all he remembered. No, he had called for Cassa then, he had heard her voice, he thought he might have touched her.

And here? He felt if he moved again, only his shadow would move, his solid form remaining still. He would weave over grass and trees both, a dark image molded to their surface but only of the moment, of a chance of sunshine, his difference one of light, not substance.

"And what about you, Cassa?" he said as he rubbed the grass blade between his palms and looked around again, slower, trying to take in the wholeness of this place. "Did you think there was as little left of me as there is of Lillisim?" Her world perhaps. And solid -- as he apparently was.

Still, he waited for an answer before continuing with the task of emptying the packs. "An odd assortment of things, Cassa. Your doing?" The birds ignored him, he found himself listening as a reward for each thing laid out, letting the dizziness that the bending caused to pass. His heart pounded in his ears.

Originally, Bolda had one of the packs he had now. A blue towel was in the other, smaller bag, the one he didn't recognize. Sealed pouches underneath, nothing of theirs. En'talac's then. His writing case. He felt discouraged even thinking what kind of mess was inside and started on the larger pack next.



Some of his clothes, two of his books that Allwyk had given back to him, several mugs, a tea set of all things... and, at the bottom, food in a waterproof sack where the books had been left to get wet. Fried avipp, the shape and smell unmistakable, he must remember to thank Bolda. He had also ended up with the beer cask -- sitting on it at some point, then when he stood to shout -- one of the times -- it had vanished, only to reappear a ways off. He poured a mug full and sat, his back against the keg. Beer and avipp -- for a moment, he wasn't sorry he was alone and laughed out loud as he turned back the wrapping.

An avipp half way to his mouth, he heard a short scramble of rocks and got to his feet. No sound except the drone of insects. The two birds were gone. As he tried to decide if he should be alarmed or not, and from which direction, Gennady appeared.

"Have you drank it all then?" the Zimmer asked as he kicked the beer cask. After a quick inspection of the other things drying, he went back to the cask. Burrs piggybacked the cloth of his white trousers and dry grass trailed from the banding of his high boots, leaves and the pale seed heads of the grass, more caught on the knife sheath.

Garm put the avipp back with the others and wiped his hands on his waist-tie. "Not all of it," he said as Gennady sat quite suddenly in the dirt. "How did you find me?"

The man hung his head as though too exhausted to look up. "Down wind," he said. He shook his head as he picked one burr from his sleeve but left more of them. "I felt her grab you, maybe an hour ago, then me like an afterthought, and then something like doors slamming all around."

An hour ago was about when the world had finally settled. Garm tilted the cask to make the beer flow out better, the cask practically on its nose before the mug was full.

Gennady took the mug and drank it off in a rapid sequence of swallows. Then blinked and hissed. In one motion he stripped his tunic off to the waist, the front seam opening, and arced his hair in a crest that extended down his back. "Hot," he said between deep breaths. The hair along his spine was a brilliant pink and moved like a caterpillar does on a twig.

"There's water," Garm said, alarmed again. "Somewhere." He looked around frantically. "Swallowed quite a bit of that last night." The Zimmer had too, he thought, the man had a bedraggled look. "Do you need some?"

Gennady shook his head, his breathing slower as the hair along his back faded to pink, almost white at the tips. He started on the burrs on his tunic, a frown of concentration on his face. "That's a trail," he said, giving up on the seed heads again, pointing to the way he'd come. "A marker cairn just down the slope, a flat-top pyramid with a narrow pointer stone and some more loose ones that could mean anything. Animal tracks, hooves about the size of my hand. Nail marks.

Some kind of protective covering on the hoof. At least five different animals. Dung, maybe a day old." He watched the mug as he swung it between his knees. "Good thing for the beer or I might not have found you at all. Found whoever made the tracks, maybe. That might not have been so good. My bag is gone, no weapons, no wards."

Garm looked around. He hadn't thought about people as something to be avoided, or as needing weapons against. Not in his thoughts, at least, although his body appeared to remember more caution than his mind did. Anga had said there wouldn't be people around the Opening site, at least not settled there. How far away were they?

"Are you serious?", he asked. "Should we pack everything up?"

"I heard you talking," the Zimmer said without raising his eyes. "Was she here? At the terrace... her Suite, no... in the Web, she was there..." He rubbed at his face with one hand.

And in the spiral at Cam'lt Temple? "Should we pack up?" Garm asked again, and sounded each word carefully. The look he got asked what he thought he was talking about, but Gennady nodded.

Garm sipped on his beer as he thought. There wasn't much but he had just finished getting it spread out. One by one, he picked up the medic's packets, using the skirt of his waist tie gather them. He needed a better place for them, if they ever found Ulanda, she'd need what was here. With luck, they could find her before the actual dance of the Opening started.

The food sack would do, he decided. Stuffed with the packets, it wouldn't seal back properly but breakfast should take care of that. Gennady still hadn't moved. Garm licked his lips. "What's wrong?" he asked, bending to pick up the mug the other man had dropped.

Gennady nodded again, his eyes focused on the ground between his legs. His Clan marks were silver on white. Blinking, he raised his head then squeezed his eyes shut as he turned away. "This place is getting wrapped up tighter than a Web ship before a jump."

"You said you saw Cassa..."

"Don't be an idiot. I'm talking about Anga, I can smell him. It's his doing, besides. Us going missing."

No surprise there, Garm thought. Only they weren't the key players, the game Anga was playing would more likely be directed at Ulanda. They had just gotten in the way. "He might be surprised. He didn't expect Lillisim."

Gennady rubbed the inside of his wrists together through the gloves. "Did you?" he asked softly followed by a long drawn out hiss. He looked up suddenly at the blue of the sky. And shut his eyes and lowered his head just as suddenly, his lips drawn back to expose his honor points. "We shouldn't be here," he spat. "Anyone coming along the trail would have to see us."

Garm wanted to ask him what he had seen after Cassa had died, but took a closer look at the man and closed his mouth. He could take instead what the man had told him twice: that it wasn't safe here. Starting to pick up the odds and ends again, he suddenly thought better of it and dressed quickly while trying to watch every direction at once. Footsteps. No, hoof beats followed every movement he made, only to have the noise stop when he did. Hoof beats like a goat would make on a hard packed road, he thought, trying to calm down. Memories from long ago. The goats were real, goats on Lillisim, and he looked around, trying again to make this place familiar. The two birds were back, louder than before, fighting over the seeds, two trees over now.

"You said you saw her..."

He might as well have asked the birds. The thick cloth from En'talac's pack was still wet and he draped it over the Zimmer's head like a scarf to cover the spine crest. The hairs were pink to the tips again. He didn't know what the pale blue cloth was supposed to be. Too small to wear or use as a blanket and didn't think it was a towel, the right size but much too stiff and rough.

"Any ideas on which way we should go?" he asked. Not too far he hoped. Neither of them were up to it. Bolda would be with Ulanda, he told himself for the thousandth time. "Were there mountains in the map Ulanda pulled? Did you happen to notice which way the Opening site was from here?" He asked both again, louder, when there was no response. "Do you know if your flitter came through?"

Gennady frowned at him, then pulled the cloth off to rub his upper body. Then glanced up at the sky again. "Can you see them?" he whispered hoarsely. Eyes that had been the color of the cloth were circled with black.

Garm stepped back and looked all around in a panic before realizing Gennady meant the sky, not someone on the trail. His heart skipped about every fifth beat then tripped to land with a heavy thump in his chest.

Almost something right overhead, he decided but had to squint too much to be sure; he thought looking from the shade would be better. It wasn't. The sun was over the tops of the trees down slope from them, and he had sunspots in his eyes already that were blinking out very slowly. He walked back to the Zimmer. "What is it?" he asked.

"World-pattern. Just starting, like it's being born here. I can feel it. This isn't Anga at all. Tastes like Cassa did when she was sleeping, after we'd been together. Her skin was like it was oiled. Tasted salty, like salt water where she was warm. She would always sleep after."

"I know."

Gennady dropped the cloth to the dust. "You don't know anything," he growled. "This is her, what she should have been if Temple hadn't screwed her up."

"Cassa is what she had to be," he said, lifting the Zimmer's chin a moment to check the eye color. Blue that was only flecked with black, not solid. He didn't know for sure what that mean, probably distress, not challenge. Not with his being able to handle him like that. The man was trembling.

Gennady shook his head free. "What Ulanda has a chance to be."

"She'll be part of the world-pattern. There's no way she could survive, not her body, not in the way you mean."

Gennady looked up, his eyes were darker.

"You said you saw her... when?" What did she say to you, Garm wanted to ask -- to demand, he found himself behind the Zimmer, his hands over Gennady's shoulders, poised to shake the answer out of the man. And only touched the g'ta points along one side of Gennady's face to no more reaction from him than before. It looked for all the world like a light pattern draw but that was impossible.

A few more minutes and he finished packing, the bags bobbing against his back. Wet on soggy, he was quickly loosing any of the warmth he'd picked up.

Gennady hadn't moved except to draw his legs up under his chin. "Up or down?" Garm asked.

After the second time he asked, he lifted Gennady's head and saw that the pale blue eyes were blank. The Zimmer hardly appeared to be breathing. The clearing was dead quiet.

"The birds..." he started to say then heard hoof beats that didn't sound at all like goats. The sound was as much in the ground, a rolling thump, thump-ump, that he now thought he'd been hearing for some time. Coming from up the slope, past the boulders, not the way Gennady had walked. A faint haze of silver dust showed further still, rising over the treetops. Quite distant, he thought, relieved even as the thunder seemed to envelope him.

"Your strangers have come," he said as he looped an arm under Gennady's. "They're up, so we might as well go down."

At the first tug, the man twisted out of his grip, swinging him around, the pack straps slipping off his shoulder. The noise was louder, improbably so. He had one strap over his arm when a scream froze him. Nothing near human and he turned to see. Something huge with long legs pawed the air, the creature backed against the stone, then another was past it and another, all rounding the boulder and piling up, all screaming. White dust surrounded them like a storm.

He didn't move, too paralyzed from fear. At one side of him, he was strangely aware that Gennady was crouched, his honor blade out and weaving in the air, his lips drawn back in an open mouthed snarl.

More creatures, people and animals, he saw now, and managed his first gasp of air. "Gennady, don't..." he tried to say as he turned to the Zimmer. Then he was sitting without realizing he'd fallen. Snapping sounds came from all around as

the creatures trampled the dead branches into kindling; his head couldn't move fast enough to follow. Then a louder snap from behind, or crack, like two flat rocks slammed together and Gennady collapsed half across his legs.

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"Hold your fire," Rit yelled as he stood in his stirrups and leaned back. His horse stopped dead in her tracks, flesh rippling like she was going to shed her skin. The men were slower to react, his command worked only because the woman blocked their line of fire. Maybe a woman, Rit thought, his finger twitching against the trigger of his rifle; he was as spooked as the horse under him. Maybe an old woman like that other thing was maybe a man.

Swinging his leg over got Heni side stepping, pushing him up against the rump of Tennin's red gelding. It reared and screamed again, starting the other horses off. "File out," he shouted. "Tennin, lead point. Hold at the turn boulder." Going somewhere would help. He let his reins drop; Heni rolled her eyes at the ends trailing in the dust, blowing loudly, her head down. She'd stay.

Maybe an old white-haired woman, maybe not. She was watching him, not the others arranged for a mounted attack at the turn of the trail. Leaning over the man, arms wrapped around to hold him in her lap. He was twitching like the horses. Red blood, at least that. Plain red blood stained the woman's bright yellow dress and the dark hands.

The knife was a body length from her and he got that first. A white knife, handle and blade. He tucked it in his belt by touch, still watching her hands. She watched back. Two good-sized carry bags were closer than the knife had been, one strap still looped around her arm.

"Who are you?" he asked. Eyes like green glass blinked at him. He rubbed his chin, feeling the stubble. They'd been riding through the night, taking advantage of the cool. Maybe a woman. Not a trace of facial hair, but... He swallowed hard. Taller than he was and there was a hard strength in the line of the muscles on what he could see of arms and hands. Maybe old. Then decided she was, the skin over the muscles had the softer folds of age and darker spots especially on the hands. And those hands looked as though they'd never done anything hard at all. A lady maybe. He hoped that bullet wasn't going to cost more than one man's life.

And swallowed hard again on the word: man. Man? Looked more like a white snake he had seen when he was a boy. A nest of snakes in the haystack by the

spring house, all but one the plain green of grass snakes. A tiny thing not much longer than a finger. Red eyes. All twisted up with the others.

"I'm Captain Wilnmeit," he said, having to clear his throat after the first word. "Gray Squadron out of Endica Fort."

A sound like water over rocks and those blood stained hands moved slightly while still holding tight against the stark white skin of the man.

He shook his head. He hadn't been this unnerved in over fifteen years of riding border patrol. "Tennin," he said, without moving his eyes away. "Cover me." He felt more than saw his second dismount and move around to the back of him.

"Wilnmeit," he said, motioning to his chest then repeating it.

"Wilnmeit," came back at him like an echo. Then, "Tennin." The same voice and a motion and a glance to one side where his second was placed.

"Captain Rit Wilnmeit," he said and had that repeated back as well.

Then an awkward bow. "Garm." And moving one hand slowly to stroke the back of the man's head, leaving a streak of red on white hair. "Gennady."

He repeated the names, feeling himself start to come down from the rush with a familiar prickling in his muscles. Moving slowly, allowing time for her to compensate without letting go of the injured man, he eased the strap of the larger carry-bag away, grabbed the free one and dragged them to Tennin.

"Have Vinn go through these," he said, dropping the bags. Then tossed the white knife on top. A moment's thought, and he added his rifle and own knife. "Get two others to check for footprints, the trail first, both ways, then spread out. Might as well eat in turns, this could take some time."

"We'll have ruined any tracks along the way we came," Tennin said as easily as he ever said anything. A small very thin man, but he thought and spoke like he moved, steady and very calmly.

"Just do it," he told him back, as he usually did. That helped along with getting names spoken. Tennin grunted. His rifle hadn't wavered a hair's width from being centered on the woman's head.

Rit went back, squatting this time to bring his head level with hers, ignoring his men and the horses. Tennin set watch-guards high on the rocks; he'd forgotten to order that.

Speaking constantly in a smooth low voice to reassure her, like he would to a hurt animal, he repeated her name and waited before he made a move. But she started helping once it was clear what he wanted. Still holding the man's head with both hands, she let him turn him over and check for more weapons. Nothing.

One rifle hit then. He'd almost been certain, he'd find out who's later. Or not, depending on how this went. No blame that he'd care to assign for the shooting, regardless of what his superiors might want to do if this turned political. Too early to be thinking scapegoat anyway.

A single hole, mid chest, no exit. The man should be dead, or making blood bubbles with every breath, but he wasn't. His skin was hot, waxed feeling but dry, no sweat at all. And except for the blood, white as bleached cloth. Rit held his hand still for a moment, staring at the contrast. His was brown from the sun, white dust turning the bare skin a muddy gray, and caked in places from him sweating, darker in the creases and cracks. Used looking.

"Captain Rit Wilnmeit," the woman said softly, making music with his name instead of an echo, and he looked up startled at his lapse. She had the short tie from her loosely fitted dress between her fingers, then dropping it, ran her hands over the man's wrists as though tying his hands up with rope. Then pointed to his legs and repeated the gesture. Then both hands were back to protectively cradle the strangely angular head. The man twitched and his eyes flickered.

Rit swallowed hard again, and scurried back on his heels before he realized he had. A rope landed next to him, making him jump again. "Need help?" Tennin asked.

"I'll let you know," he said dryly.

Watching his face for any more signs he was waking up, he tied him slow enough to be careful. The woman watched, then checked the knots, seemed to think about it, then nodded.

Tennin came over and did the same.

"Looked like he was trying to protect her," he said, watching his second work the knots even more carefully than the woman had. "What do you think this is all about?" he added, but his gut told him. Dangerous.

But Tennin grinned. "Maybe he wakes up as grumpy as you do."

"I don't think he's going to wake up." Thumbing back an eyelid, he grimaced at the feel of the white skin. Ice blue eyes, not red, he saw with only a fleeting sense of relief. The small snake had just been an albino, but he had thought snake on seeing this man, not albino.

Suddenly, the man twisted with a growl he shouldn't have had the breath for. Snatching his hand away, Rit heard a snap at the same instant. An after image of a pair of dagger sharp teeth stayed in his mind over the shock of how fast the man moved.

Hands as soft as a baby's took his and turned it over, and again, until in the skin on the edge of a finger, they found a cut that was new but on a thick callous. Her fingers touched his skin as gently as feathers. She sighed, then said something and stood, still holding onto his hand. Taller than he was by a half a head, she towered over Tennin. Breathing heavily from the effort of getting up, she moved stiffly, but managed to pull him a couple of steps. Then she pointed to the rocks and to the sun, then back to the rocks.

He left two of his men standing guard on them, one cutting off the entrance to the crevasse between two of the largest rocks and the other high up, looking down. Spine of the Serpent, these rocks were called. Part of the old border wall from near the end of the Millennial wars when they still had the technology to move stone this large, but without the aircraft and the bombs which would have made the wall useless. The Spine lay in a curved line, forcing the trail to follow to this point, then a gap led down to the main Way-road from Ojin to Endica, going in back of Dog Mountain to the tail. Spring runoff still brought bones to the surface but there hadn't been a battle here in his lifetime. Trouble was usually down from here, the Xintan nomads and the Ocea pirate ships.

The water in his canteen was blood warm and tasted of the leather. They should have had their break in the barracks at Intil, four hours out of Endica. A decent meal instead of trail rations and a chance to rest during the worst of the heat and clean up before the last ride with the sunset behind them and their own beds waiting.

Or a drink with Eunni at her place before bed, in her office at the back, away from the tavern commons. He had a small sack of tea in his roll for her, a late birthday present, a blend that rarely made it as far as the markets in Endica.

The rest of his Squadron was on leave, most would be in Endica, a very few they might pick up at Intil. He had pulled special escort duty, luck of the draw, then passed the bad luck onto a double handful of his men.

He walked down a short washout section of the trail like going down steps. Even if they made it to Endica today, which he doubted very much, he wouldn't be spending time visiting. "Anything interesting?" he asked. Clothes were spread out over the larger of the exposed boulders, with the rest of it in orderly heaps on the hard ground. Vinn was still rearranging things as though moving them around would tell him what they were. Cillamet sat cross-legged on a much larger flat top rock, peeling back the pages of a book.

"Everything's soaked except what looks like food," Tennin said, wrinkling his nose. A fishy smell came from a cloth wrapped square nearby. "The small pouches were with the food, I can't get them open and my knife won't go through. Looks like leather, but..." He shrugged and glanced at Vinn; the man was sorting them by size. "The broken pieces of pottery might fit together to make a container of some sort. Smells of beer. We must have trampled it. Other than that, there are only a couple of books and some writing things."

"A scholar?"

"Him?"

He shrugged. "Her. Who knows?"

The look on Tennin's narrow face said he certainly didn't. "Cillamet says he seen Ocea and Ril'mil script well enough to recognize them but he says it's not



either of those or anything close.” His second took the canteen and wiped the lip on his sleeve before drinking. “Nearest running water is Gillfish creek.”

Vinn looked up. “This time of year it’s mostly drying mud and with enough slime on top to stink.”

The wet clothes were clean except for bits of grass like this isn’t the first time they’ve been set out to dry, and they didn’t smell other than of wet wool. And silk. “Any money?” he asked Tennin.

Tennin shook his head. “Nothing, no jewels either. Maybe...”

“They’d have to have money,” Vinn said, ignoring Tennin’s glare at being interrupted. “Those clothes are worth plenty. Weird style but it makes the stuff in Endica market look like beggar rags.”

The woman’s dress as well, where the caked dust had flaked off was a shimmering cloth, yellow and gold, with a pale green somewhere deep inside the folds. And soft, like shorn fur. High born for sure, he had decided, and not just from the cloth. He suppressed the thought of what all this was going to bring down on him and his men. Not just his thoughts either, from the worried looks he’d been getting. Almost anything they did here could be wrong.

Rit turned his back on Vinn. That usually worked to shut him up. Tennin obviously had more to say, more that didn’t want to get said. “Any tracks?” he asked in a lower voice.

Tennin nodded, his gray eyes narrowed in thought. “Some footprints, matching the... man’s boots, followed them to the Doglook way-marker and twenty span down into the scrub, then nothing. Like he came out of nowhere.”

“Coming and going?”

“One way, coming up.”

So they hadn’t been together, or both of them very good at hiding their tracks, then one of them hadn’t cared, just that once. Only he didn’t think anyone could hide marks from Tennin. Not when he was really looking. A shipwreck on the river was possible, but neither of them would have crossed the waste between here and the river on foot without showing more wear than they did. Overland on the trade routes and riding was the best answer except they would have crossed either Hegemony or Xintan lands and the Xintan language hadn’t registered anymore than Heg did, not even the formal exchanges that most everybody on the Border learned. And there was no sign of horse tack; even the carry bags weren’t suited to be used as saddlebags.

Tennin was chewing his bottom lip. A large cherry red spot against the brown already, at least one layer of skin peeled. “What else?” Rit asked.

“By the way-marker, the ground drops, and except for the back of Dog mountain, it’s clear to the waste...”

“I’ve been there.” About a few hundred times, most of them with this man.

Another layer of skin was being nibbled at by blunt yellow teeth and Rit shut up. By that stage, Tennin would take his own time or not speak at all.

"I couldn't see anything, or maybe..." Tennin spat a piece of skin out. "Panntin says there's lines in the sky, like polished metal bands all crossed together. Said it made him feel sick to look at them. Nobody else could see them."

Panntin cal'Oster. Seventeen. Maybe. Too young to be riding the Border at any rate, and not suited to the life even if he lived to be much older. "Everything makes him sick."

"Yeah, but this is the first time he's ever complained. And he wasn't faking it. White as, well, almost as white as that thing in there and he threw up the water I gave him, and kept retching even when he was dry. All the men with brains enough to be scared are, but this was different."

"Where is he?"

"With the horses. Set him to rub them down." He chuckled but with a sour note. "Up wind of that thing."

"Just an albino."

"Sure."

That story was and wasn't working. He shook his head; the men would believe it if they wanted to enough. Hell, he wanted to believe it. "Get Panntin to bring one of the horses down, not your gelding, and stake it near the crevasse." He thought a moment. The boy was a younger son of a minor House from Deni, or so he said when he'd say anything at all about his family. He could be, Oster was a common enough name. "Get him to look at this stuff as well," he added. "He might recognize something he's seen in the markets in Deni. Might even have shopped Denman Capital and the high markets."

Tennin nodded. "The sooner we're out of here, the better. Vinn's horse will do for that thing."

"But...", Vinn started.

Rit shook his head and motioned Vinn to back off. "Make it Heni, she stood better than most did. I'll take your gelding and you can double with Cillamet on his stallion. We can't stay here, and dead or alive, he'll have to be taken to Endica.

Garm took a sip. Something resembling tea and served in his own mug. The Atlasimic leader had handed it to him gingerly, as though he might bite as well, then sat close to drink his own, as though he wasn't nervous at all. They sat in

the shade of the largest boulder, almost a small cave, a fire against one side of the rock. Thin smoke rose slowly in the still air, licking against the rough surface of the stone with a gray tongue.

He nestled his back against the rock, feeling the relative coolness from his still damp robe and wondered at the thoughtfulness that prompted the fire. The small space was hot, even being in the shade, but he liked the comfort of the flames and the smell of the wood to cut the sharp acrid scent of the heavy man next to him. More of the same drifted in from the animal tied just outside the entrance, stamping its feet and making strange noises.

The smell of metal as well. Rit Wilnmeit wore more metal than Garm saw in a year at Palace. Iron based, he thought, probably steel. Small cylinders set in a leather belt, a knife of steel with a cord wrapped handle, buckles of metal on his cloth jacket, even rounds of metal set in the seams of his pants. And the long weapon with the small hole at one end, the end that was usually being pointed at him by someone. Dark blue steel and beautifully finished wood. Everything else was covered in dust, including the men, but the weapons were all freshly polished.

Rit Wilnmeit had brought the food pack with him and while Garm ate, continued the language lessons started earlier. They had progressed from personal names, to names of things, then very quickly, to verbs. A couple of dozens of words and he was stringing simple sentences together between mouthfuls. The structure of the language appeared relatively straightforward.

"Gennady is Zimmer is man," he said, pointing to Gennady. A name, make him real to them, not some kind of monster. He had cleaned Gennady up as best he could. The blue cloth made a good pad, and the tunic wrapped around to hold it in place. The bleeding had stopped already. He felt Gennady's g'ta points again, rubbing slowly to feel the difference in the resiliency of the skin as the energy flow changed. How close to the start of the dance, he wondered? How much time did they have to find Ulanda? He couldn't be sure of anything, not even that he was supposed to be with her.

When Rit didn't respond beyond a frown, Garm repeated the words, then for emphasis, pointed to Rit and added, "Is man." Easily the heaviest of the men with him but a dry man for all his size and flesh. Like the ones who followed the goats on Lillisim, their eyes holding the look of the sky over the dunes and the ocean.

Rit gave Gennady a long searching look, but finally nodded and pointed back. "Garm is woman."

They'd had some problems. "Man." he said, touching his chest, wondering if he'd gotten this basic thing wrong after all.

The Altasimic frowned again, black and gray eyebrows shading his light brown eyes. The expressions he wasn't having problems with, just some of the memories they invoked. "Is woman," the man repeated to him, with a drawing of

his lips down as his eye brows lifted, and moving his broad hands in exaggerated curves as he spoke.

Garm started to laugh. He had wondered why he hadn't been searched when Gennady had been and for a brief moment considered playing along. Except he needed more than a few words to figure out what the difference in how he had been treated meant. "Is man," he said and pulled his robe up. Then the Altasimic was laughing with him.

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Rit waited as Panntin put the small packages back the way Vinn had arranged them. The boy looks like a whipped dog, he thought, sympathy mixed with a mild irritation and not a little curiosity. Panntin was hunched on a rock, staring at the ground, his dust scarf pulled up over his mouth and one hand over that.

"Anything look familiar?" Rit asked him.

Panntin glanced up as though taken by surprise at the question. Face still pale under the dust, his eyes were squeezed to slits even though he was in the shade close against the huge rocks, his back to the open where he might see the sky. "Nothing, Captain. I'm sorry."

"What about the writing?" Panntin had looked at the books first, using canteen water to wash his hands and drying them on the seat of his pants. Cillamet already had mud prints all over the wet pages; Rit couldn't see it would have made much difference to have a few more. Worry about good water was something you learned fast on the Border.

Speckled eyes glanced at him, sliding off to see the sky to one side. Sucking air, Panntin flinched as he dropped his gaze again, going paler if that was possible. Tennin looked over from where he was cleaning under his nails with the tip of his knife but didn't say anything.

"There's at least three different languages there," Panntin said in a strained voice. "Or types of writing that is. Could be the same spoken language, I suppose." He frowned deeper. "One looks like it most likely is ideographic."

"Which ones are you familiar with?"

"No Captain, you don't understand. All our modern writing is based on only three scripts, all of them phonetic. Hegemony alphabetic is the most common by far since the finish of the Occupations last century. Ocea and the Balltinitta the Xinta use, for example, use the same letters as we do even if the words are different. Ideographic remnants exist mostly in various art forms like the Xintan tapestries and..."

Rit had moved further into the shade so that Panntin could see him and not sky. The mild irritation had grown considerably as the boy spoke. He didn't like having new recruits dumped on him no matter what the reason. And this recruit had a habit of taking a simple question and spinning it into a discussion. So far he hadn't done the same to an order. He'd only do it once.

"Have you ever taught someone to speak our language?" he interrupted, keeping his tone level with some effort. Showing the books had been a long shot at best.

Panntin shook his head, looking up again, and managing better this time. "Can't be that much different than learning a new one yourself. Why though? We'll be in Endica by tonight, won't we?"

He wanted to be in Endica now, with this behind him. He shook his head at the question. Give the boy the time it took to get to Endica and he'd figure it out for himself. Panntin had eyes the color of a russet checked marsh flower, copper when the sun hit them and hair not much darker though he kept it shaved to stubble. The Royal House could and did kill that line if they found it in the wrong family, but a Border Lord wouldn't dare.

"We'll be there just after sunrise," he said. Tennin snickered and he glared over at him. "Two will be riding double and I won't push the horses in this heat." He wanted time to find out what was going on here and he wanted to have this young man beside him with some cause for doing so when he gave his report.

"Captain!" A shout from behind, shrill with fear and coming over a scrambling on rocks as two others converged on the crevasse, rifles at the ready. "He's awake." Heni was straining back on her rope, her eyes bulging.

"Keep away," he yelled. They didn't look sure, but did stop. Dead silence, even the birds had shut up. Cillamet had been on point guard, the tall gangly man was two paces out from where he should be, and crouched with elbows and knees sticking out at odd angles, but he looked like he was in control. Then to Vinn, closest except for Cillamet, he said, "Get Heni out of here."

"Panntin, you're with me," he added in a lower voice. "Everybody else keep back." Footsteps and hooves striking stone were the only sounds, then a pinging broke through that. A pebble bouncing on rock as it fell. Yanni was on guard up top of the boulder, he couldn't see him. He'd better keep it together, he hadn't wanted to shame him by skipping his turn and sending someone else up instead.

Closer, it wasn't so quiet. Garm was talking a steady stream, the same water sound that he'd spoken first, and even through the strangeness, Rit could hear the urgency. One hand gripped the other man's shoulder, both of them standing. The white man was a stone, the sound seeming to flow around him.

Through the narrow space between the boulders, talking was the first thing that registered, but the second was a stray thought that bloomed through the buzzing in his head. That Gennady's eyes weren't light blue at all, but darker than

his own, black against the white skin. But the bloom of reasoning died as he recognized the louder buzzing: something akin to absolute fear had frozen him where he stood.

Garm stepped between them, slowly and deliberately, hands moving in a strange dance with the words. His being between them wouldn't make any difference, Rit thought wildly, caught between the need to run and the impossibility of moving. Suddenly, the other man flicked his skin, the statue stance broken and he slumped against the rock face. And nodded. So familiar, the motion looked worse than something else would have. It wasn't until then that Rit realized that the ropes were still around the man's wrists and ankles, that hadn't penetrated his fear at all.

"Captain Rit Wilnmeit," Garm said after a short flood of the other language. "Gennady."

Blue eyes rimmed with black stared at him. Another change. "Gennady a'Genn d'Zimmer," the man said, working a hiss into the words, and the image of the white snake twisted to the surface again. Not human, not a chance of that wishful thinking lived past seeing him move again.

Rit had caught the first word after the name, but the rest had disappeared into the confusion of his thoughts when he tried to find them in his mind to repeat. "Gennady a'Genn," he said shakily and looked to Garm for help.

But it was Panntin who spoke. "A'Genn d'Zimmer," he said as he stepped from behind, the two of them filling the narrow entrance.

He started to stumble over the rest of it, but nobody was paying him any mind. Both of the strangers were staring at the boy.

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Had there been any of that breeding at the sampling, Garm wondered as he walked, trying to work the kinks out of his legs. About an hour's riding past the stone cairn that Gennady had told him about, and they had stopped to rest in the shade of a small grove of broad-leafed trees surrounding a stagnant pond. Mid afternoon and very hot.

There was no mistaking the effect of unregulated pattern... more memories, even the confusion so evident when the cycling began, Cassa had never lost it, each time seemed to take her by surprise. Comfort had been all he could offer her then and all he could offer Panntin now, and that limited to what would be accepted. And not much would be, he thought, from observing how the men treated each other. No body contact, they'd circle around, even the leader

accommodated his men rather than using his position as a weapon and forcing them to do all the moving.

Looking to the sky, he tried to see the pattern lines and failed again. The sky was more white than blue, but not with clouds. Bleached looking as though the sun had stripped the color out.

The black horse bumped him with her nose, almost knocking him over, and started to snuffle into the folds of his robe. One piece of nut cake from the food pack and he was a marked man. Panntin laughed and pulled back on the strap tied around the animal's head then led her to where the others were grazing on the scanty grass.

The mare -- 'woman horse' had made Panntin smile but the language was coming -- had carried Gennady but hadn't liked it, streaks of bubbly white sweat marking her coat even before they'd started. Garm watched a moment as Panntin rubbed the sweat and dirt off with handfuls of the dry grass. A wide brimmed hat was pulled down low over his eyes, his head bowed as he worked. He couldn't tell him it would get worse once Ulanda started the dance. Much worse.

A couple of the men were straining water from the pond through a cloth. A fire already going and a tripod set. Few words were being spoken and it wasn't just him and Gennady being there, but the feel of something done so often words weren't necessary.

He carried his replenished bag of water to where Gennady sat propped up against a tree and sat beside him. The bullet had been stopped by the overlapping plates of cartilage that wrapped around his chest, the outer part of the heat shunting system that ended with the crest of hair along his spine and head. Worse was the massive bleeding caused by force of the impact on the capillary rich tissues underneath.

"Foul but it's wet," he said, as he passed the leather water bag over. "Besides, the microbes probably won't like you any better than the horses do."

"Or the men."

"You don't help." He didn't try, although probably nothing would have worked. The ropes were off at least, a bargain that the Altasimic leader had slowly realized was very serious to the Zimmer when the hard-worked promise not to try to leave was tied to a detailed drawing in the dirt showing sunrise and sunset, with a single day at a time as the agreement.

Gennady shrugged then motioned towards the small rise. The road made a switchback on the way up although the incline wasn't severe. "Two of the men were sent up there to watch. The rest act like they're on a picnic."

"Managed to get you down."

That earned him a glare, then a chuckle. "Cassa said I never knew when to duck. Simitta says the same, they could be right." He sighed and rubbed his back against the smooth bark. "The first time she killed, she was sick for a week. Said

it was like eating someone's life. She said it as though she didn't remember the spiral at all."

The Zimmer shifted his weight again, took a swallow of water and grimaced more from the memory, Garm thought, than from the pain of moving or the taste. Gennady had already finished two of the water bags the men had with them. Marginally better tasting than the pond water from the sip he'd had of one. Better made into strong tea.

"I don't think she did remember, not the killing at least. Not as something she had done." A dream even then, most likely there wouldn't have been any point of reference in her life to what had happened. How long before she had been able to see what had occurred in those few seconds as being more than a nightmare without cause or effect or blame. And touching overpattern for the first time, how much of the rest would have stayed with her.

He took the skin from the Zimmer, sipped as much as he could bear to and passed it back. "What did it feel like to you?" he asked.

"I could taste it from her, it was a scent on my tongue, it filled the air like a stench. Cam'lt Temple, I could taste it then like I could..." Gennady took a deep breath through a yawn, points showing, as he shaped a Zimmer prayer sign with one hand. "The Ladybug... one of our first jobs was doing escort runs. We sharpened our feeding teeth on Riu^cin raiders. She drank their blood from my hand." The sign died against leather as he swirled the water in the skin, a smell of algae and rot coming from the small opening.

"And what did you drink from hers?"

"Is this another way of asking the same question as before? Need she have said anything to me?" Garm received a long sideways stare from the Zimmer, his eyes a reassuring pale blue, then the man sighed and answered. "I drank the dark ocean, the Wu'loss cass. 'A salt ocean of tears'."

A quote from the blue book that had been on his table in Palace and was now drying in the sunshine not twenty feet away. "Is this another way of not answering the same question?"

"I though you liked stories." Gennady chuckled. "What I'd like is a look at the inside of those... rifles." He spat out the second mouthful of water. The word had been in Hegemony. "Metal. They must have gutted this planet to have so much metal around."

"Drink the water, don't waste it. You need the liquid." He looked better than he had when they'd started riding although the Clan marks were much the same color as the white skin, with little more than a hint of a different texture to show where they were.

The tree gave scanty shade, scattered around them were balls of light, sun and shadow moving with what air moved above them, not a wind certainly and not enough to relieve the stifling heat. Garm took the yellow cloth from Gennady's



shoulder and shook it to cool. Thin silk, his waist tie, and barely damp from the last wetting, not enough to do much good.

Gennady was examining the water skin again, running a finger over a scar in the leather, then to the rough uneven stitching along the strap. "The rifles are well tooled but much of the rest of their equipment is garbage."

Garm shrugged, but from ignorance, not lack of concern. These men were prepared for fighting, equipment and attitude, and fear made them more dangerous, not less. A difference from the Simic -- from him. What he saw here, he hoped wasn't an accurate mirror of their culture. Then thinking metal, asked with a gesture towards Panntin: "Would using the metal they have help the boy at all?" Finished with the mare, he was walking towards them, his head still down.

"Iron based won't. Silver would -- I shouldn't have to tell you that -- but not for long, not even blocker would. The pattern lines will become stronger, a progression, at a low speed right now but..." The Zimmer managed another drink and kept it down. "I didn't have time to go over all the information Sarkalt gave us but apparently the Opening will use people to form the threads of the world-pattern, and if they want, eventually the reference points for the world-net. Same as they did on Lillisim. Most of this generation of people who are able to respond to pattern to any appreciable degree will die."

"The warp and weft of Empire," Garm sighed. An old story and as disbelieved as that of the Change phoenix. "So he dies." In the same way his young relative had died. The cloth wore over time.

"So what." No more a question than his had been, but it should have. The Zimmer wasn't thinking. What kind of fear-based violence would an epidemic of pattern related deaths cause? One that appeared at the same time as they had? They could be half the world away from the Opening point and where the ships would start to look for them.

"What about the drugs in the packets?" he asked. Inside several he had checked were books of patches, but they weren't neural blockers, at least none that he was familiar with. Another contained a granular substance that looked like sand. Each packet had a different shape on the seal tab, but if they were more than pleasing designs, he didn't know.

Gennady didn't answer; there was no reason he would know, Garm thought. Picking up the leather pouch where Gennady had let it drop, Garm poured the rest of the water onto the yellow cloth. Where had the sense of urgency come from? He started wiping the Zimmer's face and upper body, the moisture a film that wouldn't last long.

Gennady pulled the cloth from his hands. "You're shocking the boy," he said, and started to laugh. Looking uncertain, Panntin had stopped just outside the circle of shade.

Garm sighed then bowed. "Panntin cal'Oster. Welcome."

“Lord Gennady a’Genn, Lord Garm,” Panntin said with a bow to each of them, but deeper to the Zimmer. “Honor to your Houses.” The uncertainty had changed to fear with the show of Gennady’s sharp teeth, but the young man swallowed it and continued the last few feet. Formal greetings had been given a high priority in the language lessons, both military and social terms, with ‘lord’ apparently occupying a rather large category for polite exchange and Garm had left it at that and didn’t insist on his proper title. Rit had listened to the first lessons, scowling the whole time, but hadn’t interrupted.

Garm returned the second part of the greeting, remembering the change from plural to singular. Gennady barely nodded, his remote approach apparently making more of an impression than Garm’s attempts to be helpful. Shall I keep track of how deep the bows are, Garm wondered, amused at the similarities to the behavior at Palace. Ascertaining formal rank there was a simple matter of asking the local Net if it hadn’t already been mentioned or wasn’t obvious from the dress, but the subtleties and maneuvering began from that point, a dance of languages, posturing and gestures.

Or perhaps the fangs made the difference. The boy had a wary look on his face as he knelt in the brittle layer of leaves over the hard packed dirt and he settled closer to him than to the Zimmer. The dust had changed color in the journey Garm noticed, white to reddish, but still plentiful.

“Map,” Panntin said. Then after Garm echoed it, he repeated the word as he brushed leaves to one side to expose the soil. Using the tip of his knife as a tool, he started to draw lines. Gennady had glanced at the knife, then leaned back against the gray striped bark of the tree, looking out to the sky, his mouth slightly open to show the purple tip of his tongue and a making a hissing sound in time to his breathing.

Panntin shaped elongated ovals in the dirt, like a school of fish. “Mountains,” he said, twisting to point to the rise they had just come down. He gasped and turned back as quickly. Garm resisted the urge to cover the short space between them.

The boy’s hand shook as he continued drawing. “River,” he said to a waving line following the long axis of the mountains. “Endicastrom River.” Adding what looked like fronds to the end of the line. Garm repeated the words dutifully; he supposed this would make some sense eventually. Gennady ignored them both.

More lines, a curved one generally perpendicular to the line of the others, another cutting across the ovals, and then pebbles placed here and there with a word for each. A row of pebbles over one of the ovals and Panntin pointed at the two of them. “We go from here,” he said with a finger on the row of pebbles, “to Endica.” The finger moved along the transecting line, stopping briefly at a point on the end of one of the last rows of ovals then turned to continue to a point near the fronds. “Endica,” he said again, stabbing the point of his knife into the

ground, then turning to look behind him, more careful than before to avoid the sky.

Footsteps. Garm had been concentrating so intently, knowing he'd seen this before, that the two men were almost there before he realized. Captain Wilnmeit and Lieutenant Tennin. Rit's boot scrubbed out the drawing in a rise of red dust -- kicking the knife free -- at the same time he spoke rapidly to Panntin, the words a mash of sounds that Garm couldn't separate. But he didn't need the words to understand the anger.

"Silence!" Gennady hissed but Garm would have been the only one to understand. The Zimmer was on his knees before the word had finished, Panntin's knife in his hand. But the map he was drawing was as different to the boy's as possible for the same collection of dirt and stones.

His hair took the color from the yellow silk still wrapped around his shoulders, and the tips, from the reddish clay he leaned over. Still open mouthed, he breathed raggedly as he drew: mountains in curved lines showing shape and texture, a river with a feeling of slow water that cut relentlessly through a dry plain. A line of stones where they had started this journey, but a sense of both a beginning and an end in the shape. At the point where Panntin had hesitated, so did Gennady. He glanced up, but past his silent audience to the sky and his eyes had a blank look.

Garm looked up as well, but to the others. The two older men were staring at the map without understanding. Panntin was ashen, but looking at Gennady, his eyes a copper image of the pale blue. All three Altasimic were crowned by opal bands set in a blue-white sky. Garm blinked at the image, then flinched as a crackling roared over him, sounding as though the sky were being ripped apart. Panntin dropped like a stone, a long moment unmoving as the sky grew quiet then he started convulsing.

Garm knocked him out then held him, not caring about custom. The pressure points he had been taught by the Master of Tass'kin'lic Studies at Palace so long ago, he was surprised his body remembered them where his mind certainly hadn't. His finger for an im'bt stick to keep the boy's teeth from chewing his tongue. That much he had done often and had the scars to show for it.

"We go here," Gennady said in Hegemony. "Here, not Endica." The knife was stuck in the soil at a point between the run of low mountains and the river. A road way nearby and further along, a bluff where perhaps a flitter was parked. Where the spiral of the World-altar was, Garm realized. On Lillisim. Ulanda.

Rit stood on the low crest that ran the length of the tail of Dog Mountain, his hat off to allow the rising breeze to dry the sweat on his head. The sun was finally loosing the war to the turn of the day. The plain that stretched before him looked the same as it always had.

Tennin picked a stone from a small pile next to the pointer on the surface of the way-marker he was sitting on and looked at it. "Vinn's an idiot. The Xintan are on their way to Intil," he said. "Not Endica. Bluestone Clan, along with..." He frowned. "... Silverfox Clan just like Vinn said but that's not a local Mother name. They must be leaving sign for others to show they're here." Another pebble. "Shit. That's Redleaf. What are they doing with Bluestone?"

The road ran the crest to the tip, then alongside a dry streambed to Intil. They could be there by sunset. From the first crest watch, Vinn had reported Xintan sign, giving only that it was Silverfox and the direction, but not that Intil was the destination. "They'll be holed up through the heat same as we are."

"Too early for the harvest pack-trains from up country. And what do you make of the way the stones are arranged on top of the way-marker?"

Rit put his hat on. "When you to go to Intil, take Yanni with you for escort and leave him there. Keep him quiet. Don't vary from the story we worked up. It's believable, the truth isn't." Tennin looked at him. "Take care of the letter first, then get White squadron out here as soon as possible. Whatever of our men are there as well. Spare horses. Have them wait here."

"They won't leave with the Xintan massing."

"If they're massing. Nan will have sent word to Endica at the first sign of Bluestone Clan coming in off-season in any numbers. Lord Camuit would have agreed to more men, they might have come already."

Tennin chewed on his lip like he was skinning himself. "That's a lot of ifs. And we're probably the men he was planning on. Might be orders waiting for us at Intil along with the rest of the Squadron."

Probably. "Do what you have to," he said, looking back out over the plain, trying to separate the old post road from the twists in the land. Anything could be out there, lost in the fissures that made it into a maze of trails and traps. It wasn't the arrangement of the pebbles so much as the lines scratched into each stones surface. The Lady-mark. There hadn't been a religious war among the Xintan for years. Redleaf and Bluestone. They were usually on opposite sides, not riding together.

The Xintan wouldn't camp where he suspected they were going, but they could be in the way of getting there. He was tired from having worked through the heat

instead of sleeping. The waste that began down from the line of mountains to die at the cliffs overlooking the river wasn't a good place to be stupid-tired in.

Tennin stretched slowly as he got to his feet. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Not a chance of that," Rit whispered, looking further yet, past the broken silver line of the river. The ocean flickered on the horizon, a line of brighter fluid light. Like the sky had been that once. He'd seen it even though he'd been staring at the ground.

Squatting, Tennin picked up a couple of pebbles from the roadway and tossed them hard. "A couple more holes in him might get him going." As he spoke, he looked up, eyes squinting. He said he hadn't seen them. "And there'd be no problem getting men out here, one look at him, alive or dead."

They had found out early that a promise not to run off wasn't necessarily a promise to go with them. "I don't think shooting him would be as easy this time." Yanni's rifle was the only one that had been fired recently, though he denied shooting. He would. Names by then, and Panntin calling both of the strangers 'lord'. The boy most likely thought he was just being polite, but the men figured that he would know if anyone did.

"They'd be out here for the wrong reasons," he continued. "We're at the start of something. Kill one or both of them, and we might have made enemies that we can't afford to. Or lost friends. Not just us here, but maybe the whole bloody planet."

During the language lessons, Garm had put the accent on the first syllable of Alisim, closer to the Xintan pronunciation than the Hegemony. Rit offered variations from more languages, then scratched the globe in the dust and added the other planets and the moons to the drawing, not even trying to keep to scale. Well over twenty years since those lessons. Except for Alisim, he gave the Hegemony names alone. Tennin had listened, sounding the names inside his mouth, with more than a couple of curious looks his way. Astronomy wasn't an approved subject; he doubted his second had even known how many planets there were in the system. The drawing had just been pride, he knew. Pride that he thought he'd outgrown in the other lessons since he'd learned that.

Sitting back on his haunches, balancing on the heels of his riding boots, Tennin stared at the dirt road between his knees. Sharp bones pressed through the coarse gray fabric of his pants. With the tip of one finger, he drew eleven circles one inside the other. "Where'd you learn that stuff?" he asked, gruffly. "Same place Panntin did?"

Rit laughed. "If you ever see me acting like some spit off the lip of a Noble House, shoot me."

The other man didn't look up. "That's not an answer." Smaller circles set across the rings and dots next to them. He had the number of moons wrong on

the fifth planet but otherwise everything was the same. “Fifteen years riding patrol more often than not with you, the last eight years as your Second, and all of a sudden I don’t know you.”

“You’ve known me almost half my life. The only half that’s real.” He smudged the drawing out, raising dust, but the other man didn’t move. A single minute’s lapse. Of not wanting to look like an ignorant savage and rubbing that like salt into the wrong wound. An apology would make it worse. The rest of what he had done had been out of necessity, but probably just as bad.

Faded gray eyes in a leathery brown face stared at him as his second stood up, brushing his hand on his jacket. “Don’t get yourself killed over this,” he said in his usual tone, but the worry showed over the tiredness. He hadn’t been sleeping the afternoon away either.

Rit took a deep breath of the hot dry air and let it out slowly. “This is worth my death. And yours. Can’t say that much for most of what else we’ve been doing here.” The grove of trees where the two aliens waited was in the shadow of the mountain behind, the sun line halfway up the rise. The reddening sun made the dirt on the switchback look like it was bleeding. Fifteen years riding the border for a crumbling State that wasn’t much better than the ones doing the crumbling.

“We lost that dream of the stars,” he said as took his hat off again and thumbed the broad rim. Horses were being saddled in the distance. Am I compounding my mistakes, he wondered, even as he said the words and continued saying them. “Six hundred years ago the Millennial wars stripped this world of dreams.”

Tennin snorted at that where he hadn’t at the first of it. “If the Civilli had won, there wouldn’t have been anyone around to dream anything. Or did you learn that differently too?”

A mistake. Rit slapped his hat against his thigh. He opened his mouth to try to repair some of the damage then hesitated. “Just get the book and that letter were they’re supposed to go,” he finally said and started back down the hill.

Their path was the same as far as the length of the crest to the tip of the tail of Dog Mountain and the dry fording at Oss creek. He passed Tennin the letter and book wrapped in a neck scarf and then the smaller of the two packs he had taken from Garm, flattened and with only a piece of lace cloth in it. Before leaving camp, he had put the other things in the larger bag, Garm watching, then given it to him. The writing case separate, it wouldn’t fit. Then the white knife that was passed silently to the Zimmer. Panntin had tried to explain, over-using the few words they were sure Garm knew, but Rit thought he understood without them.

“Use the bag and lace for evidence if you have to,” he told Tennin, speaking only loud enough for him to hear. Their horses were side by side. “Otherwise, the less said the better.”

Tennin barked a laugh. His gelding jerked, almost rearing. Rit was glad to be shut of the animal. They'd left two men at the camp rather than double up, he still didn't have Heni back but Sami's stallion was better than Tennin's nervous bone-rack.

"What the hell would I say? I'll give them the story we agreed on. A party from parts unknown stranded in the waste, two of their people making it this far, looking for help."

"And the book..." He stopped at the look on Tennin's face. Company.

Yanni was walking his horse up slowly on the outside, trying not to watch the Zimmer watching him. Rit couldn't pin down just when it was he had first noticed the man watching Yanni, but there was no doubt he knew who shot him.

"I know what to do," Tennin said, eyeing the approach of the chunky patrolman. The same slow tone as always, but his thin mouth was set in deep lines like an empty purse.

He nodded. With luck Tennin would be able to pass it on safely in Intil. "Go then," he said and reined his horse back.

The language he had written the letter in was as unfamiliar to his second as the ones in the two small leather books. He had Panntin add his cal'Oster House mark on the seal of the wrapping that covered book and letter as insurance against it being opened prematurely.

Garm had been asleep under the tree, letting loose a chorus of rumbling snores and the occasional short put-put. The Zimmer knelt near by, not asleep, but Rit wasn't sure what he was doing. Panntin made a third, keeping watch although he'd been told to rest. Dead pale as though he'd never seen the sun instead of having spent the last six months riding patrol.

Rit left Tennin at the shade line of the tree to stand watch. All the men were sleeping except the two who would be staying behind and they were at the crest of the hill on lookout. Putting the writing case on the dry leaves, he opened it flat, deliberately making small noises: remarks to Panntin and clanking the inkbottles. Ink and paper, that much was familiar.

"Do you want me to write a letter for you?" Panntin asked, rubbing his hands on his pants.

A snorting gulp of a snore and Garm was awake. "No," Rit said. "That won't be necessary." The old man was watching. He gestured to the writing case. "Yes?" he asked, taking one of the pens in his hand and mimicking writing.

"Yes," Garm said then chuckled at his selection of paper. "Yes," he repeated. A single gold colored sheet in its own folder and appearing unaffected by the water that had left the rest of the sheets swollen and stuck together. An hour or so in the sun and they were usable already, stacked in a warped pile. Not too impressive though, and he hoped to impress.

Panntin had the white ink stone out, turning it over in his hands, a puzzled draw to his lips. Garm smiled at him, making the boy blush as he put the stone down quickly before looking away. Rit shook his head, keeping his own smile well back of his face. They didn't have enough words between them for the old man to explain what he had done after the boy fainted. He wasn't sure their language had the right words, just words for what had appeared to happen.

The wrong words, Rit thought, seeing the smooth grace of the man's movements as he opened one of the small boxes to expose an ink stick, closed it, then opened another. Exaggerated movements but not effeminate. He sighed. That was the least of their worries.

Garm stopped with the third box open then tipped the small stick into his hand. Dark green against the amber skin. His hand was trembling so hard that he almost dropped it. Rit could just see the shape of a stylized bird worked into the surface. Dry, the boxes must have been waterproof. He hadn't been able to open them, had thought them sealed as the small packages were.

"Here," Garm said as he passed it to him, motioned to the paper, then picked up one of the brushes and passed that along as well. A sudden rush of words came from the Zimmer and Garm shook his head, looking very old all of a sudden. Words, Rit thought. They needed more of them and fast.

"Continue the language lessons if either of them wants to," he said to Panntin.

"Lord Garm. Speak words now?" Panntin said, more duty now in his tone of voice than the eagerness he had shown earlier. Tired, shaken and probably still sick, Rit thought. The other man had gone back to whatever it was he wasn't doing. Blank blue eyes stared at the sky. He couldn't think how he had ever thought him human.

"Ink," Panntin said, picking up a bottle of green ink. "Bottle," he added, running a hand over the surface, one thumbnail tracing the deep cuts in the glass.

"Ink in bottle," Garm said, taking it from the boy and putting it where it belonged in the writing case. "Ink stay in bottle," he added firmly, looking at the brush Rit held.

He laughed. The attempt at using a bush instead of a pen would certainly impress, but Rit wasn't sure his style was up to it. Not after this long. He held the brush awkwardly, motioned a couple of preliminary forms in the air, then another, more complex, the old man watching closely. He would do.

Panntin watched curiously as he poured water over the white stone, then gently worked the sloping surface with the tip of the ink stick, pulling the water up and pushing it back until the mixture in the small square depression was a rich green.

Very impressive. Drying in moments, the ink pulled the green color to the edges, leaving a golden line running through the center of each brush stroke. A



different gold than the paper, though, this sparkled. Was it in the ink, he wondered, or a reaction of the paper to wetting. He tried a bush mark on a sheet of plain paper and got the same effect. In the ink then.

Giving up any pretense of teaching new words, Panntin watched the complex ideographic figures grow under the tip of the brush, looking up sharply when Rit folded the paper into the flying crane form. Messenger from the gods, the form meant although from the frown he didn't think Panntin knew the name, just surprised that Rit had known more than squaring paper to stuff an envelope.

The letter went inside the cover of the blue book, and the whole wrapped with a sheet of thick white paper from the writing case. He didn't want to impress the wrong people.

He picked up what had to be a stick of sealing wax, a signet ring with it, but he wouldn't use that. "Your seal over it, if you don't mind," he asked Panntin as he pulled out a match from the holder in his belt. When he didn't get an answer, he looked up. "The seal of a noble House will be recognized and respected even out here on the Border. The forms I draw might not. Will you lend it?"

Panntin swallowed hard, then nodded, and pulled a tiny leather pouch out from where it hung on a chain around his neck. Three talons crossing a plain horizontal bar and the cal'Oster pledge name under, paired leaves with the stems crossed. Better than Rit had hoped in this gamble. Trihawk would be recognized anywhere in the Hegemony.

Blue wax peeled cleanly from the carved ring and he gave it back without a word past a plain thanks. He had finished with three layers to the package, each outer one to a certain end where it would be opened and passed on. A month, he thought as he ran a thumb over the outer seals. Half that if it moved quickly. What could happen in that time? The Trihawk seal was prominent at both end flaps, but the Charter House in Denman Capital was the destination, written in Hegemony in plain blue ink, but with a single form drawn under in a different language that would send it to the Councilor alone.

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The horse sidestepped then bucked, almost throwing him. Gennady pulled back on the leather cords and the animal stopped, shivering, its head down. He did what he had seen the men do, he kicked the animal in the sides with his heels. It worked.

Almost night, the sky was a strip of silvered blue above them. They rode in the deep shadow of crumbling banks of soil, the way pock marked with shrubs and

grasses. Layers of different colored dirt made up the sides, shades of gray and red, a layer of black near the top, less than a finger deep, then a muddy gray again. The top portion was undercut, he could see where rocks had tumbled, and in the center where they rode was a serpentine path of gravel. A dry streambed that wasn't always dry, he decided uneasily, seeing the pattern of rocks and plants that said the living things waited on the water that would come, had come many times. The horse shivered again and started to walk sideways despite his attempts at control with the leather cords.

Garm grabbed the leather and steel nose ring of the horse. "Try talking to her," he suggested, leaning to keep hold as he urged his own mount to continue.

The mare rolled her eyes back, but moved better with her head close to the old Simic. "Which language would you suggest?" He gave up trying for control of the animal with some relief and not a little temper. He thought the only reason either his or the Simic's animal moved at all was out of habit of walking with the others. "How about old-tongue? Perhaps these are Anga's Altasimic and not the humans. Or both, they smell the same. And the mare seems to like you, she might be close blood after all."

The Simic laughed softly and the horse whinnied against his robe, bumping him. "Better than walking."

"I think not." He didn't. Slower than he could have done on foot. Or could have rested and well, he had to admit to himself. And he was neither and this place was still too hot. He wasn't walking or riding double and he wasn't being led, other than by Garm. At the first indication that he preferred to handle the animal, he had been allowed to do so. And he wasn't tied or under obvious guard. Each point where he could be granted status, he had been.

"We should reach the road soon," he said. "At this rate, half an hour to where they are." He had tried to hold the image of the map steady against all the turns they had made and the scramble over rises to fall again into fissures that the Altasimic preferred. The old man nodded.

"Do you feel her?" the Simic asked. Again.

"Don't be stupid." He regretted the insult the moment he said it, but knew he didn't have the patience for better. A keg of beer and Ulanda's writing case had come through with this old man, but his own carry bag had vanished sometime in that long, very strange night, along with weapons and everything else that might have helped here.

Anga again. He sighed and signed an apology, a minor movement that didn't necessitate taking his hands off the saddle. He had a vision of attacking her, or rather of his knife in her arm, but seeing it like something out of a poorly staged drama. Just not what led up to it, or came of it, only the fog all around him.

An echo of hooves rang towards them in the narrow space and he put his hand over his knife. The man sent out on point clattered his return in a racket that

could have been heard back at least as far as they had come since the last crossing. Pale dust rose above him in the darkening air, never finding sunlight. The humans would be near blind soon.

Garm let their horses nose in close to those in front, the animal the Captain was riding and the two others moving to accommodate them. Three more behind. They stank. Gennady slid down from the saddle and the horses moved, crowding against the bank of soil in a shower of dirt, adding more dust to their filth as he walked to the front.

The dry stream opened into a lopsided dish with cracked sides. One section of the walls crumbled to a rock pile, the other faired better but with an overhanging shelf of worked material. He could smell the change in the air but the rise of heat was wrong for stone or tile. What would they build a road from if not dirt or those two things?

"Road?" he asked. Rit nodded, not smiling, mouth or eyes. He looked and smelled like Cassa always had before a raid. Sick scared.

He would have held the map in his mind as well, Gennady thought, and probably better. He knew this area, didn't like it, but he knew it. What enemies might be here, he wondered and not for the first time. They had traveled noisily but fast and the other men weren't any happier than their leader about being here. They had lost much of their fear of him, some of it a quick familiarity he remembered from Cassa, but also the rise of an older, more certain fear.

This was close to where Temple on Lillisim would have been. This circle, perhaps, and the Priest-house between here and the world-altar. He hadn't walked this far on the road on Lillisim.

He looked up. In the sky was a sunburst pattern similar to the robe Ulanda had worn into the spiral. Would the world-pattern marks on the Priests be the same, he wondered. And would it be opal? Or black? The lines in the sky had faded over the past couple of hours, bleeding into the sunset with flares of opal light leaving a hollow where they still were that drew the mind more than the eye. Panntin had stopped and looked at the fading on a scramble over a ridge with the sun a copper disk pressed against the mountain behind him, a transient hope in his sun colored eyes. Gennady had watched the hope die.

Panntin was last of those still bunched in the narrowing, slumped over a speckled horse, one hand tight in the long white crest of hair, the other holding the leather cords. Every breath was a conscious effort. Gennady looked at him a moment, the tip of his tongue between his lips. Instinctively trying to taste the boy, he only got another taste of horse.

"I go to road," he said softly to Rit through the noises of the shifting animals. A bowl of a sky grew above him as he climbed, dark blue with a rim of yellow, the first stars showing. In the direction they were headed was the smell of wood smoke, near a rise of land. No ships where he had hoped there would be the pod

at least. Too soon for their equipment to work well enough to risk a landing was all he hoped was wrong. Or they thought they could ride the Opening out better in orbit. In leading the Altasimic men to her, he had gambled that his crew would be waiting. He looked back for a moment. If he had to kill them, the night would help.

The broken edge of the road extended several feet out into the ravine and he made the last of the climb to one side of it where a flow of water had cut a sloping passage. Intact for several hundred feet, the road was at the bottom of a river of heated air before him. Letting yuin sight grow, he saw the road was made up of irregular blocks, like the surface of a dried flood plain on Zimmer, patches of warmth showing even where the material appeared to be buried. Cooling slower than the surrounding ground, it was warm to touch even now, and had a smell that made him want to sneeze. He dropped the fragment and backed off, rubbing his hands on his pants, then wished he hadn't as he carried the smell away with him.

With less noise than he would have believed from the heavy man, Rit was beside him, his hat bunched in one hand and full of dirt. His nostrils flared. "Fire," the Altasimic said with too loud a voice, then rubbed his face hard with a hand before shaking his hat out.

"And water," Gennady said. The rise of warmer air from the fire was like a beacon above a fold in the land, but with the smoke came the smell of water. Gennady pointed. "And people. Me, you, Garm and Panntin," he said. "Four to circle, guard."

The Altasimic nodded with a look of fear and anticipation. "Panntin?" he asked, and from the tone, was ready to protest the combination.

Gennady shrugged then realized the other man probably couldn't see him well enough. "Panntin not guard. Panntin go to fire." Despite using the Heg word, he added a twist on the last that wouldn't exist in this language, mangling it.

After a brief pause, the big man started back down and a moment later, Gennady heard him giving orders, only some of which he could follow. There hadn't been a protest about the necessity for setting a guard. Against these same men, if only to keep them away and busy? He thought the Altasimic Captain believed so. All the man's caution had gone from them to his men, with a constant watch for trouble. What did he expect? Or better: how did he know to expect it?

"He's Cassa's then," Garm had said when he had tried to explain the importance of this man, the Simic staring at Rit like he was a character in one of his stories. "Our being where we were, his being there. When we weren't with Ulanda, I thought we were lost, but..."

"Bring the Ladybug instead," Gennady prayed as he walked further away from the road to escape the smell. He wanted the ship like he wanted a joss stick,

something more solid than the on-again, off-again faith the Simic had. Set a joss stick in these rocks and the sun alone would burn it, he thought, seeing a black line over the land, wanting to see it leading to the Opening site. He tasted the air but he had the stink of the man in his mouth again, like rancid oil and he wasn't sure what he could taste that wasn't him.

The land continued to cool around him as he waited for the others to lead the horses up the wash. The night animals emerged as silver heat against the land as he let yuin sight take over completely, but the only ones he knew for sure were dangerous were the ones behind him.

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"I might be able to stand one more," Ulanda said, trying to smile it into a joke but she was still shivering. "Then I'll poach in my own sweat." Bolda had warmed rocks in the fire while En'talac scooped out a hollow at the back of the rough shelter of branches. The first of the stones, then a layer of dirt to hold the heat, then a mattress of dry grass. She was lying on her side, watching the fire.

With the sun down, the air was cold, with damp rising from the moist ground near the spring. The medic had fallen asleep lying spoon fashion behind her, her arms wrapped tightly around Ulanda's waist. She'd had the heavy lace robe off for a short time earlier, Bolda laying it out to dry, but the cold in her bones had moved into her flesh and her shivering threatened to become convulsions.

Bolda added a stone against the cloth covering her lower belly, then put his jacket over her exposed shoulder. Under his jacket was a short sleeve shirt, curly hair in a mat on his arms, dark like the thick straight hair on his head. "It could be worse," he said. "It could be raining."

"It could be Kalin."

He chuckled at her tone. "Was that one of the versions you rejected?"

"Apparently." She moved her head, trying to see past him, he was blocking her view of the fire. He moved those few inches needed.

"Any idea how much longer until the Opening?" A worried note had crept into the gruffness of his voice.

"I told you I don't know. It will happen when it happens." The Opening would be a relief from the twisting of the Altasimic patterns as they unfolded from the warding, somehow unfolding inside her. They were still alien to her. The Opening would be her last chance.

"Thought you might have changed your mind."

"Tomorrow, sunrise." And looked up at him, or what she could see in the dark with just her eyes. Shadows on his face emphasized the hanging flesh. "It's not anything," she whispered. "The flames, watching the fire..."

At her back, En'talac moved, where she had been was instantly cold. Ulanda closed her eyes when the medic's fingers touched her face, checking points even as she yawned noisily. "Why don't you get some sleep Bolda? I'll watch her for awhile."

"I don't need watching." She concentrated on the feel of the woman's skin on hers. The silver rings were still a shock against her flesh.

Finally En'talac sighed, hands just touching now to smooth Ulanda's hair back from her face. The medic sighed, managing a yawn even in that sound. "You'll do for now."

Bolda snorted, the burst of sound returning undiminished from the rocks surrounding them, but his words held quiet relief. He sat slumped shouldered on the wood box and stared at the flames of the small fire.

He couldn't seem to help it, Ulanda thought, as she watched him kick a fragment of burning wood into place. The next piece of wood would add something to the pattern growing there, no matter that it just looked like a random bit of dry branch or broken bush. And all he was doing was warming more rocks and heating water in the two tea bowls balanced in the coals.

En'talac went over to talk to him in a quiet voice that Ulanda ignored, her concentration on the flames until the voices were raised to something more like an argument.

"That's just stupid!" Bolda snorted but the medic had turned her back on him. Picking one of the tea bowls up with the hem of her tunic, En'talac brought it over to her. "Do you want some water before you eat?"

Eat? She'd eaten a few spoonfuls of a cheese-flavored porridge earlier and promptly thrown it up. She hadn't thought there was more food. The supplies had disappeared with Garm and Gennady.

"A couple of mouthfuls," the medic urged, putting the lip of the bowl against hers. She managed to drink as much as she spilled down her neck, maybe half the bowl. Even after, her mouth felt dry.

En'talac settled herself with her legs to one side, the bowl on the ground. The blue glaze looked black with only the firelight and the stars.

"What are you doing?" The other woman had rolled a sleeve up, and was tying one of the spare silk cords around her arm. One end wiggled before Ulanda's nose.

"The blood ring is set up to modify any blood proteins that your body might react against." En'talac pulled a thin band from her thumb. A delicate design on the surface flashed in the firelight, then the ring extended into a long tube that narrowed at one end. "Blood to blood is what we'd planned on, for emergencies,

but you need food more than you need to make up for the blood you lost from the knife cut. What's happening with the pattern lines is sapping your strength."

A slow drip, drip from the tube into the bowl. Her stomach twisted at the thought. "Don't bother. I'm not hungry."

"I know." En'talac used a loop of the cording to stir the mixture. "One swallow to start and we'll see how that takes."

"I'm not drinking it."

"The ring on my other thumb works into a wider tube. Pressure points here..." Fingers touching. "And here..." Again. "And you'll be out long enough to feed you regardless." She moved closer, her knee against Ulanda's head. "Don't waste this."

Ulanda had a cross-eyed glimpse of a shiny dark tip to the woman's pale finger, then the taste of blood in her mouth. "The blood meal is an ancient tradition in Temple," En'talac continued. "An offering of life to the Priest for the life they give. Can you feel that? The age of what we're doing?"

Her mouth was flooded with saliva, she had to swallow.

A hand was behind her head to lift it, the thick rim of the bowl held to her lips. "One more mouthful," En'talac said softly. A small one but the medic appeared satisfied and sat back on her heels, putting the bowl well out of the way of getting kicked. "Sarkalt did a Blood Examination just..." The medic pushed Ulanda back down when she tried to move. "Just before we left Palace. The lesser forms of that ritual are more like offerings, like this in a way. Older, I think, than what he did."

A crackle from the fire, Bolda had added a branch to the pattern. "He did one at our Palace as well."

En'talac glanced at him, then back and licked her thin lips. "The power to do what he did there wasn't born with Empire, Ulanda. What you're going to do here, what you've already done, wasn't either, not one person."

Ulanda coughed and pain flared in her injured arm, burned along the bone to her wrist, and then jumped to the other. "Does that matter?"

"In our reality, Rigyant had a breeding colony of your people. We found the records a couple of days ago. They tried for Priests over and over. Shall I give you their names, and how they died, or if they didn't die immediately after Initiation, why they were killed?"

The feel that her body was shivering came more from the hand holding her than from a sense of her own flesh. She knew how they must have died.

"And shall I tell you why, if you had actually gone through Initiation at South Bay Temple, that you wouldn't have died? And that you would have survived the Challenge of Office, survived Nexus Change?"

"I know why. And I know that nothing was ever given me, not life, not anything, that wasn't to someone else's purpose."

"And to an end you wanted."

"It doesn't mean I owe your Sarkalt anything."

"And Niv?"

"That's between us."

"We know you knew him. We know the degree of training you would have been given, and that it involved him. We know it by how Niv reacts to our Sarkalt, what he expects from him. Who he tried to turn to. Promises made to another, you said to him."

"Promises?" Bolda said roughly. "Think about who and what you're talking to. The ships aren't here, remember that."

"Will they be here at all?" The words came from a white shape on the other side of the fire circle.

En'talac reacted first. "So I've been told. You took your time, Zimmer."

Ulanda pushed herself up on one elbow. Stars swarmed in front of her eyes and the burning sensation flared stronger. Garm was there, beside Gennady, dressed in that horrible yellow robe and smelling like something she couldn't begin to describe.

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The promise of the dawn had grown to a thin strip of color broken by shelves of rock. Less than an hour remained before the sunrise. Ulanda had slept for a while and woken up like this, feeling as distant as though she had died already.

"Do you know that it won't help?" she asked quietly, looking at Garm, then to En'talac.

"As much as I know that it won't hurt," Garm said. "And that's not at all."

"Then do it simply because I ask."

The blood in the tea bowl was fresh, not the diluted mixture the medic had prepared earlier. He had drawn the first line from the start of her hair to the tip of her nose, using his finger as a brush. She could feel the center of the line drying faster. A paler center, she thought, glowing white to the dark blood. He made another line, then the matching one on her other cheek. And two more, sloping down instead of up.

Panntin had woken up the same time she had. Slack mouthed from the neural blocker En'talac had given him, he stared at where the fire had been. Rit stood close to him but watched the blood marking, his face set like stone. She didn't think the Altasimic leader had slept at all.



Garm started a line from her lower lip to her chin and throat, but the scream broke into the motion. Much further away than last time. A round dark shape was on the ground near the trail up from the small spring to the mound of sand. Gennady had brought it in after the first screaming had followed rifle fire.

"Xintan, Bluestone Clan Warrior," Rit had said, tracing the markings on the severed head with one finger, then said more words to Garm that her tass'alt translated as meaning a group of people named Xintan. Then he turned away, eyes to the dark sky. She could feel that he wanted to go.

"Moving along the broken road," Gennady said as he knelt, then began marking his knife with ashes from the dead fire. Panntin didn't react to his presence. "Twenty-two adults, all but two are male. I saw four children." His voice was clinical. "Two of the Captain's men had set up watch there. Massani is dead, and two of the Xintan. The others left the bodies; one of the women marked their own two, but left them. Four of the Xintan are on scout, two on either side of the road and constantly shifting relative position, planned, not random shifting, but too complex to see the end of it in as long as I watched. The screaming is Vinn."

Lines had been cut into the dead flesh on the head that Gennady had brought in, then the cuts rubbed to fill with ash moistened by blood. Lines that matched the pattern formed by the opal bands over the central mound, and repeated layer on layer until the entire sky blazed with light that had faded slowly in the white sky of afternoon, and was gone by night. The Zimmer had gone out again and returned with only one man. Cillamet win'Entin. The other patrolman was dead.

Garm finished the line on Ulanda's throat. There had been more detail on the man's head, curves leading off from the main pattern and he raised his finger to add the first.

Ulanda drew back slightly. "This is enough. The ones that matter." Garm nodded. He looked sick.

En'talac handed him a cloth, then careful not to touch the blood, checked her points, rubbing lightly in a slow rotation that sounded like chimes. "How much longer?"

"Long enough to reach the mound. I can feel the world-pattern just about to start spiraling. The Change is cresting." With help, she made it to her feet, and had to have help to stay on them.

The Altasimic Captain was still watching, his rifle on a strap over his shoulder. She'd asked Garm what it was, feeling it like a shiver on her skin. The shiver had gone deeper when she heard the noise it made. "How much does he understand?" she asked Garm as she watched her bare foot make the first step of many.

"About what you're doing? Not much except it has to do with the lines in the sky that the boy can see. That we're not from this world. And that it's important."

Garm moved an arm to her waist when she faltered and held her tighter. His hands burned through the layers of silk.

He was lying. Or he was the one who didn't understand. She gave him some more of her weight and let her head rest against his chest.

"Let me carry you," he said.

She shook her head at the same time as En'talac. "Let her walk," the medic said, sounding for a moment like Bolda. Then the slight woman laughed and some of the tension Ulanda had felt grow in her over the last hour faded. "The walking will help center your body, as much as the purification rites did."

Or what had passed for them, she thought, remembering the complex cleansing rituals at South Bay Temple. Not the bathhouse, but the open toubi pavilion just above the small hot spring. The old wood of the beams, the mossy tiles all around, the stone basins and reed dippers. Here: a very quick bath, using the wooden box to hold the water, they didn't dare take more time with the robe off her. The braid cords had been washed and smoothed and Bolda had used the rest of the water to clean the lace robe as best he could.

Water from Fuall'It spring, the 'seeker of the wind', the one where Cassa had waded. Or where it had been on Lillisim, and a spring here as well with sweet cold water if you climbed past the stagnant pool into the rocks to find the source.

Rit had turned away when Garm started undressing her, carefully standing to give privacy, but gave up the effort when it became obvious that no one else was. Or he was past being shocked. Or curiosity had won out with En'talac chanting the words of the ritual while she marked Ulanda's skin with the water.

About her height, but heavy in the body, he had a thick waist with a small potbelly that had his belt riding low. Dark skin, but tanned, she thought, especially seeing him now with the natural light growing around them. Dark eyes and hair, silver at the temples and a thick short growth of beard on his heavy jaw, some silver there as well. He was complete looking, as though all his potential had come to rest in his solid frame. And when he was quiet and watching, that was all he was doing and he almost wasn't there to look at.

He was watching now. Ulanda wet her lips, touching dried blood with the tip of her tongue. Garm's blood. She would take that small part of him into the dance. "Put Panntin under," she said to En'talac. The person with that name was like a scream in her mind for all he was featureless and shadowy, without a form that she could see without looking harder than she cared to right now. He was one with the lines in the sky, and like this, he wouldn't live as long as the dance lasted. "Put him under as far as you can without killing him. You have something?"

En'talac nodded. "I do now." The bag that Garm had brought with him held the medic's small bundles. Help for Gennady's wound as well and the medic had

removed a fragment of metal and passed it to the Zimmer. Bolda had shaken his head and looked disgusted when Gennady kept it.

"The rifles have to go, and the rest of the metal as well, the larger pieces at least." She looked around. "Gennady?" The Zimmer jumped down from one of the rocks. "See to it. At least twice again as the distance from the mound to here. Leave the animals where they are, just keep them away from me."

The light was bright enough to see the shape his answer made, hands moving in a complex motion that was sister to the one he'd made at the spiral on Lillisim. "As you say. And the men? Without the metal?"

She signed honor in return, as best she could. "Cillamet will stay with Panntin, here." The other Altasimic had been standing watch earlier with Gennady. Something for him to do that he understood, she thought, but wondered at the courtesy from the Zimmer to allow him. He was like the land, all angles and dry surfaces. Or like one of the tiny yellow crabs in the pools along the shore at the beach down from South Bay Temple. Ochre claws raised to fight even as they scurry back to the shelter of the rocks. A wave could take one, rolling it in a storm of sand and old shells, then the wave would pull back with the sand and the crab would still be there, claws raised to the shadow of the child teasing it.

Gennady nodded at her choice. "And the other?"

Bolda straightened from packing the carrybags, a mug in one hand, the wrapping cloth trailing. He had been packing as though they were going somewhere, stowing whatever wasn't being used, picking things up the moment they were put down. "Why drag him into it?" he said. "Leave him here."

He knew. She felt his disgust and the direction of his anger: against luck, against Cassa. If he prayed, it would come out as a curse.

She shook her head, secure against Garm, feeling the softness of his robe and the itch of the wool on her skin, but not him. "Tell... Rit, tell him about the metal," she said to Gennady. Bolda snorted and tossed the mug onto the pack. "Tell him about what's going to happen, that he's going to come with us... do you understand?" She saw that the Zimmer did, more than Garm had, he lacked that singular blindness. And the other man, his eyes held understanding when he looked to her after listening to Gennady.

Garm shifted her position against him but she still could barely feel him. Or see... fingers on her chin, he turned her face until she was looking at him instead of Rit but the image of the man followed in the wake of the movement. "Look at me," he whispered and drew a finger down the length of her nose, she felt the dried blood again, through him. The amber skin was marked by tiny flecks.

"How couldn't I see you no matter where I look?" She tried to take a step as though away from him but he didn't move or let her go. "You're all I see, what need do I have for any other vision?"

"Ulanda..."

She would have fallen but that he still had her around the waist. She concentrated on her feet until he raised her chin up. Fried avipp, she thought, and wanted to laugh. One fried avipp, she tasted it on his lips when he kissed her, the taste of the insect and the dried blood. Taste and smell, that was all. The dance pulled at her, she felt almost as though it had started already and she was only a memory of something that happened and was over with.

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Marked like a Bluestone Clan priestess, Rit thought. The only Xintan who could wear the marks and still be alive. Blue tattoos, not blood like the old man was putting on her face. She looked Xintan as well, he decided, seeing her more clearly in the false dawn and with no fire to burn off his night vision. The same small eyes in a dish flat face with the nose slightly hooked and thin bridged. Human appearing, but he found any of the rest of them easier to look at.

Cillamet had come down from the rocks with the Zimmer, but circled the clearing, keeping well away from the strangers, shrunken from his usual swagger. He had been standing next to Erni when a single shot from a Xintan rifle had torn the top of the other man's head off. The swagger would come back given time, Rit knew, a bad act the man would hold to as a basic tenet of his faith.

"What's happening now?" Cillamet asked, voice croaking. "What the...?" He had ended up next to Panntin, the boy kneeling beside the ring of stones where the fire had been. But he wasn't looking at Panntin.

Ulanda watched back, then turned to say something to Garm in the language she used most often to the old man. The Zimmer stood nearby, not obviously watching any of them, Rit wasn't sure what he could see but he felt the attention in a ghost of the emotion that had him frozen at the Spine of the Serpent. He walked over to stand next to Cillamet, forcing the patrolman's attention to shift to him. "They're preparing her for something," he said in a low voice. "A ceremony of some sort."

He had the attention he wanted, Cillamet had the target he wanted. "Xintan?" Cillamet's voice rose to a shriek. "Fucking Xintan?"

"Shut up. They've copied the pattern from the head." He didn't think Cillamet saw past the pattern on her face, hoped he wouldn't. "Tennin's bringing help, we can sort it all out then." Cillamet's long jawed face unscrewed enough to show Rit that at least some of the words had penetrated.

"Lines," Panntin said, swaying back and forth. "Lines, lines, bleeding lines, bleeding." The words were turning into a chant.

Cillamet scowled at Panntin and made as though to kick him to make sure he was real. "What's he talking about now?"

Squatting, Rit turned the boy's face towards him, feeling the delicate bones through the light growth of reddish stubble. There was no resistance to the handling, but he was trying to focus, the skin tightening around his eyes as he blinked rapidly. Whatever the small woman had given him earlier was wearing off. "What about the lines?" he asked, speaking slowly. Panntin's mouth worked but no sound came out. "The lines on her face?" he asked and turned the boy's head towards Ulanda.

Panntin twisted out of Rit's hands and fell heavily, landing in the fire ring. The fire was long cold but he scrambled through the ashes as though they burned, brushing at his jacket and pants wildly, almost sobbing. And stopped as suddenly and stared at the gray ash smeared on one hand, his mouth open, a rope of spit hanging from his lower lip.

Rit stepped into the fire ring, kicking a stone loose. Panntin turned his head to stare at that instead but his expression was as distant. Then, without warning, he started to vomit, backing up, still on his knees. "Sky lines," he gasped between heaves as though the violence of the action had broken the spell. "She is the lines. Oh shit. Shit."

By the time Rit grabbed his shoulders, En'talac was beside them, a thin green and white striped disk on the end of one ringed finger. Her words didn't make any more sense for being shouted and he turned to say so when Cillamet pushed in, leading with the butt end of his rifle.

He saw her land, and saw the surprised look grow on her face as she sat back up, holding one arm. "Back off," he ordered, turning to stop his man, but Cillamet was lying flat out on his back, the Zimmer's knife across his throat.

Still holding Panntin, Rit froze as completely as the patrolman under the knife. There was a spreading stain on the crotch of Cillamet's pants, and the stink of urine in the still air. Between Panntin's gasping breaths he heard the force of the stream against the heavy fabric.

Cillamet would be dead already if he was going to be at all, Rit decided, and let out the breath he'd been holding. Panntin was jerking under his hands, much more than the trembling from before, and the motions were building. He had the same distant look as earlier, that head to one side, a listening look, until a tremor took him, and he convulsed, lips drawn back in a snarl. "I could use some help," he said sharply to En'talac.

She frowned at the start of what would be just noise to her then he saw the start of a smile in a twist of rose colored lips.

Bolda said something as he stooped to pick up the dropped rifle, and laughed. Already busy smoothing a patch over the back of Panntin's neck, En'talac looked up to glare at the fat man and said something that made him laugh harder.

Gennady echoed the laugh with a hiss over exposed sharp teeth. Then his white knife moved to cut the buttons off Cillamet's jacket.

All the metal, he realized, after letting them take his rifle, bullets and knife without protest, then let the woman run her hands over him, not touching, but obviously searching. Anything larger than the rivets in their pants. His belt with the large buckle was gone, a thin rope substituting or he would have lost his pants.

He found Cillamet's hat, brushed a layer of dirt off then offered it to the man. "Better odds with the fucking Xintan," Cillamet said, as he took the hat. "I should have stayed out there. You sell out?"

Sell what? He shook his head slowly. "Tennin will bring the rest of the Company, until then, just try not to get yourself killed over something you can't do anything about."

"But what the hell..."

Garm broke in. "Panntin and Cillamet stay here," he said in an overloud voice.

Cillamet opened his mouth. "You heard him," Rit said then gestured towards Ulanda. The old man was by the woman's side, holding her up probably, she had been moving like she was asleep, or drugged, except there wasn't anything drugged about her eyes. The only man he had ever loved and respected without qualification had waited for death with the same look in his eyes.

"Damn it," he said to Cillamet. "Look at her."

"A Bluestone slut priestess, what the fuck else? You saw them going at it."

"Shut up." At the words, Cillamet's thin body jerked in the effort it took to stop the next words. "Take it as an order," Rit added. "You'll stay here and look after Panntin." His mouth hanging open, the patrolman looked over at the boy. The medic was still working, kneeling in the dirt beside Panntin, running her fingers along the sides of his face, over and over, same as she had done with Ulanda earlier.

"Cillamet and Panntin stay here," Garm said, louder again as though volume could compensate for sense.

Rit motioned to Gennady. "So he said." The Zimmer had also mentioned something about iron that he hadn't entirely understood, or rather, had thought meant just the rifles and for the obvious reasons. He hadn't protested even though he'd also assumed himself now as much a prisoner as the other two had been earlier.

At his words, Gennady looked up from where he was packing everything metal into a carry bag. A predator, Rit thought... and the prey? That cool stare went from him to encompass Ulanda and Garm.

Gennady had also said something about his going with the others to watch... what, he didn't know. They didn't have enough words between them. Again, he

had made assumptions. The lines in the sky... and as Panntin said, they were the same as those drawn on Ulanda's face with Garm's blood, the same as the Xintan used on their dead.

His leather water bottle was propped up against a saddlebag, the metal stopper gone. It had been empty the last he'd noticed but was full now, the tin flasks must have been emptied into it. He sniffed the opening and offered the bottle to En'talac. She held it to Panntin's lips, supporting his head with the other hand. The boy took a couple of swallows before choking. She let the bottle drop, splashing water, the scent sour and muddy, mixed with the smell of vomit and wet ash. The bottles had been filled with fresh water from the spring but the leather held the smell of horse and the water from the camp by Dog Mountain.

They left Panntin unconscious again, curled where Ulanda had been before. Warm soil under him and any of the rocks still warm been tucked around and the blankets from their bedrolls over that. Cillamet was beside him, but tied. He'd let that happen as well, again without protest. And without attempting an explanation to his man, even a lie that might have given him some pride back after the laughter. A mistake, he knew, but he couldn't seem to open his mouth around a lie and he had nothing else to offer.

Twenty minutes or so until sunrise, slightly less if they were going to the mound of sand above the spring. High ground and morning prayers? He knew the customs of enough religions to understand the significance and had read legends from even more cultures -- sunrise, sunset, the full moon, the equinox, circles and stars, rises of land, all were measures of time and place that gave a structure to man's understanding of his existence. That was the meaning and provided it both. Meanings -- he wanted some very badly. Like Cillamet and his bravado, he needed some answers before he spun out. All he had were assumptions and conjecture and had tried to keep those to a minimum. He kept telling himself fewer premature conclusions means fewer wrong ideas to discard after, but everything he saw was half familiar and all strange, the combination unnerving him more than the totally unfamiliar would have.

The Zimmer was back before they reached the high ground above the spring, then was gone as quickly, apparently scouting. Everyone moved like they knew what they were doing, as though what they were doing was the only reason they were here. In the middle of nowhere with no equipment or food, two of them injured and all of them very apparently at the end of their strength.

Salt in the air, a slight breeze from the ocean with the sunrise, salt mixed with the dry spice of the shrubs. He knew the place: Harlot's teat, the Endica Patrol called it besides ruder things, and the spring the obvious result. High ground to be avoided, but how the names were usually spoken betrayed the fear this place bred. Even the Xintan avoided it as haunted, but their name for it had a different slant. Mound of the Lady was the standard translation of the pictographs, the

polite one, the drawing obvious if you traced the evolution of the stylized forms from the more detailed older ones. Except he had seen Xintan tapestries using most of the same form to depict the center of white flowers, the petals tearing loose in a dancing wind to make a sunburst of white on a red ground.

Footprints were everywhere, making depressions in the sand, and as easily seen in the surrounding pale dirt. They would have come from here to the spring, he thought. If he could have traced a beginning, would they have appeared like Gennady had, from nowhere? He walked full circle around; no one stopped him or appeared to notice. Made with bare feet, all of them. All the prints were hers.

Ulanda knelt at the edge of the mound, talking quietly with the doctor, the long ribbons tied to her wrists dark against the light sand and her paler flesh and those same dirty bare feet showing under the dress. A broken sandal was abandoned on the rise.

He had a faint shadow now even though the sun was still below the horizon. His reached towards Ulanda and hers towards the moon that crowned Dog Mountain. Silver horns capped the faint disk, completing the circle. No clouds that were anything more than a fine haze towards the ocean, and those would only last long enough to take the red from the sunrise into the sky. But etched against the mountains, seeming to rise from around Ulanda, were slanted plumes of gray smoke that became a luminous red before fading, fanned out by the stronger winds higher up. Half a dozen thin streams showed towards Intil, and more to the right and further back of them, deeper into the mountains. Xintan fires, the smoke an offering to the rising sun and the fire makers long gone from the site. Some of the prayers would be for their dead; he knew those rites too, or the basic form of them and a part of his mind wanted the comfort of whispering the chanted words, wanted the belief that would make them a comfort. Two dead... somehow his memory of them didn't seem enough of a memorial.

And the others? How many more would die? Would Tennin and Yanni even have made Intil, he wondered, or left there alive. And the letter? All he had said about the Xintan was that they were gathering out of season and only that much because of an old memory surfacing. He hadn't mentioned the tapestries and the thought that he should have was part of the fear.

He continued back around, watching his feet again, he didn't want to step in any marks, he felt foolish even as he did it... childish, as though this was a game with rules he knew at some level that simply hadn't reached his conscious mind. Staying well to one side of the others standing in the cold dawn, he put his hands in his jacket pockets and waited.



The first step into the center of the mound and Ulanda dropped to her knees, and began scooping sand with the curled edges of her hands. Sand under her nails, several of them already with ragged broken ends, the skin around torn. Blood seeped around the cuticles, pale sand sticking to the moisture.

Burying herself in sand. Can I dance buried, Ulanda wondered, still pulling sand towards herself with the edge of her hand, keeping her wrists straight. Can she dance? Li-Fu. The Priest's face was half uncovered, then her body, her arms moving as the dry sand was scooped from under, more sand bleeding in from the sides to re-cover almost as much as had been cleared.

"That's enough," En'talac said sharply as she took hold of Ulanda's arms and held them still. Silver rings burned through the lace of her sleeves, stronger on the side where the fabric had been cut. She looked back at where the others waited. Bolda had Rit by one arm, the man struggling.

"You'll hurt yourself," the medic added in a softer but still rough voice. "Please."

The girdle of sunstones was in front of them. Li-Fu was wearing it. She had been killed by a single stroke across the throat, such as a Warder might make, a mercy to the Priest-candidate with a knife in their belly. "Don't let Garm see."

"He won't. Can I touch it to get it off?"

Ulanda nodded. The Li-Cassa flowers, the sunstones, glowed against the bloodied skin of the Simic-priest's throat.

En'talac touched the girdle like she was about to touch fire, fingers reaching past the will to do so. "When she wasn't there, when the girdle wasn't.... there's too much we didn't know."

"She's still on Lillism. Two of her, both dead now. It might be easier with both dead. A bonus for him, I think, that there were two." She remembered how he looked at Li-Fu -- that there were possibilities in their relationship. And remembered that Li-Fu hadn't told him about Cassa being on Lillism for her Initiation. Li-Fu's gift to her. Had Gennady told the loom-master what he would have heard with the ship's sensors?

"Her being dead doesn't stop it," Ulanda said. "Not tied up with the pattern threads like she is. He must have been weaving her during the entire afternoon." As lives were woven into the robe and those about to be woven into the Opening. "He means me dead too. What part of me is taken by the weaving can still dance the Opening. Easier probably. That's what you were telling before. I remember now."

The woman nodded and closed her eyes momentarily, her lips pinched as though holding back bile.

"You've seen worse," Ulanda said. Her weight on the edge showered sand into the hard won depression. Her shadow rose as she did, sharp edged now with the sunrise.

"It's always worse. If it ever got better, I couldn't have stayed in Temple regardless of Quin'tat."

Two other bodies, two hands showing, were one on either side of the Simic-priest. Wrists and arms uncovered. Both Simic by the skin color, and by the texture of the skin they weren't young. Ulim, the aide, she remembered his name now. And his wife, the woman who had been with Li-Fu on the Ladybug?

The sun was beginning to warm her back, setting fire to the robe. There wasn't any time left. She looked at En'talac calmly. Past the initial shock, there wasn't anything else to feel. Her body yes, but not inside, not anymore. "You stay because you love him. Is it enough?"

En'talac didn't answer, she was busy pulling at Li-Fu to get the girdle off. Red stained silver hair, longer than her father wore his, had wrapped around the sunstone seeds and flowers.

Ulanda looked away and the lines twisted with the motion. She could feel the medic in them now as a whisper that she hadn't noticed before. A change? She didn't know. En'talac had Li-Fu's blood on her hands.

And with her eyes away, Ulanda heard strongly the difference the sunrise had made. "Can you hear them?" she asked. "The drums?"

Her answer was carried in bits of starlight. Blood and sand on the crystals -- she could feel En'talac's hands tying the ends. Silver strands sparked when the medic's rings touched. En'talac didn't react beyond squinting her eyes, lips drawn up in a snarl and cheeks raised as far as muscles could bring them. The movement of her hands were unconnected to the sound rising about them. She couldn't hear them, then.

The girdle was heavy and like the robe, resisted her. "Did Li-Fu love him?" she asked, timing her words to her footsteps and the drum beats. "Was it enough for her as he slit her throat?" Anga. Loom-master. And her and Niv?

"Ulanda, there isn't time for this," En'talac said.

Time? The girdle hissed in her mind: what is time? She'd kill Anga if she could and meant it now. Cassa had been at Li-Fu's Initiation, had buried the girdle at the world-altar there. Anga had slept with Li-Fu, made love to her, had a relationship of some kind, a trust... and then had killed her.

How much longer, Rit wondered. Sunrise. Ulanda stood at the side of the mound, looking towards the ocean.

"Sit now," Garm said, gesturing him to come closer, then folded his long legs to settle in the dirt next to where a fire had been scattered. The man's long yellow robe brushed charred branches.

The old man was old, Rit thought as he walked over, needing reassurance even of that. The stark light of morning revealed what the night had encouraged him to forget, and the night's events. "Water?" he asked, offering what was left in the leather bottle and watched how the swollen joints of the fingers pushed the wrinkled skin from gold to white and noted the tremor as he drank but also how his eyes never left the woman standing alone now at the center of the sand mound.

Her lover, and welcome, that much had been obvious, his welcome still evident in the hunger those emerald eyes showed as the old man watched her. The rest he had filed under the 'wait until you know more' category. She had been handled by the others and worked at by the old man like a plaything, but the only words he had heard that had sounded like orders had come from her and everywhere in the handling, along with a sureness of competence was wariness, even what he thought might be fear.

Gennady and the other two sat next to them, their eyes on the woman as well. He sat. Everybody was waiting; everything they had done must have lead to this. He opened his mouth to try questions but En'talac shook her head as she shifted position to be next to him. Putting her hand into his, she held it, more comforting than he would have believed possible.

Ulanda walked to the center of the mound, dragging the train of the heavy dress after her. The world seemed hushed as though it watched as they did. Slowly he became aware of sounds, he thought of the horses and strained to hear. The jingle of tack, a neighing. Heni? And birds, sage hoppers from the strident trills, they must have been waiting for them to settle down. Small brown birds that nested in the enitree, behind the maze of green thorns. A low bush despite the name.

Between one bird trill and waiting for the next, came a roar that separated into a series of booms, distant like echoes, but nothing came before or was repeated after. He had started at the noise, but the small hand tightened on his and held him there, En'talac's strength gone beyond flesh and bone. Then another sound came but much softer and almost lost in contrast: a flutter of wings suddenly stilled, a fox kill perhaps. Ulanda turned to the second sound, one bare foot catching in the trailing end of the dress she wore. She stumbled, trying to catch

her balance with her arms out, the hanging ribbons on her wrists weaving in the dawn. If she fell, he thought he might fall with her...

Then Ulanda was on her knees digging, a moment later, En'talac had joined her. Rit was half up and would have been all the way up except Bolda pulled him down.

Starlight. En'talac fastened diamonds of light around Ulanda's waist, but she didn't seem to notice. She was listening to something or for something, Rit thought, and totally still now, but with her body held as though poised on the precipice of movement. When En'talac sat back beside him, the hand she put in his had blood on it. Only her touch gave him any sense of his own body.

Red sky behind her, a bloom of red was unfolding from a single point to a disk and the shadows around them sharpened with edges of flame. The change in the air was electric as a shiver flicked over the land. As though lightening had shattered glass, stained glass, shattered panes of cerulean fell around them, and the land rose to meet the blue in a tidal flow of sand and rock. He was between them, sky and earth, his soul pushed wafer thin, he was a leaf, blood red in the autumn, hearing the storm wind howl.

She was watching him. Standing surrounded by light and dark, the dark lace dress like a creature eating her. He hadn't seen them put it on her, he thought, confused, then he remembered that he had, right after her bath -- and that she had been wearing it earlier -- but it had been just fancy cloth and he had wondered why when she could barely stand much less dance, and with something that heavy...

Dance? His head swam and there was red in his eyes as though he were bleeding. And when she moved, the bloodlines stayed, his and the ones on her face, and there were lines in the sky to match. But when she moved, the lines weren't red but mother of pearl and white opal, and silver still molten before the crust forms. And white flowers against the sunrise.

And a dancing wind in a red night like wine and he was so thirsty, years thirsty, but a hand held his, and silver rings touched his skin, burning, and for a fleeting moment, he felt another's hand in his, saw other eyes...

A mountain shape lay in the four poster bed with the curtains of Xintan weave, cobalt waves lifting from a dark green sea as though the bed were a boat and sinking. "I wasn't sure you would come," Tirreniti breathed. "An old man's foolishness, to want to see you again. Or conceit, that you would want to see me."

"One or the other," Rit said, seeing the twinkle reach past the puffy flesh around the old man's eyes. Bushy white eyebrows half veiled the russet eyes, the Councilor's face a more vivid red and sweaty. His long beard looked like a wolf's pelt, yellowed at the mouth and lying in thick waves on the coverlet.

"Come around closer, no, pull up a chair, that one will do, dust and all. You, I mean, you could have cleaned up. It wasn't that much of a rush."

Despite the labored breathing, the twinkle was still there. Talking about dust would have done to start, he thought as he searched for his own words, but found himself totally without any that he could bring himself to say, even about dust. He alternatively bunched his hat then smoothed the rim round and round. They both watched the stained felt.

He had left his horse at the back gate and come through the garden way, following a long path of autumn flowers, the smell of ripe fruit combining with the scent of freshly turned earth. The vineyards and the orchards had been as much his school as the Scriptorium; trees he had grafted and pruned under the watchful eye of the Greens Brother were bearing fruit. Espaliered winter apples grew along a red brick wall, tart yellow fleshed apples, and he had eaten one while talking with his old teacher. For a moment, he felt as though time had stopped in the two years since he had left this place.

A very long silence then Tirreniti reached his hand to the edge of the bed. "Have you found it, then?" he asked simply.

Preferring the twinkle to the sober query, Rit shook his head. "Nothing to be found, just one day following the last. Same from a saddle as from here but it takes less time doing it."

The eyes closed a moment. "If you say so. Do you have any ambitions at all with this soldering? The Guard? Not here, of course, but I could peddle some influence through the offices of a brother Charter house. Nothing obvious to make you stand out."

"I've signed up for Endica Border and I'm happy enough in the Common's Patrol."

Tirreniti sighed noisily. "You share that trait with your father at least. Stubborn as hell. Not as foolish, although with this last bit of news I might have to reconsider my assessment."

Rit put his hand over the old man's; the only strength he could feel was in the metal of the massive gold signet ring. These spoken words were as important as those about dust. He had no illusions that his plans had been a secret.

When he didn't say anything, his great-uncle sighed again. "Besides stubborn, I would have thought you too lazy... a book and a warm fire was always more your style. Not riding around who knows where..."

"Endica," he repeated and earned a snort from his uncle. "Besides, it's not the doing that takes the energy, it's the deciding what to do." He smiled as he shook his head. He had been spoiled here; the only decision he'd ever made was to leave.

"You can be as lazy in the Guard..."

"I can't stay here," Rit said. "If my father had lived, or my half-brothers, then no one would have bothered looking for loose ends. Or cared if they found one here at least." Or the Royal Guard. A refuge for bastards, even Strom bastards if they weren't too obvious about their breeding and he wasn't.

"What else do you have out there that keeps you away? A woman? Or are you too lazy for that as well?"

He shook his head to both questions. "I'll be careful where I have my fun." He made the words a promise, the first time he'd spoken them out loud, but those words were ones he had lived with since he could understand the consequences of what he was.

His great uncle nodded again, drawing round lips down to a fish-mouth shape. "You would. Reminds me of my brother, your grandfather. Not looks, but the same stiff-necked sense of duty and of what's right and wrong. Not a trait I admire in..."

The words died in a fit of coughing. Rit helped him to sit up, pushing pillows behind him. "Well, you'll manage," he continued. And I suppose careful pleasures of that sort are better than none at all. So I've been told."

"Have any of your pleasures ever been careful?"

"Besides you?" he said. Then started chuckling again. "And you have been a pleasure, Ritsiniti. Or Rit Wilnmeit, I should say. A terrible pun." A chuckle became a gasp and the old man closed his eyes as the hand under Rit's lost what little life it had before. "Brother Pallant," he said, releasing the air in a sigh, but rallied. "No wait, don't call him yet."

Ten minutes passed before the eyes opened, ten minutes of breathing along with him with the same shallow quick count and effort and holding the swollen hand too tightly.

And when the eyes opened it was to a difference yet again. "You leave for Endica Fort on Third-day, joining a Ranking of new recruits along the way," Tirreniti said softly but with the power as raw in his voice as it was in his eyes. No teasing now. "You will have new orders waiting for you when you leave here, an assignment as a Charter House Messenger. Take the Twin Lake Road through to Seven Points Province before turning into Denman. And leave on First-day instead, tomorrow and early if you can manage to get yourself up. And quietly, as though you were going to visit an old man somewhere. Your roomer will be paid, so don't get stiff-necked with me."

He hadn't been about to; too busy hushing the icy feet walking his spine.

"Papers to take to the Councilor at Denman Capital, an introduction as well. I want..." A ragged breath and some of the fire died. "A letter to the Charter House in Denman Capital, to the Councilor there, will get here. And from here to the Charter House Archives."

"What letter? In response to the papers I take them?"

"Eventually. To the Archives, Ritsiniti. About the Xintan. A long time Ritsiniti. You'll almost forget there was ever anything more."

Icy feet were doing a drill along his scalp. "Who can I ask about this?"

"No need to ask, this is all there is. Did I ever tell you I loved you?"

"Frequently." A brown hand over white, rough to smooth, but both blurred and the fear gone for now. He hadn't thought he would cry.

"Too many words, always." A gentle smile was in the voice even as it faded. The next words were barely spoken, less than a whisper but they held wonder like an ember does fire. "Always words to cover the fear when the night comes early. You don't know that night, Ritsiniti, I don't know if you ever will, there's too many paths, I can't see them all, just the dark at the end and so cold that it burns. You'll see the end... sometimes I see you there, looking back, then the image grows and there's nothing but the dark and it's so cold... cold in the throat so I can't breath, but it tastes like aged wine and as sweet as it is strong."

"Uncle..."

"Too many words," the old man breathed. "Just hold me."

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Nothing had prepared Ulanda for this. No need to prepare, the threads that led only to here whispered. You are. This is.

Fire surged along the pattern of the lace, but her body moved regardless: the first movement of the dance, an incomplete turn. Without the robe, the fire would have taken her, she realized. Burned her up slowly, living or dead. From the first step to the last and she would have danced through it regardless. Burned her up very slowly, with or without the girdle. He had set the weave of the Opening so that if she survived the first traps, she would be caught in this one. A knife across her throat would have been kinder.

How many other chances for her to die in this, she wondered. How many traps that would see her bound or worse?

The third beat and she almost fell. Pain flared along her arm, shooting out and eating in where the lace was cut. A thread? Or more in the original weaving. A life? She took the pain and forced the following of the lines.

She knew this dance. Living or dead, she knew it.

The Dance Master had accompanied her only as far as the pavilion at the foot of the steeper trail that lead to Ri-altar. The woman's robes were arranged to drape over the lift arms of the sedan chair, and her posture was as though she

might rise in dance, or was paused mid-dance. The bearers had gone into the pavilion already, having set the chair into a single larger patch of weak sunlight.

"The last of the journey you take alone. Follow the path; it leads to only one place. The Overpriest waits for you at the altar." A thin light voice, like trickling water, but cold as if drawn from a deep well before being slowly poured out.

She bowed. "Honor and thanks to you, Master."

"You can thank me by surviving. I dislike wasted effort."

Ulanda looked to where the mountain backed up behind them, where the path wound, starting in a climb of stone stairs, the same stone as the pavilion, a gray granite. Bones of the mountain, but other than those bones cut and set to make the stairs, the mountain might as well not have been there. Trees blocked her view of the path at the first turn.

Forest surrounded them, imparting an uneven shade to the path and the building. Deciduous trees were mixed with evergreens, their leaf buds swollen to give a haze of red and amber-green to the brown, and here and there, hanging catkins added yellow. Mid morning, but cold here where the morning had been warm when they had left Temple. Passing the first bloom of the apples trees and back through spring, they approached winter as the path wound higher. There would be snow still on the ground at Ri-altar.

Despite her best efforts at control, she was cold. The ritual bath at sunrise had been with water from the creek above the hot springs and she had never gotten any of the night's warmth from her bed back into her again.

A single senior Acolyte had stayed near the chair. Dark blond, with his hair long and tied high at the back of his head to make a fountain of gold when he passed into the streams of sunlight. Around his left eye, the heavy band of kohl made the blue of that iris lighter in contrast, as though it caught the sun easier. A pug nose and a sly expression kept him from being pretty but he had a carelessness about the way he moved that Ulanda had always found appealing, even when they had been children.

"Tomu," the Simic Master said, signing to him. Thin but sharp and querulous to the Acolyte where the tone had been modulated and somber to her. "The box, get me the box."

Tomu wiped his hands on the back of his tunic before pulling the small box from in back of the seat of the sedan chair. Heavy corrugated paper with a marbled finish in shades of green. It opened to show dark green tissue paper and the Dance Master hesitated, her fingers barely touching the paper to hold it closed. The amber skin of her hand was creased with the bronze of age but the nails had been cut to form points, and each painted a glittering pure gold.

A deeper crinkle of paper. "Do you know what this is?" The Master's green eyes were on her rather than the silver chain now in her hands.

"Master, I don't."



The Master's lips twisted into a smile. "This tie is a small part of something much more." Her voice had risen in tone as it faded in volume. "A little thing to take you a little past what usually happens during Initiation." She let her hand drop, the metal clinking dully. "Take it with you. Wear it."

The fourth step took her and moved her heavily. The fifth step, and the sixth and the drum stopped and so did she.

"Not much of a show," she said turning her head to where the others sat. The movement shifted the world around her like a kaleidoscope.

"I've seen better," Bolda said. He sounded like the sand he stood on, a grinding, clashing fall of grains was in the words and Ulanda squeezed her eyes shut because she couldn't seem to move her hands to block her ears. "You don't think you're through do you?" he added.

Except he couldn't really be there. He was on the other side of Rit from En'talac, the medic holding onto Rit's hand, Bolda, his other arm.

"No, I don't think so," she told the other Bolda, the one standing nearer her. "Just starting." A spinning of the threads.... she felt like a spindle dropped quite sharply on hard tile. Or a top. A difference? She looked down at her hands, still blinking to clear her vision. Threads, not fingers. She blinked again, harder. Threads and fingers. It didn't matter.

She hadn't gone any further than the first bend of the trail leading to Ri-altar, at the top of the narrow stone steps. The center of the stone was bare of moss and she had brushed the evergreen needles off before sitting -- leaves of brown and dull orange and a few still green. Two of those long narrow leaves she kept and creased them with her thumbnail before inhaling the scent. Sweet resin and the taste of fear filled her mouth.

The day was quiet past the high wind in the treetops and she heard him well before seeing him. "Are you waiting for me, child?" Niv asked, his lisping voice soft and sad as it so often was. The smaller flow of air along the ground brought his scent to her.

Across the soft inside of her arm, she dragged the pointed end of the still sharp evergreen needle. White, then red bloomed in a thin line, but the skin wasn't broken. Niv took the fragment from her fingers and let it drop from his.

"I knew you would come," she said.

He sat next to her; a cloak the color of his eyes brushed her leg. He hunched down in it, drawing it close around him and sighed. "This isn't a journey I can take with you. You should go now."

She looked at him. Crest flattened, the bands of color on either side, dulled. Bits of Temple Net still clung to him, trying for focus, but couldn't hold, they were shredded as though having passed through a mesh of branches on the way here.

One hand held the front of his cloak tightly closed, only the tips of the fingers of that hand showing, the long nails pale with distress. She rested some of her weight against him, feeling the warmth of his body even through the thick wool.

"I'm going, how could I not be going?"

He looked at her as he blinked slowly, his nostrils pinching then opening again, keeping time. Except to lean on him, she hadn't moved. "Ulanda, please."

She shook her head, sorry that she had teased him. "I've spent my life preparing for this. I've no doubts. And only one regret." And softer, thinking she lied, added, "I won't see you again."

"No," he whispered. One hand moved from the comfort of the cloak to touch hers. Tiny scales on his fingers rubbed her skin as he took her hand. His color had darkened and with the rise of his crest, the sweet musk scent enveloped her.

Her laugh was gentle. "Oh Niv." He had raised her hand to hold it better and the feel of his warm breath was mixed with the warmth of his fingers and the sharp pressure of his nails. She pulled her hand away, or tried to. "The Overpriest wouldn't let you. Or me. Not like this, not just the two of us."

Deep cobalt strands from his crest floated around her face as he leaned even closer. "What they do allow is cruel to you. Cruel to me."

She held his hand between her two. "It would be cruel only if you loved me."

"How couldn't I love you?"

She had expected the flick of the membrane over his eyes -- a sign of misery - - but instead the crest on his head rose to stand straight up and his eyes took hers whole.

"He wouldn't share your love." She stood awkwardly, stiff from the cold. He stood with the smooth grace he never lost. Putting both her hands on the front panels of his cloak, she gripped the soft fabric tightly.

He fooled her by drawing the edges of the cloak from lower than the hold of her hands and encircling her with the thick wool. "Not everything I am is his." He drew his breath with a harsh sound, lips molded over sharp teeth, breathing her in. Temple Net opened hollow around them, only a moment, then died in wisps of sound that didn't quite make words and she realized it had been his doing that it wouldn't hold.

Mid morning from the position of the sun. On the sand where she knelt, her shadow was almost completely under her. Hours had passed. Ulanda turned her

head gingerly from side to side, expecting some disorientation, but her head just turned.

"Are you finished?" Bolda said from beyond that small range of movement. He sounded bored and it was the real him this time.

"I'm sorry," she shot back, turning her head to see him. Her neck hurt. "Is this taking too long for you?"

He walked around to face her, his path at the base of the mound of sand she was standing on. "Well, you did it better on the terrace."

The dance on the terrace had stopped before it started. This hadn't, any of the times. Finished? she wondered. Like looking at long grass being blown by the wind. Looking quickly, before the serpentine path changes again. As well ask if the grass was finished, or the wind. Or reeds. Or threads looped close in a rug.

She licked her lips. "Yes, it's over," she said, and shifted her weight in an effort to take a step that wasn't part of the dance. Li-Fu's body was hidden by the sand from her dancing, more kicked in as Bolda came to help her, both of them balancing on the edge of the center depression. Or was she even there anymore? And the other two? Ulanda couldn't tell, her mind had started humming so she could scarcely think. Bodies weren't important. Nothing was, only that she wasn't different. Or would she feel different? How long would she have to wait to see if Altasimic pattern crowned the black on her arms?

Bolda half carried her to the edge of the sand mound. The humming in her head was getting stronger. I'm thirsty, she thought and tried to say the words. Garm watched from near by a small fire burning where Bolda and En'talac had set one yesterday before deciding to look for shelter by the spring. The wood popped and sparked as it burned. Bolda took her to Garm and let her drop.

No one moved, they knelt on their shadows. She looked from the sun directly overhead, to the flames of the fire, more movement than light, then to Garm, to Bolda, to En'talac, to Gennedy. Then to her hands. Just fingers, she thought, puzzled. Braided almost to the tips. She was shivering although the air was hot and the sun on the robe.... She remembered it burning. Sunrise.

Burning? Yesterday, Bolda had briefly dried the wet robe over the fire. He must have burned it by accident, one sleeve was scorched, the lace flaking. She looked closer and couldn't focus on it then tried to kneel properly back on her heels and almost fell over. Her legs tangled in braid ends and the ties of the girdle and she settled for sitting instead.

En'talac moved to her side, then behind, Ulanda vaguely aware that her points were being checked. She couldn't feel the woman's hands but there was some effect. The silver rings.

"Do you see him?" En'talac asked, her lips against Ulanda's ear while her hands held her head. Then to Garm: "Move so that she sees you. No, not any closer."

"Where's Rit?" she asked. Garm looked at En'talac, then back to her.

"I'm not getting anything from her," En'talac said and came around and squatted close in front. More silver, the rings flashed in the sunlight as the medic stood up and moved across Ulanda's field of vision.

"Ulanda?" Garm said. En'talac had brought him closer to her, holding one arm in hers as though to be able to drag him away if necessary.

"Where's Rit?" she asked again, but the urgency to know was starting to fade.

Silver rings flashed again, and Ulanda flinched, but En'talac was looking to one side. "Gennady?"

"He's alive."

Alive? The Zimmer's voice was flat; Ulanda tried to turn to see him again and couldn't.

"He's by the spring," En'talac said. "He's with his men. Where else should he be?"

She tried to shake her head. She didn't know any more, didn't know why she had asked, or why it had seemed necessary for him to be at the dance. As though from a distance, she heard Bolda and Gennady talking, but the words didn't make sense.

En'talac was still speaking. "... concentrate. Ulanda, do you see..."

"Who?"

"Ulanda, you must see me." Garm's voice.

She looked past the medic. "I see you, how couldn't I?"

"Good." En'talac sounded relieved. "Garm, move slowly, making sure she's actually looking at you at all times."

"Why?" she managed. Garm hadn't moved from where En'talac had placed him. He wasn't going to move, not towards her. His eyes were on the tie of the girdle and Ulanda moved her hand to touch the Li-Cassa flower. The tie of the girdle, the flower bruised -- the white petals had brown creases, one of them half torn off. A smell like rotting meat rose from under her fingers, her breath catching at the odor. Not sunstones, not glass.

En'talac eyes had followed her movements. "Flowers," Ulanda said. The medic didn't say anything. "Are they? Please."

"Yes." A hard won sigh of a word.

"I wore a silver chain... to Ri-altar. Why would they have left the flowers off? There were flowers on the beach..."

She couldn't remember the dance, but she could the memories... memories that hadn't gotten so far as to take her to Ri-altar or back down to the pavilion where Sarkalt... where Niv had killed the vass'lt Sarkalt had intended for her Initiation.

She looked up at Garm and whispered, "Flowers on the beach and you fell into her eyes."

The snow had started in small patches, deep in shade at first, then as the trees thinned, in the shadow sides of rocks. Walked to a surface of ice on the trail, the snow stayed longer there, even as the new grass sprouted through yellow stalks on either side, and the first bellflowers bloomed.

She had stopped at one of the patches of snow and cleaned herself as best she could. Niv watched quietly, the only movement was his nostrils pinching and opening. The dress was stained, she should have taken it off, but neither of them had thought of it. It didn't matter, Sarkalt would know.

She held his hand as much for support on the slippery path as for comfort. Her slippers offered little grip. "Is it much further?" she asked.

"No." The word was so soft she more felt it than heard it.

"I'm so sorry, Niv." She looked up at his face but the expression was almost impossible for her to read. Obvious things, like color and the height of his crest, she could see, but the small things, no. Worried, she decided. "What will he do?"

"To me? Nothing to me."

"And me?"

"Nothing. He can not."

The air was colder here, in patches, like the snow. She shivered, even with Niv's cloak. "Are you...", she started then glanced from watching her footing to look at him again. Sorry? I can't say it, she thought.

More snow than bare ground now, and heavy where there were trees, hollows formed around the trunks showing depth by turquoise shadows. The smell of wood smoke reached her before she saw the fires. Late afternoon, the sun was before them, making the flames of the fire into tongues of liquid motion more than points of brightness. Above the fires, Palace was like a stain against the brightness of the sky. She had only seen it from the beach or when in the city; South Bay Temple was too tight into the flank of the mountain to see over the top of it.

Fires had been set around Ri-altar where more usually for Initiation there would be drums. Hollows in the snow, and ashes laid over, and the fires in the middle. To one side were the flitter and a group of people. A Warder of the Spiral, she recognized the woman as having accompanied Sarkalt to South Bay Temple in the past. The others she didn't know, none of them were from South Bay Temple, several were of species she only knew from the Net. Piltsimic and ti'Linn.

Niv left her to join them and she continued on her own to the spiral.

Sarkalt stood in the snow by the fire at the opposite point from the one nearest to the flitter. Footsteps marked the outer side but only his showed further in. All he wore was a white skirt, tied at one hip; white braids drifted from arms tucked well up. Abandoned in the snow as though he had been too warm was a white robe.

He watched the fire as he spoke. "What world-pattern did you find in his arms?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice. He had sounded indifferent, but that didn't mean anything in what he might do.

"It wasn't his fault," she said, surprised her voice worked.

"Why do you speak of fault?" Looking at her, his face showed a vague interest only. Fire and sun warmed his dark skin. "Fault," he repeated, sounding bemused.

Braid ends floated as he dropped his arms. "It snowed here last night. A skim of new over the old. It's melted where the sun has passed. Tonight, a forest of crystals will grow from the melt, and tomorrow will melt again."

He turned and started towards the center of the altar as he spoke the last words, stopped at the outer ring of trees and looked over his shoulder. A shift in the air, he'd gone into pattern.

"No," he said, looking directly into her eyes for the first time. "You won't."

"Overpriest, what?"

She wanted what she saw in his eyes. A Priest's power, their connection to pattern. She wanted it more than she wanted Niv, more than she wanted life. The desire that had joined her and the Camerat seemed shallow compared to this feeling.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

She bowed and made the formal sign of the Acolyte offering their life to the spiral. "I would become my world, I would become the Unity, I would..."

Words dying on her tongue, she took a step backwards and almost fell. A knife was in her belly, the blade cutting into her. "I'm here to die," she said, shaking her head desperately, trying to breath around the pain, her words come out in gasps of air.

"Why did you come," he persisted, closer now.

"You say come, I come. Go and I go," she whispered, the words forming on lips, bypassing her will. These weren't the words anyone said to the Overpriest. They weren't the words she wanted to say.

She knelt before she fell, and with one hand, tried to untie the girdle. "What else can I do? What would you do?" She spoke to the snow, grown turquoise in his shadow, expecting blood on the surface, her blood.

White cords crossed the shadow as he knelt in front of her. "You do what you must, as I do."

She had the chain in one hand, broken. The pain had disappeared. "Without this... my Initiation...?"

"No, not here." He sounded detached, almost as though he were speaking to himself alone.

Staring at the white silk cords of his braids, her eyes burning, she waited for him to do something. But he didn't move and she had time to go from fear to panic and finally, flight.

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En'talac's voice was rough and Ulanda had the sense that the words were well worn in an attempt to get her attention. "It was really quite beautiful what you did. You don't remember?"

Ulanda focused on her.

"Welcome back. The medic smoothed a patch on the back on Ulanda's neck and then held her hand over so the warmth would speed absorption. "You're still drifting in and out. Talking will help; it takes more coordination than you might think. Tell me what the last images were, the ones just before you came back out."

Sarkalt and Ri-altar. "There wasn't anything."

En'talac sighed. "Often those images are the last steps on the pathway back to your body, not actual pattern. Having to concentrate enough to speak about them will help center you as well as reinforce the way back. Ulanda, what you see in deep pattern fades quickly; only bits and pieces will come back to you. With practice, you'll remember much more."

The humming had a counterpoint rhythm now. The blocker? "I'm not sure if I..." The words tripped over the fear that she had failed herself.

"Everything you're feeling is just pattern-sickness."

"I know that," she snapped. And dropped her eyes, suddenly feeling the need to pant, she couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

"I know you do, just keep remembering that that's all it is, including the doubts. Keep breathing but slowly, stretch each exhalation to double. Don't worry, I'll bring you down."

"You hope," Bolda said. The tone was one of dry disbelief.

She hardly heard him, she was panting rapidly and some of the dizziness must be from that. "Garm? Where is he?"

"He'll be here when you need him." Bolda again -- his tone as dry as before. "He's sleeping right now."

She couldn't remember but had a sense that this had happened before. And that Garm hadn't been there. She concentrated on slowing her breathing. Forms, she thought. A simple linear fractal would do to start. Reductional pyramids. "Was I asleep too?" she said between the shapes of the forming mantra.

"Slower, Ulanda." En'talac put one of her hands over Ulanda's mouth, the nails digging at her cheek. She had to fight back the urge to bite her. A distraction, she thought -- the other hand was at her throat, pressing. "The air here is a little richer than you're used to and you're breathing too fast. You went into convulsions and you're feeling the effect of that too. I don't want to have to use restraints. While you're conscious, I'd rather you controlled the pace of this."

"Bolda?" she said past En'talac's fingers. The medic loosened her grip but Ulanda could feel both her words and her heart against the other hand at her throat. The shape that had been growing in her mind was gone. "Why were you there? The others were by the fire..."

"Ulanda, try to describe what you saw, don't try to have it make sense." En'talac's fingers rubbed where her hand had been pressing.

Disorientation was most of what she remembered. She licked her lips, tasting En'talac's fingers. Of the dance, she remembered nothing. Was what she had seen of her and Niv and Sarkalt simply her mind turning memories of a physical path into a mental pathway out of overpattern? It wasn't a path -- real or memory -- that she could share. Other shapes, ones taught to her, would do the same thing. The mantric form of a snag-tooth pyramid began to grow in her mind again and spread through her senses. It tasted of silver in her mouth, cold between her teeth. Salt and bile and cedar.

Ulanda turned towards the fire and knew immediately she shouldn't have. The shape of the mantra suddenly became nonlinear, flickering off in unpredictable reductions. Flames -- she breathed them. Clanny. Simitta. Gennady. Garm. Niv. Rit. They were burning there, in the chaos of flames, in the snap of burning wood. She reached out to touch them...

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The sun had set by the time Ulanda reached the pavilion, but from Ri-altar, she had been in deep shadow almost the entire way, running to one side of the trail where the snow gave some footing, then faster again lower down, where the snow was scant. Mud smeared her shift, was caked in her hair, she had fallen several times. Scratches bled through the dirt on her thighs and arms.

She stopped where Niv and her had talked and made love. Through the trees, the mist rising from the warmer ground of the clearing below was golden with torchlight. Hunched over to keep warmer, she made herself as small as possible, arms wrapped around her knees.



Sarkalt behind her... or had he left Ri-altar by now? She wasn't sure she would have heard the flitter, her heart pounded so hard in her ears. She wished... Niv? That he would follow her? Save her as he had that time after Qalt'ici's death?

Time passed and she listened for him -- held her breath until she was faint, just so she would be able to hear, then breathed cold air in great mouthfuls, trying to detect his scent.

What was memory worth on a cold mountainside? The sound of his voice. His taste -- she remembered differences: the inside of his wrists where the cam-claws were, so carefully sheathed so he wouldn't mark her. The taste of his lips. The taste his touch left on her skin, she still had the scent, mixed with the salty taste of sweat... and of mud.

No one came. She could hear music from below, a flute, she thought. Or it was the wind, high in the trees. Those in the clearing would know where she was; a scanning placement would tell them. Higher-level Net from South Bay Temple might even stretch this far if asked. Or Sarkalt -- wherever he was -- would know without having to scan.

What had happened at Ri-altar? As an Acolyte she had participated in Initiations, she knew the forms. And the rituals, the last three months were meant to finish the binding of her will, focusing her towards the single end her entire life had been directed to. A Priest. She had lived and breathed that certainty for as long as she could remember.

And had fallen in love.

It shouldn't have mattered. Celibacy wasn't a discipline ever asked of those training for the Priesthood. And love happened.

Not with the Overpriest's tass'alt. And Niv's actions? Insanity.

And hers?

Sarkalt hadn't dismissed her chances. The man could be angry, but the Priest? All he had said was not here.

Gathering her courage, she walked down the steps. Torches had been set around the clearing, the surrounding trees made darker in contrast. Where the sedan chair had been was a flitter, the Overpriest's signature on the hull tiles.

The two attendants didn't look at her more than they had too and they didn't touch her. Coming in from either side of the watch fires, they had appeared like columns of light in their white tunics, their faces obscured by the contrast.

The door of the pavilion was already open. The two took her there, and then let her take the first step in, keeping to her back.

Dressed stone, floor and walls, the walls and ceiling framed by rough-hewn beams, the underneath of the thatch roof left exposed. Wooden shutters covered the windows.

Sarkalt knelt on the floor on the far side, half to the centre, Niv beside him, both of them staring at the stones.

Ulanda bowed, her hands making the form of supplication. She forced herself not to look at Niv, but instead, stared at Sarkalt until the edges of her vision blurred. Most of what she saw of him was the white glow of his ceremonial robe framed by the dark fall of her hair around her face.

When Sarkalt finally moved, it was to dismiss the attendants. The door closed behind them.

"You dropped this," Sarkalt said when the two had gone. "Did you mean to?" On the stone before him was the silver chain. It hadn't been there a moment before.

"Yes, I meant to. It was killing me."

Sarkalt moved white cords over the metal, as though his wrist braids could taste the silver. He shook his head. "I don't think you did mean to. You have been described to me as stubborn and willful. I think perhaps the first but not the second." He shut his eyes and she thought he looked tired then dismissed the idea. He was the same as always, the same as when she had first seen him.

"And my future in Temple?" As he had said: stubborn. Now that she had stopped, her legs felt as though they had turned to sand, and were being stripped by waves.

Without opening his eyes, he said: "The spiral."

She felt relief roll over her.

Then he opened his eyes and looked at her and the feeling of relief died. "What else would you like? A clean robe and dry shoes perhaps. A bath certainly. And Niv?"

Niv stirred and placed one hand on the other man's upper arm. "Sarkalt, please. None of this has been her doing." Sharp nails scratched pale lines on the brown skin, the surface cells only raised, a scratching that could be rubbed smooth again.

The Overpriest turned towards his tass'alt. Just a man, she thought. She had been wrong earlier. Worried and tired, with a wondering in his look.

He shook his head and the order went into the Net. "Prepare for Initiation."

The blue nails flexed and the marks on Sarkalt's skin would stay until healed. "Sarkalt, please. Don't do this to her. To yourself. Tomorrow. At South Bay... then, please."

"Here?" she whispered, only then understanding what Sarkalt had ordered. This was no place for an Initiation. She was in no condition for one.

The doors opened, footsteps came towards her, but she didn't turn to see. "Why here?" she asked.

Anger -- in the man still. "Even stubborn and willful, you were to be something made to a purpose, a tool." Emerald eyes blinked torchlight back at her. "Whose tool though? Who made you?"

She shook her head wildly. The man may be speaking, but the sense of the words held only a Priest's sense of what was real, what was true.

She could speak her own truth. "You did. You made me."

His eyes narrowed and her fear leaped. But she took a deep breath and pushed it down again. Who else but him? "You made me," she said again.

A man still looked at her -- not a Priest -- a tired man and angry, skin pulling around his eyes as he narrowed them more. "I don't think so."

"Our choices have narrowed," she heard En'talac say. "I didn't want to start with physical stimulation this soon, she won't really feel it and it doesn't leave anything in reserve once those neural pathways have been exhausted. Besides..." She sighed tiredly. "... none of us have the experience to work them. We need Niv. Damn Sarkalt."

Ulanda opened her eyes to ashes; she was lying where the fire had been. How long had she been here? The sun was setting behind a narrow horizon wide band of clouds as gray as the ashes from the fire. Turning her head towards the sound, she saw the medic and Bolda standing by the edge of the sand against a pale yellow sky threaded with trails of smoke. Behind them was the Zimmer pod, the long legs of the craft folded. A trick of light -- or vision -- and Ulanda saw the people in the biting mouth of the ship; shapes against a colored floor, then remembered that was the Ladybug, not the pod.

Bolda turned to look at her. "That burn will have to be looked at eventually."

The medic gave a shaky laugh. "She won't die of it, so forget it."

"Did you make me?" Ulanda whispered. Silver to ashes? She could taste fire and all the will she had left went into keeping the flames in the past and the fires that make the smoke trails surrounding her, well in the distance.

En'talac was by her side in moments. "Make you do what?"

"The ships?"

"You were right. You pulled them here. It's just the Zimmer pod now, but Gennady's set up warding to protect this area. You're safe here. The Overpriest's ship won't be able to land until tomorrow."

And would she still be safe when it did? "Fire," she whispered.

"It's the Xintan, they can't hurt you so don't worry about them. Bolda, I need some help here. No, get the robe off first, I've been reading an on-again, off-again residual effect. I didn't want to take it off until she was stable, I thought it would protect her... damn, I just don't know. It might be what keeps pulling her back in."

Then closer, silver rings from one hand moved slowly in front of her face: "Deep breaths again but slow ones. I know this is taking a while..." A shaky laugh. "...but I think we all expected that. What you feel right now is your heart skipping a little but this will help."

She felt another drug patch going on and hard rubbing at the back her neck. "Kill him," she whispered through the numbing. "Anga. I want him dead. Do it now, tell Gennady..."

"Bolda, leave the ties, try to bring the robe over her head."

"No, I..." The words drifted, then silver rings danced in front of her nose. The after image stayed in the air, or in her vision, making a simple pattern. It helped her organize her thoughts enough to speak. "The Zimmer pod. Talk to them, tell Simitta. Tell him..." To destroy the Overpriest's ship? The last image of Sarkalt just before she woke was more real than anything she could see with her eyes. Kill him? He was already dead, twice over now... she saw the ship dissolve in bands of fading red like it was a drop of ink in water.

En'talac wasn't listening anyway. "Damn, I can hardly budge it, I don't know how she could have danced like that wearing it." Then Bolda was in there. "Hold still," he grumbled, something in his hand. "The ties will have to be cut. I'll fix them later."

Beyond the rings, she saw a metal blade flash in the sun.

The two attendants took her in, waited a moment, then bowed and left. The Overpriest knelt where he had before. She looked around in brief catches, never taking her eyes off him for more than a moment at a time. The room was empty except for the two of them. Then a movement to her left and she saw another person, a small man, round, and he rolled from foot to foot as he walked towards them. A Piltsimic... like the Overpriest? Memory twisted, then settled. Sarkalt was Piltsimic, how could she have thought otherwise?

And what now? "Where's Niv?" she said.

A puzzled look to her from the stranger and some of the swagger she'd seen was replaced by a more hesitant step.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply, signing it as a demand.

He stopped, looked at the Overpriest and back at her. "Asam e'Bolda," he said, pulling on an earlobe. "Who are you?" Then he smirked. "I know who you're supposed to be, or what, but what the shit... you look like you've been dragged backwards through brambles."

Was his sight as mutable as hers? She had been bathed -- as complete a cleansing ritual as time and place allowed -- and dressed again in the plain white Initiate's robe, her hair braided in the same pattern as the silver band that was once again around her waist. And for now, thankfully, not doing anything.

The man snorted. "Besides, this sure as hell isn't any spiral in any Temple I've ever seen."

Then it was.

The earlobe got an extra tug and he turned a startled look towards the Overpriest. "Okay," he said as he was edged back by a Warder's aide who hadn't been there a moment earlier. "I could be wrong."

She shook off hands reaching from beside her. A man and a woman -- it had been two men earlier -- their faces averted in the formal posturing of the killing spiral. Where was Niv? He had been here... then realized she wasn't remembering from an hour earlier. Can he save me this time?

She shook her head at the vass'lt. "It wasn't you. I remember..." What did she remember, and how could she?

The small man rocked on his heels, hands in his pockets. They hadn't bothered dressing him in the ritual clothes. Pants and a jacket, both creased. And sand...

Then he spoke. "Just as long as I get the blood money, it's all the same to me." He eyed the people around them uneasily as though they might disappear as suddenly as they had appeared.

"It wasn't you," she said again, yelling it at him over the noise of the drums and chanting. He shrugged.

The Bearer brought the knife, red cords trailing from the handle; with her arrival came an additional dance in the beat of the drums and a shift in the chanting. Higher pitched -- a doubling of the harmony. Her recognition of the sound was split in time: near and far... and much further away again. Altasimic... she heard the word in the one-two beat of the drums, it was whispered beneath the words.

Ulanda blinked and the cords binding the knife handle were green, a dark green, like the leaves of an evergreen tree seen an hour past sunset. Then white. No, they were opal; it was the darkness of the green they had changed from that tricked her. The shimmer of the silk was a paler image of mother of pearl.

The small man hesitated rather than moved at the proper beat, his cheeks puffed out as he frowned. But he did move finally, a step behind the proper, his hand stretched out to take the knife. The cords were blood red again.

They had dressed him in the vass'lt robe after all. She was confused, distracted by the feel of hands on her wrists, and the warmth of bodies next to her. A change in the pattern pull -- that's what it had to be. Or was she confused? Niv? Why had she asked about him... her Initiation? Were days missing in her life? Years? The slick cold of the cuffs against her wrists shattered her thoughts... or the thoughts created and forced on her.

She tried to turn her head to see the Overpriest but could only move slowly as though the air were thick or she had lost all her strength. But knew he would hear her if he wished, whether she spoke or not, or looked or not. She took a breath. How real was this? Real enough to die in? A part of her said yes. And that felt familiar too.

"Has this happened before?" she whispered, looking over top of the bowed head of the man holding her. A blond head, the cords woven into his hair denoted rank and reason for being here. "Will what happens here be real?"

"Not real," the Overpriest said back to her, looking up to meet her eyes with his even darker ones half hidden in the folds of flesh on his round face. "Not unreal. Something else, I think." He laughed. Torchlight flickered in the thick mat of hair on his chest and his legs, red jumping in the glossy black curls and licking the ebony skin. He wore a short white skirt, low to his rounded belly, not the robe she almost remembered.

"Niv was here," she said clearly. That particular memory flickered more strongly. She had other memories to work with and thought that here, in this place, she could work them, whereas at the top of the steps, the same memories had remained stubbornly confined to her mind.

"Niv was here," she repeated, but this time, the words were only to support her vision. He was here. Through the music, she heard his footsteps. No, the door had to open first. Did the torches flicker in the sudden breeze? He moved like the music, that was the same, and she felt her body start in the same rhythm as though she were entering into the growing sense of the Initiation.

Sarkalt smiled a broad grin. Then to the Warder of the Spiral, he said, "The Whi'talt overbeat." The woman made a deep bow to him. A moment later, the chant and drumming changed, strengthening the weaving.

She changed to match it -- so easily, she knew this, all of a sudden the beat was her heart, the chanting, her breath.

Niv. She had his scent now, coming to her with the resin of the torches. His hands had the same heat. His passion could flare and burn. And smoke. She tasted him in her mouth, she spoke him. "He was standing by now, not kneeling. He danced to the drums more gracefully than I managed."

She didn't know if Sarkalt heard, or cared if he did. His grin didn't fade, but her attention wasn't so much on him as on the air. An outline. Blue and white. Dark blue in the firelight, a burning blue as his scales reflected the heart of the flame. He was the dance and the dance had changed again from what the Overpriest had made it, even from what she had heard in the music. Her soul.

The vass'lt had the knife; he waved it in the air before him, his mouth open. He didn't appear to see Niv and Ulanda renewed her attempt to concentrate Niv into existence. That she had succeeded even a little, told her that she could entirely, the effort it took pushing away any question of how or why she could do it.

"I remember..." She spoke the words to Niv as though starting a chant. "On the stairs. The feel of the wool cloak warmed by your body. Your hands cupping my face... how cold my skin was." She shivered, but not with the cold. He had been cautious. Cam-claws retracted. She hadn't wanted caution then, didn't now.

She threw her head back, wishing she could let the real memory become subject to fantasy but it was the wrong time and place to test an ability that had to be impossible by anything she understood of the Unity. Memory was possible and her memory went back further, or further as this strange reality counted it.

What would you do...?

Ulanda shook the words away. She knew what to do. Around her, the torchlight had doubled. Now and then. Or, now and now. Niv had blood on his teeth, his mouth dripped. A man on the stone flagging, his white robe crimson soaked. A different man, a heavy man... she knew him too, she thought... but that couldn't matter. What mattered was Niv.

Niv turned -- he was here -- his breath was a loud hiss, the sound grew rapidly until it was a scream. The drumbeat shattered in her ears. Someone else screamed, then she realized it was her. Then. Not now. Niv would take her in his arms and she wouldn't be afraid anymore. She wanted him to, in any time at all, or none. A part of her -- a growing part -- felt she could let the rest happen if she could only be held again by him. Safe. And remembered -- unwillingly -- feeling the same thing, but in other arms.

Garm.

A name. It meant nothing, she wouldn't let it.

What would you do if...?

Her knees buckled and the Warder aides holding her tensed. They would be about ready to snap the cuffs. Her memory had outstripped the re-creation, confusing her as the layers of vision surfaced.

"I only need one vision," she mouthed. Here, as real a 'here' as offered her, one last part of the dance remained: the retreat of the Bearer after presenting the knife to the vass'lt.

Niv had faded to sparkles in her eyes. Had he ever answered her? Seen though tears, he was facets of blue crystal. She had let him almost disappear. Answer? Her?

The opal cords taken from the knife flowed in the air as the Bearer moved in a final circle around the vass'lt. Ulanda forced the sparkles to include the Piltsimic vass'lt. And he was Piltsimic again. And forced the sparkles to include his death with the one vision spanning three events. His raising the knife in a salute to her, Niv at his throat, him dead. Will answer? Would answer? It didn't matter; this was the only answer she needed. It had to be memory, all of it rooted in the Unity and brought back in a memory pull.

The Bearer still circled. Time and motion skipped and backtracked, repeated and repeated and repeated. Red and yellow torch light reflected endlessly off bright rings on the woman's fingers...

It was cold but a rain soaked cold, not ice and snow. Rain wet, rain drenched, dripping rain. Cloud. The air was silica and metal. Silver against her teeth and tongue. And Niv.

What would you do if you were me?

Cassa.

The layers of vision multiplied, out-stripping all possibility of them being her memory, until there was only the one vision: Ulanda stood alone in a box of a stone room, no windows, no door. The light just existed, it had no obvious source.

What would...?

"I'd want to be free." She screamed it.

Suddenly, white light shone between the joins of the stone, half blinding her before she managed to cover her eyes with her hands. Behind closed lids, the vision was easier to see: sunset in the diamond, she was at the portal leading to Cam'lt Temple. She had asked herself the same question and the same answer had risen unbidden. Cassa's diamond. Names, places. Each plucked out of the air but unconnected. Cassa's desire, not hers.

"Not freedom," she said quickly in a panic, suddenly afraid she couldn't say it fast enough. "A Priest. An Altasimic Priest." She had never wanted freedom, freedom was too undefined a word. Being away from Temple had been years living as a stranger, an outcast. And none of it by her choice.

Ulanda turned around, or seemed to, but her perspective didn't change. Stone again. "I want to be what I should have been."

Her life was like a mantra, something to be constructed bit-by-bit, turned and examined. She put one foot in front of herself, then another, and was walking. Day wasted into night, into day. She giggled through a hiccup. And the ice always melted under her hand.

The stone box was gone like a dream not quite remembered in the dawn. Stone still surrounded her, but it was the pavilion. Did what she see of it include only those layers of vision as supplied by her own mind? The past? If so, then to what future? Or probabilities such as she could imagine on her own, or could understand.

A man knelt in front of her. Familiar, he belonged to a memory she hadn't experienced yet. Anga. She had a name. Niv still danced, the vass'lt still wove to the drums, knife in hand... not Piltsimic. The Bearer still circled -- all happening, or had happened, or will happen. Sound and sight were muted.

She raised her hands. Braids and braid ends. Opal. Altasimic. "Your vass'lt appears redundant. I asked to be an Altasimic Priest and apparently, I am."

Anga laughed. "You can still die."

The words were a cold wind. She countered with drumbeats, willing them louder. And Niv. He was close, more solid than before. Her will, not Anga's. Her



will and what had really happened. Who possibly could she have asked anything of?

She took what she could find in her mind: “Apparently, I can make Niv as real as I need to. I don’t need the source to know the end: even if all of this is created out of pattern energies, your vass’It will be dead in all the ways that matter.”

But he had been real. In all ways. Real enough to die. And *she* must have killed him, not Niv. She was an Altasimic Priest.

Drumbeats sounded through her confusion. Louder again. Matching the pounding, her vision squeezed to a pinprick, then expanded until, just as she thought her mind would explode, her sight shriveled again.

“Always when I think of her...” Anga’s blunt teeth were bared in a grimace.

“No.” Ulanda backed away.

Anga stood. “What is the form of your prayers...”

A man the color of ash and flame. Smoke, he was smoke rising in prayer. Gennady. Another name she had no place for.

She was an ocean, her memories currents. She saw the images in the instants when her sight expanded and tested them against her own mind when pressed to a point. They weren’t hers; she had nothing past, present or lived future to account for them.

The vass’It had circled out of her vision. Memory. Did memory include have a knife in her back? Her panicked turn was clumsy; she caught a foot in the trailing edge of her robe and stumbled.

He was only feet away, still circling closer. Ashes were smeared over his face and in the flickering light of the torches, she saw the same pattern as on the ritual soil mound. Blood and ashes, she could taste it on her lips as though she had kissed him. Rit. Another name she had no place for.

And she saw him dead, his throat ripped out, Niv standing over him...

A small boat on the waves and her brother calling her name...

And she saw him dead, skin peeling away in layers as pattern energy crackled and consumed his flesh with tongues of blue flame. Niv. A hiss mounted to a shriek, the sound rising in a spiral.

“No,” she screamed.

“Get down,” En’talac screamed, and kicked. A belly kick and he went down like a sack of grain.

Her hands pushed Ulanda away from him at the same time, her head where the fire had been a moment before, En'talac scattering the burning sticks. Burnt hair smell closed Bolda's throat off as he tried to get his wind back and help boot the worst of the fire away at the same time.

When he looked up, En'talac was starring at him, Ulanda's head wedged between her knees and held there by both hands clasped under the girl's chin. The Zimmer webbing the medic was using as a restraint was charred in places, but still binding Ulanda's arms and legs. The sensors built into the fabric hadn't lasted past the first series of convulsions.

He took a deep breath, then stopped short when the movement hurt his gut. "What the hell was all that about?"

Narrow pink lips trembled over a chin smudged with ashes. Then the chin trembled as well and the woman started to laugh. "Oh, nothing much. She just peaked."

He frowned at her. Her fingers were dead white from the pressure of holding Ulanda's chin. "Peaked," she repeated. "As in two seconds later, you would have been dead. Like a vass'lt."

"Oh." He blinked. "Are you sure?"

She closed her eyes a moment and nodded, one hand loosened from the other to check Ulanda's neck for her pulse. The other hand loosened and then both hands were very busy checking energy points. White ridges had stayed on the skin from the pressure. "I felt the drawing before I could see it. The rings do that, part of why I wear them. There's a feel to that kind of thing that's different than the energy flow you get in the usual pattern draw and very different than the residual flow she's been experiencing. Spirals out from the major points and just sort of... well, combines into one spiral as it leaves the body. Explosively."

"I've seen the result."

"You almost were the result." She peeled a circle of blocker off the pad. Plain blue, a local neural blocker, he realized. No sedative. "Loosen the webbing on this side, I want to deaden the energy flow a bit at that point."

Some sedative would have been nice. Lots of it. He wiped his hands on his pants first, no big help there. The braids were a mess, sand and dirt and ashes, even a few burn marks on the loose ends. "Both sides?" he asked as En'talac smoothed a patch over reasonably clean skin. Her left arm, the one that hadn't gotten cut up and then fried.

"Just one side for now. I hope she'll notice the difference and that can help. An irritant."

He scratched. "Like the sand?"

She laughed and he heard more hysteria than humor in the sound, but she had a right. "Like the sand. I had hoped getting the robe off would help, I don't know

if removing it only made things worse. It probably would have contained the peaking... or..."

"Or killed her."

En'talac nodded. "Most of the time, pattern is beautiful. Like heat rising in waves on a hot day, especially deeper pattern. You can actually hear the music it moves to." Her expression had grown distant. Then it snapped back and she swallowed hard. "I'm not familiar with Selects, perhaps it's the same with other ones. With her, it's not seductive or beautiful, or maybe it is, but... it's like you're expecting the rise of air from a burning candle and what you get is a forest fire."

"Your forest fire's awake." Eyes flickering at least and a groan from deep in her throat.

"I know that." One hand was back to firmly holding Ulanda's chin, the other checking points. "Let's see if we can keep her awake this time. Simitta says it should only be a couple of hours more until Sarkalt's ship can land."

"How about trying Garm again?"

At the name, Ulanda twitched in the medic's hands. "Hell," he said close to her ear, "it's his job to get killed, not mine."

She didn't react, probably didn't hear, or make sense of it. Garm was on the Zimmer pod along with the Altasimic prisoners. Rit might live; he was in worse shape than Panntin and heavily sedated which was about all the Zimmer medic knew to do. En'talac wouldn't even look at him. What role he played in this, they'd have to wait to see. He might only have been part of the backdrop, like the location, a part of the shape of things needed for the Opening.

En'talac was working points like it would matter, trying to capture Ulanda's attention. He helped, mostly by getting in the way, stopping once to kick more dirt over a flare up from a scraggly bush nearby. Dry as dust, it was half burned by the time he got there but it stomped down okay and there wasn't much else nearby to catch. Taking a smoldering branch, he coaxed a second fire into life, smaller this time and further away from Ulanda.

Straightening, he rubbed his back. It was damn cold... when he had had time to notice. Since light enough to see by, the fire had been more for comfort than anything. The glow-globes Simitta had brought over from the pod had died within minutes of being near Ulanda. Fire had been all the light they'd had during the long night, a layer of cloud hid the stars and moon. Morning had brought more plumes of smoke from the Xintan camps out from the Zimmer warding barrier and, if he listened hard or the wind was in the right direction, the sound of drums.

Suddenly Ulanda twisted. "My arm..." she gasped.

"Concentrate on the pain," En'talac shouted, both her hands holding Ulanda's head, leaning forward so all Ulanda would have been able to see was her face.

"Make it into a mantra. Make forms out of the lines, try a square, then a box... put the lines in at right angles..."

Ragged breathing -- he couldn't see the girl's face worth beans with En'talac over top of her, but there was a rhythm forming in the sound of the breaths like the change in the harnesses on a big loom. And not as simple a weave as she had started the other few times she'd been conscious.

"The pain is a good sign..." En'talac was almost sobbing with relief. "With a mantra, she can tie in the physical..."

"Don't tell me, listen to her, damn it." Which wasn't exactly fair, Ulanda wasn't talking, just twitching.

En'talac hesitated then nodded and let her hands loosen their hold, waited a moment and dropped them, flexing the fingers. Ulanda lifted her head, looked at him like she'd never seen him before and then rested her cheek against En'talac's thigh.

"You was there," she said. "Bolda, you were there. En'talac too. And Rit..."

Rit? "You're not making any better sense than usual."

"I said you were there. En'talac was too." A shudder ran the length of her body. "I'm so tired."

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Filtered sunshine. Cloth moved in the wind with a snapping sound. A pavilion. She remembered waking and the sky had been cloudy, the real sky, not this white haze of cloth. She had been dreaming... or was that a dream too? And the Zimmer pod? Ulanda tried to sit up but couldn't make it. "I'm thirsty," she said.

En'talac licked a finger and ran it over Ulanda's lips. "I'll give you a drink in a moment. I want to make sure you can handle it"

"My arm?" She glanced towards it but didn't really look. She had woken to the pain but it was fading, the taste from the woman's finger on her lips was stronger. More real.

"It happened during the dancing."

The brightest point of light was behind the other woman's head. "It's... was I asleep?"

Another lick of her finger and En'talac held it to Ulanda's lips. "This last time, yes, I think you were."

"My arm?"

"Will heal. As the world-pattern gets stronger, being home will help you as well."

Home? She had asked for something... her mind felt too far away to think. Moving her other hand, she touched her side. "I'm cold," she said, surprised at feeling frost-bumps. She was shivering.

En'talac took her hand and held it down against her body as she arranged the blanket. "You're in shock. It's actually quite warm in here." She smoothed fine material against Ulanda's stomach. "Being cold is an improvement. I want you to concentrate on any physical sensations. You were working a mantra when you were awake before... try it again." She chuckled. "I've been told your mantras are better than mine."

The medic's hands arranged the ends of the braiding from the good arm then smoothed them down, following the curve of Ulanda's stomach and between her thighs, her small hand warm. Then quick fingers checked points near her groin.

The laughter stopped and the smile looked forced, thumbs of either hand rubbing the g'ta points at her solar plexus. Ulanda looked away as one of En'talac's hands slipped under the blanket. The rings on bare skin burned, then the sensation was gone. "Don't, please."

En'talac sighed. Her other hand joined the first. "Every flow line in your body is trying to recover some of what happened, to match it. That's an improvement too." She chuckled again, but it was a tired sound. "It's an improvement that could still kill you. Damn it, Ulanda, if you want to live, you have to start trying now."

She kept her eyes away. "Sarkalt won't let Niv..."

En'talac hesitated even as her fingers still checked points. "Niv is in the ship and the ship is next to the Zimmer pod. He'll be here when you're capable of responding to him."

The glowing cloth sky hurt her eyes. It was too reminiscent of the light in her... dream? En'talac supported her head as she held a mug of water to her lips, then when that didn't work, put an arm under her good one to lift her and tucked pillows under.

She took three swallows before she could even taste the water. Then gulped several more mouthfuls and wore more, pushing the bottom of the mug up with her good hand.

"No more for now, you'll be sick."

"I spilt most of that cup," Ulanda protested. Her head swam from sitting up and her mouth was still dry.

En'talac looked at her over the rim of the mug. Blue glaze with white specks, the base was the same color as the sky. The bright rings glinted in the sunlight. "How does the arm feel?"

"Arm?" Then she remembered.

Ulanda felt a hollowness in her start to rise. She might be sick after all. En'talac dropped the mug and rapidly moved her fingers in a simple pattern.

She swallowed hard and watched the flash of the rings to center her. "I want to live."

"Of course you do." En'talac sounded relieved.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't ever say that. Ulanda, the will to live can make all the difference in this."

Not will. She shook her head. "That's what I was trying to tell you. I was still pulling... something. Time... did I sleep?" En'talac just look puzzled. "I was reliving... it was as though I was two places at once, one of them a memory, but it wasn't entirely a memory."

"What memory?" En'talac asked softly as she wrapped a cloth around Ulanda's burnt arm. Cool -- it looked wet -- she could feel sensations, just not pain. "Like I told you before, it will help to talk about what you saw."

Ulanda closed her eyes a moment, the only privacy left her. Memory. And a medic from Sarkalt's Household. The people outside the pavilion -- she could see the shapes when they moved away, how their shadows collapsed into the brightness of the cloth sides -- they would be the Overpriest's as well. Or Zimmer. Reach out and she could know who they were, same as she had with Anga and his helpers at the spiral on Lillisim. Reach out and she thought she wouldn't come back.

Who could she trust? Garm? She could see him looking at the Li-Cassa flower on the end of the girdle tie, not at her. A part of her could trust him, but not the part of her that was going to make a life here.

There was someone else. Rit? Like in a dream, she may have added new faces or people simply because she had seen them last. The man Niv had killed? She looked up from the finished wrapping to see the medic watching her. En'talac had been the Bearer, her rings... She took another long breath.

Bolda? She remembered him with his throat torn out. His blood dripping from Niv's mouth.

You'll die of this. Few hours... hours. Niv, not Garm. He was hers too -- her Niv. Of everything that had happened or had almost happened, or could have happened in Anga's trap, she remembered a question and the answer she had given. To be an Altasimic Priest.

Out of that hope she spun a shape, making soft folds that opened as a flower opens its petals, drawing her in. Altasimic. Home. She had a part of its creation, how couldn't she be a part of the Unity growing here.

Freedom?

Life. As a Priest-Select. She wouldn't need the diamond to make another reality, this was all the one she needed.

And be Empress?

"What memories?" En'talac asked again.

"From when I was a child. Walking in the gardens at South Bay Temple." The lie grew and multiplied on her tongue. "I think you're right, I used it as a pathway to find my way back here from pattern." Panting heavily by the last words, Ulanda pressed her good hand over her mouth to keep from throwing up the water she had drank. "Niv. I'd see Niv..."

Blue lights flashed outside the tent, then leaped in crackling balls along the spines of the pavilion to explode into the air at the center. Energy fields like moiré patterns surrounded Ulanda as she instinctively countered. Blue and red. Then nothing, and she felt the clearing of her mind that came with the first moments of entering pattern, and again, in the moments after leaving it before the body remembers itself.

She managed to get to her knees. "Is there a different law for loom-masters?" It was Anga, with Quin'tat behind him. Then Simitta, a knife in his hand. The shadows on the other side of the cloth were now Zimmer and right now, she wasn't worried about being able to find her way back from being able to know that.

Anga snorted. "I don't see a High Justice Court and it would take one to say differently. And maybe even then, they might think better of it."

"This discussion has to wait," Quin'tat said. "Anga, you had no authorization to leave the ship or to....."

"I'm here. That's all the authorization I need."

Simitta was between her and the Piltsimic, standing in the residue that dripped from the charred ends of her braids. Quin'tat's words faded, his eyes on the embers as the black sizzled and burst in a rainbow of fire to fill the pavilion knee-high with color. Simitta didn't move from guard position and Ulanda felt more than saw, two other Zimmer enter. Gennady and a third she didn't know.

One foot under her, then she would have fallen but for En'talac at her side. Then standing, then on her own. "Do I need a Law Court?" She meant the power she could raise, meant that in some way she was Cassa. But saw knives in the loom-masters mind more than fear of anything she could do.

Anga at Red Band Depth. Anga at Ri-altar, the ocean in the distance. She didn't ask herself where the images came from. He didn't like heights. And he didn't like the idea of being killed.

En'talac stepped between Simitta and her husband. "Quin'tat, get him out, now. She can lose control in an instant, she's barely started to come down from the dance."

"Not out," Ulanda said. "I want to see him dead, here, now. Tell me, loom-master, how far do you fall when you die?" Her body hummed as though she was a song she was singing. Another dance, she swayed to the sound. "Simitta, slit his throat."

The order was a shroud, but for the Zimmer. Rain and the howl of centuries of wind. The Alisim world-altar slowly forming out of sand that had been fused to glass then shattered with a fist. A world-altar with Zimmer bones, with fragments of ship tiles still carrying in their heart the energy forms of their Spann makers. The bones of a people, bones and people, and both a haunting in the Altasimic mind. Zimmer -- eaten by the unfolding world-pattern.

There were other traps in the loom-master's weaving, ones she hadn't seen, ones that weren't meant for her. Did they require triggering sequences or did the loom-master have them under conscious control? The former, she thought. Or she'd already be dead, the Zimmer with her. Killed with power Anga didn't have the ability to make on his own, just to manipulate. Her power.

Centuries and fractions of a second. "No," she said softly, even now reluctantly, even though it was as much her death as the Zimmer's. Simitta stopped almost before starting to move. He fit into her hand so easily, her hand and her heart. If she had stayed longer in the last vision, would she have seen Simitta's death as she had Bolda's and Rit's? Or had he already died?

"I don't know," she said in a broken whisper, hearing still the howl of the wind in her ears and through it, the sound of Cassa's laughter. Simitta sheathed his knife and turned to her.

Always when I think of her, it is winter...

"It was a long night and very cold," she said, already turning away from him, afraid she would drown in the dark ocean of his eyes and never reach the hidden green depths. Silver and violet yuin sight. Then to Quin'tat: "See to your own people's survival, or do your oaths to Sarkalt mean allowing the loom-master to kill him as well? If he's capable of twisting anything I do to his own ends, what about Sarkalt's power?"

Quin'tat appeared to be waking from a trance. "Kill...?"

En'talac had his arm. "Did you think he had come to visit her?"

Anga snorted. "If killing her takes my death and Sarkalt's, it would still be a bargain. If you're thinking about oaths, medic, think of the one you've made to Empire."

"Which Empire?" Ulanda said. "And, in any case, this time, I'll do the agreeing and any deals will be said plainly."

"Well, if you're talking plainly, tell me I'm wrong when I say you didn't pull Altasimic pattern just now."

"You wouldn't know, you're guessing. And would say I wasn't even if the world itself was dripping from my braid ends." She looked at Gennady. "You at least aren't shy of what I am. What is your service to me worth?"

Honor teeth flashed. "To keep the loom-master in check? It will be months until the Temple ships will be here with news of the reality we're in. I'll talk about



any further payment due then.” He looked at Quin’tat. “What can Temple offer me that the Empress can’t?”

Her or Cassa? Ulanda saw the question in Quin’tat’s eyes. She didn’t have to look to see it in Anga’s. Loom-master. Did he find his creation interesting?

Quin’tat shook his head. “We want the same thing -- survival until the Temple ships arrive. With Anga on our ship, Ulanda on the Ladybug...”

“I won’t be on the Ladybug. I have no intention of waiting until someone else decides what my fate will be. I’m staying here, this is my home.”

Quin’tat looked to Anga as though expecting confirmation or denial. Then to her: “Home?”

“En’talac?” she asked, ignoring Quin’tat’s question. “A robe... or I’ll leave wearing this blanket.”

The black robe she had worn to the dinner on Lillisim. The medic fitted one arm through, Ulanda’s bad one first, then the other, and tied the girdle loosely. Then sandals. “This won’t last,” she whispered into Ulanda’s ear as she tied her hair back. “Trust me when I say you’ll be safe here.”

“No, not here.”

Anga stepped aside as she left the tent into the blinding sunlight. And saw a watery world as she blinked back tears. Hills on one side, or rather, her mind said they were hills, her eyes saw only a flat purple colour splashed against what could as well be painted scenery. Two dimensional. And between: a dirt-colored land, shades of pale brown and red. Her home? She barely remembered seeing it while waiting to dance. A different person had, she thought.

Bolda was just outside. “So? What now?”

“If Cassa can create something like the diamond, surely I can create a life for myself here.”

“For a few months.”

She shook her head. “The Empire ships will arrive to an established Temple with me as the ranking Priest. I’ll make it happen. Cassa’s given me this.” And turning, added: “Simitta?” The Zimmer walked out past her, his eyes on the horizon as hers had been. The crest of hair along the top of Simitta’s head blushed pink, then rose and smoothed out again, only to lose to the wind. For an instant, she saw through his eyes: heat rising from campfires outside the warding line. The people.

When she turned back, En’talac was at the door to the tent, her husband behind. She would follow her; Ulanda saw her footsteps set in time and place. More possibilities. And made a motion of Closure that stopped the woman in her tracks. “You wear the Overpriest’s oath band. As you said, I have to look to my own people first. And I have to find those people.”

En’talac bowed.

"Lady Priest," Quin'tat said from over his wife's shoulder. "I can make an agreement in the Overpriest's name."

Bolda answered: "One that takes her rank into consideration."

"Rank?" Quin'tat asked.

"Rank," Bolda repeated. "Are you capable of guaranteeing a truce from your end?"

Quin'tat glanced down to meet his wife's eyes looking up. "Yes, but only if our ship's Net remains as it is. If there is a Challenge, a change in absolute ranking, the Overpriest to..." He shook his head as his eyes returned to her. "The controls are all linked to Sarkalt. If you want his support, they have to remain that way. We weren't your enemy on Lillisim, we're not..."

"Don't patronize me. On Lillisim, you still wanted something from me. What could you want here?"

"The Overpriest is leaving that question open." The admission sounded forced as Quin'tat looked past her to Sarkalt's ship. "He's leaving all questions open."

A chance to live. And what was owed the Overpriest in turn? She turned her back on Quin'tat and almost fell with her first step away from him. Her sense of her own body came and went. Land and body, mind. Each had too few dimensions; she kept falling from balance as though normal reality was a razor's edge she walked.

And if she fell from the razor's edge? What would she have? Freedom? The word had lost its urgency. "The dance... I wore lives woven into cloth, and in the dance, wove a different cloth still. Am weaving, will weave. The people..." Those caught with her in the dance. By the last word, her voice was scarcely more than a whisper. Only Bolda would have heard her. And Simitta. "Make the arrangements," she said to the weaver. "Niv..."

"Sarkalt keeps his own council. Arrangements have been made, you get Niv."

For how long? She had him, then had lost him, would have him again. Arrangements made with someone else. She was shivering. Slipping. Niv was hers only in how much he was Cassa's.

"Who else?" Bolda asked. "Garm?"

Small dark eyes were boring into hers. He had the same eyes as the loom-master. "Can I walk away from him? Ever?" And what would be left of her if she could?

"You're walking now."

Not for long, not in the literal sense that Bolda delighted in twinning to the metaphorical. Each step wasn't so much an effort, as a lack of effort, of letting her body remember how to walk. She didn't have a direction except away from the tent and Anga. To one side was the Zimmer pod and the Overpriest's ship, to the other, the native encampment. With the discriminating sight that came of walking the edge, she saw a woman turn from one of the fires and look towards

her. On her face were the same lines that had been carved into the head that Gennady had brought back to the spring. Xintan. Then her ability to control the pattern threads slipped and she was again in a body rapidly losing the ability to function.

Dropping to her knees, Ulanda raised her eyes to the sky. Blue-white, the light was blinding, and in her tears she saw the lines of opal fire that made up the Altasimic world-pattern. She had worn the sky on her face and danced this place into being. "A camp by the spring... the Mouth of Winter, not here, not where the dance..."

In how many ways could she leave what she said she was and still be it? In how many ways could she leave what Sarkalt and Cassa had caused to happen and still have the result?

Bolda had squatted, putting them face-to-face. Behind him, his expression lost against the brightness of the sky, stood Simitta. She could feel Gennady at her back. "Rit...", she said. "He was there."

Bolda gave one long earlobe a pull. "So he was."

Rit was her twin in the same way that she was still walking away from the tent and not kneeling in the dust. She might still need what he could give her, she might need to take his hand and retrace her steps. "Arrangements made have to include his survival as well. He's mine."

End of Book 1