

The background is a complex digital artwork. It features a low-poly, brownish landscape at the bottom, resembling a desert or alien terrain. Overlaid on this are several glowing, golden-yellow lines that curve and swirl across the frame. A prominent feature is a bright, multi-colored light burst or explosion on the right side, with rays of light extending towards the center. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones: browns, oranges, yellows, and hints of green and blue from the light burst. There are also small, faint plus signs scattered throughout the composition.

Alisim

Eye of the Ocean Book Two

A fantasy trilogy by

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New cover art February 2007.

ISBN 0-9687845-1-8 (vol 1, electronic) Ri
 0-9687845-2-6 (vol 2, electronic) Alisim
 0-9687845-3-4 (vol 3, electronic) Ji'jin Station
 0-9687845-0-X (3 volume set, electronic) Eye of the Ocean

- 1 -

Rit woke being held, a slow waking as he drifted in and out of sleep. Even with the feel of smooth skin under his hands, a deep lassitude stilled his mind past wondering how the warm flesh nestled against him would taste.

Escort duty... he was on his way back to Endica. Eunni? Had he arrived?

But it wasn't Eunni beside him.

A bag of tea for her birthday; the tea in his saddlebag. Spine of the Serpent... something, he remembered something.

His mind refused to encompass the images, the scents and the sounds. Pine and dust. Wood smoke. Horses screaming. Each of those things could be from memories days past, or years, and patched together as dreams tended to be. Dog Mountain and the old post road. The Xintan. Vinn. He remembered more screams, human screams.

Recent. Real. The sick feeling in his gut said real. The cramping twist sent bile to his throat and dragged him out of the dream into day. One man, one death.

He was awake now, awake enough to know he hadn't seen Vinn's body, hadn't seen the skin peeled back... but could patch that image together same as he had the wood smoke and the dust and the tea. Then, with the screams still in his ears: Ulanda. And the rest came to him.

Blood in lines on her face marked her as dead in the way the Xintan Bluestone priestesses mark their dead. The lines in the sky. Panntin cal'Oster. The alien book on its way to the Strom Charter House in Wilni Capital. Sunrise and the world flattening to a single note. Then a stone room and blue fire moving at him. And a woman dressed in white. Ulanda again. And then... his mind narrowed to a point as he recoiled from the image.

Being awake finally meant having a body. He was on a mattress on the floor, a woman whose name he didn't have the presence of mind to remember was lying beside him, asleep. Around them, the room floated in light, splashes of gold over the wood floor and the white cloth of the bedclothes. The walls and the ceiling were a mosaic of shimmering gold.

Definitely awake - he knew this wasn't a dream in the same way you can awaken inside of a dream and know that too. "En'talac," he whispered softly as her name came to him, then was sorry he had spoken, not at all sure he wanted to waken her. The small woman's head was tucked under his chin in a bristle of fragrant hair, his arms around her and his hands held by her hands. His memory

didn't reach as far as getting wherever it was they were, or his getting into bed with her.

"Are you awake?" she asked, turning in his arms to face him.

He pushed up on one elbow. "You speak Heg."

"I do now." She laughed and took hold of his hand trying to pull the covers up. "You can touch, if you're curious. I'm not human, not your kind of human."

"Close enough," he said, not sure where to look. Then sat and wrapped the sheet over his lap anyway.

Still watching him, she stood then stretched slowly. A robe he hadn't noticed was draped over a low table by the wall and she put it on, hiding the differences he wasn't sure he was really seeing in the shifting light. Green-gold cloth, heavy but lustrous. A darker green band was already on her right wrist, a finger width of cloth with long ends. It was all she had been wearing. He wondered what would she have done if he had touched.

"Where is this?" he asked.

"The ships came. This is a room inside of one of them."

"Ships?"

"Two ships. This one and the Zimmer ship. So we have the language, the customs, food and a very nice bath with lots of hot water." She stretched again, like a cat. "Not necessarily in order of importance."

"How long... why..."

"Why the two of us?" He nodded. "What do you remember?" She sat on the edge of the mattress beside him and smoothed her robe over her knees.

What did he remember besides the nightmare he had woken from? A string of events starting at the Spine of the Serpent and ending at the Mound of the Lady, all of which he thought En'talac could account for better than he could. A dream of his great uncle. Then ... Ulanda. He thought the dream might only have been a continuation of what had started then. And in the way he knew he was awake now, he knew that only the touch of this woman sitting next to him had kept him from dying.

"I remember that I thought there would be ships, or a ship." He stared down at his hands as though the dark lines in the skin from cracks and cuts healed over dirt could give him support, and the calluses, scabby yellow and peeling, could give him answers. He knew he had needed starships and machines, had taken them from stories long dead, from a future his people had lost, but still understandable. Possible. He had wanted to find them waiting as though they were the answers to keep him sane.

"You were right, there should have been a ship."

He shook his head wildly. "Not a woman dancing barefoot on a pile of sand."

A narrow hand, heavily ringed, smoothed over his. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know." He hadn't then either, had kept trying not to think, not to expect, just to hold each thing as it happened, just as it was. He looked up. "I almost died."

"Yes, you did."

"What did she do? Ulanda?"

"The Priest Ulanda. Or Lady Priest. We dropped titles and rank there, but until things are better settled and you know the customs, you should follow the basic forms."

"Priest?"

"As best the word translates into your language. A Priest is a conduit to the Unity, or God, if you prefer."

"And you, what's your title?"

"En'talac will do for me, at least for now."

"Would a title tell me something I need to know?"

She sighed. "Of the Overpriest Sarkalt's House. Temple medic of the Master rank, which, with my already having some contact with you, is one of the reasons I'm with you now. And my rank is also why I was with the others at the dance." She touched the braid on one wrist. "My service is to the Overpriest, and for this, his interests coincide with the Priest Ulanda's."

"Are those basic forms?" he asked, letting the meanings of the words float for now.

She laughed. "Quin'tat says I deserved that. My husband and Chief of Staff and quite sure someone else could have handled this. Have you had much experience with jealous husbands?"

Only once and he'd been much younger and not as smart as he had thought he was. "I'll have to play it by ear," he said, trying to find a way to escape being so close without it becoming a rout. "Will that be part of my 'handling'?"

"Not jealous," a deep voice said from behind them. "Try exasperated."

"He also has terrible timing. We were just getting to the interesting part of our conversation."

"So I noticed."

The other man was a head taller than he was and far larger, with skin the color of oiled cedar. The shape of his face was a rocky outcropping on a mountain; Rit half expected the floor to break under his weight, but he moved easily and knelt next to the bed, putting a large round tray down between them.

On the tray: a plate of toasted bread, still warm, darkly browned and smelling of wheat. No butter, but an herb-scented oil in a small pool on the plate, the cut edges of the bread soaking in it. Flecks of the herb mixed with toast crumbs.

A plain red clay teapot, unglazed, but buffed to a soft shine. Well used: minute scratches on the rounded belly, differences in colour - the handle where oils from the skin had darkened the surface, the edges of the lid where tea saturated steam

collected, around the spout - a patina like silver got over years of handling. A pot not any different than he could have bought in the market at Endica, stouter perhaps and the handle shaped like a hand gripping the sides, only the fingers had twin knuckles... too late to escape that detail... his own hands made fists and he closed his eyes, but it didn't help, he was shivering the length of his body.

The other two waited, sipping tea and eating toast.

When he opened his eyes, Quin'tat handed him a bowl of tea, his other hand holding his sleeve back from brushing the tray. A light green silk robe - like En'talac's - and the same wristband in darker green. "You're doing fine,"

"Am I?"

He nodded. "Your animals, horses. We've seen what appear to wild ones as well. Do you breed your stock or do you catch the others?"

"Both." The tea was strong and bitter, the surface of his tongue felt numb on the first sip. "Is that what you're doing? Taming me? Gentling me? Or was it handling me?" Trembling again, he had to concentrate to keep from spilling the tea, but a good portion of it was a sudden and almost overwhelming anger. Mostly against himself and how he hadn't given his men the loyalty owed them. How he had let Cillamet be treated was worse in memory than it had been at the time. Not the deaths, he told himself, they took that risk; all of them did, but the lives.

"Have a piece of toast," En'talac said calmly, nibbling on hers.

He slammed the tea bowl across the room. It shattered and dropped before reaching the wall.

"You came to us gentled," Quin'tat said evenly, looking at the pieces of earthenware on the blond wood of the floor. A mottled red glaze on white but over the same color clay as the teapot. "We would be interested in knowing by who and why."

"Where are my men? Panntin and Cillamet?"

"Both of them are safe. Why did you untie Lord Gennady?"

"What?" he said. He had stopped half up, holding the sheet in front. Then sat back down quite suddenly. His head buzzed. Someone came with another bowl, they were a shape there and gone, but Rit was scarcely aware of it.

Quin'tat poured and offered more tea, then put the bowl on the floor when Rit didn't move to take it. "You were faced with an apparent alien to your world. We're quite sure you understood he wasn't human. At the very least you knew him to be dangerous, your own instinct should have been sufficient, and added to that was the actions of the man's companion. Yet you untied him."

Rit pushed the sweat from his face with one hand, noting absently that he had been shaved. "I don't know why." His voice was as shaky as his knees had been. Part of it was that the men would have poked at him, he knew. Not all, not right off, but one would have started it. Vinn, he could have said. Gennady wouldn't

have fit any of Vinn's categories, his need for order that drove the rest of them half crazy with impatience. Then the memory of how Vinn had died came back to him, the man's screaming over the space of a long slow death. He remembered through years of skirmishes between the Olum Hegemony and Xinta, finding others killed that way, and how orderly the Xintan were in their skinning.

"Untying him seemed reasonable at the time," he continued after a moment when it appeared they were willing to wait for as long as it took for him to talk. He took the bowl just to have something to touch. With Gennady loose, the men had to watch out, react to the alien as something real; it made him more real because they could have ended up dead if he took anything wrong. And when they saw that he acted human... He almost laughed out loud but suspected hysteria was waiting if he did. "Well, not entirely reasonable, but then nothing that happened..." He took a long slow breath. "How long was I unconscious? Since yesterday? Was it yesterday?"

Quin'tat picked the bowl from his hand as the first drops spilled over the lip. "You worry about loyalty, besides to your men, to your superiors most likely. But the letter you sent along with the book wasn't going to them, was it?"

"How...?"

"Lord Gennady is quite experienced in dealing with alien cultures, not in adapting to them as many human lines tend to, Zimmer don't consider that desirable, I'm not sure it's even possible..."

En'talac threw the last quarter of a piece of toast at her husband. "I think my questions would have gotten us further."

The large man picked up the piece of bread, tiny in his fingers and sighed, a deep rumble of sound. "I'm sorry, Captain Wilnmeit. When I said you're doing fine, I should add that each decision you've made since that first one has shown a remarkable sensitivity to the flow of what is happening here."

The dance, Rit thought he could have as easily said. "Panntin could see the lines in the sky right off." He took the bowl again, and looking at the dark surface of his tea, saw shimmers of gold where his own reflection didn't block what came back from the walls and ceiling. No lines. "You knew immediately what was wrong with the boy and had a drug to help." En'talac looked at her husband, but neither of them spoke.

"The lines didn't start with you," he continued, forcing himself to look at the two people watching him. "When Ulanda... danced, the lines were there again, the same ones, same as those drawn on her face, same as those cut into the Xintan dead, or their priestess' tattoos." And in a related form, the seal of his father's House. A flower with six petals. Xintan tapestries, the white flowers with centers made of three parallel lines, the ancient form for vulva, and the petals around them to form a sunburst of six lines. "They're older than a couple of days."

Three people watching him. “Much older,” the other man said from the doorway. Rit scrambled back across the room before realizing he was moving. His tea splashed on the floor and then the bowl fell.

“Are you mad, allowing him in here?” En’talac said sharply. But she was speaking to her husbands back, the man already up. A mountain blocking the sun, Rit thought, desperately trying to blink back the spots hazing his vision. Sunburned eyes, too long... His mind didn’t want to work, to make the connections. A river of sounds splashed in the air, and the man was gone.

En’talac moved slowly, calmly. “Take deep breaths, head between your knees.” One hand rested on the back of his head. The warmth of her body with the drape of the silk half covered him. Her kneeling legs were bare to the thighs. “You asked why the two of us, like this.” She moved one of his hands to her thigh, her hand over, all the silver rings warm and cold. “From what you’re feeling, coming back means coming back to flesh and warmth and when you don’t have enough of your own...” Her hand guided his higher, pushing the silk of her robe up. “... or can’t find it, then someone else can help.”

His disorientation crashed into the pit of his stomach, his vision blurred. As he straightened, he thought he might pass out, then, as quickly as it had happened the terror was gone.

He was a vacuum waiting to be filled by what the moment offered. Anger, fear, desire. “I think I’ve found myself.” His sheet was half the room away.

She giggled. “Yes, so you have.”

Quin’tat was back, clothing draped over his arm, soft leather boots held in his hand. “You might prefer these to what we’re wearing.”

The clothes sorted into black pants and long belted tunic in pale gray, split at the sides to the waist. Pants first, and before he said a word more.

“Who...?” he started as he pulled one boot on.

“The Overpriest Sarkalt.” En’talac arranged her skirts as she sat back on her heels. “You’ve been over-sensitized to pattern, but even if you hadn’t, he takes some getting used to.”

He hadn’t really seen the man; even the memory was blind in the center, as though he had looked at too bright a light. “What the hell is ‘pattern’? And will I have to get used to him?”

Quin’tat sat next to his wife. “You’re part of an arrangement, one that means your having to get used to Priests is a certainty.” He sighed. “I want to tell you a story. About some goats.”

When he reached the weaver's tent, Rit stopped and looked back at the Overpriest's ship he had just left. The sun was about to rise from behind. The hull tiles had interlocked rings stamped into the clay, and this close, even with the glare, he could see the irregularities in the surface. Not much thicker than a plate, each tile had been made by hand. If he put his palm on the surface, he would feel a buzz from the energy fields the tiles routed, the direction and meaning as irritatingly elusive as the rest of what he was trying learn.

Using amplified Net and linked with En'talac, he was just starting to control the effect pattern had on his mind and body. A band of pain had taken up residence behind his eyes and a larger pain in his shoulders from tensing, waiting for her to drop him from her link again to leave him floating in nothing, as though on an ocean in dense fog. At night. He should have accepted her offer of a back rub. Careful pleasures, he thought ruefully. He wasn't sure what was careful anymore, pleasures or otherwise.

Changing focus, he let his eyes rest on the wards further out; those he saw as something similar to heat rising but with a blue cast. Additional wards were set around the Opening site, along with red and white flags on poles to mark the perimeter of the protected area.

Xintan flags. The Xintan were to the North Command Line cities already. Endica, all of western Denman Province, was in enemy hands. He didn't know what was happening in the other provinces, but could guess. The Noble Houses would sit tight until it was too late, using their levies to protect their own land base, and leaving the cities to the various local Guards, and general defense of the borders to the Patrol. The sharp demarcation between civilians and the military in Heg society meant that the general population was ill equipped to mount an effective resistance to the invaders.

From behind him, Bolda grunted as leaned forward to slam the bar against the threads to tighten the weave. "You worry it too much, give it some time."

The sides of the day tent were tied back for what little breeze there was. A Xintan weaver, a Slowfire Clan Matron, was kneeling next to the basket with the ready yarn, short lengths spread over her skirt and her blunt tanned fingers running them absently as she watched Bolda work. In the dirt between her and Bolda were designs that looked like they'd been drawn and scratched out, drawn again, changed and argued over.

Rit squatted to get a closer look at the cloth. How many grunts to a length of cloth, he wondered as he watched. The simple basketweave rows were every second, or third or fourth, the others a finger weaving of dangling ties of thin

yarn. Looked like nothing doing it, a slow nothing, but the cloth had grown appreciably from earlier this morning.

He straightened. "I'm not sure there is time enough to get used to seeing pattern. Ever."

"Maybe." Bolda stopped to glare at the Matron. A tiny looping of mud yellow wool was in his hand, the end broken. "Bloody yarn's too short in the fiber. I told you so."

Two women, too young to be Matrons, were kneeling close by sorting yarns into lengths and twisting them between their fingers. They looked up at Bolda's tone, their dark eyes widening. The Matron hissed a few words at them and they bent their heads to their work. "Fools," was the least of what she said. Then to Bolda: "You need to use jin-jin soaked wool. I told you so too."

"It's too stiff, it won't take the amount of finger matting needed to lock the yarns into this kind of design. If you think you can do any better..." Bolda stood up.

The Matron pushed in beside Bolda, eyes narrowed as she twisted the broken fragment back onto the looping. The tent cast a light shadow, more a hazing of the sunlight. The other tents were red with white stripes but a Xintan Weaver's day tent was always solid white.

The short man stretched a hand or two taller, then settled back. "I must be getting old," he said, rubbing his back. The Matron glanced at him, a sly crosswise look. Bolda grunted.

Rit kept himself from laughing only with difficulty. "Mother," he said politely in the Xintan that Bolda and the woman had been using. "If you would excuse this one from your presence and that of your daughters."

She didn't look up, barking, "Excused." Then did, a thoughtful look on her deeply seamed face. "Near Hand of the Lady's House, honor to your leave-taking."

He bowed, and then took Bolda's arm as they left. "I'm taking Heni out before it gets too hot. Why don't you join me?"

He had spoken in a bastard mix of Hegemony and Xintan, but Bolda didn't miss a step. "You're forgetting about breakfast. Then I'll think about whether I'm crazy enough to try riding again."

Rit caught his link with the Net like the buzz of a mosquito. Three hours practice again this morning and he could only hear stray noises. "We can eat up here."

Bolda shook his head. "You can't keep avoiding her."

"Our meetings aren't very productive."

Bolda waited a moment then shrugged and started walking towards their encampment. "Hell, work it out between yourselves."

The mound of sand where Ulanda had danced had more flags set around; six of them white silk prayer flags, each a body length but narrow and cut deeply into three along the length. Near where the fire had been, seeds had sprouted. The long narrow casing of each was carried up by the triple seed leaves. Li-Cassa, or "Cry of the Lady" when translated from the Empire tongue. Others of the seeds had been planted in the center of the mound of sand as a burial offering.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he had asked, incredulous when Quin'tat had told him the story about what had supposedly happened. Crystal changing into seeds and grass? An allegory, a myth, he had thought. Acceptable as a reason behind their actions, their beliefs, but real only in that way, not in the way the sharp fragment of seed and dry membrane placed on the pale wood between them had been real.

"Everything is energy in one form or another," Quin'tat had said. "Reality is only a shaping of these energies, a patterning. Even with extensive training you will only learn to see deeper into the shapes, your senses will remain limited, and your span of looking will only encompass a single lifetime. What you see will appear continuous and sequential." He shook his head slowly. "*Our* limited senses. Not just yours. I'd prefer as much as you that this seed stays a seed, or becomes a plant and flower in a very predictable way. To a Priest, the seeing is deeper again, more visceral, less conscious, and less dependant on time and place. And, in varying degrees, they are able to change the immediate expression of reality."

What part of reality had Ulanda changed with her dance? Evasions - and more myths - couched in polite language was all he got for his questions. And from En'talac: "It's what is *now* that's important. It doesn't matter what was before."

A path was being worn from the ship with its cluster of attendant Xintan tents, around the mound and down the slope to the spring. A few minutes walk from the Xintan Weaver's tent to the spot nearest the mound, the air rising with the heat shimmer, and the smell of sage, and as always when he passed this spot, wood smoke. The seedlings had grown since that morning, the seed casings gone and the first true leaves just showing in the center where the three seed leaves met.

"Weeds," Bolda said, following his gaze. He had stopped, fists on his hips and was glaring at the landscape. "Just the kind of place the bloody things like too. Be a mess of them in a few years."

"Why not pull it out now? Then remembered again the others that had been planted and why.

"Everything gets left alone." Bolda turned his head to look at him. "See any new footprints off this path? How about where we all stood around while Quin'tat did the burial ritual for Li-Fu and Efflin and Ulim? Any footprints there now?"

There were footprints. High arched feet with the second toe longer than the big one. Just hers. There had been Bolda's and En'talac's, his and Gennady's and Garm's. And would have been many others in the days since.

He had felt shivers as Quin'tat described the forming of the sunstones and their harvest, both stories, the one with goats in it and the other. He had been in a susceptible state, unnerved already, but he hadn't believed a word.

"What happened to the footprints? What do you mean about getting left alone?"

"The land is re-forming. We're like floating dust for all we matter to the shaping here. Except Ulanda." Bolda tugged on a long earlobe. "Wind for the footsteps, or animals tracking over them, who knows. Even hers will go eventually. Next time it rains, the cuts in the land will be different than they might otherwise have been, or a windstorm will put dirt where it wasn't before, and different again. A bird for seeds, or a bit of guano. Not in my lifetime, or yours, but the world-altar will be here and it won't change after that, ever. Or any 'ever' you'd care to think about."

"What will it look like?"

"Don't know." A very short pause that Rit wouldn't have noticed except for the buzz of an insect, almost like it was crawling in his ear, and then something drifted down around them like a translucent net cast into water. A spiral?

Bolda scratched his head and the image vanished. "That wasn't worth the effort. Anyway, each world-altar is different. Ri-altar wasn't much of anything to look at, a ring of trees, about all."

"You've been there?"

A snort. "Cassa liked it. Liked to take a flitter there and watch the sunrise over the ocean. Then she'd go to bed."

The mythical Empress of a perhaps real Empire. They started walking again. "And it didn't change?"

"Every time we were there it had changed. Different seasons, plants growing or dying, animals different, always changing."

"But..."

Bolda stopped. "Look, if you pulled images over a few million years, say, the same day of the year each time and allowing for the weather, all you'd see would be the same thing, all the changes would be like that heat shimmer you see back there over the mound. The sameness extended out as well, anything that happened elsewhere on the planet would have to allow for Ri-altar staying the same. All hooked onto that one thing."

"What about this path then?" Packed dirt to a series of rocks in shelf-like layers to form stairs to the lower ground where the spring was.

Bolda kicked at a pebble sending it bouncing ahead of them. "Got a better way of getting from there to here?"

Rit opened his mouth and closed it. No, he didn't.

He was used to religion as history, religion as something non-Hegemony peoples took on faith, could even accept the secular rituals and political dogma of his people as religion of a sort. Even the Charter Houses, or especially them. He had read the secret histories that said how deliberate the creation of the Charter Houses had been as the Olum Hegemony had both centralized the government and rapidly expanded its borders, making critical the need for organization beyond a strict feudal system. They were taking record keeping very close to being a religion, with the rules and sets of orders and the segregation meant to defuse the power struggles that originated in the Noble Houses and which the members brought with them regardless.

But this was more like shaking hands with a ghost, and inviting it for tea and asking about the weather.

More tents. White and black this time and not in stripes, but in offset layers like the wall of stones half surrounding the clearing. A cairn like that at Dog mountain was at the base of the path where the ground leveled, a pyramid with a flat top and marker stones in orderly arrangements on the surface. Mother names of those staying here, and if they were here, or absent.

Already warm air shimmered further in the warding entwined in the poles supporting the large pavilion. The buzz in Rit's ears crackled as Bolda passed through the entrance.

The whinny of a horse came from the staking past the grove of Unib trees, hooves on the hard ground and voices. He thought he might keep walking, take Heni out as he had told Bolda he would. But he didn't leave and he didn't follow Bolda into the Lady's tent, he didn't move from where he stood beside the dark fire pit. A ring of stones, black and white again, the arrangement caught his eye, his eye willing to be caught by anything. Reluctant, yes. Avoiding her, yes.

A bundle of branches were entwined next to the firestones, as though woven into a shape rather than simply stacked and his mind was even more willing than his eyes to be distracted from his thoughts. And from the twigs, almost by chance, saw the same shape of leaf and stem in the stone, a fossil in the sandstone slab.

He blinked. Nothing obvious showed on the surface of the stone. A step closer and a harder look and suddenly he felt the energy within the ring of stones. Fire that had been there, that would be again. The smoke filled his mouth making him cough, he saw enitree branches burning, the curling of the thorns as the flame approached...

- 3 -

When she should have been concentrating on the meeting with the Bluestone priestess, Ulanda had watched Rit through the Net. Did he deliberately try to avoid her as Bolda had said? Approaching where he might meet her, he was wary, once past, it was as though the possibility of her was a wind at his back.

"Your turn," Bolda said to her in Ri-common as he came in. "See if you can manage to get more than five words out of him at a time." He ignored Viy'lana on his way to the rear section of the tent.

Walking through an image of flames that didn't exist, Ulanda went out to meet him. "Will you join me, Rit Wilnmeit?"

From staring at the non-existent flames, he looked at her, surprising her as always that their eyes were on the same level. Sometimes she thought she looked up to him, as a child does, or down, as from a height. Other times, just so distant as to be looking out from the night to where he stood in the day, just eyes looking back. And wondered if she was taking the images from his confusion, or from hers.

"Thank you Lady Priest, but I'm not hungry."

"Join me regardless. Jini has brought some cakes from the ship." Ulanda moved closer to stand hip to hip, arm to arm close, suddenly needing to feel the heat, the maleness of him. And was glad Garm was asleep. "I'm not sure Viy'lana entirely approves. I think she prefers a more austere god."

And what did he prefer? In a god and in a woman? He had moved away at her approach, it was as though she herded him into the tent.

The Xintan priestess sat on a saddle stool center of a small rug in the second chamber of the pavilion. Layers of shadow and light threw the tattoos on her face into sharp relief, making them float, brilliant in the darker air. Riding into Intil with the first of the Warrior bands, there when the city fell, she had spoken of leaving a Sister priestess dead of pattern kill. Ulanda had heard the longing in her voice.

"Elder Mother," Rit nodded to priestess. She nodded back without a change in the line of her lips or a softening of her eyes in recognition, even though Ulanda knew they had met earlier. Traditional enemies, and worse, in the middle of a war. The Xintan invasion had been timed to the prophesy of the Lady's Coming, the pattern lines and sickness that caused panic in the Hegemony population, had supported their jihad. That the immediate area was secure was a function of how well she fit the role of the Xintan god. And the effectiveness of the Xintan forces.

She remembered the screams as one of Rit's patrol had been tortured and killed by the Xintan. And saw the priestess in the sound. Was it a real vision or a reflection of Ulanda's own reaction to the woman - a reaction she suspected she

borrowed from Rit? In her late twenties, Viy'lana's tattoos masked her quite effectively to a casual look, hiding the sum of her beauty, something seen more in the perfection of her features taken one at a time. Brown hair bleached in strands to a dark gold and woven to make fine braids which framed her face before being pulled up and tied to a loose fall of hair at the crown of her head. Her eyes were a lighter brown than her hair but with flecks of the same sun-washed gold. She wore the necklaces of silver coin that showed the live births of two children.

Ulanda had hoped to see herself in the Xintan, especially the Bluestone, but except for the similarity in looks, they remained alien.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Viy'lana," she said, soft toned, but shaping a sign of dismissal with the hand she could use more easily. Several of the Empire signs were already common, their honoring insisted upon.

"By your leave, Lady," Viy'lana said, slipping to her knees to bow, then rose to leave in a sweep of black skirts.

With the priestess gone, Ulanda sat in a saddle stool opposite from where Rit still stood and leaned against the leather of one curved side. "Won't you sit?"

He took the seat Viy'lana had vacated.

Bolda called something from the next chamber, a guttural sound that the Net wouldn't translate, but she caught the tone and the name. Viy'lana. "Yes," she said.

"Bloody sourpuss." Bolda brought in a small table with teapot and bowls on it. Jini followed carrying a covered basket.

"San Garm sleeping is easier now, Lady Priest," the large woman said as she fanned herself with the lid of the basket. The few loose tendrils of sweat damp hair on her forehead barely stirred. Pale red in the long braids that hung from either side, darker framing her round face. "The heat agrees with him - lucky him." She put the basket on the table, sliding bowls to one side with the edge, and then stared at the contents. "The pin-berry squares are especially good. Last jar of preserves." She sighed, and then looked around, still fanning. Rit got the same look as the cake square had and Ulanda kept her smile to herself. "I've got a continuous scan on him, but I'll check back in a couple of hours. I don't trust this Net."

"You won't stay?"

"My thanks, but no, I'm going over the local medicinal plants with the Xintan healers. En'talac's busy with something else - lucky her."

Ulanda took the tea bowl Bolda passed her, resting the weight on the arm of her chair. Something shimmered in the air. A medic scan. "You might ask next time."

"You could use some sleep as well." Jini sounded unconcerned at the disapproval. "But not with your San. If you find you need anybody, call."

Rit looked down, he had gotten another look from Jinii, but more like a cake square would already half eaten. This time Ulanda did laugh, quite forgiving the medic her presumption.

Bolda snorted and the medic looked at him next, her hands in fists on her wide hips. "Men," she said, sounding disgusted. Then chuckled with a wink at Bolda before returning to her. "Lady Priest, you might want to ask Lord Gennady about Clanny. He's refused Quin'tat's latest request, but from you...." She shrugged.

I think she likes you," Ulanda said to Bolda when the medic had gone.

"Humph," he said, but sounded pleased.

After getting up to get a bowl of tea and one of the pastries, Rit had remained standing and each restless movement on his part brought him closer to leaving. Her attempt at polite chitchat failed as miserably as Bolda's had earlier.

Do you hate me so much? she wanted to ask him, but knew the coin she would be tossing into the air with the question. Love. Hate. Mirror words. And her own feelings towards him? *A small boat on the waves and her brother calling her name...* Poultat twins, one soul. Cassa's reality where wishes could come true and where the right man could be at the right place at the right time. A grain of sand on a mountain of chance. He was hers and she didn't know what she had done except they were both alive.

Ulanda took a sip of tea, bending her head rather than raising her bowl. The surface of the cooling liquid didn't hold any answers. "Quin'tat is still in Endica," she said then looked up. "The local Ocea Council for the Delta lands has worked out a non-aggression compact with the Xintan Princip in command of the Endica area, essentially in support of the treaty already in existence between the two peoples. And more, maintaining trade in the new territory much the way it was with the Heg rulers. It is expected that the Ocea government will ratify the terms."

Rit took a swallow of his tea before answering. "Which removes yet another barrier to the Xintan invading the rest of Hegemony."

From the reports she had, there were no barriers. Or effective military opposition. "I didn't create the situation and I can only welcome this sign of peace."

With exaggerated care, he put his tea bowl on the table. "If you'll excuse me, Lady, I have no say in these matters."

"Sit down and listen," Bolda growled.

She looked down at her tea again. "Panntin's Initiation is tonight. You are required to be there."

"I told him I would be."

"As his superior in the Olum Hegemony Patrol, or because I say so? Or is it to represent your House?" She looked up. "Interesting that the first native-born

Priest on Alisim will most likely be of your blood line. Strom Noble House, I'm told."

He didn't say anything.

She moved her hand to cup the tea bowl, trailing pale blue braid ends over the shimmering opal gray of her robe. Her injured arm didn't want to move and she used the pain to help focus her mind. "Because of the unusual circumstances..." And the bargain she had made with Quin'tat, and through him, with Sarkalt. "... the Overpriest's Household may have taken responsibility for seeing to your training, but they can't - they won't - support you in opposition to me."

"Opposition about what?"

"I want your oaths to my Household."

Bolda shook his head as he reached to take the bowl she struggled with. She ignored him, her hands forming shapes Rit's eyes didn't follow and which he wouldn't know the meaning of if they had. "Ritsiniti, for whatever reason it was that put you here, with me, I want your oaths to me before the Xintan Elders take what's left of you to fit their plans."

At the use of his proper name, one she knew only from what the Xintan had told them, his eyes narrowed. "I'm not interested in either likelihood."

"Do you have a choice to be interested or not?" Bolda said.

Ulanda motioned Bolda to be still, her eyes didn't leave Rit. "I meant it when I said that the Overpriest's people won't interfere with my wishes. Nor will they oppose the Xintan. For purposes you need to know nothing about, they won't become involved in the local politics."

"And this isn't involvement?"

"Quin'tat is in Endica as my representative, nothing more. And necessity moves my actions."

"Necessity to create a new political will? All I see around me is another Xintan religious cult. They grow them like some countries grow corn. And cut them down as quickly."

"Is what you see over the mound something from a cult? Are the ships from a cult? Altasimic pattern is what is happening here and now. People are still dying, still being taken up by the world-pattern, and not just Xintan. And Panntin... he won't be the last who has one choice and one choice only regardless of lack of training or preparation. Become a Priest or die from their unstable access to pattern. Or be killed. On any Empire world but this one and under these conditions, and by my will, he would have been killed. They can all die, I can, you can, and there would still be Altasimic pattern and Alisim will still be part of Empire. I'm giving them a chance they wouldn't have had otherwise."

She shifted her weight. "Xinta is a theocracy, Temple - Empire-style Temple - will form an important part of the government, or rather the government will be an arm of Alisim Temple. As for the rest, I don't care except where it impacts on

my people and me. If the Xintan don't know that now, they will soon. There will be other oaths to me, willing ones, and the pattern of Temple custom will be seen."

"What possible interest could the Xintan have in me?"

"The Xintan Elders have plans for a Strom-led government to rule over the Hegemony territories."

"A subject government? That's not how the Xintan take over other countries."

She shrugged. "They intend for you to head the new Royal House."

"Why? Because of this...?" He waved one hand around.

She shrugged again and looked away, she found it exhausting to watch how his deep anger flickered to the surface to catch on her words and burn freely. But a glance was all she needed to know their being here was and wasn't a factor in his future and she didn't know what difference anything she might do would make. She was feeling this one word at a time; the only imperative was that she not lose her connection to this man. An image came to her: the island in the biting mouth of the diamond - the small limited creation of Cassa's where her awareness had gone from sand to reeds, to water and the fish, the shallow water, the algae. And if she made a leap of awareness now that she hadn't dared then? What would she find in a deliberate creation as large as the universe? Would Rit still be with her?

"One thing doesn't preclude the other," she continued slowly, forcing her choice of words to mean what she wanted them to, something Bolda so often said they didn't. "Your being king, or at least under consideration by the Xintan Assembly, is something that has long been arranged with your own people, the Strom. Our being here may have changed the shape of what is unfolding, but we didn't create it or your part in it."

"I don't believe you."

She looked to Bolda first - he was staring at the floor rugs - then back to Rit. "You do believe me. Tell me, Ritsiniti, are your words a balm to your pride or is it you simply feel it necessary to contradict everything I say?" His knowing the truth was quite independent of his believing it. The Xintan plans. Her plans. He saw her in the same way she knew he had seen flames in the ash of the fire ring. Whatever she was and whatever he was, his connection to the pattern here wasn't in doubt. "Your cooperation with the Overpriest's people, with the Xintan, is a natural result of the choices you've already made. Why would anyone believe you won't continue to cooperate?"

"Because I'll demonstrate differently right now." He turned and walked out.

"You'll do what you're told to do," she said to his back. Too late, she had managed to find an anger to match his. Or it was the same anger, but in her, spent itself against the floor cloths and rugs in a fall of black fire from her braid ends. She could feel the Altasimic pattern as a shimmer around the other, but it

was vanishingly faint and not for the first time, wondered if what she sensed was only its echo in overpattern.

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The horses were staked at the far end of the camp, under a stand of trees, the only shade in the immediate area that wasn't man-made. Just an illusion of cool: the rustle of the small round leaves overhead, the moving, filtered light... Rit knew his senses were fooled but he welcomed it. A separate place defined by the trees, by the circle of shadows, the sweet dry smell of the hay bundles stored nearby, the familiar sounds as the horses moved, hooves against the beaten dirt, the skitter of the dry yellow leaves along the ground. A place to arrive at to show he had really left Ulanda's tent.

Cillamet nodded hello at his greeting but didn't speak, he was busy working a tall white mare with a curry brush. A dapple line ran along the mare's neck to her flanks, a scattering of dark gray hair added color to the tail and mane. From Lord Camuit's stud outside of Endica, one of twenty or so horses brought back, mostly mares, the pick of them being for the Lady's House. Cillamet must have just finished Heni, she was fancied up with cross-brushed patches on her haunches. His thanks got as much a response as his first words. A pair of Bluestone Clan Warriors was untying their horses at the far end of the string. He received more of a greeting from them: a pair of watchful bows, hands signing honor, Empire style.

Heni whiskered, pulling from the long rope, and he untied her halter from the line before feeding her the rest of the cake square, rubbing the blaze on her nose with his other hand as her soft speckled lips tried to find more crumbs than were there. Somehow he still had the cake in his fist when he had walked out and the mare didn't mind it mangled.

"I'll take her out for an hour before it gets too hot," he said to Cillamet. "Why don't you come, work some of the frets out of that mare. Do all of us some good."

Cillamet glanced at him, and then continued working.

He waited until the Warriors were gone. "I'd like to talk, but not here." He picked up a saddle, not his Patrol issue, but Xintan style in heavily stitched felted black wool. Outside the range of the ship's Net was what he wanted, even if they would pick up an escort of Warriors at the perimeter boundary of the camp. A chance to explain in relative privacy what was obviously not going to be a secret

much longer. And the rest... the Strom and Xintan conspiracy? He'd like it explained to him first.

Cillamet's red face looked over the short bristle of the white horse's mane, his eyes squinting through bleached lashes. "Panntin already told me. Finally got to see him when he wasn't doped up and that bloody priestess wasn't hanging around." He bent to his work again but the words traveled. "I guess the Warriors finally decided who has the honor of getting gutted. Or whatever happens."

The white horse sidled over, away from Cillamet, pulling her head up to the end of her rope and rolling her eyes. A beautiful animal but highly-strung.

"Might be better if he had died already," Cillamet added, waiting with the brush in hand until the horse calmed.

The Net buzzed again and he managed to recognize En'talac's signature if not any of her words. "We're getting some company," he said softly to Cillamet.

The man rubbed too hard, sending the mare sideways again. "So, when isn't there?" His tone was higher pitched with anger. "You can't fart without them knowing it."

Cillamet was having all he could do to settle the mare, something more than his anger had spooked her, the other horses picking up on it. Heni just shook her head, her ears twisting as though to catch a sound. Rit felt the whine first in his teeth; the ship was almost overhead before he heard it. The Zimmer pod, almost as large as the Overpriest's ship. It always circled the mound first before landing on this side. The ground rose sharply towards the usual landing site then dropped even faster and deeper to make a narrow crease in the land.

The Zimmer were allied to the Lady's House - and Alisim Temple - rather than to the Overpriest's House, or so En'talac had explained. As Bluestone Clan was, in honor service. "A dance," she had said and chuckled. "Best if everybody agrees to the steps rather than feet get stepped on."

The ship moved overhead no faster than a walk, his vision of it filtered by the trees. Greens, varied by the sun and the new shadow, and beyond: the black of the ship against the silver blue sky. Cillamet stared skyward, holding the cheek strap of the white mare's halter in one hand, the brush still in the other. Nervous stomping from the other horses, whinnies and snorts, a chorus that sounded like a building storm of horses.

Rit went back to fastening the straps from his saddle. Heni had found a wisp of straw in the dust; she ignored the ship as she played at picking it up, blowing noisily, a different sound quite distinct from the whine. Rit stroked her shoulder, scratching the few small white patches of hair as he always did. She flicked her tail at him, swatting him in the back, but didn't give up on her game.

"Lord Ritsiniti." When he looked up, En'talac was there, her eyes on him. She wore the formal robes he had seen her in only once before, at the service for the three Simic who had died during the Opening. A pale green robe with white

showing at the neck and lower sleeves from an underrobe, a girdle in an elaborately knotted pattern held the folds of heavy cloth close to her narrow waist, the ties floating hem length and trailing behind as she walked. Leaves of all shapes showed on the surface of the cloth; the uneven light under the trees made them look as though they were shivering in a breeze and not just silk in a textured weave.

A change from this morning when he had seen her last in a thin silk robe tied at the waist. She was more alien appearing out of doors, the land around her too familiar and ordinary. Beautiful either way and he wondered again if he was supposed to fall in love with her. And if he was, or if she was a refuge from what he felt about Ulanda. And if she was meant to be a refuge. 'Handled', she and Quin'tat had said, and he had been. And was still at a total loss of what else to do.

He led Heni out a few feet to meet her. She had her arms crossed, her thin oath banding on the wrist over and showing. "You're not required to like this, Lord Ritsiniti Strom." She spoke Hegemony quite plainly instead of the Xintan that Cillamet understood poorly. "We're none of us required to like our duty."

Cillamet looked over sharply at the name the medic had used, his dark blue eyes narrowed and staring. Then he pulled the horse roughly to stand better between him and the two of them talking, kneeling her when the mare balked.

"I'm an officer in the Border Patrol," he said stiffly. "My duty is to the Hegemony."

"Yes, it is."

"And that doesn't include working for the Xintan." All he knew was that the future Ulanda had spoken of unfolded already dead in his mind, stillborn, nothing there of anything he wanted. Had ever wanted. 'Ambition' his great uncle had once asked of him. None. He had left the Charter House for the Common's Patrol on his own, unwilling to wait until the Royal House or his cousins discovered his existence.

"You have an opportunity to prevent what may yet turn into a war of extinction." Her head was tilted back, the blend of comfort and teasing of her various expressions that had helped him through the changes of the past days was gone, masked by something he couldn't read.

"A war triggered by your arrival, and allowed..."

"Allowed? Your people fight constantly. What do we have to allow to have you still fighting for whatever reason?"

He had never seen her angry with him before and was surprised at his feeling of having lost something. Had what he thought of as the start of a friendship all been duty to her - one she hadn't necessarily enjoyed?

He pulled Heni between them, as Cillamet had done with the white mare. "Is it so easy to divorce yourself from your actions?"

"Consider your own actions and the consequences of them."

The whine from the pod cut off like rain stopping and the horses began to settle. Heni turned her head and pushed against him with her nose, teasing into where there was a pocket in his uniform pants and here, was nothing. En'talac stood watching him, as though waiting.

"Oh shit," Cillamet said, staring up the path that led towards the tents.

Two people jointed En'talac. "This is Arasima," En'talac said in a more normal tone of voice. "Of the Overpriest's Household. Our pilot. Pida, you've both met."

"Lord Ritsiniti a'Strom d'Alisim," the Zimmer said hesitantly, looking down as she said it.

"Arasima," he said, signing honor to her and bowing. Her eyes met his momentarily, and then dropped again before sliding off to look at everything around her. Her? Rake thin and obviously not human, like Gennady - especially when he let himself see more than what his eyes told him: Zimmer pattern like static electricity sparking across her skin - but unlike as well. Was it the difference between male and female for the Zimmer?

Pida had been walking beside her, the man wearing what he always was whenever Rit saw him. A simple white skirt to the knees, a large pendant around his neck and nothing else except light sandals. Leaving the Zimmer woman standing near En'talac, Pida continued to the mare that Cillamet had been grooming and started stroking her nose while he talked softly to the lanky man. Cillamet didn't look happy and backed up only to be followed step for step.

Heni snorted and blew at the Zimmer being close, but two weeks of coming and going had gotten the horses used to Gennady. The Zimmer crew had always stayed in the flitter or pod; he hadn't known the Overpriest's ship had any Zimmer.

"What's this all about?" he asked En'talac.

"We're expected at the pod."

"Why? Because of the Assembly of Elders? If you want to greet them, you don't need me. I'll not play puppet to Xintan strings."

"And you're not sure those strings don't include ones pulled by Temple. Frankly, they do."

Her eyes went to the Zimmer woman, a softer expression on her face. "As I said, we're expected." She sighed. "If the strings include Temple, it's because right now, we fulfill the Xintan expectations."

"And they, your needs."

"Yes. One way of fulfilling our needs. A way that fits into the flow of what was already happening here. Alternatives exist. For one, the Zimmer could establish a corridor here by a show of force that your people couldn't begin to imagine. For certain concessions, Lord Gennady would be more than willing to oblige the Lady Priest Ulanda. Except it would be a step that can't be taken backwards."

Her eyes narrowed more as she continued. "We disappoint you, I know. Too primitive in what you see and what you don't see easily you persist in not seeing at all. We didn't trigger this war, it was planned over years, Xintan and Strom, using the prophesy of the Lady's return as the key to unite the Xintan Clans. Our being here was as much a shock to them as it was to you."

"And this business about taking oaths?"

She looked puzzled and he heard the buzz as she used the Net.

"To Ulanda," he added. "Excuse me, the Lady Priest Ulanda."

"En'talac," Arasima whispered and Rit could hear the distress in the woman's tone even with the more alien voice.

En'talac nodded with evidence of the sympathy she had shown earlier, then to him: "I can't say anything about what she does or doesn't want and it's not my place to provide explanations she didn't give you. My only concern with you right now is to get you to the Zimmer ship. Am I going to require help?"

Cillamet and Pida were still talking, the taller man with his head down to hear the other man better. Rit didn't answer but followed the two women, leading Heni. Cooperating again? Step by step... where did he draw the line? Or had he crossed that line to where it was impossible to step backwards? When did he stop waiting for all of this to make sense?

From the small grove where the horses were kept, the ground rose in a rocky stumble of a path to the top of a rise. To one side, Dog Mountain was a muted purple in the distance, the gray and ochre waste between. The near end, opposite the tail, curved towards the mound and was only slightly greener for being closer. The snout of the mountain it was called, as though the dog were curled in sleep. The mountains behind softened even more through a white haze. On the further down slope of the rise, on a shelf of broken road, the Zimmer pod stood on three thin legs, already folded like those of a spider until the belly was near ground level. It sparkled in the sunlight as though made of carved black crystal. Across the gorge, the two Bluestone Clan Warriors sat their horses, watching.

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The young woman had the hollow eyed, dazed look of having seen too much with no familiar ground left her for comfort. Not ignorant, Rit thought, a Border Lord's niece wouldn't be protected in the way a Noble House woman could be and were in central Hegemony. She would have grown up on tales of Xintan atrocities, would have seen the people themselves in the Treaty Markets.

"This is where you'll be staying," he told her, and dropped the carry bags he'd shouldered after the formal introductions in the belly of the pod, refusing the help of the Xintan servants. She had been sitting on the bags and half lifted to stand on his arrival, each arm held by a Bluestone Matron. They would have followed them into the tent if he had allowed it.

"Lord Strom?" she said, sounding confused. A small bundle still held tightly in her arms, she looked around the tent. "Staying? With you?"

He hesitated. En'talac had assumed he'd been told why he was needed at the pod, had assumed the source of his anger was that he was being forced into a political marriage. The Matrons with Alicia had assumed he'd been told. Damn Ulanda. "I have my own tent. I'll find you what else you'll need to make you comfortable here."

"I...I've seen you, haven't I? Before, I mean." Her large hazel eyes welled with tears. About all he knew about her was that she had been orphaned as a very young child and subsequently fostered by Lord Camuit, her uncle. Alicia. Sixteen or seventeen years old, not quite pretty but pleasant looking in a quiet way, or would be normally. Younger looking than her years, or it might be the fear he was seeing or the starkness of the black dress and the heavy shawl she wore despite the heat. The belly of the pod had been cold enough for wearing a shawl, but she still hadn't taken it off.

"You might have seen me," he said. He had seen her, and her cousin, the Lord's eldest daughter. About the same age but there the similarities ended. There hadn't been any gossip in the barracks to do with Alicia. "I was stationed at Endica Fort. A Patrol Captain, Gray Squadron."

She nodded. "A Messenger came - I'd taken Uncle his dinner, to try to get him to eat something. The Charter House Messenger mentioned Gray Squadron but in passing, just that the...." She frowned. "An escort party, ten men, he said. They were past due to return. More about the Xintan attacking Intil. We were supposed to leave on a ship to the Oceeni Coast when the tide turned that evening, but Lady Ollina refused with Lord Camuit staying. Because of the plague riots, not the Xintan, nobody thought they would attack Endica with a full regiment of Patrol stationed at the Fort." She put the bundle down, and kneeling on the floor cloth, started untying the thongs, the loose cloth of the shawl hanging around her like wings.

"I have seen you. At Parade in the Court Square. You rode the same black mare, I remember the blaze on her face like a hand print." Inside the bundle was a kitten, gray with butter yellow in odd patches on its fur. It meowed as she picked it up and she held it too tightly with thin white fingers, her face pressed against the fur.

Her grandmother, Camuit's aunt by marriage, had been of the Olum Royal House, he knew. Likely a branch family of the dynasty, although he wasn't sure

which one, just that it must have been distant from the crown to have a daughter marry into a minor Noble House. Rit supposed the line went back stronger into the royal family, but through the female line as the Xintan counted blood.

"They were looking for me," she whispered into the cat's fur. "The Xintan Warriors. It all happened so fast, there was no word that an attack was imminent, nothing. Then they were there, everywhere all at once. They took us all to the Manor Keep... there was a counter-attack on the Manor; this was about an hour later, I think. I could hear the shooting and the yelling. That's when they killed... they took me away back through their lines, they said I was Royal blood, but they killed Gannit..."

The tears came then, he wondered if they had been shed before other than in private and at night. Or not at all. They wouldn't have dared let her be alone; there were too many ways for someone to kill themselves if they really wanted to. He let the kitten drop down as he held her head tightly against his chest and her hands were full of the cloth of his tunic instead of soft fur. He was a sad excuse for a familiar face. What would happen to her if they didn't marry? Potentially, she was still a valuable political tool, and married to another Strom, she could fulfill the Xintan plans as well as she could married to him.

Bolda came with a tray and left quietly. She let go of him then, pushing as she turned away, her head hanging as she wiped her eyes with a sleeve. Then from the bundle, a white handkerchief, wrinkled and covered in gray cat hairs.

He gave her a couple of minutes by busying himself pouring the tea. An extra bowl besides the pair for them, and a small jug with milk in it. The kitten was hungry and Alicia sniffed as she smiled, stroking the soft fur until the cat flicked its tail, annoyed with being disturbed while it ate.

She poured a little milk in her tea then poured the rest of the milk into the cat's bowl. "About all the Xintan Matrons who kept me would say, that I could understand, was that I was to marry a Strom lord with blood rights to the patrimony of that Noble House, not who you were." Her voice was husky but clear. "How did a Strom Lord come to ride as a Captain on the Endica Border?"

"My mother was a bondmaid on a Strom estate. It serves these people's purposes to call me a Lord, not mine, same as it serves their purpose to have us marry."

"Estates are full of bastards and for all else I've heard about the Strom, I wouldn't think that either they or their estates would vary in that respect. What makes you different?"

No, not ignorant. And not a fool either. "My father was the Head of Strom Noble House, before the current one. How much have they told you about the..."

"The Strom treason?"

"If you know even the word, then you know as much as I do."

She picked her tea bowl up. "Am I supposed to believe that?"

Not a fool, and not common born either. Her tone suited the daughter of a Noble House. "Alicia, does it matter?" She stiffened. "Was that a Xintan or a Strom thing that brought you here? What else did the Matrons tell you?"

She shook her head.

Nothing then, or just nothing that she had been able to take in. "These people, the other ones, they say that I..." He shrugged. "That it was fate that I was here where this started. To them, I think the Xintan plans, even the Strom ones, would merely confirm this. I'm no more free to leave than you are."

She was trying to drink, but having trouble swallowing. "The Matrons said that you were a 'tool' of the Xintan Lady." She put the tea bowl down delicately, watching her hands as though she needed to see them to know what they were doing. "And what about me? Am I a tool of this Lady of theirs, born for this, waiting all my life for this to happen?"

"I don't know what part you play..."

"Play? Cellia was five years old. A Xintan warrior picked her up by her hair and slit her throat then left her lying on the floor like a rag doll you leave when you tire of it." Her voice had risen then fallen to not much more than a whisper. "I didn't see the others die, but I heard the screams. Gannit begged for them to kill her, she screamed until her voice... is that what you have planned for me? And when you're finished, to pass me off to your Xintan friends? Marry you? I should have died with them."

She was shaking when her words broke off. He moved to be beside her, but she shied off, her eyes huge in her white face. Drawing her shawl over the short curls, she held the ends wrapped around her with fingers made into claws, rocking her upper body convulsively. He didn't know what to do except to wait, and stared at his hands as though they didn't belong to him, dead meat at the end of his arms. When En'talac came moments later, Alicia looked at her like a horse does something they don't understand, or can't quite make out. A patch went on her throat with the same lack of seeing.

"Does this meet your needs," he asked very softly, clenching his slow useless hands into fists. Alicia's eyes were starting to close, her thin body slumping against the medic as the woman rubbed at the patch.

"Your people," she said to him harshly, eyes dark slits in her face. "Damn this Net for being useless. I got over here as soon as I could leave..." Then she blinked. "What is that thing?"

"A kitten." He picked it up and held it, much as Alicia had, feeling the warmth, and the heartbeat, and the start of a soft rumble in its throat as the tiny claws picked in a quick rhythm at the fabric on his shoulder. And closed his eyes to feel the warmth better, the small cat almost lost in his big hands.

Wanting to be angrier, he couldn't find it inside himself. Even against Ulanda, the anger couldn't last - blunted by confusion and disbelief he had told himself,

but neither of those emotions had lasted either and afterwards, all words he had spoken were no more than what the occasion demanded. Had they drugged him as well, he wondered, and not for the first time. Then thought he knew this feeling from long before: a waiting to see the end of what was happening. Or not feeling, rather, just waiting. It had brought him here from the Spine of the Serpent when he should already have been in Intil when it fell. He didn't know where else it would take him.

He felt the waves of energy from the brief scan the medic did on Alicia, barely seen but already automatically looked for. A scan on him was next, a longer one. "Drugging her won't stop the memories," he said after a moment.

"I know that," En'talac said gently, as she eased Alicia to the floor cloth. The girl's black clothes blended into the dark cloth and the shadowed air, leaving her pale skin glowing. "But spiraling through them endlessly won't help her either. She needs to sleep; her mind and body are starved for sleep." She sat back on her heels and smoothed her robe, silver rings flashing against the green silk.

The kitten had settled up in his lap, still purring. A stoke of soft fur, and it curled around his hand, biting and kicking with its hind feet. He teased the kitten off with a dangle of his belt tie. "I won't marry her," he said. "I'll do what I can to help get her settled, but that's all."

"You're telling the wrong person," Bolda said as he carried an armload of rugs in and dumped them unceremoniously on the floor next to the tea tray. Then staring at En'talac, he stood with his hands on his hips, "Speaking of the wrong person, don't you have something that needs doing at the ship?"

"Is the Presentation and Choosing over already?" En'talac stood. "I'll check on San Garm then, Jini's still going over herbals." Rit felt her use the Net and then give Bolda a puzzled look.

Bolda snorted. "Hell no, I just ducked out. Put a look on my face like I had somewhere to go, and left. They'll be at it for a long time yet but Ulanda's the one who has to listen politely to long-winded speeches, not me. Anyway, it's not like I was needed."

As Bolda spoke, he unrolled a carpet, one tasseled end landing half curled against Rit's knee. The kitten spat at it then batted the knotted strings. Not Xintan. Flowers and vines and for a moment, something light purple, long sticks with glass that winked at him. Rit ran a hand over the surface, drawn to find them, the kitten darting at his fingers as he searched the deep pile.

"Gennady brought down the rest of our stuff from the Ladybug, so I'm spreading the wealth around some." Then looking towards the entrance, Bolda snorted, "How the hell should I know?"

"Lord Strom?" Pida said. "Where would you like these set up?" Behind him were two women, each with bundled bedclothes in their arms.

"Uh, the back," he said, distracted, still feeling the surface of the rug. Cut pile, carved into shapes. Pida shooed the woman along in front of him, then out almost as fast. His thanks were in heavily accented Xintan, not a translation from the Net.

"Is this wise?" En'talac toed the carpet with one sandaled foot, but watched him, not the rug or Bolda. Rit stood and stepped away, leaving the kitten batting at a sculpted rose bud. A puzzled look was directed at him, but she spoke to Bolda. "And why bring it here?"

"Is that any of your business?" The rest of what Bolda said was lost in some other language.

"Do you want me to lift her?" Pida said, ignoring the two.

Rit shook his head. Alicia hardly seemed more weight in his hands than the kitten had been. Pida had made one bed up already, a layer of felted mats with a cream-colored cotton sheet over and tucked in at the sides and another smoothed over then turned back. Folded like a fan on one side was a feather comforter, ready to pull over when the night turned cool.

Rit went on one knee to put Alicia down gently, tucked the large shawl into a pillow, then started to straighten her legs, embarrassed at touching her with Pida still there and feeling stupid and clumsy at the same time. The kitten had followed them and was sniffing at the comforter. Then started to scratch at the floor cloth with a single-minded purpose.

"Not in here, you don't." Rit got to his feet and scooped the kitten up in one hand before it could squat. "I'll be right back."

He passed the two young Xintan women again, almost bumping them. More bundles were stacked in the middle chamber. Bolda and En'talac were still talking, stopping only to stare at him as he rushed out.

Ten minutes of trying to convince the cat he didn't have all day to watch it swat at dry leaves and he was able to carry it back in with him. Purring against his cheek, its dark golden eyes were half closed in contentment.

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He returned to find Pida alone with Alicia, sponging her with water from a basin next to the pallet. There was something sweet and bitter in the water, like oranges.

She's just a child, he thought standing in the entrance, stunned at seeing all of her. The kitten in his hand was forgotten.

Pida squeezed the large sea-sponge dry, and then looked up. "The Lady Priest Ulanda asks that you join her at the Presentation. I'll stay here. There shouldn't be a problem, your wife will sleep for hours yet." Rit hesitated and the slight man smiled. "Even if she wakes up, I've never frightened anyone yet. And I thought better me than someone who looks Xintan."

Rit still didn't move and the smile died. "Lord Strom, what is it that concerns you?" Pida turned the sponge over in his hand, watching it. "You know what I am? What the word tass'altin means? Or tass'alt."

He knew what it meant. En'talac had explained the function of each area of responsibility in Temple. Definitions, yes - but the reality still escaped him. Then the image of Ulanda and Garm at the spring come to him. And the dance she did, the one he didn't remember. And his waking up with En'talac by his side.

"I know something of what a tass'alt is," he admitted.

"Then, Lord Strom, again, I ask what concerns you? If she invited me into her bed, it's likely I would go. If she asked me to please her..." He shrugged. "... I would. Do you consider either of these things likely to happen, Lord Strom."

Rit let his breath out. He was imagining things, she was sixteen at least, perhaps seventeen. Girls her age got married every day. "No, it won't happen."

"No, I think not." Pida looked at Alicia then back to him. "What would she have worn to sleep in? Our cultural spins are shockingly incomplete in some areas and I wouldn't know what to look for. Perhaps your Lady Priest would spare you long enough to go through whatever the Lady Strom has brought with her."

"Lady Strom...?"

"I used the Hegemony form, would you prefer the Xintan?"

"No."

Pida dipped the sponge, water dripping back into the bowl, and then let it fall back in with a splat. "Whatever she brought will probably be too hot and constricting, but she'll need what is familiar more than comfort right now." Reaching to lift her head against the crook of his arm, he tucked a towel under and started to sponge her hair. "I had Lilliana and Sica put your pallet in the middle room along with your things." He looked up. "Is that satisfactory?"

He sighed. "It'll do for now." Then, after putting the kitten on the comforter, said, "I'm sorry about the other thing."

Pida glanced at the animal, and then chuckled. "It's quite all right." He dipped the sponge again, his eyes on his work. "The Xintan I've met have made assumptions about my role in the Overpriest's Household, and other than being an object of some curiosity, and that mostly from the women, no one seems to think it terribly odd." He looked up. "I understand that the same assumptions in Hegemony society would result in a quite different reaction. Does my being here offend you?"

Rit shook his head, not sure what there was to say. Pida went back to his work, humming a tune under his breath, the sound almost like the words you hear in the waves, or the wind over rocks. Too different to be related to any form of song he knew and too soft to be heard clearly, the noise intruded in a more subtle way, making a home in the sound of his breath, in the creak of the leather bags as he looked through Alicia's things. When the song was over and another didn't take its place, Rit thought of asking for the name, but didn't, and when he brought the nightdress he found over to the tass'altin, felt his question was like something lost beyond reclaiming.

While Pida dressed Alicia in the white lawn shift, Rit tried to put the things he had disturbed back in place in the bags, only removing a small worn stuffed bear. Several chests of stiffened woven leather were against the side of the tent and he put the bags near. They were filled with mostly books and clothes, one dress was a ball gown of dark red silk, too large to have fit Alicia without padding, and generous in the seam allowances as though it had been cut down for her. Not something she would have chosen herself, he thought, seeing her as Pida combed her wet hair. Or not something that would suit her, although she might have wanted it or what it represented. The nightclothes suited her more: white lace around her throat and at her wrists, the rows of tiny pearl buttons at the front. And a child's thin body under the fine cotton. Despite his effort to convince himself that he had to be wrong, the image of what she looked like undressed lingered in his mind like the tune Pida had hummed.

Pida sat back. "Buttons. Fifty-three buttons." He shook his head.

"Why are you here?" Rit asked. "This wouldn't be your usual job."

"Think of it as a courtesy extended to the Lady Priest Ulanda, that her people..." A smile. "... willing or not, are accommodated. And frankly, neither your Lady Priest or the rest of us can afford the consequences of strife between you and the Xintan in the camp." From a pocket in the skirt came a handful of beads that separated out into four strands. "These are from En'talac. A gift and something of an apology, I think, although I really shouldn't say so."

Tiny clay beads? Rit wondered, taking them. Roughly molded, yellow with shadings of brown, each one a different size and shape. "A gift of what?"

"Net interrupters. Tie one to each corner post or hook them on something. All four have to be separated by at least several feet. The effect extends as far up as the minimum distance between the strands. The maximum is about half again this chamber, not larger. Any Net has real problems accessing the enclosure. And this Net, I wouldn't think it could touch them, not for some time yet."

Privacy. Rit didn't smile back.

After pulling the sheet over Alicia and the kitten both, the tass'altin got up and stretched. "I'm assuming some kind of courtship first, so she'll at least know about the Net by then. This wouldn't be a bad kind of gift to share with her."

Rit let the strand of beads he was holding up drop into his palm with the other three. Courtship. Prompting him. 'His people', En'talac had said. He squatted close to Alicia. A wet curl like a dark shell had stuck to her cheek and he had the urge to smooth it back. The end of the kitten's tail showed from the covers and he stroked that instead. He could have had a daughter Alicia's age, having a wife her age seemed only slightly less possible than having a wife at all.

"Pida," he began, and then hesitated, finding the words caught back of his throat, somewhere in his pride for fear of being wrong. "I don't have any experience with..." That didn't come out right. He turned to look at the man and saw only curiosity in his face. He wasn't sure that if he waited, this might get lost like the other question had. Or if he should say it except he knew he never could say it to En'talac, medic or not. And not to Ulanda, not if his life depended on it. "Pida, regardless of my opinion about the Xintan plans, what I'm trying to say is, I don't think she's ready for marriage with me or with anyone else. Physically, I mean."

Pida looked puzzled, then pushing the comforter away, knelt on the other side of the pallet. Fine straight brown hair rippled from static as he drew his pendent off. Three twists and it broke into pieces, one a disk, red with a raised pattern, and this he passed slowly over top Alicia. Then biting back a smile, he pulled the kitten free from the covers and passed it to Rit. Three times scanning, a distant look growing on his face through all of it, then he stopped over her lower belly for several long moments, the disk not quite touching the top of the sheet. There was a buzz in the air. En'talac hadn't used anything doing the medic scans, at least not anything Rit could see, but the effect was the same.

Then more than a buzz, a crackle that made him jump and the kitten dig its claws into his shoulder. Light coursed along the walls, just a second, and was gone. "You're right," Pida said and looked up.

"What...?"

"Oh, I put a different kind of warding around this area." His brown eyes were on Alicia again, a sad look on his face. "She's not ready and she won't be. I don't mean sex. With a bit of care from her partner, she's capable of enjoying herself. I mean the marriage. En'talac jumped the scan and we did a correlation with the readings we have of the Xintan, but there's no doubt about the results. The girl's health wasn't a concern of ours..."

Unlike his health? Or his temper if he had found a Xintan servant here on his return instead of Pida? "What's wrong?"

"It might be better if En'talac explained it."

He kept his voice even. "Then again, it might not."

Pida hesitated then nodded. "Her ovaries don't work properly. The scan indicates that even the few of her eggs that start developing, die almost immediately. She's never ovulated. I didn't know, she doesn't look so different

from the women of my people... I just didn't think. And we knew she was young, and the Xintan Matrons didn't say anything. And as I said, her health or lack of it, wasn't anything we felt we needed to be concerned about." He looked at Rit. "I don't mean that as an excuse."

"I wasn't asking for one. En'talac has made the direction of your concern quite clear." A large black shawl in the stifling heat of midday. Two weeks of hiding more than could be easily seen, especially once she had known why she had been spared. She would have known the alternatives.

He rubbed his face, suddenly exhausted. "The announcement at the ship means that by Xintan custom, we're already married. And last time I looked, this area was under Xintan control. If I'm a concern, then my wife is. If I'm to be *accommodated*, then my wife is as well." It was coming out as an attack and he changed course before he started shouting. "Can't you do something? Temple, I mean. You must be able to do something for her."

Pida sat back as he slowly fitted the pieces of the pendant together. "Prompt the ovaries to produce the proper hormones, yes. Quin'tat's agreed and Sarkalt hasn't overruled him. However, what's wrong with her isn't a simple developmental problem. For her to carry a live child to term, even for her to become pregnant in the first place, would require extensive genetic restructuring. That won't be done; she won't have children. En'talac says that her even being alive is an almost unbelievable balancing of what can only be lethal genes. I know little about how Xintan marriage customs work or how permanent the arrangements are, but... I'm certain from what I've heard, that children will be expected."

A kitten and a stuffed bear, cinnamon colored, half the fur gone. He hadn't wanted this match, now the only way he could think of to protect her was to insist that it already existed. "You could do something. Heal her."

"Rit, please. We 'could' a great many things but do very few of them. And a problem like this is self-correcting as she won't pass any lethal genes onto the next generation. Accept the gift that she's alive and otherwise healthy. Even if it weren't just her, Temple wouldn't allow anything to be done. Too few births is rarely a problem for a people as a whole and when it is, that people become extinct."

Pida closed his eyes as though they hurt him, fine lines creasing his forehead. A buzz again, but sounding different, an echo of sorts from the warding, Rit thought. "There's some question as to what happens now. Quin'tat is arguing that her position here was contingent on this marriage leading to a new dynasty, and to be fair..."

"Fair?" Rit breathed incredulously. "Fair to whom?" And would have added more, and harder words, but Pida very obviously wasn't hearing.

Pida blinked several times. Tying with the last piece of his pendent, a curved stick that looked like it was made of ivory. "I'm glad I'm not in that discussion," he said quietly. Then winced, looking up, his eyes focused out again. "Did you get any of that?"

Rit had felt something. A bee sting, like the buzz of the Net was a bee buzz. And at the noise, his anger had drained suddenly and he didn't know why. He shook his head, not trusting his voice.

"Command level Net, such as it is, so I suppose not. The Lady Priest Ulanda reminded... certain people of who holds rank here. My instructions are to carry on as though nothing has changed. Apparently, the Xintan Elders will be told nothing. And besides your oaths to her, she's insisting the Lady Strom do the same." He looked surprised and turned his eyes to look at Alicia.

Rit put the kitten on the sheet next to Alicia. Gray and cream, a darker cream than the cotton sheet. Sitting on its rear, one hind leg straight up and it started licking, spreading the tiny toes. He could hear the purring between the rasps of tongue against fur.

He felt as though he had fought some kind of battle, yet didn't know if he had won or lost. Except he was now married. "Is the Presentation over?" he asked, putting the stuffed bear on Alicia's other side, against her hand. He had better talk this over with Ulanda, see if he could keep his presence of mind long enough to work something out with her.

"No. Your Lady still wants you there."

His Lady.

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Ulanda had felt Garm waken - not just felt him in the limited Net, but through pattern - the softer rising from deep sleep, his mind as curled up as his body in the warmth of the day and the still darkness of the sleeping chamber. And saw him... the images weren't usually so strong, or so untried for. This had come like a scent drifting in the hot air of the Assembly tent and for several moments she was in both places at once. She reached to touch him, she almost touched him... and she was back entirely in the crowded Assembly tent. If Garm had opened his eyes at that instant, would he have seen her?

She moved in her saddle stool as though to test instead that she was in this place and not with him. Sweat rolled down her back and tickled until the robe absorbed the moisture where the girdle pressed the cloth against her skin.

"The arrangements stand," she said, interrupting the Xintan Elder who had been speaking. A squat, bow legged man, gray bearded. He bowed frequently as the direction of his oration changed and waved his arms to punctuate his words. Spittle flew from his lips.

She glanced to where Rit stood to one side of her, to include him in what she had to say then returned to the Xintan Elder. "My arrangements," she said evenly, without expression. "Your arrangements. How can yours be different than mine?"

The fabric of the tent was in wide bands of red and white, casting a sick pink over the sun darkened skin of those watching her and the air jumped around when she moved her eyes. White to red to white. She didn't need these hours of speeches, the looks from the Xintan that analyzed her very existence. God, impostor, a nuisance, a prophecy come to life. Or need Rit like point of anger at her side.

Bolda had had the right idea when he had simply gotten up and left. "Can I tell them all to drop dead?" she asked Pida through the Net, keeping it to a verbal exchange. "Would they? For me?"

"Some," he said, sounding amused. "But others would find a different interpretation of your words, but then still others would be willing to assist those few along in observing the proper form of obedience and to thus be able to take their place in your favor." Amused, but his words were distant, even through the link. Part the extra warding he had put up in Alicia's tent, part his deep distress at what had happened there, but more, he was concentrating on something else. Then despite the limited mental link, a silver of what was as much pleasure as pain came from him, and she saw claws hooked into flesh and flinched, drawing in the fingers of her bad hand. The Elder stopped mid-word of where he had started talking again, his mouth open in a splash of red reflection.

But it was Garm he was looking at. He walked into the tent wearing a long snake-pleated skirt that writhed around his ankles, opal silk as red splashed as her robe. Across one shoulder was a more resistant gold colored shawl, a knotted weave of fine wool, heavily fringed. Only the ends of the fringe caught the red glow like sparks of fire. Xintan work, from the loom of the Slowfire Matron Bolda was seeing.

He knelt next to her saddle chair, one amber hand drawing the long ends of his black oath band across the twisting skirt, making a show of what he had left it plain before and usually hidden under a sleeve. "I can feel the coming Initiation like a storm growing over the ocean," he said, addressing the Elders, pulling Xintan with the inflections found in the older recordings of that people. "The wind blows the spume into my eyes as I stand to watch the waves mount the shore like a stallion does a mare." He looked up at her. "Or it might be just my Lady's

mother nibbling on these old bones. Perhaps she will spit them out tonight and find meatier ones."

"But she's not the one who has been waiting here for you," Ulanda said, meeting those emerald eyes. He hadn't woken earlier when she had stormed into the ship's Net to put a stop to that idiocy about Alicia... and the apparently innocent mistake in bypassing her authority. Or it was only the first of Quin'tat's moves intended to test her grasp.

She turned her eyes away. Watching Garm tired her further and she had to marshal her strength. Her reaction to Quin'tat had ignored the danger from the loom-master's traps; she was shaken and even less prepared for the heat of this airless place. The one person who should have noticed her need for comfort, hadn't. Garm had woken in his own good time and come to her like this, Cassa's.

En'talac had seen it, and Pida would have as well, and she felt no censor from them for her lack of discipline now. Quin'tat sat opposite her, silent, but still brooding about their confrontation, not about jokes regardless of their poor taste. He insisted that his decision about Alicia had been in line with the administrative duties he was already performing on her behalf.

In line? For the time that she required his help - and not just his, but En'talac's as well - she had best watch where that line was drawn. By actions, by prayers. Prayers. To her, from Quin'tat? The idea was almost amusing. Moving one foot so the robe would catch the sweat starting to trickle down her legs, she sighed. *Watching* was the wrong word in any case. Not watch. Feel. Feel the present, feel how it grew into the future, the possibilities that arose out of each action. Rit's oaths. Alicia's. Of all the possible futures, which ones had been selected, which eliminated with that one choice?

She looked around, her frustration growing stronger, focusing into a desire to escape this all too real 'now.' Simitta watched her from where he stood honor at the entrance with three of his people. They all looked as hot as she felt, their hair red in a stripe from forehead to back collar.

And still, the Elder droned on. She raised one hand, allowing herself only that motion when what she really wanted was to run out. The Elder stopped talking, his mouth hanging open. "Panntin cal'Oster of the Trihawk Noble House cal'Oster," she said, "and of natural Strom breeding, will stand Initiation tonight. The Warrior Fontil quil'Pall of Bluestone Clan is due honor as vass'lt. These two will dance a dance older than this world." The words filled the large space until the walls seemed to push out. Without intending to, she was augmenting them with overpattern.

The Elder blanched. He knelt quite suddenly and leaned forward on his hands, face almost to the surface of the rug. "Lady, as you say."

Another Elder stood, a withered man, with a face like badly cured leather. Surprisingly bright eyes twinkled at her as he bowed. Not amused. Interested

perhaps, and despite the reaction of the previous speaker, seeing less a god in front of him than a tired woman. She resisted a smile, quite agreeing with him, and felt better.

"Lady," he said, drawing even the single word out and showing the control of a practiced orator. "The Assembly would give honor to your House with gifts from ours. Gifts of life, of sworn oaths, of the honor in serving you." He stepped to the entrance, stopping short of the two Zimmer, but enough to show his intent. "Will you allow...?" he asked, leaving the sentence open for her response.

As arranged. She inclined her head in a nod. Behind her, Rit stiffened, his calm broken. He hadn't looked at her even once since walking into the large Assembly tent but all his awareness had been on her. It wasn't now. The same oaths as would bind those she chose here, would bind him. And Alicia.

Twelve young women entered, each veiled with a large square of white silk gauze, the edges beaded, the corners weighted with silver coins. Long narrow tunics over matching pants, both in black cloth, the tunics heavily embroidered and inset with tiny mirrors. Accompanying each girl was a Matron and a senior Warrior of her family.

Faces... shapes of chins and noses, all the eyes downcast. Fair skin and dark, thin faces and round, girls not yet women, others just past puberty, two obviously pregnant, one of those Bluestone Clan. They knelt in a semi-circle before her and those who had brought them moved in back of the Elders.

The Net was clear with only a silent watching from the Command levels. Ulanda had studied what was known about the ritual of oath taking, as the Xintan understood it. This was the extreme, an offering of lives as the Elder had said. The veils stood for the placenta, the caul of birth, and those she selected would be as born-again into her Household. They brought the honor of their families with them, but owed them nothing. Hers. Her Household.

Fingers of one hand brushed Garm's shoulder and stayed there a moment. He didn't respond. Silver hair longer than it had been, and thicker, a shower of silver over her face when they lay together, soft and fragrant with the taste of his lips through the silken strands. A small island, she thought, pulling the memory until she could smell the pepper of the algae and hear the reeds sing in the wind. Any of the Xintan would be hers willingly, but not him. Not unless she let herself be what he wanted.

She stood and stepped into pattern with a step away from him. Overpattern - she was skimming the surface. Deliberately, she tried for Altasimic threads, taking the image of them from what little she remembered of the dance and from what she sensed surrounding Rit, and found them like a glitter of sun, shimmering opal strands over the other.

She tried to take the pattern up with both hands, only to have it run through her fingers... and tried again but the opal strands disappeared like the under-

surface of sunlit water does when you reach the air. There wasn't a place she could be where the glittering spiral shaped net was, only above and below.

She thought she heard Garm's laughter. He had stood at the same time she had and stepped into the arc made by the twelve kneeling Xintan, looking at one, then another.

As though he felt her eyes on him, he looked up and said something. What isn't Cassa in you is still mine. You won't have the luxury of hating me.

He could have laughed, like he could have said those words. Except he had said others. *Will you kill me?*

"I'm not her," she said in old-tongue. "I'm not yours." Her denial twisted out of the limited Net's ability to translate but she knew he understood, he answered in the same language and this time, she heard the actual words.

"If not mine, then whose are you?"

Not who, but what. "Altasimic. How couldn't I be?" Another image. Silk cloth instead of water... she would veil herself with it like the Xintan kneeling around him, spin a cocoon, finally feel herself grounded in her world-pattern. She tried harder, then harder again, and when that failed, much harder.

Garm might have laughed again. And your vass'lt? And your vass'lt? And your...?

Rit. Instead of the cloth tent, she saw the stone pavilion. And Niv where she had thrown him as though he was the pattern energy spiraling out of her. His mouth at Rit's throat, his teeth bloody.

What difference does not having a vass'lt make?

And she had said no. To save Rit's life she had said no.

But that had been in a dream in which, in some way, he had been hers. She saw him in the dusk of the tent where he had brought his wife, saw him holding Alicia for her comfort, for his comfort, and saw...

Pain ripped through her and exploded into the air. She felt the warding around Panntin's tent flare and heard a scream. The girl kneeling next to Garm bolted, was caught by the arm by Simitta and held as she fainted.

Overpattern again, not the so-faint Altasimic. Snow fell on white gauze and black cotton, melted on body-warmed glass. Ulanda took another step forward. "Are you dead this time?" she mouthed, but looked at Garm, not Rit. Expecting blood. Expecting burned skin, expecting flesh peeled back, blasted from the bones. Those eyes dead. *Why aren't you dead? I killed you. You don't want me, only her.* Snow dusted his silver hair, catching in his eyelashes. Moisture like tears on his cheeks, but it would be melted snow not tears. His eyes were emerald.

"Please die," she said as she reached to touch Garm's face. Strong hands around her waist pulled her back. A man whispered something, the language unfamiliar.

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Rit saw Quin'tat take one step towards him and it was like that first time when he had woken up on the ship and thought the wooden floor would break under the man's body. Net sizzled back on but he didn't let go of Ulanda. Snow, he thought, feeling dazed. Snow.

After the one step, Quin'tat stopped and Rit had the idea that En'talac was beside him, despite that he couldn't see her, the both of them waiting to see what else would happen... and he realized what he must have already known for him to have acted as he had.

These things, the physical world, were a small part of his mind. He felt perfectly aware but the awareness was like a reflection in the pupil of an eye. Below the image, it was as though his sight had expanded, his perception crowded with things that didn't belong, a confusing jumble of impressions that flashed a word, then a thought, a brief glimpse of something, part of a face, a hand, a sensation of movement. Across the room, Simitta spoke to Quin'tat - or was it to En'talac? - the words traveled the distance, he heard them but that was all.

Instead, from the impressions in his mind, a single cohesive event came together into something he could see. A child dressed too lightly for the snow falling around her. She had been there, surrounded by the snow, for some time and would be for some time yet; he could as easily follow either direction as stay where he was. Other people stood nearby but when he tried to focus on them, they receded. Sarkalt? He wasn't sure of anything but Ulanda, and in that brief instant, instead of moving to what had happened, or would happen, the seeing became understanding, he was inside her skin, he was part of the cold that rocked her, of the isolation and the pain.

His hands were still around Ulanda's waist, he felt the strength returning to her body in a fit of shivering. He was kneeling with her in melting snow. His hands tightened, he thought he should have been holding her then too, holding the frail child, he felt the same things now as she did then, as though they belonged to him.

"I'll take her," Garm said quietly.

Rit stumbled back. He had let go without deciding to. He stared at his hands. Breaking free from Ulanda had been like pulling away from a part of himself.

He looked around as he straightened, only then beginning to see and hear the chaos surrounding him. Besides him, the young woman had been the only one to move at the time. Bluestone Clan and at least a half-year pregnant, she was still unconscious but with arms cradling her belly even so. One of the Zimmer, Simitta, stood over her, his weapon drawn. Protecting her, Rit realized suddenly,

seeing the direction of the violence, and the force of the control in the ice green eyes. The other three Zimmer were on their knees, appearing as stunned as the Xintan.

The Xintan had frozen, girls, Elders, Matrons and Warriors, but they were breaking free now into hysteria or worship, into a twitching of faces and a gurgling that resisted being confined to words. Perhaps both hysteria and worship, or there wasn't a difference. He wasn't sure, seeing a blending of intent like a whirling of air where spent leaves and the debris of years rise together in a funnel until lost to sight.

"The Lady has chosen," he said loudly in Xintan, using the formal syntax. "All honor to the Lady." He willed them to make the proper responses to what he had made into a ritual, and saw the starting of bows, a dropping of stiffened bodies and of faces being pressed into the rugs. The Elder who had spoken last - Redleaf Clan from the colors in the embroidery along the edge of his tunic, he hadn't been here for the introductions - rose first, still bobbing with bows, his eyes wide but with a grin across the width of his wrinkled brown face.

A granddaughter in one of the chosen. Rit saw that in a younger blooming of the same strength of life he saw in the old man. The youngest of those here and the first whose veil he drew off to show the change in her status. A narrow face and strangely long, almost a muzzle like the face of the kitten but with a full lipped mouth curling into a smile. And eyes as golden as the cat's, wide open in wonder. She was already getting to her feet as he offered his hand to help her rise. Four others... she helped them up more than he did and pulled them away to stand to one side. The sixth was the pregnant Bluestone Clan woman and Rit carried her and helped her to sit down, still only half conscious, but being hugged by the old man's granddaughter.

Ulanda still hadn't moved; he could fall into her from just looking. What had she done to him? With a force of will, he turned away.

"Grandfather," Rit said, as he stepped close in front of Ulanda to block people's view of her and faced the Elder. He bowed deeply. "The gathering should go now, the Elders of the Assembly as well. Honor to all your Mothers."

"As the Hand of the Lady says," the Redleaf man said, matching Rit's bow but almost laughing in his delight as he started gathering the people, the ones still stunned first, getting those closest to help and the Matrons for the six still kneeling in the half-circle. A gentle touch for those, the girls looked as though they were listening for music to start playing, they pulled from the hands touching them, confusion and pain on their faces.

Quin'tat was watching him, not the people leaving or Ulanda. Scans came constantly, like waves crashing into him. Rit sat heavily on one of the saddle stools, leaning one arm against the side, then slipped both hands between his knees when they started to shake. Paler skin against the black of the pants than

he had seen in many years and the deep cracks were smoothing out and clean, just yellowed dead skin on either side. The fall of snow had cleared the air and it was cool now and fresh. He tucked his hands further between his knees for warmth.

The Redleaf Elder bowed towards Ulanda, but the words were to Rit. "I've given too many children to the gods," he said gently. Rit looked up and the light brown eyes searched his. "My wife's only son in the first days of this war and I thought I might be fated to join him in death before it was over, but I'm glad I lived to see this." A wink to his granddaughter and he blew slow and deep into the cold air to see his breath. She giggled and did the same, still hugging the Bluestone woman with thin arms. "A happier giving if perhaps to the same gods. An old man's eye, but I see myself in her more than in my sister's girls or their daughters. She'll run you ragged."

"I know," Rit said, pulling both hands free and rubbing his palms hard against the fabric. The friction on the damp cloth felt good, it felt real. The old man laughed and slapped him on the shoulder.

Then a long last look at Ulanda and the Redleaf Elder looked away, the smile faded as though the muscles of his face had forgotten how. "I thought it was just talk," he said thickly, shaking his head. "More Bluestone talk. Even with that thing that brought us here... and the snake men. Those you can touch, like a horse born with two heads, or a machine from the old cities..." He turned away. "Just talk," he muttered as he ducked to clear the folded opening cloth.

A motion from Simitta and the other Zimmer guards left, but shadows showed them just outside. Then Simitta stepped closer, his weapon still raised. "Enough scanning," he hissed to Quin'tat. "Leave him alone. Or should I ask if Ulanda will give the same order?"

The scanning stopped. "That won't be necessary," Quin'tat said, his voice a tired rumble of sound.

"Quin'tat," Rit said. "Is Panntin okay? The scream, I remember a scream."

"He was asleep, this woke him up. Viy'lane was still with him." Then the big man nodded. "He's fine. He's already sleeping."

One shadow at the entrance moved and Bolda stepped in. "Decent temperature."

Ulanda laughed, startling Rit. He had thought she was barely conscious. Sitting back on her heels, she leaned against Garm. Braid ends dragged in wet pools on the floor as she moved her hands to her lap, the silk of her robe sodden, showing the iridescence of the dye in a darker flickering than earlier.

Bolda snorted. "Well, are you finally finished here or do you intend to waste the rest of the day too?"

Ulanda looked at those waiting in front of her. "Do you accept service?" she asked softly, hands moving in barely seen forms.

The Redleaf girl stepped out first, golden eyes going back to the others in nervous glances, once to the Zimmer. Her steps were hesitant but her small body almost bounced with excitement and she had gone from hugging the Bluestone woman to hugging herself. "Yes, Lady," she whispered. "Please."

Rit coughed. "Some introductions would help."

Ulanda turned her dark eyes to him. "Yes. You might start with yourself. Who, or rather what you are."

Garm gently touched long fingers to Ulanda's cheek and she leaned into the caress, her expression softening, eyes half closed. Rit remembered... something from her. A threat against the old man? It hardly seemed likely now.

"He's a single petal blown in the night's wind," Garm said.

Bolda snorted. "More likely, a goat with the rest of us."

"A Strom bastard," Rit said roughly, to hide that his eyes were caught again, unable to look away from Ulanda. "Didn't you know what you were getting?"

"Apparently we didn't." Quin'tat sat, the chair creaking under him. "The only information we have is that the Strom are advisors to the Royal House and have strong political links to the Charter Houses. That's about it. We assumed the usual power struggles led to them to conspire with the Xintan. It was the Xintan Assembly of Elders who made the point about Panntin and you being Strom, not us."

The Redleaf girl was listening closely, eyes as wide as her mouth was open. Looking at him. "What's your name," Rit asked her gently.

A quick bow, little more than a shallow nod of her head. "Rossaliana quis'Redassa. My grandfather is the South Marshall for the Occupations. I didn't know you were Lord Strom." She swallowed hard but her eyes were gleaming. "I mean, you don't say it in front of a Bluestone Clan priestess but..." She glanced at the pregnant woman as though to assure herself that blue tattoos hadn't suddenly appeared. "I mean, everybody knows what the Strom are. They're what Bluestone wants to be."

"What Bluestone is," the Bluestone woman said curtly. "The Lady Prophecies are Bluestone. We six here will serve the one seen in the blood-washed night by Bluestone, seen in her slow dance over centuries by generations of Bluestone." She stood, arms crossed over the swell of her child and stepped free of the huddle of the four others. "My name is Bissalta quil'Pall and I would take oaths to serve the Lady, as my mother did, and my grandmother did. As all my Mothers have served." She bowed as deep as she was able to.

From what looked almost like sleep in Garm's arms, Ulanda faced those calm dark brown eyes with hers and the Bluestone woman faltered, small even teeth biting her lower lip, but she stood her ground. From their features, they could almost be sisters, Rit thought, but for the first time, he didn't see the same stamp of pride in Ulanda.

"Bissalta quil'Pall," she asked, "what do you know of the Strom?"

The Xintan woman glanced at him and away, both quickly. "The words are in the Coda, the sacred weavings in the Hall of the Assembly in Vancallin. They say that in the time of the burning, there were born two, a man and a woman. The man with red eyes and hair like the fire of the cities burning, like the sun reflecting from a copper mirror onto pale stone; the woman, with hair and eyes the color of the black ash that rose from the burning to cover the world, like the shadow of a dark bird raising her wings to the night in flight. Both had the power to see the blood wind, male and female, the same wind that carries the world on its breath. Each was in thrall to one of the two powers who had enslaved the world and who had bred them as weapons in their fight."

"The woman fought free and joined the people who became the Nations," Rossaliana said breathlessly. "The man was kept as a slave to..."

"I will not be interrupted by a child, and besides, Redleaf Clan knows nothing of the true Speaking of this..."

"Well you ran, not me."

Rit pulled the girl away from her march on Bissalta. "She was protecting the baby," he said, holding her gently by her upper arms, bending his knees to put him eye to eye with her. "Her move was instinctive to protect her child. And there were seven chosen, the child included." Rossaliana dropped her golden eyes but he was sure the quiet wouldn't last although the lesson might.

"Seven chosen, Ritsiniti?" Ulanda said.

He let Rossaliana go and straightened. Some of the impressions had solidified into knowledge and he wondered if this is how the visions had appeared to his great-uncle. "Ten. Three more, one of the Matrons and two of the Warriors from the escort. I remember their faces and Clans. They left quietly, I don't think they know, they might think it was the same as what the others experienced."

"Ten?" she asked in the same detached voice.

Twelve, not ten. One of the twelve was asleep, holding a toy bear in her arms, cinnamon fur darkened to nutmeg where she had woken just enough to cry herself into a deeper sleep. He repressed a shiver as the vision faded. "Twelve."

Ulanda looked at Quin'tat who shrugged, then back at him. "What did the choosing look like to you?"

He tried to wet his lips. A man he had loved said it was like tasting aged wine at the harvest of the grapes whose life you are drinking.

"What did you see?" Ulanda asked again.

The threat to Garm? Or had he supplied that? And if he had, why? "Not all the oaths were to you."

"Not all?"

No pride in her at all that he could see and the lack frightened him. It was something of the cold he still felt in his flesh that she could lose something as

human as pride. Loose it like shattering a hand mirror, he thought, but a mirror he was holding, not her.

"Two were," he said. His and Alicia's.

"Yes, they were. Or will be. Who were the other ten oaths to?"

"Panntin."

Bolda laughed. "Really cut down on the vass'lt business if this gets to be common."

Quin'tat stirred. "Do you see this, Lady Priest?" A troubled note to his voice, and puzzled.

"I do now."

Quin'tat nodded slowly. "If I may ask, what did you actually see?"

She shook her head. "Rit?"

"The oaths like flame burning outwards in a web; the flames were pulled upwards until the sky was consumed and fell as black ash falls, like white petals fall."

"Petals?" Quin'tat said dryly.

"I've read the Xintan Coda in translation and in the original, and seen the Strom records which contain much the same kinds of things. The images are from those. I think they were recorded to describe just what I experienced. And if it's not accurate, how can someone describe something there's no words for?"

"There are words," Quin'tat answered. "Entire languages have been created to describe this."

Actually the tapestry he remembered of the white flowers had said it very well, Rit thought. As they described the dance Ulanda had done. "The oaths were something like the pattern lines," he said, trying again. "A small part of that, like a faint image or..." He sighed. They couldn't hold to her. He had felt her reaching... and he had, for an instant, he remembered now, moved forward in time. And had seen Garm dead. Flayed alive like Vinn would have been. More than a threat. What had he really seen? Only it was more like a taste, than seeing. Like how you know the kind of grapes a wine is made from, the type of soil they grew in, the wood and the length of the aging in the casks.

Ulanda stood, rising as though she wasn't sure of her body. "Ten oaths to Panntin?" she said, blinking, looking as though she was going to be sick. Garm held her tightly. Quin'tat had risen as well, took one step towards her, and then he stopped as though struck.

"Twelve," Rit said. "Twelve, but the last two don't exist."

Ulanda shook her head. "They will, tonight. Twins. Bluestone Clan and Strom blood mixed. Panntin and Viy'lana."

"They already exist," Garm said. "The twins. Stone in a room very far away from here."

The Zimmer by the doorway hissed a laugh. Rit had almost forgotten Simitta was there. "Cassa having fun. She'd like that."

"Well she didn't much like the twins," Bolda said. "Could stand them for about ten minutes at a time." He snorted. "I usually lasted five."

"Tolerating or tolerated?" Ulanda asked, smiling but the effort showed.

"Oh hell, both I suppose." Joking with the words but Rit saw a shadow in the round man of the uneasiness he had seen at the spring before Ulanda had danced. Bolda scratched his head. "Just how far into pattern did you have to go to make this much mess?"

"She's loosing stability fast," Quin'tat said. The air buzzed and this time Rit heard the words, but the language wasn't one he knew and the words wouldn't change for him. Except the name, Pida.

"That won't be necessary," Garm said coldly.

Quin'tat looked at Ulanda, she shook her head and he shrugged. "Then, unless you can tell me what other service is owed, I would say we're finished here."

Rit looked at the other young women, one was fighting back tears. "These four," he said in Hegemony, "need some introductions..."

Ulanda looked stricken for an instant, then as instantly composed. "My apologies for having you wait overlong," she said gently, her words in Xintan. But there wasn't anything gentle, Rit thought, in the force of will that allowed her body the strength to break free of Garm and stand. "Do you understand the differences here? From what was spoken to you before?"

"That we don't make our oaths to you," the first said bluntly. The one who had been fighting back tears, her lips so tightly set that Rit wouldn't have thought her able to speak. She stepped out from the grouping. "I am Wandassa quil'Samm, senior Daughter of the Greywolf Clan." Gray eyes and ash blond hair, fire marked by the red light and her eyes as well. Making her almost Strom in appearance, Rit thought, the same fine build, slight without being thin.

"You make your oaths to me," Ulanda said. "But for service to Alisim Temple."

"Why not service to you?" Rossaliana piped up. "Should we do it to Panntin then?"

"That is something for the future to see."

"Oh." The young girl sounded bitterly disappointed.

"Wandassa quil'Samm," Ulanda said looking to the blond woman, "would you introduce the others?"

"I would be honored, Lady." She motioned to the first. "Delassi quil'Van of Quickwater Clan and like myself, a senior Daughter." Then to the last two. "Hann quil'Rostrinassa of Longstem Clan, a weaver and daughter of a Senior Matron of the Cloth, and Dannolian quis'Dell of Silverfox Clan, a weaver of song as Hann is of thread."

Ulanda nodded to each as they stepped forward, but her eyes had gone distant, a pulling away that tried to pull him as well. "I think..." Rit started, without knowing what he was going to say, but Garm was already with her.

"Show's over," Bolda said quickly as he stepped between them. Rit hadn't realized he was moving until he stopped, his way blocked by the stocky man. "First lesson in service to Temple - and I mean all of you - is that when a Priest starts getting vague, you don't just carry on with what you were doing, you jump. Fast."

Wandassa never took her eyes off Ulanda. "What can we do to help?"

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The moans were quiet as they were raw, almost rasps, but they dragged Rit from sleep to start groping through the shadowed images surrounding him. His last memories were of the Initiation, jumbled and taken out of sequence, he wasn't sure where they started or ended. The moans... Panntin? No, or if he had, the sound hadn't carried over the drums. There were drums now, but faint. And there had been fires later than that. He remembered more now.

Then his hand touched a felt wall and the shadows took form: the inside of a tent made of layers of black cloth, doorways hung with tapestries. Chests and rugs and saddle stools. The cream glow of his bedding on the dark floor cloth. The moans continued, louder now, and Rit followed the sound to the rear chamber of the tent. Alicia had become caught in the sheet and comforter and was struggling against them, still more asleep than not. The faint glow of early morning turned the paler gray walls here into a storm cloud but he could see her.

He gathered her back onto the pallet and held her down, still tangled in the bedclothes. "You're safe," he whispered into her ear. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

When she stopped struggling, he tried to find an end to the sheet. "Damn!" He pulled his hand away fast. She'd bitten him on the thumb.

"Get away from me," she said, her words as raw as the earlier sounds had been.

He backed until he was several feet away, then sat. "I meant what I said. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Pulling the sheet free, she wrapped herself in it, then the comforter over that. A small white hand bushed at her face and she tried to look around without taking her eyes off him. "You're in the Xintan camp but in one of the Lady's tents," he added. "Do you remember coming here?"

Drums in the distance, a hypnotic sound but faint. He'd fallen asleep to them what must have been only a few hours ago. Closer, a bird shrilled. Alicia turned her head to listen before remembering to watch him.

One hand was to her throat, feeling the lace of the nightdress. "You've slept the whole afternoon and night. It's almost morning. One of the Lady's people changed your clothes so you'd be more comfortable."

He was still in his black pants from the night before - where he usually stripped - and wished he'd had the sense to keep his tunic on. She'd see him half naked in front of her. To his own eyes, the pale skin of his body seemed to glow around the small mat of hair center of his chest.

"There was singing," she finally said in a whisper. "It sounded so sad. I woke up, but I couldn't stay awake, I wasn't sure if I was dreaming it or not."

"It wasn't a dream." He wouldn't have thought anything could have sounded like that, so full of sorrow and yet with a yearning that tore at him. The song of Lamentation, En'talac had said, tears streaming down her face. Quin'tat singing, standing between Panntin - with Jini holding the new Priest tightly - and the body of the Bluestone Warrior. The Xintan drummers had faltered then but recovered quickly, weaving around what had started as a sound more like the earth would make crumbling in a flood of water, but had built slowly into something that might have had words.

"It was a religious ceremony," he said to Alicia. En'talac had stayed next to him the entire time, one of her hands usually touching, his arm or at his waist. Expecting something like at the Presentation, he thought, but there wasn't anything from him, only Panntin and a flare in the center of the mound as though the earth had become an opal flame. He wondered what she would have done if he had reacted, if this was another test. "There were drums then too, do you remember them?"

She shook her head. "There was someone else here when I woke up."

"His name is Pida. He was watching you to make sure you were okay. He was playing with the kitten."

She nodded, and then looked around. "He's here somewhere. The cat I mean," Rit said to her startled look. "Last I saw, he was sleeping in the other room. With me."

"Tika is a her," she said, relaxing slightly. "All cats that color are female."

"I didn't know. The cats in the Barracks were mostly black." He stood up, then stepped back when she shrank from him. "I'll make a fire to heat water for tea and washing," he said. "Your things are by the chest there, and a chamber pot is behind the screen." He hesitated. "Alicia, someone has to do this, show you around and explain things here, and I thought it might as well be me." She had pulled the sheet higher under her chin. "That's all it will be," he said softly. "Nothing more."

"I understand," she said in a choked tone.

He wanted to go closer but didn't dare; he didn't need any Strom gift to tell she was afraid despite her eyes being downcast and the room dim.

The extra warding that Pida has set up was still in place when he checked, a whisper when he touched the Net. He pulled back, not sure what that meant other than it was still working. "Do you remember what we spoke of yesterday? What I am?"

She looked up at him. "Strom. You don't look it."

"If I looked it, I wouldn't have been allowed to live. Babies born to Strom estate bondswomen that look Strom are killed at birth."

The gaze faltered but she didn't look away. "And the rest of it? Or do you have only a bastard ability to match the breeding?"

"Alicia, I knew what it meant to be a Strom bastard from the time I could reason, and my great uncle took care to have any tendency to Strom behavior beaten out of me."

"You didn't answer my question."

He shook his head. "I don't know what I had then, I was too young. I scarcely remember what I did, only what happened." And his great uncle. There had been no anger directed at him, he'd been trained like a puppy is, with a quick swat.

"And now... I still don't know."

"You said your father was Lord Strom."

He sat again. "I didn't think he knew I existed, I was probably wrong."

"You didn't live on one of his estates?"

"No, at the Strom Charter House in Wilni Capital. I saw my father only once, from a distance, when I was thirteen. He'd brought his new wife to meet my uncle."

The king had been there as well, and several others. He had watched them through a crack in the brickwork. It had been a warm afternoon, late summer like now, but a milder season in southern Wilni Province and the formal gardens were lush with growth. Only a sparse last blooming of roses was left, but other flowers surrounded the bushes. There were bees and the sound of bees all around him, an escaped colony had swarmed in the broken crown of the old wall, the hive hidden somewhere in the tangle of ivy almost as ancient as the setting of the brick.

His father spent most of afternoon standing at the edge of the terrace, staring at the rose beds, his hands held behind his back. He had wondered what his father was looking at, had ducked back when the looking had brushed the wall, even though he knew he wasn't visible. His great uncle had filled the afternoon with his words, and the king, a young man then, had laughed often.

The next year the ivy was cut down, the wall repaired and he had helped the greens-keeper with the apple trees, grafting the scions to the dwarfing

rootstocks, the next year helping plant them and learning the pruning needed to form the trees into elaborate espalier shapes.

It had been later in the season, mid-autumn, when he'd last been there, and the stubby fruiting spurs along the few maimed branches allowed each tree had a single fruit at each. And he remembered the taste of yellow-fleshed apples in his mouth as his great uncle was dying.

"They had three children together," he continued slowly, seeing the Strom girl again, the sun in her long curling red hair and the graceful way she moved, and what he had thought then was her flirting with the King, but was probably just Court manners, despite what happened after his father's death. "All sons, and all died before their first birthday. When my father died, the Patrimony of Strom Noble House passed to a cousin of mine. I was twenty and had been on my own for two years. My great uncle was very old, and Endica Border sounded like a good idea. The worst danger was the Royal House finding out and thinking it was all part of a Strom plot. Not my being born, you are probably right about there being Strom bastards around, but why it was kept secret and why I was with my great uncle and not my mother."

"Wasn't it a plot?"

"I think it might have been." And his great uncle's part in it? "The Xintan haven't said anything where I might overhear. Yesterday was the first I had heard of any Strom involvement in the Xintan invasion and I didn't hear it from the Xintan."

"And you agreed that quickly to betray..."

"To betray what?" he broke in softly. "The North Command Line, if it hasn't already fallen, will soon. From the other side, the South Clans, primarily Redleaf, are half into Wilni Province."

"And being greeted as allies by the Strom?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

Her voice had risen. "And I'm supposed to give legitimacy to their claims? Mix Royal Blood with a bastard Strom of their choosing. I won't do it."

A marriage arranged by her uncle would normally have happened within a year or two, and as likely or rather more likely, to someone his age then her own, and if she had no property to bring to the union and he didn't think she had, the man would be a widower and on his second marriage or even third. Except that Lord Camuit hadn't been a fool - or wasn't, he could still be alive with the Heg forces - and wouldn't have exposed his House to the chance of an expensive breach of contract ruling if the husband could prove that she was already known to be infertile before the marriage. Her fears, some of them he could understand, but not all, and some he suspected he couldn't even begin to put a name to. Nor could he know any dreams she might have had, or the effect on her of watching

them die over time, the mixture of uncertainty and hope making the waiting worse.

"What will you do then?" he asked.

"I won't take the option of being a traitor as you have."

He was her option. Would she ever forgive him for that? "Alicia, my being twice your age and male doesn't give me any more power in this than you have. There just isn't anything to fight them with."

"I can choose to die rather than live on their terms. Or yours."

He shook his head. "If you really wanted to die, you would have found a way before this." En'talac had asked him to wait, but she was wrong and this proved it. He wouldn't have her watched like a caged animal, like the Xintan must have done. "Alicia, the Lady's people are using the Xintan. For what, I don't know, but there might be something we can use to our advantage. There is a future."

"Obviously, one end they want is our marriage."

"By Xintan law, we're already married. A first marriage is the decision of the families involved, not necessary the two people. In our case, the Assembly of Elders ratified the marriage. To the others here, I think it's only a means to an end. Apparently oaths of service to the Lady Ulanda... like the oaths the Head of a minor House would make to a great lord, are more important to them."

"I suppose you agreed to that as well."

"Like the marriage, there isn't a real choice. With the oaths, we belong to the Lady Ulanda's Household. To the Xintan, religion is a political tool... I think it is to these others too."

"It's all ignorant superstition."

"Alicia, it doesn't matter if you think their beliefs are nonsense, nobody is asking you to believe anything, especially not me. Despite the occasional raids by the Xintan into Heg territory, your uncle dealt with them because the Oceana did and because Oceana trade was important to Endica and to the wealth of your family. He didn't have to believe in the religion of either people to spend the money they brought to Endica. Alicia... right now, the most important thing is that you understand that whatever safety either of us has is based on the Xintan belief that the Lady Ulanda is a god... or the next thing to a god."

"What difference does that make?"

"Because it will matter very much that you can't have children."

The fingers of one hand picked at the lace around her neck. "There's no way..."

"There are ways to know that you can't have children that are as independent of your believing in them as the Empire religion is. And what could come of it is too important to be left unsaid between us."

She covered her mouth with trembling fingers. "Lots of girls start late."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Alicia, but I didn't want you to fear me finding out what I already know. And I won't keep from you what you need to know to

make up your own mind. All I'm asking is that you give yourself some time." He got up. "I'll get the water started heating." He turned to leave, then stopped, remembering the gentleness of the words Pida had used. "Alicia, children or not, and in spite of the politics, we can make this a marriage to suit the both of us. When you want me to share your bed, I will be pleased to, but not before."

He left before she could reply, not sure if he had ruined this start between them or if anything would have helped.

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The sky was a muddy yellow, thickly banded with gray streaked clouds. The wind had risen, coming in from the ocean. On the less protected edge of the clearing, tents billowed with the gusts. This place would be a mess if it rained, Rit thought, smelling the moisture in the air, metallic in the back of his mouth, soil and salt together. Drums still sounded in the distance, softer but probably from the competition of the wind over the mound and the deep fissures all around.

Sitting at the front of the tent, the wind was more a whine in his ears than a whisper, but plumes of dust crested from the high ground at the start of the path to scatter pebbles down the stone ledges of the steps. A shaping, Bolda had said, and he wondered if this was part of it or a consequence of the power released last night. Or both. He had read of storms following battles in the Millennium wars, fire winds and rain fighting for domination over the remains of the cities.

Rit added another thorny branch to the small host-fire, using the tip first to arrange the others for better heat. A ceramic bowl full of water sat on a footed grill, he didn't know what kind of material the grill was made of, certainly not cast iron. Even the Bluestone Clan Warrior's rifles and knives were kept away from the tents at this end. He found himself trying to separate the sounds around him, the wind and the heating water, trying to hear Alicia, worrying about what she might be doing and if anyone was watching her in the Net. And if they could reach her in time.

He found a teapot and several bowls with the things Bolda had brought the night before, and put the pot beside the fire to warm while waiting for the water to boil. The tea was from the bundle he had bought for Eunni as a birthday present. Was she still alive? She might be, barring random bad luck. Smart and quick to sense any shift of tempers, and with connections inside the Xintan Treaty Enclave. Her tavern was often used by those who had business with the

Xintan, close by the Enclave walls and with a private entrance off the alley so the merchants could avoid the common room.

Alicia came out before the water boiled. She had dressed, the black dress and shawl again but with her brown curls smoothed back from her face by a bright pink enamel comb above each ear. The kitten followed closely, meowing, rubbing against her, the cream patches of fur vibrant in the yellow dawn. "She's hungry," she said.

Relief felt like cold water down his spine. "I don't suppose she likes tea?" he asked to tease gently, even as he searched her face for some clue as to her state of mind.

"Cats don't drink tea!" They both started at the other voice, Alicia pulling her shawl closer. A small face peeked from around the corner of the tent.

He motioned the child closer. A white robe was wrapped around her but the hem tailed in the dirt. Her dark hair was out of the elaborate braiding but crinkled as though it hadn't been brushed.

"This is Rossaliana," he said to Alicia. "I have it on the best authority that she will run everybody ragged."

"I will not," the child said indignantly in heavily accented Hegemony. "Rossaliana quis'Redassa, this is my wife, Alicia."

"Not yet, not by Hegemony custom." The girl reddened, then bit her lip and he thought she might apologize but she didn't.

"What are you doing up so early?" he asked. He had no idea where the six had bedded down. Only Bissalta and Wandassa, the older two, had been at the Initiation.

Rossaliana screwed her small face into a knot. "Dannolian snores and Bissalta keeps waking me up when she rolls over, and all she does is sniffle when she thinks nobody is listening, as though everybody doesn't know she's been crying over her brother."

"She didn't cry last night; she was very brave." The lip was being bitten again. "Why did you learn....," he began just to change the subject but stopped, realizing why she would have been taught Hegemony. Rossaliana's grandfather was the South Marshall of the Occupation; her maternal uncle was his First Hand. Wilni Province. The old Warrior he had met in the Assembly tent. He had arrived in the Zimmer pod for the Assembly and would be returning to the war.

Bolda turned the same corner as Rossaliana had. "What's all the racket? As if I didn't know." The wooden box he carried dropped solidly on the ground by the front of the tent. Tika ran over and got a hand up onto the lid of the box and something bright yellow crumbled up for her. The kitten finished it hungrily and started sniffing for more, but not before the rich scent of corn cake drifted over.

Rit made the introductions as more corn cake was produced from Bolda's jacket pocket, three thick slices wrapped in a cloth. The corner of one slice was

broken off and fed to the cat. Alicia was pale but managed a polite exchange, stroking Tika while she talked.

Bolda took over making the tea; sniffing at the leaves in much the same way the cat had the corn bread. "Has promise," he said, scooping the boiling water from the bowl with the small jug that had held the milk. "Oh, the box there has a proper tea set with everything you need, a mix of Xintan and odds and ends." Then grabbing the back of the white robe as Rossaliana started into the tent past Alicia, he said, "Mind your manners. That's the Lady Strom's tent, you wait till you're asked."

Before Rossaliana could protest, Wandassa arrived, a white wool shawl over her sleeping tunic. "My apologies," she said in Xintan, taking Rossaliana firmly by her hand. "If you'll forgive me, I hadn't realized this *child* had left." Then to Rit, "Lord Strom." A glance to Alicia as she helped her hair back with a flick of her head. A floating cloud of creamy gold curls around her face and half down her back gave her features a softer look than the braiding of last night.

"Wandassa quill'Samm," Rit said to Alicia, then her name to the Greywolf woman, again as his wife, using formal Xintan. Properly, Alicia should have introduced him as her husband, not the other way round.

"Lady Strom," Wandassa said in the Hegemony style and nodded briefly, then pulled Rossaliana away, still protesting, the child's voice rising until Rit heard Wandassa ask where she had taken the robe from, and then silence.

"Ulanda's robe," Bolda said, shaking his head as he poured the tea. Passing a bowl to Alicia, saying, "My own apologies for taking over here, it's a bad habit of mine. Making the tea or whatever is a host right by almost any custom I know." He yawned hugely. "Most of my habits are bad."

"How's Panntin?" he asked.

"Panntin?" Alicia said, almost dropping her tea bowl, spilling half the liquid on the loose part of the skirt, not near skin. The black shawl had become a cushion, the box a backrest, the long dress pushed to one side with her legs tucked.

"Panntin cal'Oster," Rit said. "He was a new recruit in my Squadron. Do you know him?"

She started to nod as she straightened the wet fabric then changed her mind. "No, not really. Gannit and I met him in the market in Endica a few months ago. He seemed shy then, but she said..."

Bolda snorted. "Hadn't noticed the shy part."

Alicia looked at him sideways, startled, then as quickly embarrassed, her lips pressed together as the blush reddened her cheeks.

"Don't let anything I say get to you." Bolda passed her the napkin of corn cake. "Here, eat this. Nobody bothers much with breakfast around here, and that goes double for this morning. I'd be surprised if anybody in the Xintan camp is in any state to even notice it's morning."

"Why is Panntin here... oh, he's Strom."

"Half Strom," Rit said. She had known that from one meeting? Or from her uncle, more likely. "I had him with me on the escort duty. He's been sick and probably knows even less about the political situation than I do. The religious ceremony last night had to with him." He explained what he understood of it.

The corn cake was untouched in her lap. "That's barbaric. And I don't care if it's politically expedient to say so or not."

Bolda poured a bowl of tea and sat down near the fire. "Whether it's barbaric depends on your perspective."

"What about the victim's perspective?"

"No one forced anyone."

"Because someone was stupid enough... or *fooled* enough to think they were doing the right thing? Each morning the Matrons would take me to the dawn prayers to pray to the Xintan Lady. I had to mouth the words in Xintan, it didn't matter that I didn't know what half of them meant. Am I supposed to make sacrifices to her in the same way?"

Rit refilled Alicia's bowl and passed it to her. "I told you they pray to her because they believe she's a god. And that it doesn't matter what you believe... but it does matter what you say or how you act."

Bolda snorted. "Must be someone else who can't manage to say two civil words in a row to her." He pulled one long ear lobe. "Besides, calling her a god all depends on your definition. How many do you have?"

"Definitions?" he asked.

"More than a few?"

"Most of them in the abstract, which somehow doesn't fit this."

"Well if we're talking perspective, what about what you did? What definition fits that?"

"What are you talking about now?" Alicia asked.

Bolda turned his scrutiny to her. "Which part don't you understand?"

"Why don't you explain it from the beginning," Rit said, trying with some effort not to let the anger Bolda had accused him of show in his voice.

"Beginning?" Bolda snorted, then waved one finger at Alicia. "Endica's on the ocean, right?" Alicia nodded. "Cliffs too, if I've got it right. At least where the Fort is, or what's left of it. Well, Ulanda grew up near the ocean with mountains in back, like there but not as hot and dry. South Bay Temple the place was called. She wasn't born there, but... hell, that part is mostly beside the point."

"A Temple where they have human sacrifice?"

"If you want to call it that, yes." Bolda reached for some of the cake and crumbled a fragment for Tika, frowning at the animal the whole time, and then he patted her head with the broad finger he had shaken at Alicia. The kitten ducked and glared at him, tail twitching, and then went back to eating when he stopped.

"Reminds me of someone I know," he said. "Anyway, as I was saying, Ri is a beautiful world, mostly ocean with a few islands and those are mostly mountains. There's not many people compared to most settled worlds, and what larger towns there are hug the coastlines. The locals are mainly fishers and farmers.

"Well, Ri is what Empire calls a 'Gate world'. The actual jump gate is centered off the Gate Station in far orbit, like your moon here, and most trading is done at the Station but there are Merchant Enclaves in the few larger cities so a fair amount of business is done on Ri surface as well. You get all sorts; lots of human lines like mine, but others too. Hell, Zimmer is human enough. I've always figured if it looks roughly human and the language doesn't take ten layers of translations to make sense, then it's human. Most Zimmer wouldn't agree with me, you might not want to mention it to any."

Rit tried some of the corn cake, oily and dry at the same time and with a peppery after taste. Baked, not fried like he was used to making in the trail camps. This wasn't the beginning he had expected Bolda to start at. "En'talac said Ri is where Palace is."

"I was getting to that. What makes Ri different is Palace. It's at Ri, not on Ri, and has been for millions of years. It's like a Station but, well, if you look at Dog mountain from here, hold your thumb just in front of one eye, Palace sort of sits in the sky over a mountain range about two thumbs worth up from the top of the mountain. Palace is the center of the bureaucracy that runs Empire, except of course, something that big can't be run, it just sort of wobbles around and that's where Temple and Priests like Ulanda fit in."

Alicia rubbed at her oily fingers with the cloth the corn cakes had been wrapped in. She seemed calmer. "Like the Strom? Do they tell the future and see the truth in what people speak? Is that the power the vass'lt's death give them?"

Rit hid a smile behind a bite of corn cake. "Most of what's believed in the Heg about the Strom isn't true. Although, even at the worst, I've never heard it said we practice human sacrifice to gain our powers."

"Strom and Priests are two different things," Bolda corrected sourly.

Alicia stared her lap, "So, Empire is this world with all sorts of creatures on it, a Palace that floats in the air, and a Station like a moon and Priests who go around killing people." She folded the cloth around the corn cake, and then picked up the kitten that had come to investigate the possibility of crumbs.

"Maybe I'd better start at the beginning." A one sided smile, and his thick lips were already rounding over his next words when suddenly Bolda twisted his head to one side. "Who the hell invited you?"

Rit hadn't heard the footsteps. "As understand it, Cassa did," Gennady said. "Lord Strom, Lady Strom." The Zimmer's long robe moved with the wind, like a red flame licking at his narrow form. It was the first time Rit had seen him in anything other than the white pants and tunic. He had been standing with the

other Zimmer outside the pod and had formally introduced Simitta to Rit, but left with En'talac and Arasima immediately after, leaving Simitta to take him inside where Alicia and the Bluestone Matrons were waiting. Rit hadn't seen him since then, not at the Presentation or at the Initiation.

"Lord Gennady a'Genn d'Zimmer," Rit said to Alicia, returning the exchange. Alicia nodded, holding the struggling kitten too tightly.

"From Clan a'Genn, a gift for your marriage," the Zimmer said, passing Rit a small, elongated bundle, "and for your taking of oaths with the Lady Ulanda." He bowed deeply, his mane of white hair flickering red against the robe, then brushing the slant of tattoos on one cheek before it rippled to form a tall crest.

White paper with thin red cording wrapped around to make a spiral, then woven back to form a net. Rit glanced at Alicia. The kitten had escaped, leaving her hands clutching at the loose fabric of her skirt, one finger scratched on the knuckle deep enough to bleed. She was staring wide eyed at the Zimmer, and he at her, but his was a blue-eyed stare that Rit couldn't begin to fathom. "Thank you from both of us, Lord Gennady," he said. "Should I open it...?"

"Afterwards," Bolda said shortly.

"L..Lord Gennady," Alicia said hesitantly. "Would you take tea with us?"

"I would be honored, but I am expected elsewhere." The Zimmer reached into the crossed front of his robe and produced a second package, smaller than the first. "From Olumka of the Spann Protectorate, in..." He smiled thinly showing one sharp fang. "The word doesn't translate very well, but at the least, means in the hope of peace and in the certainty that a gift to one of Hers is to Her as well. Think of it as being for luck." With those words, he passed it over, to Rit again, bowed and left. To the Temple ship, or returning there rather, the distinctive marks of his footwear retraced his earlier steps.

"How much later is later?" Rit asked, feeling the smaller package. Black cloth or leather of some sort, and more cording but a different braid pattern, flatter and wider and with the smaller cords making up the larger, quite distinct. A spicy smell, cinnamon perhaps, on his fingers now as well. He passed both packages to Alicia then looked at Bolda. "Any other customs we should know about?"

Bolda poured the dregs of his tea just inside the ring of firestones, making a mud of ashes. "Nobody expects you to know anything about Empire custom so don't worry about it." He stretched, yawning again. "Small gifts are usual for something like oath taking, from family and friends, that's about it. Like Gennady says, he was invited and the Zimmer, especially Clan Zimmer, have a strong tradition of ceremony, even if not for..."

Alicia was running her fingers along the silk of the cord on the smaller package. A fingers width of interwoven black. "Who's this Olumka?"

"I've met him once," Bolda said, frowning at the inside of his empty tea bowl. "We were busy with other things, didn't talk much, and he kept out of the way

the few days we were on the Zimmer ship. Sort of a him, but not really, it just comes out that way in your language."

Rit heard the Net, wrong language again except for the name and he reached for it as an anchor. One touch and the round man jerked his head up to stare at him and started to laugh. "Learned that fast enough..." He frowned again, just for a moment. "Except En'talac says that's not the Net level she was teaching you. You didn't hear that, wasn't really in words, a gargle of protest more like it. Mouth open probably, like when Cillamet landed her on her prat."

Rit had heard it, easier than understanding words, the protest sounded just like her, and with a strong under current of amusement. And something of an image that didn't want to take shape in his mind. "An insect?" he asked, puzzled, seeing a creature like he might expect to find under a rock.

"No," Bolda said, suddenly sober. "Nothing you have a frame of reference to use to describe. Other species evolved naturally, besides the Simic. Which, by the way are the origin of the human lines. Spann aren't wild, but their progenitors were. Modified by Empire, you might say, like Ri is from Simic. Or your people, or mine." He sighed. "You probably realize by now that there are factions within the Empire people here. As members of Ulanda's Household, you're not only responsible to her, but for her. The Xintan can only provide some protection, about as much protection as they are a danger to her. Despite what she insists on believing, that situation is a political nightmare, but at least it's not likely to explode right away. I'm talking about what she is, how she's different from..." "

A child standing in the snow. He shouldn't be feeling what he was. He pushed it down, threatened by even a shadow of what he had sensed in Ulanda. She hadn't been at the Initiation but Garm had. Still alive. He kept expecting him to be dead.

"Different from the Overpriest?"

"You *seeing* things again? Like at the Choosing?"

Not seeing, not now. Only feeling. And the danger wasn't the Overpriest. He shook his head to Bolda's question. "What about your loyalties?"

Bolda scratched his nose as he looked at him. "If you can't tell, I'll just leave it for you to figure out."

"But why would he send a gift?" Alicia asked, fine lines creasing her forehead as she frowned at the packages in her lap, black on red and white, one of the black cords half pulled away. "You said only friends... if it's a political gift, what would he hope to gain from us? Is it our.... connection to the Lady Ulanda?"

Bolda looked at her gently but she wouldn't have known, her eyes were down, white teeth biting her lower lip, one front tooth slightly crooked. Before he could reply, she looked up, still frowning. "What are you?"

"I'm a weaver." Alicia waited long enough for Bolda to add: "That's it. When I'm not serving tea, I weave things."

She looked confused. "A servant?"

Bolda sighed. "In Empire, you call any weaver a servant, much less a Master Weaver and you're likely get yourself woven into a garbage sack. I'm the House Weaver for the Empress. My oaths are to Cassa..."

"Empress?" Alicia asked.

"Oh hell, don't worry about it now. She's not here, not so you'd notice, so it's easier if you think of me having the same oaths you two will."

"The chest and the tea service, are they from you?"

"Hell, you needed a tea service."

She smiled, the first real smile Rit had seen on her face. "Thank you."

- 11 -

Tennin walked Red the last couple of hours into Denman Capital just to get him there alive. Stolen from a refugee camp outside of Ojin when Rosie had faded on him, and best of the lot staked out, the proof that he left the pursuit in the dust. Four days hard riding since then and the horse was doing good to put one foot in front of the other.

Any Noble House estate where he might have managed to change horses was barred, the yellow plague wreath set at the turn roads, and manned with House Levy troops. Which didn't say good things about how many they had sent off to contain the Xintan. He'd kept well away from any Patrol Barracks - too much risk they'd take him for a deserter - as long as he had a horse, he figured it was safer to keep moving. He'd seen Patrol on the roads, riding fast towards the coast, but the Noble Houses must be sitting tight, protecting their own first or adopting a wait and see attitude, and, as usual, leaving the Patrol to take the brunt of any fighting.

He found more of the big camps outside of Deni, a motley collection of guards on those but with a quiet watchful air. Past the panic, he guessed. And they'd learned a few things. He wouldn't be the only kind of person on the move with things coming apart fast.

The City Guard left him waiting in the open between the double Gates at Denman Capital, inside Deni, rifles trained on him from the wall slits and the huge wooden doors closed before and behind. He took a white band from inside his jacket and wrapped a thong around it, like he had put a message inside, hoping it looked enough like what a Charter House Messenger used that the Guard wouldn't untie it before it got to the Charter House. Stolen that as well, a headscarf from someone's wash in the front of a farm cottage. There'd been no one around. A

pile of stones was in the foreyard, a hand sticking out, charred to the bone. And not a trace of the fire otherwise.

Red went down, blowing, bleeding again from his nose. Flies settled to the moisture, and the big roan didn't have the life in him to even twitch. Tennin sat back against the horse's rump, pulled his hat brim down to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun and fell asleep.

Not long enough, an hour or so by the change in the shadow line from the walls and he woke to a City Guard poking him with the tip of his boot. A rounded pink-faced Charter House youngster was standing nearby, sweating into his whites, looking like a loaf of bread before it's baked.

"Messenger win'Tennin, you have been given leave to enter," the boy said and Tennin wondered why the doughy ones always sounded like they had a bird in their throat. "Come with me, if you please."

So it had worked. Tennin stood and let the kinks take their own time working out of his legs. The City Guard had backed off, and was talking in a low whisper to a couple others standing by the inner gate. "And who are you?"

The boy sniffed, looking surprised and offended at the same time. "Assistant Recorder nai'Rinill, of Denman Capital Charter House."

The right place. He wished he had the energy left to be relieved. Now all he had to worry about was getting arrested. At least they fed you in prison and there was lots of time to sleep.

Quiet in the long Hall, rugs were end to end underfoot and tapestries hung on the flared walls like leaves on a stone tree. Trestle tables were lined up under the rose window at the far end, laid out for the evening meal already, a loaf of bread between each placing, reminding him he hadn't eaten in a day and a half. His mouth would be watering if he had the spit. One of the Guard had given him a half full water bag, then refused to take it back, still young enough to show scared behind the polish. He tucked the empty bag in his belt but the water hadn't worked through the first layer of dust in his throat.

He left the pair of City Guard at a narrow inner door, the wood banded with iron. They snapped to attention with a thump of their rifle butts on the floor, looking like fools in their stiff dress uniforms. Light from the rose window hit them full on, splashing the pale blue with red and green.

The Charter House brat opened the door and motioned him to go in, sucking his gut in to make room, then closed it after, staying out.

"Gray Squadron, out of Endica Fort." The voice came from a behind a desk. It took Tennin a moment to place the man, a moment more for his eyes to adjust and see him as anything other than a dark shape with a white blur of a face floating over top. Heavy draperies covered one wall; a thin bright line under them was all the light that made it into the room.

Tennin saluted. "Lieutenant Tam win'Tennin, sir. Councilor, I mean." A medallion gleamed on the man's chest, a hands width in size, and made of heavy gold, the red gold of Surri Province. The Charter House emblem, bright against the dark clothes the higher Orders wore. Some of the refugee camps had flown banners with that emblem like they were Xintan prayer flags.

The white scarf was on the massive desk, his Squadron pin in the man's hand, thin fingers turning it over and over. "More of a message than this, I hope. For your sake."

He swallowed past a dry lump. The Councilor's pale staring eyes were ringed with black, heavy bags sagging underneath. Tennin didn't think he looked that bad after a week roughing it, more if he counted the day out of Finnit to the Spine just short of Dog Mountain.

Not the only one in need of a message, he thought. The Councilor himself. He hadn't thought his pin wrapped in the scarf would have gotten him past a curious flunky, but a Charter House flunky was what he wanted, not the City Guard.

"My Captain gave me this," he said hoarsely as he took the package from inside his shirt. Sweat stained before he thought to wrap it in a scrap of oilcloth. "To pass on at Intil, only the Recorder at the Barracks there was dead, or so I heard. And things weren't too settled along the way, so I had to bring it myself."

"A long way to come here from Intil." The man's hands picked at the binding like the cloth had a disease. "Do you have orders?"

He didn't, nothing written. To get to Intil, he hadn't needed written orders beyond their original. Intil was a standard stopover on the way to Endica. "From my Captain, sir."

"To pass this on. I suppose you expect to claim you followed his intent, if not his conveniently absent orders." With the package unwrapped to the neck scarf, the man still had look of distaste on his colorless face. He looked like a starved horse, Tennin thought. All bones and bulging eyes. Red had looked better just before collapsing on the cobbles.

The filthy scarf dropped to the floor and was ignored as the thin man stared at the paper wrapped package, then tilted it to better catch the limited light, inspecting the seal at either end. The paper wasn't as clean as when he started, but the ink had held up even with the sweat. But the eyes had gone to the seals first. "Cal'Oster." He looked up, hope behind the tired blue of his eyes. "Panntin cal'Oster. Was he well? When you left?"

"No, sir."

"No, of course not. Alive?"

"He was then."

The man nodded slowly, tiredly, one finger dragging over the other writing, the drawing. Then a long nail slipped delicately under the sealing wax and the outer

paper folded back. More drawings showed on the middle sheet but Tennin didn't pay attention, he'd seen them fresh.

The Councilor looked up, bruised eyelids trying to narrow over the blue eyes and failing. "Your Captain's name?"

"Rit Wilnmeit, sir."

"Of course." The Councilor sat heavily, staring at the package, both hands flat on the desktop. "I allow you the excuse of Intent. It will be so recorded." He looked up. "Tell me Lieutenant. Do you see them? The lines?"

Not so old as he first thought, Tennin decided, his eyes adjusting more to the shadows in the room. "I'm here."

"Yes, so you are. Did your Captain see them?"

Did? Dead or just meaning a week ago. Tennin chewed his lip while thinking. Maybe he was dead, from the Xintan more likely than not. Yanni too. He'd sent him back to report what was going on. White Squadron was out from Intil but not on their way to the camp at Dog Mountain. Pulling in to Endica Fort and the harbor city below the cliffs, civilians as well as Patrol, or those that were still alive. Tennin had killed Ruby, his gelding, going off trail over the mountains, cutting across to Ojin, trying to cut a day off the time and ending up wasting more time walking out. The horse had slipped going down a piece of mountain he would have been a fool to try on foot much less mounted. A shattered leg for his horse, he'd escaped with bruises.

Rosie was from a Redleaf Clan Xintan who didn't need her anymore. A white horse, but she had red painted in rings around her eyes and lines going out from them. Xintan were trouble but they were usually trouble in ones and twos. Fool kids half the time, trying to live up to their Mother names by playing the Warrior. In the Treaty Enclaves, in normal times, the real Warriors were few and far between. In the mountains, all he'd seen were bands of Warriors with their bitch priestesses. And he still didn't know what the hell Redleaf was doing as far north as Denman.

Tennin found himself shaking his head, but still chewing. Rit had seen the lines just that once, and maybe it didn't count. "Not really, sir."

"No? I suppose not." The Councilor sighed and was quiet a long time. Tennin chewed and thought, but mostly about trying to keep upright while his mind wandered.

"This has to go to Wilni Capital, to a Charter House there," the Councilor finally said. "You will go with it."

"Sir?" Tennin was startled back from where he was starting to drift off. The capital of Hegemony, in Wilni Province. "My Captain said to rejoin him as soon as possible, sir."

"That might be difficult. Endica Fort has fallen to the Xintan. This news came from an Ocea merchant ship. The Captain didn't dock at Endica, but watched the

Fort burn. He carried the news up the coast as far as Gannatin. Flare messages from there brought word along the West Command Line postings. It was the last message to make it from the coast."

"Xintan never..." Never go that far, ever, he was going to say, his mind working on the mechanics of what the Councilor had said. Then really hearing that Endica had fallen would have fallen with the Fort gone. His sister and her children.

"The Denman and Trihawk Noble Houses have decided to hold at the West Command Line," the Councilor said very quietly, as though he had forgotten Tennin was there, or thought him closer. "They will fail to do so."

He got the tone but the rest was just noise. "Sir?"

The Councilor sat back, palms together and chin resting on his thumbs, as though wedged between thumbs and fingers. Maybe he didn't mean to stare with his eyes like that.

"Three of the cities along the West Line have already fallen. Deni is next. The Xintan will be here in within two days. You will have to leave tomorrow if you are to leave at all."

Deni hadn't looked like a city that knew it was about to be attacked. Why hadn't the alarm been given? Tennin tried to swallow and couldn't.

"Tell me what happened to bring you here with this package." The Councilor spoke through the press of white fingers.

"Sir? How can it matter now?"

"Fifteen years ago a young man was sent through here, a Messenger as well, but a real one if only temporarily so. The Charter Houses don't often use the Patrol, but we reserve the option if necessary. And this was necessary, and necessary that it be he, no other. He was on his way to Endica Border, his orders from Wilni, the Patrol Offices there, but his message was from Wilni Capital and the Charter House where he was raised."

Tennin shrugged but he still couldn't swallow. He had known it had to be something like that. Maybe not Wilni Capital and Rit being a Charter House brat, but somewhere and something like that.

The fingers spread slightly to press against the man's mouth and he spoke through a cage of fingers. "Tell me what happened," he whispered, the sound hardly making the space between them.

"Same as what's happening here, what I saw on the way here." Then added, "Sir." He tried to straighten to hide his lie behind some extra form and even thought about saluting. Then almost laughed, wanted to laugh, at how dumb that would have been. He really needed to sleep before he fell over. He really needed to stop thinking about what the Xintan would be doing in Endica. The rest of Deni Province could go to hell. By the time he had gotten to Ojin he'd known Endica

wouldn't have escaped the troubles. He had figured in the plague riots and the panic killings, but not the Xintan, not really. He hadn't let himself.

"He never said anything about telling anyone. Just the..." He almost said book, but from the way the man had handled it, he probably knew that.

The Councilor had slumped, the tension gone with the hands falling to the tabletop. "Of course."

"Just to get it here and when there wasn't anyone at Intil I could give it to, then..."

"Lieutenant Tennin, have you ever been to Wilni Capital?" He shook his head. "Wilni Province? No? Well, the trip will be educational then. Tomorrow morning. I suggest you get some sleep." The door opened to splash red and green light from the rose window onto the dark wood floor. Tennin jumped. "Food and a private suite for our guest," the Councilor said to the boy standing in the doorway then flicked his wrist and the door closed again.

Door. His knees had locked, he could hardly move but the door had opened once. The Councilor's voice stopped him before he had gone two steps. "Are you uncomfortable in my company? Most regulars think the Charter Houses are the exclusive domain of the Noble Houses. A convenient place for younger sons, or those of, shall we say, less robust dispositions? A route to power that lies outside the Houses but intimately connected by birth, tradition and service."

Tennin shrugged.

"Only a matter of perception, Lieutenant. Most of the people aren't necessarily different from those you would find in the Patrol. Education and training mark them, but they aren't different. Most of them, that is, but not all. Do you understand Lieutenant, that the message was from the Strom Charter House?"

The Councilor had folded the outer paper around the package again, then the neck scarf, the oily surface and the stains not seeming to bother him at all now. "The Xintan Nations are a matrilineal theocracy. Did you know that? No, of course not, the words at least. Your Captain would, the words and the meanings. I suspect he knows a great deal about the Xintan. I suspect he does a great deal of watching of a variety of things. Wouldn't you say that, Lieutenant?"

"He's been known to watch things." Working on chewing his upper lip, the lower was too sore.

"And he's very good at waiting."

Tennin didn't answer. Lazy as all hell was the common opinion, but watching and waiting suited what he did better.

"Characteristics strong in those bred out of the Strom Noble House. Lieutenant Tennin, I'm not Strom and I can't afford to wait and watch, not now, not for the two weeks it will take for you to get there, and longer for any result to get back. If it can get back. Tell me what happened to send this here."

Tennin swallowed hard as he shook his head, not trusting his voice. Strom blood? Strom Noble House?

"The message was given from the King's Councilor by his own hand to his great nephew. The Strom Charter House is where you'll be going when you deliver this."

His mouth was open.

"Tell me, were you uncomfortable in Lord Ritsiniti's presence?"

Tennin couldn't have answered if his life depended on it but the Councilor appeared satisfied by what he saw.

"Tell me what you know," he said softly. "Tell me and someone else can take this burden from you. Tell me and I will see to it that you are able to make your way to the Oceena Coast. I may not be Strom, but I'm not a fool, I can see your need. Any refugees from Endica would make their way there by ship. And there will be refugees, there always are."

"He didn't say to tell anyone," he heard himself say again. He didn't know what was right to do. Except he could have had Oceeni and the package could have gone wherever the hell it was supposed to, except for this man using those things to try to force him. The Councilor should have stopped half way through that last bit and maybe he would have talked. Lord Ritsiniti. The whole thing had taken a flying leap into the impossible. Hell, it had done that from the start.

Blood was on his lip, then chin, working through the beard he'd started three days ago. He'd chewed a little too hard. He had a sudden image of Red lying between the Gates, blood on his chin too. He'd never ridden a horse to death before. Had them die sure, but not taken one past any chance just to get somewhere fast. Worth their deaths, Rit had said. He only ever said important things in the tone of voice he had used to say that. Just that he had always figured that was the best of him, not just the little bit he allowed to show.

He tasted the blood on his tongue and found his voice after all. "If he wanted you to know more, then that would have been in those drawings you looked at." Damn him, Rit could have told him what this was about past what they'd seen at the Spine. Fifteen years he'd known him, he could have trusted him that much. Strom. Maybe it was better he hadn't.

Tennin straightened where he had felt himself slump and looked at the Councilor harder. The man looked like he was willing to wait this out until he started babbling anything just to be gone.

He shook his head and tried to get rid of the shakes that had crept into his voice. Just tired. "If you were supposed to know more," he said like he would talking to a green recruit, "you'd be allowed to open it. By whoever sent him. My guess is that you don't get a message back."

This time Tennin caught the motion that got the door opened again. Some kind of pull rope. The boy was still there; he almost fell in, his round face open with

surprise. One ear was red. "The Record will show," the Councilor said tonelessly, "that Tam win'Tennin, formerly a Patrol Lieutenant of Gray Squadron out of Endica Fort, left Denman Charter House at sunrise, the second Fourth-day of Willow, bound for Strom Charter House in Wilni Capital, in the company of a double Ranking of Denman Guard, priority equipped and paced. With Denman Charter House authorization of Messenger status for Tam win'Tennin and at Denman Charter House expense. Suspension of any other present or previous Orders for that person by Royal Hegemony Councilor Decree and Seal."

The boy nodded solemnly and Tennin remembered his rank was Recorder. There'd be a good memory under the flab. "The Record will show and the Seal will confirm."

Another flick of starved flesh in dismissal and Tennin hoped it included him. Worked at having it include him, following the boy close behind. It could have been worse he thought; he'd figure out how worse later when he needed the lie. The man's voice stopped him again. "Messenger win'Tennin." The scarf and his pin were in the man's hand along with a badge that marked him as a Charter House Messenger. "Hegemony has already lost the war. If you should fall into Xintan hands, show them the badge and state your destination. You won't be harmed."

- 12 -

Ulanda tried to find enough spare comforter to bury her nose under but Garm had the end pinned with his shoulder. Another layer of felt wall between her and the daylight would be nice, or a darker color for the canopy, the light was too bright, or too sharp where it should be fuzzy and soft. "You don't have to stomp," she said to Bolda as he came in. Garm didn't waken.

"A trifle hung over, are we?" He put the tray down. Loudly, rattling the dishes. "Ever been drunk before?"

Deliberately rattling dishes. "Go away," she yelled then winced at the sound.

"And I bet you knew better every time it happened."

She did know better, except last night the mead had finally been warm against the cold in her bones, feeling as good as Simitta holding her.

Discipline was hard to reach for even now as she attempted a nonlinear mantra to focus her mind. Clouds, she decided after a moment of unwelcome effort and let the form shift to a passive unfolding. Not a very disciplined choice, more like lying on the grass, watching the sky. Almost a pattern pull or it could be easily; she felt the drawing from inside that she realized would have put her

on the cool ground with the long grass entwined in her fingers, grass only a slightly darker green than the sky. Chewing one end of a longer stem, sweet and smelling of home. A froth of seeds at the other end. Qalt'ici was with her.

Ulanda pulled a handful of the softer grass blades and threw them at her friend. Qalt'ici laughed and retaliated. The images deepened in place. The sound of young children surrounded them, their forms were like cloud shadows against the grass. They could be real so easily. She knew she should be alarmed... something about Qalt'ici...

A cup thunked down next to her nose and she woke up. It was an effort to get up on one elbow, but she thought she could drink the entire pot of tea all at once, forget the bowl. Then she blinked, confused as to where her two visions separated. Clouds were in the tea as well. "What did you do to it?" she asked. Something white was billowing up at the edges of the bowl to blend with the dark liquid. She slowed the movement in her mind, a low groan startling her, and then she speeded up again to hear Bolda's reply.

"... some milk in it. Try it, won't hurt you. Easier on your stomach."

The queasy feeling that had drifted away on a cloud, crashed back as Garm ran his free hand along her shoulder and pulled her against him. Just a little further to reach for the tea bowl, she thought, except her wrists and arms ached, as though she might have tugged at the comforter or sheet while sleeping. He hadn't said good morning, so she didn't either.

She tipped the shallow bowl rather than try to lift the tea to her lips, getting her hair in the tea instead of her nose, but managed a sip.

"Goat milk?" Garm asked in Simic, his breath tickling her ear.

"Bloody hell, no," Bolda answered, speaking over his shoulder on his way out.

Garm reached and took the bowl from her, then smoothed the trail of milky tea she had spilled on her chin, continued on to cup her face with his palm as he pulled her over to her back, trapping her braid ends under her. His other hand tugged sharply at the tie to her robe, the delicate fabric no more than a whisper on her skin as it yielded. She tried to get her arms free, but he tucked the loose ends of the silk under. He was hard already even as he bit to taste her lips. His eyes were like stone and half closed.

"Get off me!" Yelling made her head pound and she closed her eyes, suddenly dizzy. "Please, Garm. Just... just leave me alone."

"I think not." His softly spoken words were gentler than his hands.

She tried biting fingers that pressed into nerve clusters along her neck. Tingles shot down both legs, and too late, she tried to use them for leverage to get him off. She thought she might pass out when he leaned heavily on her burnt arm.

"Take slow breaths." He stroked her head and face with one hand as he pushed her legs apart with a knee and the other hand. "You haven't been treated

competently at all. Drinking won't bring you down from what happened yesterday, and neither will bed games with Simitta. You're a Priest now, not..."

"Not a whore in Kalin?"

"Have I managed to make you angry? Can I claim so much success so quickly?"

Her skin felt distant even as his weight on her increased until quick shallow breathes were all she could take. "You don't need any special intent to make me angry."

"Like at the Choosing?" He entered her with a sudden push that made her gasp as his belly slapped against hers. He had his full weight on her.

The tea was cold when she drank it, a wrinkled skin of something on the surface, the milk, she supposed, not much caring. Bolda and Garm were arguing in the next chamber with angry bitten-off words that didn't travel far. She didn't bother with either Net or pattern to hear what was being said. The milk skim stuck to her front teeth and she tried getting it off them with her tongue then unsuccessfully tried to wash the taste and slimy feel away with more cold tea. She could still taste the milk on her tongue, sour where the mead had been sweet.

She remembered the mead, the warm glow that had softened her mind and body until she felt she was floating effortlessly in the air. As though reality were deep pattern that she could come down from, her feelings left behind to become vague and fuzzy, forgetting all but the enjoyment of the sensation.

"Blow your nose," Bolda said, handing her a handkerchief. "Can you manage it?"

She nodded, but dropped the white square when her fingers wouldn't hold. "Don't fuss at me," she said, sniffing, getting the handkerchief before he did, her other hand working better even with that elbow supporting her. "I can't stand being fussed at."

He knelt next to the pallet. "Did he hurt you? I can call En'talac if you don't want to."

"I'm fine."

He pulled her hair back and twisted it into a rough knot. "You don't look fine. You look a mess."

"Thanks loads."

He snorted. "I told him to get lost for a while. Told him..."

"It's not Garm's fault." Then to Bolda's hard look, she told him what she remembered from drawing pattern at the Choosing, leaving out any mention of Rit. "Like you said, Garm can't help it. He's who he is."

He puffed his cheeks out as he released his breath. "You better face facts then. You need a tass'altin and obviously Garm isn't him. Hell, walking into that Assembly tent, it could have been fifty-odd years ago and Cassa waiting for him instead of you. They were quite a pair."

"He asked me... back at Palace. He told me to kill him."

"Don't be stupid."

She shook her head. "I could have killed him yesterday. And he wants me dead, the part that really is me."

"Hell, you wanted something, you tried for it and failed. Put the blame where it belongs."

"You think I have that much control over this?" She shook her head again. "I wish it had been real."

His eyes asked her just how much she wanted to die, but he only said: "How seriously did you try for Altasimic pattern?"

"Bolda, it's there. It's all around, I just can't touch it." She tried to stop the mounting hysteria in her voice by taking a deep breath. "Serious enough."

"Did anyone else pick up on it?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Don't think. Damn it..."

"The Overpriest's people won't change the bargain we made, *he* won't. For one thing, it's gone too far with the Xintan contact. At worst, they'll wait until the Empire ships arrive to challenge me. Besides, I can try again."

Bolda put the tea bowl onto the tray and started rummaging through her braid box. Fresh underpads were laid on a cover cloth before he answered. "I don't think that's an option. Simitta wasn't near as drunk as you were last night and he said he could smell the blood on you and I don't think he meant the few scratches he managed. The only thing that would cause bleeding is if your access to pattern was increasing... or becoming unstable. Or both."

"I'd know if that were true. I remember after..." In the diamond, days of being semi-conscious. The changes in her body, in her senses. "En'talac's scans would have shown something."

Bolda opened the blue jar of ukin cream and lined up the small pads of rough terry cloth, before starting to pick at her binding cords. "You know diddly-squat. There was too much silver in your underbraids, the scans aren't reliable." Three rapid sneezes from her and he tucked the handkerchief between two fingers of the hand he wasn't working on, then moved the pungent cream further away.

"I'm not cycling, I'd know if I was."

Bolda shrugged and changed the subject. "I told Hann she could watch when I redo the braiding, start her on the cords as well, the weaving that is. They don't have anything similar here except for braiding hair, that's a start, I suppose. A sixteen bobbin secondary cord, overbraid size, and a couple of colors to keep the

order of passing over easy to see. She's not a bad weaver already; she showed me some of her work when they brought in their stuff. We might as well start using local materials. The silk is adequate if not great."

She nodded, distracted as she caught ship's Net to get a placement from the domestic level. Garm was at the top of the stone steps, near the edge of the mound. Message flags gathered at the edge of her vision but none were from him and she ignored them. Bolda would have reviewed them and let her know if any were important.

"I've got more meetings with various of the Elders this afternoon, along with the local Xintan Council," she said. "And after dinner, a meeting with a contingent of Bluestone Senior priestesses. I'll cancel the first meetings, at least." And get some more sleep, she hoped.

"Forget that, you can't afford to slight them and don't think Garm is going to be of any use. And you've got the Oathing ceremony to tack on to the list and besides, they'll need some kind of orientation and I've got enough to do."

"Garm should be doing that now." Not standing staring at nothing.

Bolda snorted. "What colors do you want for the oath cords? The same black and opal? I've got enough for your two; I was doing some samples. A lengthwise striped pattern, opal inside."

"Fine."

He frowned at a knot that wasn't supposed to be there, the first overbraiding off but the underbraiding on the same arm wanted to tangle. "These have about had it. Silver, we've got. Maybe I should have Hann try primary cords, get her right in there, see if she has the eyes for it."

"What about binding cords for the others?"

"Got a fair bit of that dark green left."

He was teasing her but the memory was still too sharp. "You should have burned it with what was left of the robe."

"Just silk, not the same at all. It was the braiding pattern that counted with the cords, not the material."

And the pattern of the lace robe, but that wasn't something that could be unraveled without the kind of loom that had made it. "You weren't wearing it," she said thinly, blinking away the thought that she'd woven something quite similar in the dance, and with much the same material, lacking only the silk to make it solid to feel, or to wear. And would have again yesterday afternoon. Captured lives. Had they felt the flames, she had wondered at the time, half expecting more than what she had seen as the robe burned. A steady fire and a sour-sweet gray smoke, as though it was just silk after all.

"We're captured lives too," she said as Bolda unwound the last of the underbraiding.

He didn't stop what he was doing. "You just figuring that out?"

"No."

"Good." The last of the underbraiding was off, the marks from the braiding showed on the surface of the cloth that wound from her wrist to her elbow. Another cloth was on her upper arm, thickly padded but loosely tied, and he took that off first. Shiny purple skin over where the burn had been. She looked away rather than see it. Resting the full weight of her forearm on her thigh, she watched her fingers instead, wiggling them so the flexing of the tendons could help loosen the undercloth with the old layer of cream attached before Bolda eased them back together from her skin. With the braiding off, the flexing felt different, the cloth was stuck, and where it pulled, the flesh burned.

"You'd better soak it," she said but he was already reaching for another bottle from the chest.

More burning and the blood came through the cloth, dissolved in the liquid Bolda had sprinkled on. He pulled the underpad away. "They've stopped bleeding but they're still open." After smoothing the ukin cream on thickly instead of the usual thin layer, he used a clean towel to wrap around her arm. "Next arm."

Much the same, the dark marks thicker as well. No opal, not that she could see, and no pattern. "How do you feel," he asked.

"How do you think?"

"Probably wishing you were still just hung over."

"I really don't feel that different. It's just knowing..." The knowing caught in her throat and made her heart skip.

Butterflies of the pale blue cords flew between his stubby fingers. "Don't whine." He dropped the first bundle and started on the second.

A tracing of ice on the silk wings shattered into crystal flakes as he kept working. Her fingernails were as blue as the pale silk; the tips of her fingers that showed at the end of the towel roll were dead white. She took a deep breath. "I feel like hitting something, or screaming. I'm not whining. I don't whine."

"Glad to hear it." He looked at her, bushy eyebrows arched to pull the folds of skin up from around his eyes. But he couldn't hold it; flesh sagged to form his habitual frown.

"I did it, didn't I?" she asked. "Started the cycling when I tried for Altasimic pattern."

He putted his lips together and blew a puff of air, his breath hanging white for a moment. "Hell, I don't know. Does it matter now?"

"Bolda...?" She repeated his name until he looked up. "Quin'tat already believes that I didn't pull Altasimic pattern during the Opening... how much would it take for him to be absolutely sure? And if he were sure, would he keep our bargain? Should I wait for him...?"

"You mean should you act first to neutralize the loom-master? That's one way to solve your problems. You'd be dead." He shook his head. "Why didn't you pull Altasimic pattern?"

"I..." *I asked for the wrong thing.* She didn't need Anga to kill her, or the Empire ships, or a local war. She had killed herself. "I asked to live, I thought it meant my becoming an Altasimic Priest. I was wearing opal braids... I thought..."

"Thought? Try thinking who you were talking to."

"No." The word was whispered in old-tongue, her hands making the same shape beneath their covering of terry cloth.

He winced even without the Net set up to offer variations, but then sighed heavily, masking it with the noise of getting up. "Probably wouldn't matter if you did. Now, I've got things to do and so do you."

"I don't have anything to do."

"And aren't you forgetting two people?"

"I can't deal with them now."

"That's one mess you brought on yourself. You settle it." The last butterfly of cords got thrown hard onto the tea tray, tipping her bowl, spilling the last of the tea. He walked past it without noticing.

The wet silk of the cords on the tray was a darker blue than when dry. Lavender. She almost smelled the herb. She had chosen the color for her House, besides the opal and black, to please Garm, remembering the few times they had seemed close. In the diamond, the long ends looped around Garm's hands. On the ship, the lavender ink stick in her hand, frail, as the flower head would be and as scented with the essential oil of the herb. The perfume lingering on her skin and on his. He had asked her what colors she wanted and she had told him.

Placement had him still by the Mound. He had walked the circumference earlier and she let the recorded span of time have him march through the Net flags still gathered to catch her attention. And closed the link sharply when one flag tried to override the filters Bolda had set up in her usual links. En'talac. The medic's image had started to form, a shadowy figure but for the silver on her fingers, those seemed to capture all the available light.

Only an image, a magnified flag was all this Net was capable of, the medic wouldn't have seen her. Yellow sky had been in back of her... the ship, red and white tents... the distance said En'talac was close to the steps leading down here. The Net cut held more: armed Bluestone guards blocked the woman's way and provided an extra reason for the angry expression besides Ulanda's refusal to speak to her.

After checking the integrity of the Net filters, Ulanda tried to close her mind, finding herself breathing in time to the felt walls as she waited for Bolda to return, the wind hitting the tent in giant puffs that swelled the sides then sucked them in again. A flap, flap sound with a flicker change in the light, something had

come unfastened - nothing that affected the wards, those were intact and solid. Like a shiver of air, or light, or sound, depending on how she looked. The outer panels must be pulled back rather than layered to create a space of dead air to keep the heat out. Cooler and the light diffused as though cloudy but she didn't push out past the warding to check. She liked the breathing of the walls; the motion distracted her from her thoughts.

I should sleep some more, she thought as she wiggled her fingers to help the circulation. Her eyes still burned with the last of the tears, she shrugged each shoulder to wipe them as best she could, leaving the silk cold with the moisture. She didn't remember starting to cry, the part that could remember had been walled off, only becoming aware when Bolda had walked in, surrounded by shimmering halos of fractured light, and him shoving a handkerchief at her.

Some more tea, and a sponge bath, then she'd sleep and forget about Garm and everything else. Compounding her mistakes even to try to think about Garm right now.

And the rest of it? The breathing of the felt tent - she let her mind drift, filled with the sound, the smell, and the change in light as the cloth shifted. Feeling like what happens at the edge of sleep when the body sinks down through the mind's awareness, leaving it behind, floating. Or on the threshold of a dream... she decided the one from earlier would do: Ri in late summer.

She let the children become more than impressions. Two nearest her had picked handfuls of flowers and she willed that it be the widely scattered w'til flowers instead of allipalli. Paper dry on the stems, dusty yellow buttons of blooms crumbled in the gathering, smears of gold where the petal dust and old pollen stuck onto their sweaty faces.

Names? She let the remembering deepen more. Her class, she remembered. A junior dance class. They shouldn't be *here*, but for now, the meadow was where she wanted to be, not the practice room or the courtyard off the crèche.

Qalt'ici sat beside her on the grass, blades of grass in her hair, and grass caught in the folds of her clothes. Ulanda told her that she couldn't possibly be there, that she had left Ri months before Ulanda had taken this class of children. And found her words failing as she remembered that Qalt'ici's death was only days away from when this day had really happened. Her friend listened to as much as she managed to say and laughed at her words as though to say 'so what', shaking her long hair in the green light of the Ri afternoon, the ends brushing the living grass as she leaned back on her hands.

Then let time advance, Ulanda thought. After Qalt'ici's death, after her vision seen while writing the poems for these children to carry in the procession. Niv waiting for her in her room. And the same thing then that faced her now, only the start, not the culmination of the effect of pattern on her.

But her memory of Niv on that morning so little into the future of her dream or so far back in her past, remained elusive. One of the children ran to her and Ulanda watched as Qalt'ici touched a handkerchief to her lips to moisten the cloth, then dabbed gently at the tiny speckled face. A Wa'tic child as large as their adults but with the plates of hard chitin still mottled tan with the brown. Flowers fell round her as the Wa'ticin chittered and rubbed fore claws repeatedly at it's eyes, pollen sticking to the haze of bristles between each facet, fighting the cleaning as much as helping. Drifts of yellow w'tin and the white feathers of allipalli on their white robes... except there were no Wa'tic that age at South Bay Temple.

The sun turned, as though it were blinking. Days? She waited for the images to fade. How many days? Qalt'ici was in all of them and in the one that settled out and steadied, she didn't hold a Wa'tic child, but a stem of allipalli.

"You're dead," Ulanda whispered, smelling the almond of the white blooms and the lemon of the stem broken off to a dagger point. "And Niv was waiting for me." Would he be this time when she needed him?

"What did she say?" A hesitant voice, but clear, high pitched. Speaking Hegemony.

"She's drifting in pattern. Don't expect sense when she's like this. You'll know when she wakes up. Bad tempered as hell."

"But her eyes are open..."

She blinked. "I am not bad tempered," Ulanda said in an automatic protest. Bolda filled her sight, she was still sitting where she had been, him beside her as he had been, but with a bowl of steaming water next to him instead of tea. A sponge in his hand was dripping water onto her lap.

"Wrong language," Bolda said. "Try being polite as well as sweet tempered."

She suddenly realized who else was there and tried to pull her robe back together with hands thoroughly wound up in towels. "Are you out of your mind?"

Bolda smirked. "Told you," he said, speaking to Alicia. Then to her, "She's in your Household."

"She doesn't need to be here!"

"Really?" Bolda peeled the thin silk of the robe from her shoulders and tugged it out from where she was sitting on it. Alicia gasped when she saw the purple burn, her cheeks flaming red. "Easier if you stand," Bolda added as he spread a thick mat on the other side of the bowl of water. Alicia smoothed it out, looking happier with even that much to do. "Think you can manage it?"

She nodded and with both their help, did manage.

"The leather chest over there," Bolda said to Alicia, pointing. Then to her, "What? The serpent pleat tunic? With a loose demi-robe over the shoulders?" Ulanda shuddered, remembering that Garm had worn the same but in a skirt yesterday.

Alicia had found the clasp that locked the chest. Still biting her lip as she lifted the first robe out, a lace pattern of gray colored wool, light in weight, a Xintan weave, the color not a dye, but resulting from a harmony of wool fibers, all different grays. Styled after the dark Simic-green lace robe, with the same wide sleeves and generous cut and the simple tag-ties to hold it closed. One of the gifts from yesterday.

"It's beautiful," Alicia said, the robe draped over her arms, the gray color luminous against the black of her dress.

Bolda squeezed the sponge. "A good choice for the Oathing. Black cords would go well with that. Those we have. Not like they needed them on Lillisim anyway. There should be an underrobe right there, a slate gray."

Alicia had it, fumbling with the two robes, but managed at last to smooth them. "Those will be fine," Ulanda said. She was starting to shiver as the water cooled her skin. The towels around her arms were getting wet and cold as well, only staying there because she held the ends from slipping past her fingers.

"You can help here," Bolda said to Alicia. "Put that stuff over a saddle stool and get me those two padded cloths by the pallet, those and the blue jar of cream."

He touched the back of one knee to signal her to kneel. "This is going to hurt her. Always have her down where she can't fall and do any damage to herself. Whoever is doing it, it's their responsibility to see to her safety, not hers."

Alicia glanced at her briefly, then again, apparently still unsure if she could look. "I'm not sure I understand."

"It means that you do your job properly, not obey any and all orders just to be agreeable. You'll learn to spot the dumb ones. Do the Strom always make sense?"

Alicia stiffened. "I wouldn't know."

"Hell, give me the rumors then."

Alicia shook her head. "My uncle didn't believe that the Strom have any special abilities. He said that they are like dogs bred back into the same line too often. They get strange."

"Smart man." The first towel off showed blood in delicate feathers through the thick layer of hardened cream. "He got the abilities part wrong, but strange seems to cover the rest of it."

Ulanda coughed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He looked up and winked then nodded to Alicia. "Her nibs here can't use her hands worth a damn, wrists get broken at Initiation and they don't heal properly. The reasons why get complicated so don't bother about it for now. The marks are power sign. The bleeding cuts mean she's cycling, means she's not stable in how she accesses pattern. The excess builds up until it finds the easiest way out."

A question showed in the girl's eyes. "Cycling means she's liable to shift from one perception of reality to another as easy and quick as you or I can go from

one room to the next. And she doesn't always have a lot of control over it and it's very hard on the body. That's what she was doing when I brought you in here."

Ulanda shook her head, feeling her hair start to come loose from the knot. "Just dreaming."

"Sure." He started peeling the layer of cream back slowly. "You get to the really strange part when she drags bits of the different reality back with her or drags you in."

"He's thinking of someone else. I don't, I don't know how."

"Not yet, but she'll learn. Most Priests can't do much of anything you'd consider overly impressive, but some can. That includes making a mash out of reality. Another thing to remember about a Priest is that they don't have to think, they do what they feel is right, even if it doesn't make sense, not even to themselves. If Ulanda wants something done, it gets done."

"Like the oaths?" Alicia asked. "Rit as good as said that without them, I would be passed back to the Xintan."

Ulanda flinched and tried to draw her arm back as the peeling reached the first cut. "That won't happen," she said, smiling again to reassure the girl. "I won't let it." She chuckled. "My arrangements, their arrangements... how could theirs be different from mine." What happened to Alicia wasn't Quin'tat's decision, certainly not Sarkalt's.

"But Rit said you had ordered his oaths anyway." Then she reddened. "I'm sorry..."

"Lesson number two," Bolda said. "Don't apologize. Bluff instead. If that doesn't work, yell." Then, already getting up, added: "Just a second."

He went to the entrance; the hanging canopy blocked her view of him. Talking to somebody. Placement had them: Hann with Rossaliana in tow.

"Lesson number three," he said, back a moment later, alone. "Members of a Priest's Household get to see them like this and in a large Household, only the near-aides... and the Priest's tass'alt. And a medic as well. And, of course, their Weaver. A Priest doesn't have any privacy from their own people, not really, but they do from outsiders. Just like the Strom, they have certain abilities which are valued and which gives them a position of power, but they're vulnerable as well. They get protected."

"That's not any different than in a Hegemony Lord's household. Everybody wants something from him. I think I understand."

A quick flip to lift the end of the translucent membrane from where it ended at her wrist then Bolda bunched it in one large hand and tossed it to the tea tray, then started on the other arm. Another tug and the second arm was done. Then to Alicia: "Any objections to doing some real work?"

"Like serving tea?"

Bolda snorted a laugh. "Something like that." He used his fingers rather than the terry pads to smooth the ukin cream, one arm then the other. "Normally this goes on very thinly and is rubbed in. It provides a layer that's, well, kind to the skin so you don't have to change the pads and the underbraiding more than once a week if you keep them dry and we've got special mittens to help with that. The underbraiding is the business end of what happens here, the overbraids are usually just decorative and the pads are for comfort. I'm putting a thicker layer of cream on her skin because of the cuts. A little more doesn't hurt but it's usually a waste if the skin isn't doing anything extra to need it, like healing."

He gave the jar to Alicia and let her put some on. Her small nose wrinkled at the smell, or it might have been in concentration. "The underpads go on so, and rubbed in gently until they bond to the cream. Very gently because of the cuts, but normally they... well, she'd like the handling. Touching is important, she has to feel what you're doing and you have to watch her to make sure she can feel it. If she can't, at this stage, just call for help, fast."

Her hand felt so different than Bolda's, hesitant as first, as her speaking voice had been, but more sure very rapidly. "What is a tass'alt?"

Bolda hesitated as he gathered up the loose bits and pieces. "A Priest's lover."

"You mean her husband? Or his wife... if the Priest is a man."

He tossed soiled cloths to one side. "Not exactly."

Sometime during his explanation, Alicia found a bit of rug to stare at, the underrobe pulled off the chair and across her lap, hands toying with the teeth of one of the pink combs from her hair.

"Bolda..." Her hands shaped what she wanted to say: that the details of a tass'alt's service weren't anything Alicia would need to know.

He took the dark gray robe and shook it out. "She needs to know what you are and what the people around you are." He waited a moment, a look of disgust on his face. "You going to sit there all day or get dressed?"

- 13 -

At the top of the stone path, Ulanda asked Alicia to wait and left the girl uneasily watching the red and white tents of the main camp spread before her and the circles of flags all around. The wind was much stronger up here; a whistle and rush of noise that made the people there appear stealthy and silent. Three mounted Bluestone Warriors, rifles slung to the ready, watched outwards from the ridge of stones that half surrounded her camp, just above the spring. More

were between the mound and the Temple ship, securing a larger area than when En'talac had been stopped.

She walked to where Garm stood, and crossed her arms, trailing long black braid ends against the silver of her robe. Silver in the strange light of this day, not gray. "Would you join me for lunch?"

"Do you see it?" he whispered through a dry throat, his voice almost breaking with the effort.

Emerald eyes, skin drawn tight by staring, eyes glazed by staring, the rest of his face devoid of expression. "I see it," she said even as she wondered that he could. She had 'seen' it as soon as she'd pushed her perception past the walls of her tent instead of using the Net. The flags had said the same.

"I thought I was going crazy, that I just wanted to..."

"Garm, would you come with me? Please."

"Are you sure you see it?"

She rested her head against his arm and closed her eyes so she didn't have to see that his never once looked towards her. Her own feelings? Too much pain and anger at him to be able to sort out what else she felt.

"The wings are in layers of silver," she said. "Scales as much as feathers, but with a white bloom of feathers to mount the wind when the bird flies." She changed the words until she almost sang them, the rhythm containing something of the sound of the wind that circled the mound to rise straight up in a plume of dust in the center. Eyes of cut emerald looked to the sky. Not round eyes, but faceted tear shaped slashes of emerald the length of the narrow head, from the beak to the white crest of long feathers that fanned the start of the arched neck. The sharp beak was closed still, but it would open and she shivered to almost hear the sound of its calling.

Dry trembling fingers moved through the tears on her face. "I've hurt you. I never meant to."

"I can't seem to stop crying today. All I've done is cry." She looked past him to the mound and just saw sand and dust, all the footprints gone now, from before and from last night. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Yesterday. It would have been a fitting end, even more so than in the diamond. A different kind of full circle. The Poultat people would understand. I would have been with her. But now..."

"The bird won't fly for a long time yet." Hardly more than a promise of flight in the faint shape found then lost in the whirling mass of opal: stone and sand and dust.

She thought he would challenge her but he didn't say anything.

"It seems I've a growing Household of people here. I still need someone to be my San and you can do that."

"And share your bed?"

"No." The word hung between them, hard edged. "I can't keep thinking I can reach for you when I need to."

Both hands held her face, his thumbs brushing her tears away. He was looking at her now, just him, his eyes the faded green she'd almost forgotten, mild and kind. "I don't look at you enough," he said. "I thought I'd seen all there was of you, but I haven't. I am sorry." Hands to her shoulders now and she could drop her head and her eyes again. "I'd better talk to Bolda before he gives up on me entirely." A long look to the mound. "The diamond, I suppose?"

She nodded, seeing it as he spoke. A white room, in darkness now, the only sound, the whisper of wind through a biting mouth of crystal. Then it turned, like the sun had in her dream and she couldn't see it any more.

"Lunch, you said?" A laugh was in his question and she left with him beside her to rejoin Alicia, leaving a silver bird with a beak like a sharp broken stem, like the dagger point of a knife.

- 14 -

Rit stood at the edge of the cliff, watching Ocea ship pass between the Twin Watcher Islands to the north. Despite the strong wind and the submerged rocks in the pass, the Ocea ship kept full sail, racing the storm to Endica harbor. Grain from Cann'tilla he hoped, and a full load, although it was much too far to see how low the ship was riding in the water. The local wheat and salt barley harvest was ruined; the Ocea delta farms had flooded out repeatedly in the months before the grain was to ripen. A constant cycle of storms, month after month, had followed the Opening and the release of power at the Mound.

There was still food in the markets, but generally low quality and little in the way of the late season produce people would need for the winter - carrots and cabbages, potatoes, squash, winter onions, dried beans. The smaller upland farms had missed the worst of the storms, the problem there was in convincing the farmers it was safe to leave the land and bring their crops in for the autumn Markets. He had argued against armed force, and so far, had succeeded in swaying Princip quis'Rillwind, the Occupation Commander for the Endica area.

Behind him, Heni picked carefully through the clumps of grass on the side of a dry watercourse, shaking her head to scatter a hail of pebbly soil when the grass pulled up whole, the earth around the roots worn unevenly by the unusually heavy rains. The fading grass was an autumn gold marked with brown along the edges of the hanging seed heads, frost had whitened the stems this morning but the ground wasn't frozen.

"Heni does that deliberately," Ulanda said, laughing as she brushed at the grit on her fur-lined cloak with a mitten protected hand. She moved her horse away at the same time, controlling the dapple mare with the changing pressure of her thighs and knees. "She just wants to be noticed."

"Apparently it's worked." Rit knocked his hat against his leg and stepped to take Heni's reins. The mare stretched her head out to bump him, then neighed. Her bad habits were getting worse and his being away from the Holding most of the time, working on the trade and resettlement programs, wasn't helping. Garm was close to ruining her for being anything other than a pet.

Ulanda was back talking to Nisstin, the fourth of their party, the Xintan replying in his usual monosyllables. Nisstin had moved his own horse away to keep the distance constant between Ulanda and himself, his eyes everywhere but on her, even as he answered. Chief of Security at the Temple Holding - the old Patrol Barracks - the Warrior rode a big Xintan-bred stallion, as yellow as the storm sky above him. Despite his Temple affiliation, the man wore his Greywolf Clan crest front and back of his tunic, only the braid on one wrist showed he taken the Alisim Temple oaths. His other hand rested on the stock of a Zimmer rifle, the weapon in a leg harness.

Was he as careful of her in bed, Rit wondered? He looked away at the thought and pulled Heni around to mount, embarrassed that Ulanda might read his expression and not sure, even after three and a half months, of how much she knew without his having to say it.

Alicia's bay gelding had wandered deeper into the worn channel of earth, closer to the edge of the cliff, pulling at the grass, but less messily than Heni. He looked to where his wife balanced precariously high in the air, one elbow hooked around a flag standard apparently no thicker than a matchstick.

Jumping down the height of a single massive foundation boulder, she dropped to a roll as she hit the ground, then sat up, eyes to the flag as the wind unfurled it. White against the yellow and gray sky - not the opal he knew it was - the silk cloth caught the slightest change in the direction of the wind, outpacing the much heavier Alisim Temple Emblem. A row of identical markers flew from each of the stone cairns that bordered two sides of this area, following along the gray cliffs above Endica and along the shore.

"Bissalta will be pleased you thought of it," Rit said as Alicia walked her horse over to him before mounting.

She smiled as she brushed dry grass from the legs of her pants and the back of her slit sided riding tunic. "Is that why I did it?"

He felt himself grinning in return, but only to cover not having the slightest idea of what to say to her. This last set of negotiations had lasted two weeks, he had arrived back in the Zimmer flitter yesterday after sunset, just before Bissalta

gave birth to her son. As always in coming back, he had expected to see Alicia the same as the first time and as always, was surprised.

"Bissalta's pleasure is at least one of the results. As for what the rest of the results might be, this Strom was off duty as of last night."

"And ready for play?" She deliberately set the big gelding prancing. "Since last night? Too bad I was already asleep." Her breath showed in the cool air, her cheeks rosy from the climb. "How about you race me back to the Holding to make up for it?"

He shook his head. "Heni would never forgive me."

"You should take her with you next time and do more riding. You're both getting fat." On the last word, she pulled hard, making her horse rear as it turned, then galloped towards the Temple Holding.

Ulanda settled her mare to match Heni in a fast walk. "Take your wife with you instead. Let Heni get fat."

A joke? Her face didn't say so; she looked worried for all she tried to hide it behind a smile. And tired besides worried, the yellow light was relentless in showing the dark circles around her eyes and the shadows in them. She had lost more weight. "I didn't ask for advice."

"You could use some."

"Did she ask you to talk to me?"

"Rit, you're being deliberately blind. You're not here often enough and when you are, you don't pay her any particular attention. Most times, you avoid even looking at her. Besides everything else, she doesn't have the discipline to control what she's feeling. If it's not you, and soon, it will be someone else."

Rit glanced at Nisstín, the man oblivious to his look. And found he was suddenly angry. "Did you have someone in mind?"

Heni stopped dead, her eyes rolling, neck to neck with the other mare. Ladyspot didn't look any happier. "We have breakfast together every morning." Ulanda's words were plain in the sudden quiet. Even the wind was silent although the dry grass still rippled. "If I'm asleep, she makes tea while she waits for me to wake up. The slight noises of pottery and boiling water or the scent of the tea are usually sufficient. Or the whispering... Nisstín likes to tell her jokes, it's a game with him to make her laugh and wake me up that much faster. And it is Nisstín with me more often than not, but sometimes someone else. I like the variety."

"That's hardly a decent environment for her. And this isn't..."

"No one else sees her as a child. None of those I take to my bed sees her as a child."

He took a deep breath as he struggled for control. "And how does she see them?"

"How do you think she sees them? Alicia and I drink our second pot of tea in the bath, just the two of us. I need help there and, well, I wash her back in

exchange. She can smell on me who I've been with, and see the marks of our lovemaking. If it's not going to be you, maybe I will ask Nisstín."

"Does who my wife sleeps with fall within your area of responsibility?" He searched her face for a clue as to what she was at here except to make and then keep him angry. She had succeeded in both. His talents were erratic at best, worse where Ulanda was concerned, but this whole thing had an open feeling, as though this segment of the topic rattled around in the greater meaning. Alicia or something else?

She hesitated, one hand slowly running along the mare's bristle cut mane, the other arm held across her stomach, holding the cloak close to her body. Dark gray mittens, the flared cuffs were pieced with leather and edged in black river otter fur as was the long cloak. Dark gray wool crowded with fine black embroidery, the slightly paler cloth barely visible. Rillmilli work; a gift from their new Embassy in Endica.

"This isn't the Hegemony any more," she finally said. "The rules she grew up with don't apply. About the only difference is she's going to feel she has to fall in love with the man."

He'd be very surprised if she wasn't at least half in love with someone already. That kind of need was usually self-fulfilling. Not Nisstín, he was too Xintan looking. Her memories wouldn't let her, not yet, no matter how easily she appeared to be adapting. He was a dark blond, typical of Greywolf Clan and exotic looking to Hegemony eyes with his narrow hooked nose and high slanted cheekbones. In his early fifties, Rit thought, some gray in the blond but not much. And not fat. He looked not much different now then he would have at twenty, only with the softness of youth burnt off.

Ulanda's taste, not Alicia's. "She's not in love with me," Rit said, knowing she wasn't.

"No, not yet, but you do have certain advantages. She already likes you, and you *are* married to her. And she apparently thinks of Eunni as a challenge to overcome rather than..." Ladyspot started again in quick dance away and he missed the last words.

Heni balked and he kicked her sides hard enough to earn a nip on the toe of his boot before she went into a thumping trot. "She knows about Eunni?"

"You can thank Wandassa. Of course, by Xintan custom she's entitled to take lovers, same as you are."

"I'm more aware of Xintan customs than you are of Hegemony." He instantly regretted his tone. He never snapped during the endless Council meetings or diplomatic functions, only at Ulanda. An affair with Eunni wasn't something he had planned. Other than checking that she was alive, he didn't think any association with him was particularly healthy for her.

Which of his personal guard had talked, he wondered. He usually had three any time he left the Holding area, but they rotated, he didn't have time to get to know the men as individuals. And the truth - he hadn't wanted to. Or, it might have been ordinary market gossip.

"I had reached a dead end in tracing Tennin's sister and her two children. She's a widow; Tennin supported them. Besides, I've known the children since they were born. I wanted to find them and get them settled down before it gets widely known what the Xintan have planned for me. I thought Eunni could help me. She has contacts that for obvious reasons, I don't have access to."

Right now he was just one more person who had decided to go with the winning side sooner rather than later, and who had managed to work his way into a position of some authority, mostly by marrying a close relative of the local Lord. The last was a typically Heg viewpoint and one he had expected. That he was Strom was known, but not widely believed. And Empire and Temple? Most of the locals viewed Temple as just a powerful Xintan cult with access to pre-Millennial technology, shaping anything they heard or saw into what they could accept if not entirely understand.

He guided Heni a little closer. "I can trust Eunni." He shook his head. "Funny that I should worry about being compromised."

"Did she find them?"

Her face was closed to him. They were still past where he could reach the new Temple Net but she didn't have those kinds of limits, he didn't think distance made a difference to her, not if she didn't want it to. Knowing about Eunni at all, she would know this as well, or could know it for the asking. So, she's asking him, he thought, but wondered why. Perhaps just to talk, that happened as well, an apparent challenge that changed to a chat. Her moods were unpredictable.

"They were on the last ship to leave Endica before the Xintan took the city. Probably the same ship Alicia was supposed to have been on. It never reached Yolinder; the Captain decided Ocea territory was safer and turned back. Eventually, they reached a refugee camp on the Oceena Coast. I was too late for Billi, she died from of a fever the week before, but her boy and girl are still alive."

Ulanda had to know this too, and that he hadn't brought them to the Temple sponsored orphanage but had made private arrangements. She had slowed to a stop at the top of the rise, Nisstin over from them. Gold was all around, grass and light, and Rit felt as though the sky were sinking down, the air heavy despite the constant wind. The ocean was back the way they had come, but only yellow sky could be seen beyond the line of fractured granite that made up the cliffs. The black flags of the border cairns were knife edged to them, the wind straight in. He couldn't see the opal prayer flag. Nothing could be seen towards the east either, a snake of fog covered much of the delta lands and Endica was tucked too close into the fall of the land to be visible from where they were.

If she wanted talk from him, she could have talk from him. "Endica was their home, I thought it was the best place for them. People are coming back, families, I mean. And Eunni offered to help..."

"The ship's coming in with the tide," Ulanda said, interrupting him. She looked towards the port he couldn't see. "They're flying the Tikkanami flag under the Ocea emblem. Their Embassy must be on board."

They were close enough now for the Net and he let the list of political 'maybes' form in his mind, happy to let the previous subject drop. "They'll be in time for the Blessing ceremony tonight."

Still looking out towards the river, she shrugged, and then turned her eyes to him but her expression was as hidden as though she hadn't. "She's very beautiful."

He stared, puzzled a moment before making the mental switch, and ended up just as puzzled. Eunni? Beautiful? Ulanda's eyes were searching her mittens again. "She'd be pleased for anyone to think so," he said, falling yet again into the gulf between them.

"And your plans for her?"

"She makes her own plans." The whine of the flitter grew counter to the sound of the wind; Heni pricked her ears, gave a long whinny. Rit scratched behind a furry ear and was ignored. The flitter slowly dropped behind the gray stone of the main Holding. "If we've exhausted the subject of my mistress, is there anything else I need to see you about before the Blessing?"

She raised an eyebrow then started her horse towards the holding at a quick trot.

I should have stayed in bed instead, Rit thought as he followed, keeping a length behind so as not to invite any further digging into his private life. He wasn't sure what Ulanda's mood was, but it was nothing promising. Alicia was angry with him - with cause, but he didn't know what he could do about that either. Give up Eunni? Doing so wouldn't solve the greater problem of his marriage. A courtship, Pida had said. He hadn't been in Endica long enough at a stretch to even get to know Alicia... and taking her with him into what were still volatile areas, didn't make sense. Besides, his time was spent in non-stop negotiations, both at the table and the inevitable discussions over drinks in a play of allowance and reason and intimidation. That atmosphere wasn't a place for a seventeen year-old girl.

After Nisstin gave him the all-secure sign through the Net, he did a Placement on the domestic level. Alicia had beaten them in by twenty minutes and was visiting with Bissalta and the new baby. None of the messages waiting for him were from her.

The courtyard was quiet, the stone drywall cut the wind to a whistle above his head. The rebuilding had kept the foundations of the barracks intact, and what

had enclosed storage rooms or stables for the most part, were now living quarters. The original dressed granite blocks were Ocea work, not Hegemony, some stories had these stones as being brought here about the same time as the wall that made up the Spine of the Serpent was built. Many of the wooden walls and partitions built over the old structures, especially the top floors, had burned, but the massive timbers of the crossbeams survived the fire relatively unscathed. Spiral milled beams, the trees from who know where. Simple roof supports had been fashioned from the blackened lumber, bundles of dry salt hay tied over and carved into scalloped layers. He hadn't believed grass could keep the storm rains out but it had, better than the wood shakes of the old barracks.

Already very little remained of what he remembered from the years he had lived in this place. Some of what he saw was makeshift: walls with half-tents coming off them in the Xintan military camp fashion to make the stables and work rooms and sleeping quarters for any of the laborers who weren't local. Piles of stone and timbers still waiting to be used. But the rest looked as though it had been like that for eons instead of months or even days. The workers had found finely pieced flagstone floors under centuries of hard packed dirt and colorful mosaics under wooden boards, beams shaping doorways and window spaces that had been filled in or built over.

Garm was a spot of bright yellow against the lichen covered stone drywall of the stable yard. "I was beginning to wonder if you intended to make it back in time," Rit said as he dismounted.

Garm rubbed Heni's nose with one hand while feeding an apple to her with the other. "I've already been informed I'm late. Apparently, the Nursery has different priorities."

"Here I thought you meant Heni." Ignoring the bits of mashed up apple on the cobblestones, Heni nosed Garm's robe for another. Crisp yellow flesh and a smell that brought back memories. "I hope you brought more than just the one apple."

"Apples and young trees, both. I traded Bolda's Palace apple seeds for them. The Greens Brother at Strom Charter House has promised the first harvest of the Empire fruit will be yours. He also sends his regards."

"I've been told the Charter House wasn't damaged." Wilni Capital had surrendered quickly once the Court and many of the city-based Noble families had fled. The Strom who survived the pattern sickness had been left behind as possible carriers of the plague. It was obvious they had been affected more than most. And at the time, their involvement with the Xintan had only been rumored.

"Some of the outbuildings have been burned. Arson, not the war. Security has been increased for all the Charter Houses and Strom holdings but I don't expect the area will be stable for some years. The analysis - not mine, but the one prepared for the Assembly of Elders - will be in my report. We can discuss it later if you wish." Garm pulled another apple out for the horse and then scratched

behind Heni's ear as she munched noisily. The Simic had his long silver hair in a braid and with the apple finished, Heni reached for the end and gave it a sharp tug.

Ulanda laughed as she slipped off Ladyspot. "You've spoiled that animal." Nisstin was holding the mare's bridle; he passed the horse along to a groom. Another took both Heni and the stallion in tow. "You must have sat on the bags the whole way back," she added, wrinkling her nose as she walked towards the far gate of the courtyard. "You smell like apples. Do I have to be a horse to get one?"

"Might be one left over." Garm pulled another yellow apple from the front of his robe and turned to toss it to Nisstin. The Warrior caught it easily, and smiled as he sniffed the skin, then rubbed the shiny surface against the tip of his nose as he watched Ulanda. "Right now I want to borrow Rit for a while."

She shrugged.

Rit let the Net list of his appointments run past him. The morning and early afternoon meetings were cancelled, the annoyance from Kamill, his secretary, obvious in the tone of the attached flag. Most had been courtesy visits with the various Officials of the Embassies here for the Autumn Blessing. The Net lacked the promised report on Garm's trip into Wilni Province; he had a priority flag in the Net to see it as soon as possible. "Seems I have some free time," he said dryly.

"An amazing coincidence." Garm produced another apple from where his robe bloused out over the netted girdle around his waist. Rit caught it in one hand and found himself sniffing the skin much as Nisstin had. New wine with a hint of lemon and the black earth of southern Wilni where he had been born.

"Is this the later you meant?" He followed the old man to the flitter. "Something more than apples? How did the trip go otherwise?"

"The War Council of the Assembly of Elders has finally conceded to the South Occupation Marshall. The main Xintan forces will hold for the winter just shy of the Aklif Mountains. It's likely the rising number of frostbite cases was a contributing factor in their decision. I stayed a couple of days at Riwann; it was snowing heavily there already. Beautiful city but colder than I like."

"Any fighting?"

"Not in occupied Wilni. Skirmishes only or isolated acts like the arson at the Strom Charter House. Nothing organized by the Noble Houses. There hasn't been time, plus, any of the Patrol or Noble House based troops who still had a taste for fighting joined the Royal Guard in the retreat. It's the Mountain Lords in the non-occupied areas who are causing the most problems, they've opened their doors to any of the fighters who managed to get that far."

Rit nodded. "From the pre-Hegemony Aklifin tribes. The government never had more than nominal control over them. What about the East Occupation?"

Other than that there's still fighting in Alman, all I got in Denman were rumors of the Catalli Regent signing a treaty with Xinta."

"The Catalli envoy arrived in Xinta by ship, wisely sailing well clear of the Innit coast. The treaty has been signed and an Embassy is on its way to Wilni Capital. The active fighting in Alman is already past the East Command Line, and with Cilowt Province breaking away and joining Catalli, it's likely that what remains of Alman will have war on two fronts. They've lost this harvest already, lose another, assuming they can hold out that long, and there won't be any need for either the Xintan or the Catalli to attack. When word of a signed treaty gets to the Hegemony Generals, I think it likely they'll agree to terms."

The East Command Line was a strip of fortified cities built to face down the Catalli armies of two hundred years ago. They had grown from East Border entrenchments to a rich base of supply - after thirty years of almost constant war, Heg had taken half of Catalli before an General's uprising had ended that Heg king's rule and set the current dynasty in place. At the start of the Xintan invasion, Cilowt Province had destroyed the bridges linking it with Tilnaria and Alman Provinces and declared for the Regent in Catalli. Of the provinces, only metal-rich Surri, surrounded by mountains, had successfully stopped the Xintan. And was closed off now until the spring thaw.

Garm walked past the eye of the flitter to stand near the point, a solid appearing expanse of overlapping black tile with no evidence of a door, except that Rit could feel the energy lines that marked the space as though the tiles were fire and not clay.

"Olloss has been using the Denman point-of-origin resettlement plans you've worked out as a model for Wilni. Apparently, those of the Xintan Assembly of Elders who actively support the official plan of a Strom government for the Heg lands consider it an act of trust in you. Those opposed, think it a stroke of genius on Olloss's part in that you will be discredited when the plan fails."

"The Assembly is welcome to any set of opinions they want." And Olloss. The South Marshall was perfectly capable of manipulating both sides. "If they can get the refugees, and not just in Wilni, back on the land for the spring planting and with enough military support to protect them until the first crops mature, then half the problems will never develop."

"Do you care to guess which faction would believe you could have that attitude? And which will win? Or has won, rather. Although the news might come as a surprise to those in the field - on both sides - officially, the war is over." There had been more than apples in the blousing of the yellow robe. Garm handed Rit a thin blue leather folder wrapped with matching cord. The leather was as warm as the apple had been. "The Abdication Codex. All Royal Titles, Holdings and Pledges are passed intact to the Head of Strom Noble House, not to the charge of the Xintan Assembly of Elders. Part of the agreement is that the old

Court will remain in Riwan under watch until the mountain roads are clear and safe passage to the Innit Authority can be arranged in the spring. I didn't offer transport in the flitter and it wasn't asked."

A small sheet of white parchment, the brief sentences over-written by the flowing script of the King's signature. The Royal Seal had been broken, and then each half pressed separately into the wax at the bottom to make two clear impressions set a little apart. The Strom Seal was at the right corner of the document, space left for his signature, and the Alisim Temple Seal beside the Strom, almost the same but with three lines meeting in the center of the six petals of the flower. Garm's signature as San was just under in order to validate it by Empire standards as Rit was in the Priest's Household. Complex forms of some Empire language or other continued down the side but Rit didn't pull a translation. He found it unnerving to think that with the signature, what he held was a legal and binding document on worlds whose people had never - would never - hear of Strom or Xintan. The Xintan Marks on the left he could read: Redleaf with Olloss's Sign taking the Ranking position with authorization from the Xintan Assembly of Elders.

"Another sheet is underneath," Garm said when Rit started to close the folder.

He pulled it free. The Strom Noble House document of Patrimony, naming him as the Head of the House, the rest of the parchment taken up with the personal Seals of high ranking members of the extended family, offering their pledged service. Prominent was Wilntin's, his cousin who had taken over as Head after Rit's fathers' death. And who had treated with the Xintan to overthrow the Olum Dynasty.

There was a third paper, a Charter House will, naming him as beneficiary to his great uncle's private wealth. The breaking of the seal was fresh, the paper still wanted to roll. Beside the wax was his great uncle's mark and instructions. The money had been in trust to be released at the discretion of the current Strom Charter House Councilor. Rit dragged a finger over the mark, wanting a sense of the man he still missed after all these years but his pattern sense failed him, even something as minor as a scent was missing when he held the paper to his nose. He slipped all three papers back into the folder.

"An interesting system of government," Garm said, accepting the folder back. "Apparently you personally, and not the State, own a fair portion of Hegemony."

And the third document? Something that was really his. What had Tirreniti seen all those years ago? This? If Rit's birth was part of the Strom plot, then it predated his cousin's involvement, even possibly his father's. Rit's hands wanted to take the paper back, to feel it again as though if he tried harder he could find more and different things than just words on the surface.

"Will own," he said.

Garm smiled thinly. "The announcement will be tonight at the Blessing, I thought you'd appreciate some warning."

Several months too soon on something he hadn't allowed himself to believe would ever happen. A quasi-military government under the direct control of the Xintan Assembly of Elders had been his best guess, and that unusual enough. Enforcement of Xintan law was the rule in any other territory they had conquered. Any small ability he had to predict the future was even further limited when his emotions were involved. "Is there a reason for changing the plans?"

Gram shrugged. "It's already an open secret in Wilni. I don't see that waiting will accomplish anything useful."

"And it's such a minor affair?" The man's attitude said it was.

"Did I make it sound like one?" Another package from the robe was passed to him. "I think this will be more to your liking. A Blessing gift for you, the book as well."

"*Chaos*," the title whispered to him as he allowed the Net translation that was offered, other meanings running in an annotated list beside the original word. One of Garm's links, it had the feel of the Simic in it.

"An appropriate choice of book as it turned out," he said. Tennin's scarf was wrapped around the book as though it were cording on a gift, his Squadron pin attached. He felt a weight he was scarcely aware of anymore vanish. "Where is he?"

"In the flitter, sound asleep, or drugged, actually. Olloss's people found him in a loyalist prison camp outside of Riwann. He was still wearing the rags of his Royal Guard uniform. He's been babbling most of the flight, the medic says he doesn't know what he's saying."

Royal Guard - when all his enquiries had led nowhere, he had suspected Tennin had made it into the Royal Guard. "Injured?"

"And sick. He shouldn't die but he won't be well for some time."

He unfastened Tennin's Squadron pin and held it in his fist, the edges biting into his palm. "How much does he know about me?"

"That you're here and he knows you're Strom. Like I said, your name has been bandied about a fair bit in Wilni. He never made it to Strom Charter House, that trail doesn't go any further than you were able to find out earlier from the records in Denman Capital. He still had the book and letter on him. The letter is at the Archives now; I was generous. Neither thing played any part in this. It may be that you being where you were, and writing the letter were 'seen' and therefore included." He sighed and shook his head, but his green eyes showed more amusement than otherwise.

Rit shook his head. He certainly didn't know. "And what do I owe the Marshall?"

"I'm sure he'll let you know eventually." Garm shrugged. "A connection with you certainly won't hurt, even for someone as powerful as he is. Among those in the know, you've assumed almost mythical proportions. Even Wilntinn appears agreeable to stepping down as Head of the Strom Noble House."

"And if he knew I was more than willing to let him stay as Head?"

Garm chuckled. "I've never been very good at reading minds. Some of his more obvious traits I could recognize from what I see in you, they are quite remarkably similar. Quite an accomplishment for a small group of people to select for characteristics and abilities that can't really be tested with any degree of accuracy, only vaguely 'seen' to exist in some distant future."

Remembering the look on his great uncle's face when he talked about the seeing, Rit shrugged. Vague or not, there were compensations. And the cost? "Will there be a full report in the Net? Or shall I try to learn to read minds? We could learn together."

Garm laughed out loud. "You might learn, not me, although it would be a useful skill. Although I was shown every courtesy, entire books have vanished from the Archives that I only knew existed from passages referring to the missing volumes. I surprised the Recorder, he didn't suspect I would be experienced in tracking down files and obscure notes, even though he was Strom and I informed him he should know better. Giving the letter you had written was meant as a bribe."

"To get what? Incidences of mind reading?"

"More importantly, the breeding records. From what I did manage to see, the spins will be ready when you want them. I've tagged several areas where I'd like to have you add what you already know, which, I suspect, is considerable."

"And this isn't a minor affair when my being king is such a small, unimportant thing?"

The man laughed again. "Think of it as an Empire perspective. As a courtesy, I was asked to check into them by En'talac, but I suspect the loom-master wants to see just what it is he's created here."

Loom-master. Another being of mythical proportions and about as likely as Garm's Empress. The old man spinning tales around the fire, a circle of children entranced. Rit would look for the truth in the words - one of those abilities Garm was talking about - and find himself instead, in the middle of the flames.

"I have to be in Endica for a couple of hours this afternoon, but if Tennin doesn't wake up, I'll get something together before I go." What he was, what his family was, wasn't Temple's business, but he'd tell En'talac that herself.

"She'll expect more than a couple of hours work. Think of it as an exchange for the time she gave you. Besides, you won't get to it today, Tennin or not. The pod is bringing Olloss and several others of the Elders, their families and staff, and

people from half a dozen foreign Embassies. You will need to be there to greet them."

"I might take a nap instead while the San of the Lady's House does the honors."

"Wilntinn is with them, you might want to see him."

"I've survived this long without the pleasure."

"And, Ramsini, your father's last wife."

He had assumed she was dead. Almost twenty years had passed since that one glimpse of her but he saw her all at once in his mind and she wasn't sixteen anymore. "I thought she would have been killed during the retreat, or still be with the king if he'd been able to protect her that long."

"She was with the Court in Riwann." A small smile. "She asked to be returned to, quote: *her people*. She reminds me of what Alicia says about cats, that they eat from any hand that offers food and sleep on any soft lap, but they walk where they want." The green eyes searched his. "One more thing. Tennin apparently believes you were part of the plot regardless of what else he might know about the Strom's role in the invasion."

During the retreat across Wilni to the Aklif Mountains that made up the southeastern border of Hegemony, the Royal Guard had slaughtered anyone they even suspected of having Strom blood or Strom Noble House affiliation. Ramsini was so obviously Strom - was there a different rule for a Royal mistress?

He ran a finger slowly over the gilt edge of the book, watching the change in the energy as his finger warmed the metal. Too much killing, he was glad it had stopped there. His having seen her, if only once, made the difference, he knew. Rumors of the King's Strom mistress had reached as far as Endica years before as tavern gossip. She had never had more children than the three who died so young. Strom women taken as mistresses by the Royal House didn't have children.

"I can give Tennin some good news at least," he said, looking up. "Two pieces of good news. His niece and nephew survived."

"Then I find myself almost envying him." Garm patted Rit's shoulder. "Speaking of children, I'd best go pay my respects to Bissalta and the baby. Despite putting her out by missing the great event, I've been informed I'm old enough to be let into the nursery. I'm considered harmless even if I am male. I'll give her your regards." He shook his head slowly.

"While Tennin is here, I might bring his niece and nephew to the Holding."

"That would be wise, especially now, but they can't stay with Tennin."

"Why not?"

"He'll be kept isolated from other people and have a watchlink set on him besides being monitored through the Net. Kori, the Zimmer tech who has been working on the security systems, will set the watchlink system up and show you

how to handle it. There are two guard assigned to just him, they're with him now, besides the Xintan medic. You could explain it to him when he wakes up."

"Explain it to me first. Is all that necessary?"

"Consider it a condition of his being here instead of in back in Wilni Province in a prison camp."

Rit hesitated. In a prison camp awaiting execution. The last words didn't need to be said out loud. The Royal Guard hadn't surrendered at any opportunity and fewer of those had been offered as the atrocities had mounted up. "Under whose authority?" he asked when he couldn't think of a diplomatic way of contesting the decision.

"Ulanda's"

He hadn't expected that. Around him, the Net opened with the hollow feel of an extended link. She was there, he felt he should be able to see her, the system nodes inside the Holding were set so that it was possible, but what sense he had of her retreated as he reached out. "Any particular reason why?" He would ask Ulanda later when her retreat would have to be physical.

"Does she need to say it?"

The old man - slightly foolish appearing in the mask he preferred to wear, the grandfather who spun improbable stories to the sons and daughters of the people who lived and worked here, who would think to bring apples to a horse - those things were gone.

"Yes, I think she does," he said quietly.

"Then take it up with her if you want to, but until she says differently, the order stands."

When he didn't respond, Garm turned to go.

"Garm?" Rit waited a moment until he turned to look back. "Thank you."

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Rit left Tennin in his own rooms, the Holding medic tending him. At her shoulder was one of the Warriors Garm had mentioned, another stood by the door to his office. He recognized the herbalist; she was a member of Panntin's Household. He had seen her with En'talac at the Holding during one of his infrequent longer stays.

Could he ask En'talac for help? They hadn't parted on good terms; she had taken it as her job - her duty as she would say during their frequent arguments - to see to his training in the same way she had Panntin's training as an Empire Priest. And he was - of necessity and by orders of the Xintan Assembly who

wanted to see what they had gotten as part of the cost of a war - gone so much of the time. Endica, Ocea Prime, Yolinder, Denman Capital. As with Alicia, too many problems had been left unresolved.

He knew she would treat Tennin if he asked her to, despite the Xintan, despite Ulanda, even despite the Overpriest. But Tennin? The Xintan were an enemy he could understand, the herbalist an object of hate, but expected, even accepted once he accepted he would survive the war and his capture. But not En'talac. Rit had seen too many men in Tennin's condition; any disturbance could lead to the fever returning. Or an infection. Or a reason to stop wanting to live. And he would die. Other living arrangements would have to be made, preferably in Endica, not the Holding... and he would have to get Tennin to agree to them.

Reaching him had meant talking about events predating the war, and then, sometimes, the old Tennin would surface for moments at a time. The quiet, matter-of-fact words, the steady dry tone.

And when he wasn't that man? Killing had always been easy for Tennin, he hadn't worried it later, hadn't needed the false bravado many of the others did. Had Rit fostered that side of Tennin, had he used it? Now, through the fever-tight scar splitting Tennin's face in two, the racking cough and the delirium, he tried to see which was more real, the Tennin of memory or the man lying there, bathed like sweat in images from a slaughter.

If he followed Tennin's words too closely, the room around him became mutable. Tennin's memories. Scenes from a picture book: turn a page and find another moment captured in lines, in washes of colour. And like his memories, the stolen ones were condensed, stirred around, telescoped.

A child, three or so years old by the knowing eyes, but the size of a newborn. Rit recognized the syndrome. Fragile, the bones brittle, she died instantly, her head broken against the wall. Strom - bred back into the same line too often. His half-brothers had died of the illness, but within their first year as the male children tended to. Even that fast it was a slow death, an excruciatingly painful death as the bones decayed until a breath could crack a rib. A slow murder allowed because the few successes were so valuable.

Overtop the image from Tennin's memory, one of his own came: the heat of late afternoon, the entree and sage scent of the Waste around the Mound of the Lady. Wool tents. A fire burning in the heart of cold ashes. A cinnamon colored bear. And a girl in mourning.

What kind of child could he have given Alicia? What kind of marriage could he still give her? He should be with her now.

The Xintan medic looked up from measuring dried willow bark into a teapot. "Lord Strom?"

He shook his head.

Just before he left, the Zimmer woman set up the watchlink on Tennin through the Net then shrugged it off at her end like a garment. He put it on. Place, person - both shifted in his perception in a way his mind wasn't able to grasp. He took a step and moved away from Tennin in fractions of inches, then fractions of those fractions, each division distinct and separate: where he was, where he was going, place, person. He could measure... what? Suddenly, the room around him stopped changing and became whole again.

From his rooms to the stables, he felt the link to Tennin as though a string attached them. Distance was a factor; it was like walking away from music. By a certain point it was noticeable only when he concentrated, vanishing faint otherwise. As he let his awareness of Tennin fade, he found Ulanda's attention on him much as it had been while he challenged Garm about Tennin's treatment.

He's only one sick man, not a paradigm. Whatever he's done, he was my responsibility. And my friend. He argued with air, his emotions against hers, never knowing what was heard or understood, or worse, what he really wanted to be understood. Like in his friendship with Tennin, with Ulanda he needed a degree of blindness just to maintain the will to put one foot in front of the other.

He pictured Wilni, formed the city from his own memories. Wilni Capital. Wilni Palace, visible from throughout the city. A distant view, he'd never been inside, but now, the memories unfolded to include one of passing through the black granite portals of the main gates. Rooms opened to other rooms. The scent of beeswax and lemon and a dozen perfumes. Floating colours at the edge of his vision, always teasingly moving away from him. High pitched laughter, woman's voices. Music. Who was he? His father?

Rit squeezed those images flat like stepping on them and settled for others clinging loosely from his unspoken words. He took the scent of sun warmed soil, the roses he had described to Alicia and imagined the two of them walking in the same garden of the Strom Charter House. And more recent: the yellow apples Garm had brought him. A brick wall, the trees pruned by his own hands to make pyramids, columns, and fans. Home. *I'll be there soon. Tomorrow? The next day? There's nothing to keep me here.* The air he argued with exploded and was as suddenly empty, leaving his head aching in the vacuum.

At the stable, he told the lead groom to put Heni to pasture and saddle the white mare he used as a remount. Heg trained, from Lord Calmuit's Stud most likely. He didn't want to have to reinvent how he rode. The animal was fresh and he let her run out some of the excess energy in the half-mile to the cliff overlooking Endica. Two of his guard caught up at the HighPost watchtower, its gates straddling the start of the trail leading down. The third guard was waiting for him there.

Beyond the gates was a narrow switchback gradually working down to sea level. It had been an annual job in the spring for the recruits to shore up with rocks what the winter storms washed out. Over the years there had been so many rides up and down that Rit's memory of them was a composite, details easily selected out for season and weather, or state of mind. Most rides had been solitary or with a few companions, and his mind could supply those as easily. Mounted troops on patrol didn't use this road often, but more usually followed the edge of the cliff to where it met the river closer to Intil. Endica was for off-hours, for whoring and getting drunk. Probably less than a quarter of the regulars had had families of any sort here and even fewer had been married. Unless you were raised on the Border like Tennin, posting to Endica was usually for a single tour of duty, and meant at best, a lack of connections and worse, punishment just short of being court-marshaled. Or, as it had been for him, Endica Border was a refuge where questions weren't asked.

The remaining leaves of the bush alder on either side of the steep path were yellow, the rest had fallen since he'd been this way two weeks ago, and cut by a steady traffic of hooves, had formed a thick brown mat. Around the muted sound of the horses, miles-distant waves murmured provocatively, as though the cliff harbored the seashore. The cry of gulls, shouts, rifle shots... all seemed captured and held to be released at random.

From the path, he had glimpses of the LowPost at the base of the cliff, a square tower about fifty feet tall, double the height of the one at the summit, and the first of several in various stages of completion and ending with the keep of Lord Calmuit's Manor and Endica Harbor. Between the towers, was the start of a doubled city wall similar to the one at Intil. Stone and beaten earth walls. From the Holding, the steady hammering could be heard from sunrise to late evening, but today, the hammering posts were quiet, the wooden forms shaping the inner wall deserted.

His guard rode with rifles loaded and in their hands, their eyes searching the path fore and back. Two dogs trotted beside the man on point, one on either side, dark brindle mastiffs as heavy as a large man. The Warrior had brought the dogs over to Rit at the HighPost while they waited for the gates to be opened and had the dogs sniff his hands. They whimpered, shivering and wagging their stumpy tails, wanting his approval. No collars, nothing someone could grab to hold the dogs off or tie them with. War dogs, the first he'd seen here, although he heard they had been used in the invasion of Wilni.

The path led directly into the go-by between the walls, at a sign from the lead man, the guards changed position, the dogs behind him now. He didn't like the go-by between Intil's walls; he liked this one less. The ground under him appeared solid but the echoes said hollow. He infected his mount with the fear;

the mare fought the bit and pranced sideways, bumping his right leg hard against one of the posts supporting the framework.

"Drop back and keep some distance between you," he ordered the two guard close enough to hear without his yelling. He reined his animal into a slow walk; she had wanted to follow the lead man. Gradually, his awareness of the echoes deepened until he wasn't sure if he really heard the sounds or they were a part of his changed senses. The ocean again but not as he had heard it at the cliffs. This was the booming sound waves make in a partially submerged cave as air is alternately sucked at, then pressed against stone. Or concrete. The sound might be real, if exaggerated. Man-made tunnels dating back to pre-Millennial times extended under much of Endica. Sewers, transportation tunnels, others the purpose he didn't know. He had heard that they were being mapped, using Empire technology, some filled by collapsing them - many of these were smuggler's lairs, in use for centuries - others had been made part of the guard postings to stop the Hegemony guerrillas from using them as the Ocea had against the Heg during that war.

The sound stopped suddenly. Rit pulled back on the reins, his guard followed suit, keeping their distance. On his right, the wall wasn't earth any longer, but stone covered by a layer of red dust. The western perimeter fortification of Lord Camuit's manor house, part of the new City Gates. The Princip and a small cohort of his best men were stationed there; others were billeted in the town.

From the Manor, the wall curved to the north for a few hundred feet to connect with the dike wall of Endica Harbor. The land on the other side of the harbor, half as wide as the part from the harbor to the cliffs, was a tidal marsh, the shoreline changing by the hour. Home to fishers and smugglers.

He looked back along the go-by. Nearest was the dog handler - wearing Greywolf colours and crest - his animals beside him. Rit felt the man's attention on the walls, on the sounds and scents that might warn him of danger, on the actions of the dogs and other Warriors, especially the one in front of them with the Princip's men. Curiosity about Rit's actions was limited - some people did inexplicable things and this Strom was known to be one of them.

Known by whom? Rit breathed deeply, trying to release the knot of tension in his belly. He checked - Tennin was where he had left him, the connection taunt with distance, but straight, ignoring the rock of the cliff, and giving him somewhat the same sense of buildings and people that he got from the Net-based Placement scans. Three guards now, one in the room as earlier, the same man. The medic was gone. And Tennin? The effect of the warding link was stronger than what Rit could feel of the man.

He felt an almost irresistible urge to turn his horse around; that what he was doing had consequences he didn't want to face. Doing? Sitting a horse in a half finished go-by? Or that he intended to ask Eunni to the Holding to look after

Tennin for the few days it would take him to make other arrangements? And arrangements made for her as well. Or offered her. He had to make her see that Endica wouldn't be safe for her after the announcement tonight.

As suddenly as they had stopped, the echoes started up, louder. His horse danced sideways and he pulled her head around, not wanting his leg slammed again, and on rock this time, not wood. As his horse turned, he saw the sound and the mare's reaction had a normal source: the lead Warrior and the Princip's men. The curve of the wall somehow focused the sound of the horse's hooves as they galloped towards him.

At a word from their handler, both dogs ran forward and past him. With a scream, the white mare reared, throwing him against the wall. He hit back-first on the stones, taking most of the impact on his right shoulder. He struggled to his feet, his right side near paralyzed - and dropped the reins he'd managed to hold onto during the fall. As he fell back against the stone again, more red dirt fell off the rocks, blinding him. A cough to clear his mouth and his breath caught on a sharp pain. Had he broken a rib?

The dogs stopped about twenty feet along the go-by, guard position, facing out and a barrier to the other Warriors. Their horses didn't appear any happier facing the growling animals than his had. The third man hadn't moved from his position, his rifle aimed past Rit.

The Greystone Warrior brought the mare back, following the wall, keeping out of the rear man's line of sight. "What's your name?" Rit asked.

The man's eyes said he thought trouble was more certain than danger. "Pasi quis'Brossenwater, sir."

Allied to Greywolf which explained him wearing the more powerful Clan's crest, not his own. And more worried about the lead guard than outside trouble.

"And your last posting?" he asked as he stepped forward to take the reins. One step and he felt as though knives were stripping away the skin on his back. The pain would be worse when the numbness wore off, but as it was, he barely heard the man's answer: "Wilni Capital, sir."

Were you and your dogs on the same flitter as Garm and Tennin? Have you guarded Strom before? Greywolf was more usually allied with Bluestone. He hadn't been surprised Nisstin was Chief of Security at the Holding with Viy'lana as San of Panntin's Household and Bluestone prominent in the North Occupations. But Wilni meant the South Clans, predominately Redleaf and their affiliates. Had the addition of the Strom to the equation changed centuries of traditional alliances? *Marriages, promises of Strom blood.* But when? Now? Thirty or forty-odd years ago?

"And the Princip's men? Can they be trusted?"

The Warrior hesitated. "Haven't heard differently, sir."

"Send the other man back to the Holding, the Head of Security can deal with him." Or Nisstín might not deal with him. No doubt this was only a small part of the political maneuvering going on between the Xintan Clans. "I'll clean up at the Manor. If you think a third guard necessary, ask the Princip for a loaner. Send one of these here with a message in any case, I'll need a bath and a change of clothes."

Compared to Noble House Estates in Wilni, even those in the land-poor cities, the Manor was small, but it dominated Endica, larger than the nearby Custom House and the Civil Courts together. The city gates led past the tower keep of the Manor, the walls on either side of the passageway growing to several stories in height. Haunting the space between the stones were the cries of redbill gulls, the birds flashes of gray in the slit of yellowed sky above.

From what appeared to be a dead end, the passage turned and gave way suddenly to the open. Talking, shouts, cart wheels on cobblestones, the snapping of cloth banners. And the gulls. The wind and the bright light after the shelter of the go-by and Gate passage made his eyes tear. Moist salt air, the wind was from the ocean. Fresh, it lacked the rot stink of low tide.

The Court Square, the Manor House on his right, fronted by the multicolored standards of the Xintan Clans with men stationed there. The Civil Courts opposite, and at the far end of the Square, the Custom House and the innermost reach of the harbor. Only the top rigging of the Ocea ship was visible beyond the dyke. More distant still was the green haze of the marshland separating Endica from the river.

Most of Endica's citizens appeared to be in the Court Square and the narrow alleys leading off it. Pushing deep into the mass of people, Xintan troops had cleared a way through for the carts of grain from the ship. Ocea sailors in the State colours of white and green unloaded the bags. Cann'tilla wheat, each bag sewn with a red cloth at one end to show it had been cleared for export. The ship's Factor stood beside a representative from Endica's Trade Guild, counting sticks lying in bundles of ten at their feet. In a long day for both of them, all the bags would be accounted for, then sold by draw-lot to the merchants who had applied for the custom and who were waiting to one side. A portion would be kept by the City Council as a tax levy.

He was noticed - and recognized - the tone of the crowd changed. The Factor turned to look, curiosity written plainly on his face.

The Guildsman walked towards him, the Factor trailing after. "Lord Wilnmeit," the Guildsman said with a bow, then whispered a few words to the Factor.

Rit struggled to remember the Guildsman's name, settling for a pain-racked nod after what he hoped wasn't too long a pause. He wasn't sure what bothered him most, the transparent fawning or the hate it so poorly masked. So get used to it, he told himself. The Court in Wilni would be worse. King of an occupied

country, head of a puppet government - and it would be one, regardless of what the Abdication Coda said. He couldn't lie to himself as he had to Ulanda, or use the intent as a weapon, if not the lies. She would have seen through the images to his motivation.

I was captured outside of Intil at the start of the war, injured and unconscious until it was all over. Because of my Strom connections, the Xintan put me to work as a mediator - it was that or a prison camp. More lies. None of it was untrue, but containing so little of the truth that it could only be intended to mislead.

And the Strom connection? *An unacknowledged bastard*. In the minds of the Council and Trade Guildsmen he had worked with in Endica, the admission dropped him to the level of opportunist and only incidentally a traitor. The difference was breathing space. Ocea and Denman had been easier, his treason anonymous. He had no past in either place. And Wilni? A past, but still no future he could see even as it sped towards him.

Whatever Rit had said, the Guildsman appeared satisfied - he knew he'd been talking, appropriate pleasantries apparently, although for the life of him he couldn't remember a word. A problem with his horse, a self-deprecating shrug... the pain of that shrug he remembered.

He motioned to Pasi. "Wait for me here with the horses. And keep the dogs with you."

The Warrior shook his head. "I'm sorry sir, I have my orders."

The standard answer no matter who the guard. "Suit yourself." He took the steps of the Manor House two at a time.

The Princip was at the docks waiting for the Tikkanami Embassy to disembark. Rit was greeted by a Senior Warrior, the Princip's Altern, and shown to the inner courtyard of the main building, the old Lord's private residence and now quarters for the Senior Warriors.

Rit had wondered about ghosts, but the rooms he passed though were just rooms, the inner courtyard simply an open space, simply planted, sparsely furnished. As a Patrol Captain, he had been here twice, both times to receive written orders directly from Lord Calmuit. An escort party for one, a relative of the Lord's returning to central Denman Province. A message pouch for the second, he hadn't known what was in the leather sleeve. He remembered tapestries hanging from the galleries, rugs on the tile floor. Flowering shrubs in clay pots scenting the still air.

He walked on bare tile, his footsteps slowing as he circled around the central garden of the courtyard. The only other sound was from the clicking of claws on tile as the dogs padded after him. The Princip's Altern and Rit's two guard stood and watched.

The bath was off the courtyard and separated from it by a screen. Two small pools joined by a fountain, the first pool capable of being heated, the ductwork

visible behind the shrubbery, but when he splashed the surface, the water was cold. Still, it was a luxury in Endica, most people, even prosperous merchant families, would bath in front of the kitchen fire, using a pail and sponge.

He was dressing when Bolda arrived wearing the large headdress of a Ril'mil merchant. A neck cloth covered his ears. The Princip's Altern showed him in, his expression that of a man who prefers his battles simple.

Bolda eyed the dogs and shook his head, then said something in Empire plain-tongue.

Fingers through his hair did for a combing. "You'll have to speak Heg or Xintan, I got about one word in three out of that. I assume you were inquiring after my health. Thanks for asking. I'm fine. Just a bruise or two."

Bolda grunted, then pointed at Pasi. "You, out," he said in Xintan. "The dogs too, they stink."

The Warrior stiffened. "Lord Strom, I have..."

"Orders," Rit said, smiling at Bolda. "Take it up with Nisstín."

A Squire appeared at the doorway, Rit's boots in one hand, the leather freshly polished. He ducked away from Bolda only to find himself facing the two dogs. He put the boots down just this side of the screen and backed out.

"Are you here running errands?" Rit asked Bolda when the boy had gone.

"Nah, I was just wondering how badly you wanted to die. And how. Do you fancy your brains oozing out your ears? Or maybe fried like an avipp?"

"Avipp?"

Bolda deflated with a sigh. "You don't want to know."

"You didn't mention getting my head split like a melon on a go-by wall. I assume we're talking about earlier."

"You're assuming right. Rit, don't fight her on this. Don't fight her on anything, not on an emotional level and sure as hell not by using Altasimic pattern. Do you have any idea at all what it was you did back there?"

"I was taught to do what I did." He retrieved his boots.

"You only think so because you know squat." A glance at Pasi, then back. "Go apologize to her."

"A better solution is if I go to Wilni sooner rather than later. I assume you heard Garm's news that the announcement will be at the Blessing tonight. My leaving now only pushes up the date by a few weeks." Wilni - would there be ghosts there? His ghosts instead of Alicia's? "I'll leave tomorrow with the Marshall. Alicia can follow once things are settled."

"That's not going to happen."

His leaving or Alicia's? "Everything Ulanda has allowed so far says that my going to Wilni is exactly what is going to happen. She didn't get herself a lap dog when she pulled me into this."

"Lord Wilnmeit?" The voice came from higher in the galleries surrounding the courtyard. "Are you still here?" Spoken in Heg, it was repeated a moment later in heavily accented Xintan.

"You expecting someone?" Bolda asked.

"No, but I wasn't expecting you either." He nodded to the Warrior. "Councilor Dirnit of the Endica City Council. He's harmless."

Harmless or not, the Councilor was thoroughly searched. During it, the dogs sat on either side of Rit, their ears pricked, staring at the man.

Pulling his clothes straight, Dirnit hesitated then bowed for the second time. "My apologies, but I heard you were here, and as I was..." He stopped, at a loss for the next word.

"Heg will do fine," Rit said.

"Thank you, I am practicing, but..." The Councilor appeared to notice Bolda for the first time. "My Lord, am I interrupting something?"

Rit looked at Bolda. "What are you today?"

He crossed his arms. "Ril'mil. I sell bath sponges."

"Councilor, how could I possibly have important business with a sponge merchant?"

The Councilor fingered the ornate key hanging on a long gold chain around his neck. Gold from Surri, the reddish colour the same as the signet ring on his left thumb. A green brocade jacket with matching vest over black pants, a cap of the same brocade. Neither was typical afternoon dress, not for an Endica City Councilor. "You must think me highly inobservant. Actually, I'm constantly surprised to notice one foot goes in front of the other." He shuddered theatrically. "Whenever the Xintan search me, I half expect militia in my pocket, or snipers hidden in the lining of my vest." From rubbing his key to rubbing his nose. "It's my nerves, my wife says I start at shadows. Still, if you were shot in my presence, I don't think your guard would wait long before assigning blame."

"And outside your presence?"

"I'd hate to think. The Princip has men in the old city again..." He looked at Pasi as though for confirmation, then continued. "I shouldn't think anyone is left in there, but I suppose they know what they're doing, the Princip's men, I mean. There's even a priestess with them, and they've put some of those dogs through the tunnels." He sighed. "I expect the Princip will expect some return on his effort and I'd prefer my head doesn't join those on the spikes outside the Court House..." He squeezed his eyes shut then opened them and blinked rapidly. "I did notice they've been taken down. Because of the Tikkanami, I suppose. Still, if any prisoner they take decides the City Council hasn't shared enough of the fight... or if there is any trouble during the celebrations tonight." The man hesitated, but Rit thought it only for effect. "A word in the right ear..."

Rit sighed. "Obviously, I've spent too much time in Denman Capital."

Bolda snorted.

The Councilor's laugh was less forced this time. "Denman's gain, Lord Wilnmeit. If I can be of service at all, please consider me your man."

Despite a tendency to babble, the Councilor wasn't someone to underestimate. Rit had cut his teeth as a mediator during meetings between the Ocea Trade Representatives and Endica Council, most of whom were merchants, as was the Councilor. He walked to the screen to get his boots. "I'll take it under advisement, but being my man might not be the refuge you think it is."

He picked up the first boot. Smooth leather along the calf, fine breaks at the ankles. The boots were more comfortable than showy. Leaning his uninjured shoulder against the screen, he pulled the boot over his foot then stamped it on. The Councilor was talking again, protesting the honesty of his offer, but Rit stopped listening as he pulled the second boot on.

Place again, not person. It was becoming a bad habit, a refuge of his own, and he knew it even as he let it happen. The bath and the courtyard and the galleries ringing the second and third levels. And stripped of ornament other than what was built into the railings and pillars. No furniture, no hangings in the Xintan style, not even the Xintan tapestries he remembered from when this had been Lord Calmuit's. In the center of the courtyard, a boxwood hedge in a knot shape, framed a single statue. Weathered marble. A woman pouring water from a jug. Stone water. Tracks of scrapped off lichen scarred the surface. He was surprised the statue hadn't been removed like everything else that could mark the place as the home had been.

A very unpopulated place and he worried that was as much a refuge as the physical space. Was the lack of ghosts, his lack or Alicia's? Could her memories here be stripped away as simply as the missing draperies, or the absence of laughter echoing from the galleries, children's toys vanished from the corners where they could go unnoticed in a busy household?

What sense of place did he seek here that she hadn't had? And how far back would he seek it from? As old as the statue? The pre-Millennium city had reached to Intil and north onto the shifting equation of land and river that were the Delta Islands. Endica was built over the ruins of tunnels, the original land blown away to form a crater, the new formed out of the river by the existence of the crushed buildings and the drag of centuries of silt-laden water against the cliffs. In the higher dry lands to the west, where the Ocea hadn't built, the stumps of the pre-Millennium buildings looked like bones exposed by the wind. The holdouts, the guerilla fighters, would be based there.

If Tennin had stayed on the Border, if he had survived, he would have been with them. With the Councilor's words, Rit had had a sudden vision of Tennin's head on a spike. Was he dead now? Had Rit pushed Ulanda into giving the order

to have him killed? A pillow over his face, a drug in the tea the Xintan medic fed him. The warding link was intact but would it die with him?

An inconvenience of form... he heard Ulanda's laughter, then suddenly, it wasn't hers, but another woman's. Recoiling from the sound, he sought a different refuge, one deep within his own mind. Half bent over, arms raised, fingers wrapped into the wood screen, hanging on. The edges of the wood cut into his skin and he welcomed the pain. "Simple," he said out loud without meaning to speak. The conscious part of his awareness was very still.

"Simple?" Councilor Dirnit said, his voice choked.

With a shuttering breath, Rit let go of the screen and straightened. And lost himself. Suddenly, he was above the galleries, pressed against the sky, suspended over the hole that was the central courtyard of the Manor House. He looked down like looking into a well.

One of the dogs, the bitch, was standing, hair raised on her back, her eyes sweeping the room, looking for a target. A soft growl came from her throat. An instant later, the male stood, shook frantically, and then snapped at his rump with a yelp.

"Lord Strom?" The Warrior.

"There's no problem here," Rit said quietly. His voice came from the heavy man standing by the wooden screen.

And he was there again, with a body. "No problem," he repeated, feeling each word like it was a revelation, like each was a separate language in the same way the wood screen broke the brighter courtyard into squares, a slightly different perspective of the same thing. Perspective. He had thought he needed a body.

He turned his head towards the Warrior. The same lack of curiosity faced Rit as he had sensed during the ride here. The Warrior looked at the Councilor, then Bolda and nodded.

"He called you Lord Strom?" the Councilor asked.

He hadn't noticed - when had he gotten used to being called Lord Strom? "My father was Strom," he said. "I am Strom." He rubbed his face with the flat of his hand. "I'm sure you've heard I'm a bastard. My name's a lie, I only had a given name."

"I had always thought you had the mannerisms of a man raised with family. There's a steadiness, a kind of..." He shrugged around an apologetic smile. "When I heard... the other... I assumed you were raised by those of your family who weren't Strom."

He could suppose he had been watched back as closely as he had watched the Councilor. "I was raised by my great-uncle."

"There, I knew it. Is he still alive?" When Rit shook his head, the Councilor added, his voice suddenly lower pitched: "Was he Strom?"

"Very. The last thing he told me before he died was that he saw me at the end, surrounded by the blood wind, looking back at him."

"Blood wind?" The Councilor swallowed hard. "End?"

"The end of the world, of our way of life, or simply his own death reflected back at him, I don't know. What do they say about me, the other Councilors? That I'm half Strom?"

"So I've heard said. So I've just said." He blinked. "So you just said."

"And half Xintan?"

The man swallowed again then opened his mouth as though to answer, but not a word came out.

"Half Bluestone?" Rit added.

"No, Lord... Strom, not that, not Xintan. And please believe me when I say that any rumors to that effect won't have started here."

Rit glanced at the mastiff bitch and she stared back, calmer now, but her focus was on him, not Bolda and not the Councilor. The male dog was beside the Warrior, the man's hand twisted into the loose skin of its neck.

"I've been trying to figure out why me, why..." he began, then stopped, suddenly reluctant to reveal more, despite that Dirnit would know from the announcement at the Blessing tonight. "Bolda? Am I half Bluestone?"

"You sure you want to babble about this here?"

He had been babbling, the words a release he hadn't had the wherefore all to stop until now. "The Councilor already knows I work for the Xintan. Am I half Bluestone? Enough scans were done while we were at the Mound that En'talac would know. Why would she want the Strom breeding records?"

"Does she just? Well, you'll have to ask her yourself tonight at the Blessing."

Dragging his eyes from Bolda, the Council mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, dislodging his cap. "Speaking of the Blessing..." He used the Xintan word for the type of religious ceremony that didn't exist in the Hegemony. "... I really must go, I'm sorry to have interrupted... the timing seemed fortuitous, I was here to meet the Princip, for the Reception for the Tikkanami, except I missed him, he'd left early, and..." The Councilor had twisted the handkerchief into a rope. "I'll be there tonight with my wife. I hadn't expected an invitation any more than I had expected the City Council to be included in the Reception for..."

"Elected civil government has more power in the Xinta culture than in the Heg," Rit told him. "And there's no prejudice against people being in trade." Then to Bolda: "Why does it matter where I am? Here or in Wilni, what does it matter?"

"Places and people matter. Don't be stupid."

"Do things matter as well? If you want to talk about significance here, what does the rug mean?"

"You walk on rugs. Big deal."

"Why did you put it with my things? And the purple rods..."

"Rug?" the Councilor asked. "Was there... was I supposed to...?" When Rit shook of his head, he sighed. "Sorry, my nerves again. Both invitations are honors of course, but... all I see are heads, rows of heads on rods every time I shut my eyes at night." He looked startled. "On stakes, I mean. Outside the Court House. All my wife sees are the gowns better than what she can find in the market here, especially with the war, and especially as she feels her position doesn't allow her to wear what the nobility will wear and she's sure she doesn't know what else is suitable." His eyes went to Bolda again and Rit saw what he saw. Not Rillmilli, not human. "I don't know which of us is crazier in our obsession."

"Bolda? What's missing from this? What do I need to know?" There was more. His stomach tightened. Ulanda's eyes as she danced. A stone room... a choice? The image failed as it always did. "Is it Eunni more than Tennin? Is that what started this off? My life didn't begin with the Opening. There are parts I reserve from anything..." From anything promised. Oaths. He touched his left wrist, feeling braid under the sleeve. "Besides, apologies between us don't last the breath it takes to say them."

The Councilor had drifted closer to them, the guard following. Bolda turned to him. "You people are worse than cats. Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"Yes, I mean... I suppose I do." From twisting his handkerchief to twisting his brocade cap. The hairless dome of his head shone.

"I said scoot." Bolda nodded to the guard. "Get him out of here."

Pasi looked to Rit. "Lord Strom? Your orders?"

The Councilor cleared his throat. "I was just leaving." He slapped his cap against his thigh to straighten it, and then put in on only to lose it with his deep bow. "Again, Lord... Strom, if I can be of any service...."

"I was just leaving too," Rit said. "I'll walk out with you."

- 16 -

Eunni knelt on the box seat, her nose to the window glass. It was going to rain again, or snow. She could smell the moisture in the cold air. "Will it snow, do you think?"

Rit didn't answer and she turned her head to look. Sound asleep. She went over and pulled the blanket up under his chin and tucked the sides around him before returning to the window seat. The only heat was from the coal stove by the bed, the bed she should be in. Or down in the taproom, checking on the servers. Or in the kitchen. By the smell, the first of the meat pies were ready and

Binsi, her cook, had a bad habit of allowing herself to be distracted at the worst possible moment and letting things burn.

Instead of going back to the work Rit had interrupted, she leaned against the side of the window seat, and watched the gulls circle above the Ocea ship in the harbor. She had been in the streets with the rest of Endica to watch it glide slowly, expertly, into the berth nearest the Custom House. Dark green hull, white and green striped sails. Owned by the Ocea State, not an independent merchant. On the gallery above the main deck of the ship, high enough to see over the walls of the dyke, three men in Tikkanami dress watched back.

A new beginning for Endica - the main trade with the Ocea had always gone to Yolinder well up the coast, one of the Denman Province Command Line cities. And it was an end as well - with the sanction of this one ship by the Ocea government, the war here was over regardless of the holdouts still in the old city. She'd seen the same knowledge in the faces round her, something they had in common like a language only a crowd could speak.

And she had been there when Rit had arrived from the passageway, surrounded by his Xintan guard. And she had heard the change in the voice of the crowd. And heard the speculation when he had turned and gone into the Manor House like he owned the place. Lord Wilnmeit. Was the rule of Endica to be his reward for treason? His wife's reward?

Her eyes burned from staring and she closed them a moment, still seeing the sky like crumbled gray cloth, the gulls suspended over water only a shade darker. She felt she could cry now where she hadn't in the past months. A sense of loss filled her and she didn't pull the blind down, but let the gray seep into her. The sky didn't move, there were no shadows moving on the rooftops of the warehouses between her and the waterfront, the clouds as fixed in place as she seemed to be. She wanted Rit to wake up, to snap her out of this cold wondering, but she didn't call him. She wanted him to explain it to her, but she didn't call him for that either.

I could leave here, she thought. Leave him and the trouble that was brewing for the both of them. Ocea, maybe. For enough money, or the papers to the tavern, she had contacts that could have her on a fishing boat before the tide turned and on the near Oceena Coast by morning.

On a clear day, from her attic window she could see past the marshlands to the river and the low hummocks of the Delta Islands. Since this morning, the fog had lifted, leaving the river a smooth band of blue metal. On it, she saw four fishing boats heading in to the docks and the shantytown in the marsh. Built on foundations of six hundred year old concrete, the wood was soaked with tar first, beams hammered into the base, and planks laid over. Even in the middle channel of the river, just under the surface at low tide, were concrete walls, rusting iron bars like the stumps of rotted teeth poking out. Barges carrying trade goods

waited until the tidal portion of the river crested upstream, then rode down on the turn of the tide. Each year, a few joined the centuries of ships that hadn't made it.

The local fishers used the box-like ruins as nurseries for oysters and mussels, as traps for the coinfish schools that fed on shrimp where the water was part fresh, part salt, and, in season, for the salmon heading up river. Legend said ghosts of drowned sailors lived in the shafts and cellars, the meandering bands of ash-white foam and debris along the tide line was wash from their nightly fires, the phosphorescence in the evening, the sparks rising from the depths. The tales masked the night fishing, with lanterns to attract the catch, and nominally illegal because of the cost in lives in the treacherous waters. And night fishing masked the smuggling. Each election year, the City Council promised better policing of the river shanties, but nothing was ever done. She preferred it as it was. Ocea brandy, cured game meat... she didn't look too carefully for the Custom House mark. And for all they disapproved of her and how she lived, her parents and her sister and her sister's family didn't refuse the goods she could give them that they couldn't find in the markets. Or have the money to buy if they could.

Rit groaned and rolled onto his side. "Eunni, come back to bed."

"Looks like most of Endica is still at the docks. I thought you'd have to be at the reception. Weren't you involved in the negotiations that brought the ship here?"

"Five more minutes," he murmured.

"Will you get into trouble if you're late?" Tell me yes or no, tell me why, tell me just how involved you are so I'll know how involved I am.

Rit sighed, then sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. "No, I won't get into trouble." He scratched through the hair on his chest, separating the sweat damp curls and then yawned noisily. "It's stifling in here. Could you open the window just a crack?"

His clothes were on the floor; he picked his pants up, grunting from the pain of bending over. His right shoulder and side was a mass of bruises, still red, the flesh puffy, dark blood deep inside. He stepped into his pants, and then slipped the Xintan-style tunic over his head with a grimace. One boot was under the bed, the other behind the stove. He carried them over to the window seat and sat heavily like the effort had winded him. She moved over to give him more room. And to ease the pain growing in her hips from sitting in one position for too long.

"Your eyes are better than mine," he said. "I can't see a thing from here."

"Are you sure you didn't hit your head?"

A lopsided smile. "Not at all sure."

Despite everything, she chuckled. "Was it just wheat on the ship?"

"Wheat and seed corn; the corn was unloaded first. Oh, and seed barley."

"And the Tikkanami Embassy?"

"They'll be at the Holding by now. You must have fallen asleep too."

"Are you supposed to be there?"

"You didn't have any questions earlier. And I used to be able to make you sleep longer afterwards."

"Did you hear any complaints?"

"No." Brushing strands hair aside he kissed her forehead, then her nose.

"Freckles, I'd know them in the dark."

It infuriated her when he said the freckles tasted different. "I'd still like some answers."

He found his socks still inside the boots and sat there staring at them like he'd never seen socks before. "Answers to what?"

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something."

"Did I?"

"Rit..."

"I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough. Tennin's at the Holding. He was injured..."

"Is he working for you?"

"No, and he won't be. He was in the Royal Guard. I need someone up there to look after him, someone I can trust, someone who knows him." He shook his head and looked up. "Before you say no, just hear me out."

"Damn it, Rit." His name was a sigh in her mouth.

"Just for a couple of days. He's too sick to move and I thought..."

"You thought I gave a shit? With all else that's going on, you thought I gave a shit about Tennin?"

"You've known him longer than I have."

"Growing up in the same town isn't the same as being friends."

"Eunni, I have to be at the Assembly tonight, so does Alicia. Besides, this is more about the children than it is about Tennin."

"The children are safe with my sister. Does Alicia know about us?"

"What do you think?"

"Rit..."

"Yes, she knows about us."

"And?"

"There is no 'and.' About Tennin..."

"No. And don't give me any bullshit about Tam and Willi. They're fine where they are. My family at least, is respectable."

"They won't be safe there."

"The kids will take their lumps, but they'll survive. And Tennin having been in the Guard might make up a little for my still seeing you. My brother-in-law won't

even let me in through the kitchen, not since he heard that you still come around."

"Then let that be payment enough. The man's always been an asshole."

"This isn't a joking matter."

"Eunni, I had fifty men in Grey Squadron, and the three I know survived... all they know out of this is that I'm a Strom traitor. I can't do anything about them, I can do something about Tennin."

"Are you Strom? I've heard you are, but you don't tell me anything. Where was Tennin?"

He let the sock drop as though the effort of holding it was too much. "Wilni Province, near the Aklif Mountains. In a prison camp."

Heavy footsteps on the stair leading to the attic. A squeak - ten steps from the bottom, she kept meaning to have the tread fixed. Whoever it was, wasn't hurrying. Rit heard them, he had to have, but didn't look towards the door. One of his guard then.

From socks to the rooftops or the ship he said he couldn't see clearly. The flat light of the day brought out the lines and shadows on his face. Not the deep sun creases, those had smoothed out, and his expression had lost most of the animation she loved in him. She ran a finger along his cheek, feeling the softer skin, and he turned his head to look at her.

"He was dying. I called in some favors. He was flown in this morning."

He looked at her but he didn't. What did he see? What would a Strom see? And how would a Strom make love? Like he had?

I don't know you any more, she wanted to say, but didn't. Had she ever known him? "What kind of favors could you be owed that would get someone like Tennin on one of those flying machines?" The prison camps were holding pens for people the Xintan military hadn't got around to executing yet. Ordinary troops - Patrol or City Guard - were let go if they agreed to stop fighting, if they had family to guarantee they would stop fighting. A couple of months into the occupation, where the camp outside of Endica had been were squares of yellowed grass in an empty field. Prisoners taken since didn't live any longer than it took to question them.

Two pair of footsteps, then one as the first reached the landing. Again, not hurrying and not trying to hide, but much too light to be one of his guard. The first, yes. Was it a squire? She knew Ami's walk, it wasn't her and none of her other staff would come up here without a fire under them. "What kind of favors?" she asked again when Rit didn't answer.

The expected knock came, the door opening right after. It was the Warrior who had searched the room before they'd come up. "Lord Strom?"

"Lord Strom?" Eunni whispered.

"What is it now?" Rit asked the Warrior. He sounded more tired than annoyed.

A woman brushed past the Warrior. Red hair, darkened from the shadows on that side of the room to a rich mahogany.

"Ritsiniti, there you are, dear boy." She curtsied. "I suppose I should have waited...."

He pulled one boot on, ignoring the sock on the floor. "Yes, you should have."

"But I thought formalities unnecessary between family. You know who I am, of course."

His other boot. "Of course."

"Well, I don't," Eunni said.

The other woman smiled at her and despite, or even because of the obvious differences in rank, Eunni saw a sympathy a man might miss. "He reminds me so much of his father, he couldn't bear introductions either. Or good-byes."

"Eunni, this is my step-mother."

The woman posed, head askew, as though studying Rit. "No, he reminds me more of Tirriniti, his great-uncle. His father wasn't nearly as stubborn." She smiled again. "The weight I think, although he's not quite as heavy..." A look to her. "You must help him loose some of that, my dear." Then back to Rit. "And the brown hair. Tirriniti's had been brown you know, not red. He told me - I was child then - that he'd become gray haired at a young age quite deliberately out of fear no one would take him seriously as a Strom."

Eunni pulled at Rit's sleeve. "Who?"

"Ritsiniti?"

Rit sighed. "Lady Ramsini Strom, late of the Court at Riwann."

"The king's..."

"Ex-king, my dear, so ex-mistress. And as for the next king..." She smiled, showing dimples. "I think I'll settle for just being his step-mother." She moved further into the room and Eunni backed away without consciously intending to yield the ground. "He hasn't told you has he? You thought this..." The other woman stepped to the window. "... this village, you thought this was the limit of his ambition."

"The man I knew didn't have any ambition."

"Another family trait, at least ambition as you would think of it. Yet another is the habit you've noticed of leaving things unsaid until the last moment, if ever saying them at all."

Rit stood. "Should I leave you two?"

He could hear the drums at least, Eunni decided. The strong beat had her tapping one hand against her thigh and she thought Tennin's eyes twitched to the same rhythm but he just didn't have the strength to open them. The music sounded Xintan one moment, then the next, not at all.

The drums stopped suddenly and after a while listening for them to start again, she relaxed. Tennin didn't, he still twitched. Folding the moist cloth to find a cool side, she pressed it over his forehead again, avoiding the poorly healed scar. "Look, either go back to sleep or wake up. Make up your mind."

"Eunni? Is that you?"

His eyes all scrunched up but still not open. "I was me last time I looked. Your fever has broken, how do you feel?"

"Alive." His eyes finally open, he managed to look as surprised as he sounded. "I was talking to Rit, or was it the fever?"

"He said you were talking. Not making much sense, but talking." She reached to bring the lamp closer to the side of the pallet so he could see better, then winced as her weight shifted. Whoever had decided a mattress on the floor made a proper bed, was crazy. "Damn. My knees are killing me. Here, I'm going to put another pillow under your head and then I'm getting a chair to sit on before I'm completely crippled."

One of the saddle stools from against by the wall would have to do. Still too low for comfort, the angle would make the pain in her hips flare up even after a few minutes. Eunni eyed the largest of the leather chests next to it, but decided she could survive with the stool if she stretched her legs out.

Fully awake now, Tennin was looking around with his usual slow measuring look. There wasn't much to see, the room was dim. The small windows arranged in a row high in the stone wall wouldn't give much light even during the day and it was almost dark now. Wooden shutters were open to let the air in - no glass in the windows - and she could hear the sound of the rain on the thatch and louder pattering on the paving of the enclosed courtyard just outside. Her Warrior escort had brought her in that way from the stables. A gate to the courtyard, a sheltered porch under the eaves, then through a heavy wooden door to the inside. Another door was on the opposite wall of the room, identical carved wooden boards as the first. Rit had left that way and she had a brief glimpse of another room. A third door was a little over from the second, identical again.

Perhaps it was the barren look as much as the temperature, but she found the room cold even with her best winter dress and the knitted shawl over her shoulders. Folded next to the pallet was a feather comforter and she had been

tempted to wrap it around her. A single wool blanket covered Tennin's bone-rack frame; he had been sweating earlier.

"Are you warm enough?" she asked, pulling the stool closer.

He nodded, still looking around. "What is this place? A cell?" He frowned. "I remember Rit saying something about my not being allowed to wander around."

Her either, if for a different reason. She couldn't see a lock, but when the Warrior and medic had left by the outer door, again when Rit went through the inner, a blue flash had lit the room. She had tried all three doors, two wouldn't budge, one did and she'd just cracked the door to peek in when Tennin had started to groan. The bathroom.

"It's the old barracks," she said.

"Yeah, he did say that."

She pulled the shawl tighter under her chin, wrapping her hands in the soft folds, then tucked them half under her arms for the extra warmth. She should have brought her cloak, she had known it at the time except the shawl was Tikkanami work and almost new, and the best thing she owned.

Stupid of her. "Well, the Xintan burned the barracks but the Lady's people have set up shop here and are rebuilding everything. Hiring local, some things anyway. This is their idea of fancy quarters, I guess."

"You're joking."

She shook her head, her reaction had been much the same. "Rit's suite, that's what he said. His bedroom, at least." Which his wife didn't share.

Tennin looked around again, as slowly. The lamp cast a yellow light, but couldn't hide the clear pale gray of his eyes. A heavily scabbed line ran from chin to temple on one side of his, the flesh on either side was red and swollen. "He'd like this room," he finally said, sounding sour and bitter all at once where he hadn't before. The fingers of one scared hand worked at tearing the cream wool of the blanket.

More probably it was just half finished like most everything here. The only decoration in the room besides the rug by the bed was a red and white Xintan tapestry on the far wall, and in front of it, a large flattened bowl filled with rounded stones, sand piled in the middle. Something like the Xintan Lady Cult altars she had heard of, but not quite the same. Not Rit's style anyway. Then she shook her head, she wasn't sure about anything anymore.

Tennin looked sick again, not sour. Yellow teeth worked at his lower lip like his fingers had the cover. Then his eyes focused somewhere else, not looking away, just not seeing her anymore. "He told me Billi was dead," he whispered.

"A fever. She was out of Endica before the Xintan even arrived. Willinna and little Tam are both fine, they're with Susi. I think Billi would have wanted that, Susi and her were such good friends. You can visit the children as soon as you're stronger. Rit said he told you."

A deep breath and he nodded very slowly, but looked as though he didn't believe a word of it. "Tam's lost his two front teeth," she added. "And he's not so little, he's as tall as Susi already. Don't know where he got the height from so fast. Willi had her fourteenth birthday last week in case you've lost track of the time. She's growing up. You're going to have to beat the boys away from her. Cillamet is alive too."

Rit said he had told him who had lived and who had died, but Tennin's eyes held the question still. "Cillamet's fine. He's working in the stables at the old Lord's Stud, learning to be a trainer." She had spoken to him at her tavern. Except that he wouldn't talk about Rit or what had happened to him, he hadn't changed a bit. "The Stud is part of this place really, the people, I mean. They get paid from here."

Tennin snorted when she mentioned the pay. "You on the payroll too? Suppose you live here."

"No," she said very softly. Stupid. Of her. "He thought having a familiar face here when you woke up would help. He's married now but not to me." Familiar was probably all Rit had wanted from her as well, and damn the consequences. When he made love it was like he was starving. She understood better now why, but she didn't like being used like that.

"I didn't say anything about married."

"Maybe you should get some more sleep," she said after a moment. And maybe I can leave, she thought as she got to her feet then stretched to work the kinks out. Familiar face, sure, but Tennin had never had much use for her. She wasn't sure that Rit had ever been able to see that. Said it was just Tennin's way, didn't mean anything.

She glanced at him. It was his way, just that it wasn't a mask for something nicer.

The stretching wasn't helping, her hips hurt like crazy, and the ride up here hadn't done them any good. Bending gingerly, she checked the pot of tea on the tray left next to the door. Willow bark for Tennin's fever. One cup sat next to the pot, half full, the tea cold. She topped it off and carried it with her while she worked the stiffness out by walking. Tennin was still lying there, chewing on his lip and staring at the wall.

"Eunni?"

She closed the shutters, muting the sound of the rain. "I'm here," she said, turning.

"After Billi's Tam died, well, I thought Rit was ready for his second chance with her. I always figured he'd end up married to Billi."

The cup was empty and she poured the last of the pot to half fill it, then walked back to the pallet. "I know you did." And knew he had blamed her that it hadn't happened.

"Strom blood." He spat the words out as if he could taste them. "Hell, Eunni, she's better off dead. I used to wonder if Willi was his. I'd kill the girl myself if I..."

His eyes were staring, as though looking out from the inside of a fever dream. "Tennin, shut up."

"You weren't there. The fucking Strom sold us out to the Xintan. That Charter Councilor in Denman Capital I saw, the one who sent me off to Wilni, hell, he knew who Rit was, knew more about him than I did after fifteen years. Eunni, he was in it from the start. Strom. They bred those snake things to make it look good, used the old science He spat the last word.

Ignoring the pain in her knees, she knelt on the rug beside the pallet. "Tennin, the war is over. Hegemony lost this time just like the Ocea did when we took over here in northern Denman."

He looked at her coldly. "You always did cozy up to the Xintan. Once a slut..."

Tea in his face stopped the words but his look didn't change. She would have liked to strike him, the rage flared until there was little else she could feel. But that little else was a hollow sickness that kept her hands balled into fists at her side. Red flickered over her eyes, and all the words she would have liked to say to him were a buzz of anger that never quite made it to her tongue, stopped somehow in the prickling of her skin and a cold sweat.

She got up from her knees, trembling and weak, and sat down hard on the saddle stool, out of breath, her shawl bundled up in her lap, hugging the black knit as though it could offer more than just warmth. The anger was more than Tennin; he wasn't news to her. It was Rit. Damn him. What the hell was she going to do now?

She didn't look up until the door flared a brilliant blue, keeping the colour much longer than before, and she thought the wood might burn, expecting flames instead of it opening without a sound. Light flooded in from the other room, a steady light unlike the candle lantern she had here. A woman stood in the doorway.

Please, she thought, don't let it be Rit's wife. Then, a very quick second thought despite the strange clothing: Xintan and Bluestone Clan.

Tennin was staring as well, half up and gasping with the effort. Eunni knelt again and pushed him down. "He's sick," she said in Xintan. "You shouldn't be here."

Wrong words to one of that Clan even without the priestess tattoos, and she tried again in more formal Xintan. "My apologies, Mother. I beg your indulgence to let him rest."

The other woman took a step in and the light that had been mostly behind her was on her face. "I wanted to see you," she said in perfect Hegemony. "Really see you." Another step and she sat quite suddenly in a collapse of layers of white

cloth on the stone floor. Something more than the door flared, but not blue, Eunni couldn't have said what it was or what color. The woman had both arms crossed over her stomach and was breathing heavily.

Tennin was up on one elbow, his battered face white except for the vivid wound. "Stay put," Eunni whispered to him as she used the stool to pull herself up, then said to the woman, "I'll get you some help.

One step towards the door, she stopped to glance back at Tennin, nervous about leaving even as she didn't know what else to do. Moving her might be better, Eunni decided, and put one arm around the other woman's back to her waist to offer support. Closer, she smelled beer, and felt relieved. Just had a little too much to drink at the party. Then with a sinking feeling, she thought: not Xintan at all. The woman's hands were wrapped in cloth to her fingertips.

A low gruff voice startled her. "Now don't you try to lift her."

She didn't, glad not to have to try and even gladder to see someone she recognized. The short fat Ril'mil had been in her tavern many times in the past months. She took a deep breath. "No harm meant, none done, I hope."

"Don't see any," he snorted, but his eyes were past her, towards Tennin. Then he shook his head, and lifted the woman with an exaggerated grunt, but very gently. When the heavy door started closing, Eunni moved quickly to follow the other man out, unwilling to be trapped again. Behind her, the door flared blue again.

Another stone room, but larger than the bedroom. A desk, more shuttered windows, saddle stools and rugs, cabinets along two of the walls, one with the door open to show rows of leather bound books.

"Name's Bolda," the man said as he kicked one of the stools by the desk to face out and then sat the woman down, still supporting her. "I know who you are. Heard nothing but Eunni this and Eunni that for the last couple of weeks. You'd think there'd be something else to gossip about."

Could always hope, she thought but didn't answer as she watched the two glowing spheres pull away from where they had been on either side of the door. Above her now, they were still rising to the vaulted ceiling. The drums had started again, or she could hear them better from here, not really music this time, just a steady beat.

She looked down, feeling dizzy as she blinked the spots out of her eyes. "I take it you're not a Ril'mil trader." Not with those ears. This was the first she had seen him without the head cloth the Rillmilli men wore.

"Nope." He was squatting, the woman's chin held with one hand, and then ran the thick blunt fingers of his other hand along the side her face. Something happened in the trail of his fingers that was like the blue sparking of the door but very faint.

Eunni hugged herself for warmth, this room was just as cold and her shawl was back with Tennin where she'd dropped it. "What are you doing?"

"What the hell does it look like I'm doing?"

Eunni had no idea. The woman's eyes were half closed and blank, as though she were unconscious. Then she blinked and pulled away.

"Stop that," the woman said, and glanced at Eunni before looking down, her cheeks flaming red.

"Humph. I thought you'd sworn off drinking. Or were you just being sociable?"

A giggle almost made it through. "Sociable? Me? You must be thinking of someone else." The bandaged hands were tucking up against her stomach again as her breathing deepened.

"Might be at that." He turned to Eunni. "This is Ulanda. She already knows who you are."

The Xintan's Lady. Eunni swallowed past a dry spot in her throat. "I'm feeling famous," she said, trying to match their banter, trying to smile. Failing at both. Then had experience take over. "Um, you might want to get a bucket or something." Ulanda's breathing had deepened still more and she was staring blankly again but, from owning a tavern, it was a type of concentration that Eunni was very familiar with.

"Damn." He was already helping her up. "Hold it for the bathroom." Half dragging her the few steps, he pulled the door open. It hit against the wall, the thump making Eunni jump. She didn't follow this time, expecting the sound of retching and not disappointed. A blue ripple had showed at the door when he opened it rather than a flare and it was echoed from inside a moment later. The bathroom door to Rit's bedroom. She wondered just what they thought Tennin was capable of. Or perhaps they knew. Rit had said there were guards around although she had only seen the one Warrior.

"It's safe to come in," Bolda called after a moment.

"Do I want to?"

"Easier than yelling," Bolda said, looking up when she stopped at the doorway. Ulanda was sitting on a knee-high ledge of stone, stacks of white towels pushed to one side.

Eunni looked away fast. "This was part of the stables," she said, all of a sudden placing herself. Where the horses were washed down, a natural spring gave a trickle of water from a jagged fissure in one wall to end in a small half circle pool surrounded by a broken mosaic. Flowers and birds in marble, but with quite a few of the pieces missing. Last time she had been here, it was open at one end where stone closed it off now. Rit's office with the high ceiling had been divided into more stalls, larger ones for the officer's mounts; his bedroom had been a storeroom for feed and tack. Underground then - no windows, only vents - a ramp brought the horses down.

"Crazy to waste this stone work on horses," Bolda said, as he roughly wiped the woman's face, scrubbing with the cloth. Eunni had found her eyes back there without realizing it. Dark hair had come loose from the coil wrapped with the same pale blue cloth as the woman's hands. Loose strands trailed over her face, caught in the moisture.

Eyes stared at her. A horse stomped nearby and whinnied. It was almost dark, Eunni realized, surprised at the change from the white glow of the rounds. The only light came through the slits between the planks overhead, shining down on her as narrow golden showers of floating dust. And not cold, although the heat of summer was tempered into a gentle warmth by the thick walls. A smell of sweat and dry straw, and more dust, enough to make her sneeze. She heard herself laugh as strong arms pulled her down, the straw rustling under the combined weight of their bodies.

Eunni reached out and found the wall. "That was a long time ago," she said shakily. Rit - in a simpler time before he had distanced himself from her. They had both been young and it had seemed like what they had could last forever. Now, instead of the dusty showers of daylight, there were glowing balls to light the room. The ceiling above her was still wood, but arranged in layers to form squares which retreated back in the centers.

Bolda looked at her, then back at Ulanda, his long ear lobes flying. Then he shrugged. "I've called for some tea. You hungry?" She didn't answer. Her stomach hurt and she thought she might throw up as well.

"Well, that's called for too so you might as well."

"Maybe I should go back and watch Tennin." She tried to keep her voice calm, she wanted out now, and fast.

"You owe him anything?"

She swallowed. "No, not him."

"Well, you'll have to sort the rest of that out with Rit when you can get him in a mood where he's talking sense. Good luck on that. Tennin's sleeping now anyway, and believe me, he's being watched." He stepped back from Ulanda, peering at her. "How do you feel?"

"I'll live." Her smile was only a fleeting movement around the pale lips, but her words held the same tone of dry amusement Eunni had heard earlier. "I'm sorry," she continued, looking at her. "That was a really stupid thing to do."

"She's very good at stupid," Bolda said as he folded the towel. Ulanda kicked at him but missed and almost slid off the ledge. "Practices constantly. Really works at it."

Eunni backed up until she hit beam that made up the doorframe. The short round man talked to the woman as a friend does in private, concern for her showing as rough as his hands had been with the towel, but there all the same. She had heard enough beer talk in her taproom, had heard the awe, something

close to worship in the Xintan voices when they spoke about their Lady. No, it was worship, she thought, remembering one Senior Warrior weeping unashamed as he described seeing her in Audience, his words sliding into the poetry of formal Xintan. “A flower of carved stone, white stone, dancing in every motion and absolutely still.”

And what had just happened? A memory pulled out of her mind and made real enough that she still smelled the dry straw, still felt Rit's hands on her. “What do you want from me?” Fear made her voice harsh.

Ulanda looked away. Bolda watched the woman soberly as he rolled a long earlobe between thumb and finger. A sharp tug and he let his ear go as he looked back to Eunni. “She doesn't know. It doesn't work like that.”

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“Tea's ready,” Rit called, putting the tray on his desk. Eunni came out alone. The reflection from the light globes on the coarse red cloth of her dress emphasized the network of tiny lines quilting the skin around her mouth and eyes. As always, he tried to see more of her than the surface or from what he already knew, and, as always, he failed. Most people he could read now, but not her, not other than ordinary expressions. She was angry.

Then she laughed and the years fell away quite suddenly and the pain that had been so obvious on her face moments earlier, vanished in a wide grin as she nodded to the far door. “You've got a shadow.”

“Are you her?” Rossaliana asked in her best Hegemony. Only her small head showed as she peeked around the doorframe. A glance to him as she sided in, and then back as quickly to Eunni. Then Tika - legs every which way as she struggled - jumped free and streaked across the room. “Tika! Come back here!”

Rit caught her as she raced after the cat. “Rossa, these are private quarters, you're not free to come in here. Remember?”

She struggled like the cat had and he let her go. “I was following Tika but she got away,” she said stubbornly, facing him, fists on her waist. Eunni was hiding her grin behind her fingers.

“So I noticed. Leave the cat and go. Now.”

“I've got a message.” Just as stubbornly said and he thought was likely as contrived as the first excuse. A glance at Eunni, then she whispered to him, “It's private, you've got to come with me.” He shook his head, about to tell her again to leave, when he felt her try the Net, well past the passive domestic that was all

she was allowed. The single thread she managed made her blink in shock when it snapped free.

What he saw in that moment made him squat until their eyes were at the same level. She dropped hers, suddenly shy. Or guilty, he thought, and pulled a comprehensive trace on her movements over the past hour. A soft overview to start - the events in the main Assembly Hall unfolded with tags listing sub-routes to explore if he cared to. He didn't. The Lady Ramsini Strom, paying special attention to the young girl, gentle attentions very well received, with Rossaliana suddenly more unsure in the large gathering of people than Rit would have expected from her native fearlessness. He let his awareness circle the pair as though he walked around them, but put them and their words in a closed loop, repeating like a chant.

Over top of the image, placement security had Ramsini still in the Hall, talking with Olloss and the Tikkanami ambassador. Servants were starting to arrange food on the long trestle tables to one side; Olloss took her arm as they started that way, the South Marshall laughing at a joke she had just told him.

Rit pulled out with the feeling of disorientation from trying to see too much in the Net all at once. Or it was his stepmother who made it worse than usual. Closing his eyes against the after-images and the dizziness, he let the pounding in the back of his skull subside. It would grow into a headache if he didn't rest. He wouldn't. Only one last thing to do: flag the sequence and pass it on.

This never took as much time as he thought it should. Rossa's eyes were still to the floor, or mostly, she glanced up to see how he was reacting, then looked to Ulanda. Bolda had helped her to one of the saddle stools on the other side of the desk.

"I think Viy'lane will want to see you," he said softly to the child. "I suggest you don't keep her waiting."

The child's beautiful golden eyes widened then narrowed as quickly. She took one last look across the desk to Ulanda, as though for support, but didn't get any. Ulanda was looking down, her dark hair in a loose mass hiding most of her face. Rossa turned back to him. "I hate you," she yelled as she turned and ran out.

Dishes clanked and he winced at the sound. The headache was rapidly getting worse.

"That didn't take long," Bolda said as he poured the first of four bowls of tea. A fragile white bowl, tiny compared to the others. Ulanda didn't look up when he set one of her hands to cup it.

Rit hadn't noticed a rider in there with him. "I don't know what she wanted to say to me that she hadn't this afternoon in Endica."

"Then, you're not thinking. She's just flexing her muscle. Hell, they're going to eat you for breakfast in Wilni."

And not just Ramsini. Wilntinn hadn't waited for the formal announcement, but had greeted him as Father of the Strom, and any chance the words would go unnoticed had evaporated as his cousin went down on one knee, his offer of fealty accompanied by flamboyant gestures. The shock of the words and motion had spread like a wave over those already present in the Assembly Hall, and even those whose customs were different understood enough of the action to be curious. Rumors about the Abdication had followed, the wave growing in a storm of confirmation, readily given by Wilntinn, and with some amusement, by Olloss. The Marshall watched Rit's retreat to the private anteroom with a grin identical to his granddaughter's more usual expression.

He tuned to Eunni. "That little monster is Rossaliana quis'Redassa."

"And a spoiled brat," Bolda grunted.

"That as well."

"Old sour-puss will probably have her doing the dog-work for Hann, picking out knots for the next six months."

"I think there might have been some type of persuasion used." Perhaps Bolda hadn't been riding the Net pull. Or it wasn't as obvious as he had thought, any more than what Ramsini had used to convince several Holding Guard to escort her into Endica when they should have done nothing of the sort without getting clearance from Nisstinn. Rit added a quick spin of this latest incident and sent it along the same routes as the tagged sequence.

Bushy eyebrows rose and this time Rit felt the man's touch in the Net. "Cute trick," Bolda said, sounding surprised. "With the guards, I just thought it was those big eyes and..."

Rit forced a smile as he passed a tea bowl to Eunni then lifted the cat off the folder on the desk, holding her in one arm. There were claw pick-marks all over the blue leather surface; he hadn't realized the folder had made its way here. "Alicia is arranging for some food for us all," he said as he stroked the soft fur, the gray and cream blending together. The cat settled, purring as she flexed sharp claws into Rit's tunic sleeve, making tiny holes in the heavily textured opal silk. "I've made our excuses to those who had been invited to dine with us."

"Are you insane?" Eunni said sharply to him but her eyes returned to Ulanda and she almost flinched. "Alicia isn't..."

"Yes, she is going to," he said to stop the argument he knew was coming. His mind couldn't take any more right now. Flashes of overpattern formed and unformed all around him, threads converging, much of it coming from Ulanda.

Panntin was there, but through the Net only, observing this at Rit's request but he gave a mental shrug in answer, apparently not caring about what was going on. Or he couldn't see it, nothing of what Rit felt had anything of Alisim in it. Or the familiar opal was lost in all the other colors. Then even Panntin was gone,

that link cut off as though it had never existed. Ulanda looked at him briefly before dropping her eyes again.

Taking a bowl of tea in his free hand, he sipped the hot liquid. Lemon tea with a hint of honey. Eunni had her hands wrapped around her bowl, frost bumps on what showed of her lower arms, the joints of her fingers swollen and red. She felt the cold badly; her hands must be aching.

Any dress or robe of Alicia's would be too small, he thought, but there had to be something warmer. Besides, offering Eunni his wife's clothes wouldn't be appreciated by either of them.

He had headed Alicia off earlier; she had been faster to try to follow Ulanda than Bolda had been. 'Seeing' her better than either of them, he thought, even when Ulanda hadn't wanted to be seen. He certainly hadn't seen Ulanda go, just Alicia following. Heading her off, he used her anger against her, and then later suggested this dinner when Bolda had asked for tea and food. They had an hour at most until the Overpriest's party arrived from the world-altar, Garm with them.

"Alicia knows you're here," he said to Eunni. "As to her minding... it's gone beyond that." He sat down, letting Tika curl up on his lap, purring louder, louder in his ears than the rain. "You might want to freshen up before we eat." Bolda grunted at the other, more private message, but just for form, he was worried too.

"Now you know," Bolda said to Eunni, putting his tea bowl down with a clunk on the desk. "Not a Ril'mil merchant at all. If your ladyship would follow me..." He bowed, ears flapping. "... your freshening awaits."

Eunni looked from Bolda and back to him, obviously unsure, a frown marking her forehead. "Please," Rit said. She was still frowning when she followed Bolda out.

He lifted Tika to the floor, got up and checked Ulanda's tea, taking the tiny bowl from her fingers and dumping the cool liquid into his own bowl. "I'm told I should apologize for this morning. Would it help?"

"No." Her fingers moved as though to cradle the bowl that wasn't there. "You feel this too, I know you do. Too soon for the portal to be opened - I thought at first it might be that, that Garm might just go through, that he couldn't stop himself."

"Can you reach the world-altar at all?" He couldn't through any linking of the two Net systems, especially with the storm circling; he didn't have the control.

"No, yes." Her head moved, a slow dance that continued to involve her upper body. A rustle sounded around him, like sand scurrying over stone, driven by a silent wind. She looked up, her eyes full of pain. A sheen of sweat lay over her white skin. Her next breath turned into a series of choking coughs.

"This morning seems a long time ago," she said when she could.

The servants put the trays outside the room. Alicia brought one in with her but not until the two women had left. "Roast pork," she said calmly but with her eyes on Ulanda. "A carrot and turnip mash. Bread and butter. Cheese. Baked apples with honey and cinnamon. Should I have bothered?"

"We'll eat," he said. Tika at least. The half grown cat was on the desk again, sniffing the platter holding the thick slices of roast.

Alicia went for the other tray, taking Tikka with her and then had to fight to get back in without the cat, her floor length dress and her hands full making it a harder struggle. Ulanda chuckled as the door slammed, the cat outside. "You show promise as a dancer."

He looked at Alicia but she was carefully busy arranging things. Brown curls teased into a shiny halo framed her face, the longer ends at the back gathered in a single short beaded strand. Wearing some kind of Temple dress, not a Hegemony gown or Xintan, although probably Xintan made. A pleated gauze robe printed in blended splashes of opal and black touched by gray-blue, the lavender again in the heavy silk tunic, a narrow sleeveless panel affair tied at the sides and front. At the ends of the front ties were the three small tops that had been their marriage gift from the Spann Olumka. The small black and white toys clicked against each other when Alicia moved. Under the robe, probably in a leg sheath, would be the mate to the Zimmer knife he wore, their gift from Lord Gennady.

"Alicia?" he asked. And had to say twice more before she looked towards him. "Can we talk without starting another fight?"

"About your whore?" She slammed the bowl of baked apples down, splattering syrup. "I don't think so."

"She's not a whore."

"Well, excuse me. I must be mistaken about your relationship then. And her reputation."

"She doesn't owe anyone explanations."

"I'm sure she didn't have to explain to you. Bastards aren't news to you."

"Alicia, Eunni can't go back to Endica, not until this blows over, maybe not ever. Tennin's niece and nephew will have to be brought here as well. They're my responsibility, a responsibility that predates my knowing you. Even if I had never seen her again, she still would have been in danger as soon as word got out about who I am. And I still would have had to help her." A few weeks or months and he would have had to face the same thing. Worse than stupid to have made her a target for any one wanting to strike back at the Strom or even at the Xintan. "Her being at the Holding is only temporary, you don't have to see her or even know she's here. Normally you wouldn't have..."

"Are you saying she's been here before? To your rooms?"

"That's not what I said, you're twisting my words."

"Rit," Ulanda interrupted, "that's enough."

He took a deep breath to calm himself. "As soon as possible, I'll arrange passage for Eunni and..."

"To go to Wilni, no doubt." Alicia spat the words. "You were with her today, weren't you? You knew that I knew, that people were gossiping."

"Alicia, I want her here," Ulanda said.

Alicia stared at the spots on the table from the sauce. "I meant after. Or he'll have her waiting there for him." Then finally, looking at him, her lips drawn into a tight line: "Was her baby yours?"

Her child died years before he'd come to Endica, but talk of that kind didn't worry about the timeframe. Eunnie would have been younger than Alicia when she'd gotten pregnant.

"No he wasn't mine. And I thought you were above listening to marketplace gossip."

"Both of you stop it." Ulanda's tone cut Alicia's answer dead. "If Eunni's here, she's here. You're both here too; you can't go. Not yet." Her voice had gotten softer, more distant. "Something... Sarkalt, I see him dancing, then nothing. Not even him really. Something. It must be him."

- 19 -

Captain Slicanin walked once more around the central mound, slowly, her eyes on the plume rising there, not on the sheets of rain that brought the sky to the ground everywhere about this place but for here. Close to sunset, but the cloud obscured the direction of the fading glow. The mound wasn't a circle, she decided on this fourth trip around. A triangle with somewhat convex sides, deep cracks leading in from the points to the center. Like a Li-Cassa seed, she agreed, and said so. The Overpriest's Chief of Staff didn't answer past nodding. Impatient with her, she knew. So? What hurry in this? What other answer could she give but the one he well knew was coming?

The plume in the center fed the clouds above, but dropped crumbs of sand like a messy child eating crackers of stone. She brushed grit from the shoulders of her dress uniform before giving the answer this man waited for. "We can't touch the Spann ship, and they know it. I'm not even sure my ship's Net will accept any order to attack." She had almost told her pilot to head back as soon as she had seen the other ship, even with the Temple beacon sitting close by and gibbering landing coordinates at them.

"And if an attack was an order rather than a request?" Quin'tat said, crossing his thick arms.

Slicanin looked past him to the silver bird above the mound. A twist of light on grains of colored sand rising there, she had thought at first. And now? She had heard Tellings of stranger things. "With all respect, sir, the Office of Forms has no jurisdiction here. For local rank, the... Zimmer describe a functioning Temple who must by default also be under the Office of the Third Concord. And for Empire rank of direct significance, I see me. And I won't attack the Spann."

"The Zimmer."

Clan Zimmer, he had said. She hadn't known what he was talking about until she checked her Net link to the shuttle, then asked Wiccin. Her aide was a Zimmer from Hilla'poltin and timid as his kind were to her kind, but handy to have around.

"Captain, there aren't any," Wiccin had said. And, she thought, would have said that they had never really existed except in stories, except he had ridden what little was in the Net pull.

"Give me more than bones, man," she said irritably to alarm him. "In these stories of yours, if you tripped over one, what would happen?" Alarmed him then skewed the Net just as he started to answer, his need to answer her coming through the only way it could, without words.

I should have settled for the words, she thought again, but was careful only to think it. A ward-flagged sequence in her Command Net files held what she had gotten from the Zimmer. She still might dump the sequence to a crystal and hide the crystal. No tripping allowed, not wise at all. When they were back in her ship, she thought she might search out some Zimmer erotica, might ask Wiccin if he had any on board. Then thought she might not. She might not want to know her aide that well.

From the center plume of sand, the silver bird blinked at her. "Be sensible," she said to Quin'tat, turning to look at the Overpriest's small ship instead. Her flitter and the two Zimmer flitters were like well fed pups next to it. One had escorted them from orbit. The other had already been here. "Besides, we're only a Scout class ship, the amount of energy we can get out of our crystals won't support using them as weapons. We probably don't even have the configurations to set them up as weapons. The only advantage we have is that we can maneuver in this space better than they can, except they don't have to, they can just sit there and shoot us. Bam. Dead." More brushing but the grit was working its way inside the uniform, her pelt must be full of the stuff. Her face at least was getting dusty, she decided, after pulling face muscles so one cluster of whiskers sprang out, then strained to see it, going cross eyed with the effort.

She sighed and resisted the urge to start grooming. "A message using the proper form was on its way from an hour ago. And, I admit the Alput Warding Station will be as concerned about your Zimmer and your story, so you're looking

at some minor refitting of a Justice Cruiser or two, or be lucky and have one ready and waiting. A few months or so, no time at all. Good enough."

A few months or longer, she thought. She didn't know what the Alput Warding Station would make of the messages these people had sent earlier. A Priest Select without a world-pattern. Alternate realities, one with an Empress her ship had never heard of. A loom-master, a Piltsimic loom-master. The Overpriest of Forms - if he really was - his Household and his ship, all where they couldn't be.

Or if the Warding Station would even get the message - the codes were wrong. Her ship's Net hadn't wanted to touch it, had tried to pretend it wasn't there. The message she had sent was on repeat; she had no faith that the first sending or the hundredth would make it through the mess in this sector in any form to be understood. Faster for them to go out with the message except she didn't want to leave.

They had been well inside the Warding points, checking in with messages to the Station occasionally, not that the messages held together very well with Nexus Change building, but at least she had tried. With the first sign of organized Altasimic pattern, she asked for orders to investigate, and was still waiting for an answer by the time she had outrun any hope of a message. Without being able to get enough thread to form a Web to jump, they were almost two months getting here and they were fast *and* designed to run in this kind of space.

The Simic joined her and Quin'tat, pulling Net into where the Overpriest's man had blocked it for privacy. There was no overt challenge at the intrusion, she noted happily. They were walking easy and soft around these others, what made them think she wasn't going to as well, and that included not taking shots at anybody the Priest-Select stuck her colors on. When they got here, the Temple Justice cruisers could sort it out. Then the Justice Courts. Then she'd take orders from whoever was left in one piece.

"San Garm," she said with a formal bow, delighted to see him up close and not just on a Net sweep. A Select's San and a Simic to boot. She could tell her pups about this when she got around to having some.

"Captain Oklinastinira n'Slicanin." He bowed in return, and from the look on his face, was enjoying her enjoyment. "Have I said the name properly?" he asked. "Our protocol references are limited and I don't wish to offend."

"Proper only if you were asking to mate with me." She checked that her crystal was getting all this, not wanting to rely on the Temple ship's Net or their willingness to share it. Her own flutter Net link had died at the boundary around the world-altar. "Slicanin will do. Or Ok'sli."

He smiled. "As to mating, may I express regret that my person is otherwise engaged." Another bow, but his eyes went to the silver bird before returning to her. She thought they might be the same eyes, the same color, the same glow.

"Captain Slicanin, then. I would like to extend an invitation to you, and those of your people as you wish to accompany you, to the Blessing this evening.

She drew back her lips and sucked air in pleasure but only got more sand on her tongue. "I thank you. For me to be otherwise engaged, this evening at least and for that, would be lunacy." She glanced pointedly at the Overpriest's man, already weighing the pros and cons of who she should bring, and if there was time to go back to the ship or settle for those already with her.

Ship's Net buzzed and she grabbed it before thinking that it wasn't hers. "The Overpriest wishes to meet with you before we leave," Quin'tat said quite unnecessarily. "San Garm, will you excuse us?"

The Simic bowed. To her. "Only if I may escort the Captain as far as the Overpriest's ship before leaving to wait at the flitter."

She would have children, she decided as the Simic offered and then took her arm in his. This was going to be worth a Telling. She wouldn't even have to hire a Spinner, just add some thunder and lightening, and maybe the silver bird crying to be free to fly. Or maybe not having to add that, she thought, looking back one more time. Another blink, no, it was a wink of the emerald eye, she was sure, and was sure she saw the wind lift the frill of feathers along the creature's throat. A wing moved to sweep the mound, or at the very least, wind blew sand in ripples under the tip. She shivered with pleasure as the beak opened. No Spinner, she didn't need one.

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Quin'tat allowed the Vannsit Captain's recording crystal, thinking it better than spending an hour debating if she had the right to carry it, or whether her rather unusual style of Net lead from her flitter was more allowable. En'talac had started laughing as soon as she caught the mark behind the Captain's contact message, and had continued to chuckle at odd moments ever since.

"They deserve each other," he said to her as he pulled his robe off, scattering sand over everything close by. Sarkalt and Slicanin were in his suite chatting quite amicably about absolutely nothing at all, the Overpriest sounding more coherent than he had for some time. "I need a bath."

"Yes," En'talac said. "You do."

"You're not going to wear that are you?" A stiff brocade in Ri-green. Lovely fabric but it made her look like she was wrapped in an expensive feed sack with most the grain still inside.

She chuckled at his tone but continued smoothing the folds out of the heavy cloth. "Look at it this way: nobody but a Vannsit would be here this early. They don't so much break rules as they reinvent them and then wonder what the fuss is all about. Whoever it was that put a Vannsit as a Temple ship's Captain in a Warded sector was either a genius or stark raving mad."

"Do you want my opinion?" He was scratching sand out of his hair. A long bath.

"I think I have it." She dropped white ties in a coil on the green brocade, then looked sideways at him, clicking a ring against one tooth. "Every one else is most likely still wondering what's going on and waiting for orders. Slicanin couldn't, not a chance of it, not if you knew the Vannsit at all. So, we got the ship we wanted and a message going out in a form this Temple will recognize."

"A message that won't necessarily bring a ship here in time to stop the Zimmer from using the portal. The bargain with Ulanda was until Temple ships arrived, one is here, so..."

You shouldn't listen to Anga."

"Might I venture my own opinions then?"

"You've made his into yours. The only reason he's arguing for the Zimmer ship being tamed is that he wants this over with and thinks Gennady will continue to protect Ulanda regardless of some hypothetical danger to the Unity, or even because of it."

"With this last bit of news about the Clan Zimmer, she's his chance to change reality from inside the diamond. He'll protect her until the portal can be used, Temple ships or not. And take her with him. Or do you think differently?"

"No, the instinct to establish his blood is too strong and he has too little here to make that certain. And that is one person who is very sure that he can make the differences into something he wants."

"Then you agree with Anga..." he began.

Her eyes narrowed. "No, I don't."

"And if he has the Ri-priest Poss a'ltic, and if she has been able to access over-pattern, he won't even need to get Ulanda into the diamond. Anga's not the only one to fear what could happen if Gennady had free access to the diamond knowing what he knows now."

"There's no evidence she was anywhere near the Zimmer ship, just Anga trying to get his own way and thinking this might add to the burden of his argument. And don't listen to Bitilan either; he sees a conspiracy everywhere. With the Xintan gone there's not enough for him to do other than guard Anga. It's past time that he was moved off that duty."

"Were you intending to give the order?"

"Quin, if you want an argument, go find someone else. Or better yet, find something to do instead of mope around waiting for something bad to happen."

Sarkalt's orders not to interfere show that he doesn't believe there's a problem with the Zimmer, or Ulanda for that matter, getting access to the portal. Or he believes it won't happen."

Was he trying to start a fight? He shook his head, more to himself than to his wife. "To be more accurate, Sarkalt doesn't notice."

She sighed. "No, he notices, but not in a way that allows for much we can understand. He sees it as part of what is supposed to be, same as our going with him. Same as Arasima becoming Clan Zimmer. Patterns within the larger one. He just can't say what or how or why."

"Can you?"

"Do I look like a Priest? Maybe the portal is for us as much as it is for Garm or Gennady, or even Ulanda if she decides it's not safe here for her. We could make anything of our future we wanted to. When Sarkalt dies, any personal oaths we have to him die as well."

Slicanin had brought them the first real evidence that either going through the diamond portal to Lillisim had involved a shift, or the drawing through the center of the overpattern spiral to here had. "Is this what Sarkalt promised you back in Palace?"

As she put her arms around him, her silver rings sparked against the residue he always brought back with him from the world-altar. "Quin, once more, nothing was promised. And I won't argue with you."

There had been something. Remembering that last day, he shook his head and she blinked against the fall of sand but she didn't let go. "And if we go through the portal, if we find ourselves welcome to do so, then do we create a chain of death wherever it is we end up? How much of reality has to change to get what you want?"

Hands stilled only a moment, she sighed. "If Sarkalt saw something in me, it's only that I'm a part of the shape of things that he wanted to happen. I don't control anything. Or, I just fit his mood at the time. When he told you he was a fiber in the thread that was Hero... well, maybe he thinks we are too."

He remembered better the images from the first Net searches into Donotat's records for any mention of Altasimic, when Sarkalt had always crossed the line from the dead-end of reality into dream. Doorways, he had called them. Was En'talac such a doorway? "This reality isn't our home. If they existed at all, two people with our names died here a few months ago."

She raised an eyebrow but didn't reply.

We should have brought the children, he thought again, regardless of the risks. He had spun that thought at night far too many times even as he knew it hadn't been an option. And not his choice to make. Holding her head, he felt hair that was at once both soft and prickly. "Did it matter that Evea and Cam weren't your blood? I thought you loved them."

"Is this what you've been working up to ask for the past three months?" Then her lips were against his skin. "I don't have to defend myself to you or anyone about who I love or don't love."

"I'm not asking for a defense, only the truth."

She pushed herself away from him and crossed her arms. "If you want the truth, ask Sarkalt."

He knelt; they were face to face. Gently, he traced her points with his fingers, but shy of her even after all their years together, his hands so huge against the fine bones. And dark to her pale, the gold from the tiles changing the color of his skin to a dusky bronze where it didn't seem to warm hers at all, just cause it to glow softly. "Then talk to me. Let me hear what you want to say, truth or not."

Her brown eyes held his. She didn't blink. "The truth is that it was just a matter of time before I left."

He drew his hand back. "Obviously, I should also have asked if you loved me."

"You act like it's a form of ownership. As though loving you means I want to do anything and everything you do." She got to her feet. "If it works like that, then it also works in turn-around." Picking the green robe up, she put it back over her arm then turned at the doorway. "Would you have left Temple service to ship out with me?"

There were no words in his mouth. She was gone before he could shake his head.

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Rain still fell at the Holding when the Overpriest's flitter arrived. Rit had hoped for a break by then although an awning covered much of the courtyard off the Assembly Hall. Viy'lana had positioned herself just outside the door, the Bluestone priestess even more impatient than he was to get the formal welcoming over with. She kept twisting the narrow double oath cords on her left wrist. For the unborn twins, or twice born as the Xintan were calling them already, even with the latest of the births still to come. The cording of her own oath of service to Panntin wrapped the other wrist, but she left that alone. Wandassa and Dannolian were with her.

Fanning out from the priestess, a double Fist waited as an honor guard. The real protection was the warding pillar set where the flitter would land.

Rit paced the outer limits of the sheltered area. After the closeness of the Assembly he welcomed the cool night air and the relative quiet. The cobblestones

glittered in the torchlight; the rain on the oiled canvas above his head was as loud as the music floating out the high windows.

They hadn't resolved anything over dinner. Alicia had slipped into her 'Lady of the Manor' role, being unfailingly polite to Eunni, even initiating several brief conversations. And Eunni? She'd managed by saying as little as possible as politely. All in all, they were on better speaking terms with each other than either were with him. They were with Ulanda in the anteroom.

Nisstini left his men but didn't join him directly, waiting at the far end of Rit's path, beside one of the poles supporting the awning. "Lord Strom, is there an additional problem I should be aware of?"

Which problem? Ramsini? Eunni? Ulanda's growing sense of some disaster? Rit thought the Senior Warrior was aware of all three. He shook his head just as the bud of ship's Net linked with the Holding Net. He let out a sigh of relief. One less problem.

Rit's greeting got a rather stolid response from Quin'tat: a formal request for permission for his party to enter the Alisim Temple Holding. "Granted," he returned into the Net link.

The small vessel remained at a discrete distance, the only evidence of its being there was a faint but pervasive hum, and for Rit, of all those in the plaza, the drumming of rain on the flitter tiles through the Net link. Sarkalt liked the sound. He repeated his permission to Quin'tat but used the ritual words of formal Xintan. Was he waiting for more ceremony? And where was Garm?

Finally Quin'tat responded. "An Empire ship arrived little over an hour ago. A flitter from that ship is following us in. A second Zimmer flitter has returned to the Ladybug in orbit. San Garm is a guest of the Temple Scout ship's Captain for the ride here, and she a guest of his for the Blessing."

Gennady would have - must have - known about it almost immediately, Rit thought. And hadn't passed the information on. In shock, he sent the message to Ulanda, and from her, felt it spread through the Net links like fire. There wasn't time to react further, the other flitter landed first, swooping down like a hawk, the Overpriest's ship following in more sedately. And with the landing, came a tight line from Kori to Gennady in a complex level of Net that Rit couldn't manage consciously as yet. What he did get was an impression of what came with the words and images, and even with that little, felt his conscious mind start to fray with feelings he had no basis for experiencing.

"Gennady wants her here," Ulanda said a moment later, the starkness of her words cutting through what still buzzed around in his mind. "Bring her in yourself." Both the alien images and the emptiness he fought the invasion with were overwhelmed as warding filters settled down though the Net levels. Full Net security.

"You'll go in with me?" Kori asked again. He nodded and that appeared to reassure her. What had her message been to evoke that response from Gennady... and be so sensitive she couldn't have told him over the relay points that connected the Ladybug with the flitters and the Holding?

Her purple tongue constantly licked against white lips and she started each time they passed someone, her head bent and turned to one side. The people they passed were as startled, servants and guards both, no one expected either him or the alien to be coming this way. From the flutter, they had taken a route that circled the more public areas of the Holding; the hallways deserted more often than not, with most everybody at the ceremony. They would enter the anteroom by the same side door that Ulanda had used earlier to leave.

The Zimmer woman wore ship's dress, plain white to his eyes, but he found himself looking for and finding the ranking bands woven in the cloth and, with a different kind of effort, the faint stippling of her skin. From when he had met her earlier in the day, he knew they were a lighter version of Gennady's or Simitta's, but now, in her distress, they were a ghost of those vibrant markings. This kind of seeing had been a change that paralleled the growth of his sense of pattern, although he sometimes thought he tasted the heat change, something more 'seen' in the slow intake of air sliding across his tongue than with his eyes. Except, he knew he couldn't really do either.

Temple guards stood before the last few doors, armed with Zimmer rifles; their eyes followed Kori, not him. There was nobody else where earlier guests had been pushing in to explore as far as they could before being politely guided back to the public areas. Nisstin stood with Bolda just outside the anteroom where the hall widened into a small chamber in its own right. Rit had traced the Senior Warrior's more direct route here along with the moving around of guards. Security level placement, he recognized Viy'lana as among the others taking an interest and with sufficient Net expertise and rank to pull the images. Records showed that Gennady had arrived there almost ten minutes ago, the room cleared of guests and servants moments later, leaving Ulanda, Alicia and Eunni. But what had happened, or was happening inside the anteroom was anyone's guess. Except for the few messages initiated by Ulanda, the Net leads ceased to exist at the walls.

Bolda grabbed Kori's arm. "She'll do what she can, just keep quiet." Then to him and Nisstin, Bolda added, "Both of you stay out here."

Rit glanced at the Xintan then said to Bolda, "I promised to go in with her."

Bolda hesitated but if he had a tight link to Ulanda, Rit couldn't feel it. He sighed. "Hell, stay by the door then. Don't say anything." And to Nisstin - and this time Rit caught buzz of a Net link. "You stay here, that's from her."

"I didn't get all the message Ulanda gave," Rit said. "What could be more important than dealing with the Temple ship? And why didn't we know about it from Gennady immediately?"

"No time, it'll be worse the longer he waits. Just keep back, don't challenge him no matter what happens. If you do, he'll kill you and then she'll kill him. Kori is his. Remember that even if you don't remember anything else in your life."

Gennady stood in front of the large Wu'loss cass altar in the center of the room, a flattened bowl covered with small rocks from around the world-altar site. Cream and gray and red shades, glacier smoothed stones with a child's game of joss sticks thrown at random over top. A Zimmer observance the Xintan were quickly adopting.

Kori pressed herself against the wall not a foot into the room, but Bolda took her arm again and led her out, then motioned him back when he would have followed. Kori's eyes had gone to the altar, to Gennady, Rit first thought, and then saw he was wrong. The altar and the pattern of burning sticks, not the Zimmer Lord. She dropped her eyes.

Thin smoke rose from several of the sticks. Lavender, lemon and cedar, but all the same color smoke, the lines of gray pencil thin and straight, the air around the altar absolutely still. Even the woven flames captured in the silk of Gennady's robe seemed paused in time. Nothing was happening but Rit felt the possibilities of what might, start to form in his mind.

Ulanda was at the far end of the room, sitting in a saddle stool, as she usually was in Audience, her robes arranged in deliberate folds around her, a distant look on her face. Alicia stood immediately behind, one hand on the curve of leather at the back of the stool, her face drained of color. Eunni was to one side, her expression more puzzled than frightened. She shouldn't be there, she shouldn't be anywhere near. He felt sick that she was.

Smoke from the altar rippled and curled in the air when Gennady turned his head. All Rit's thoughts had stopped with Gennady's first movement.

Gennady took one step towards Kori and she fell into a kneeling huddle. His eyes were embers, the surface broken to show the fire deep within. Over top of the heady scent of joss sticks, the acrid stink of burning sugar closed Rit's throat.

Gennady's eyes never left Kori. "Do I see you?" he asked softly, his words coming as though he spoke triple. There was an open Net link after all, giving a translation from the Zimmer into Hegemony and Empire plain-tongue.

"No Lord," Kori whispered to the floor. "I am not seen."

"I didn't think I could. How could I see someone who could tell me what I heard?"

Then he was next to her. Rit's heart jumped with shock at not seeing the intent or even half the movement. He didn't dare move to place himself between Gennady and Kori, or more, found himself frozen as he had been at the Spine of the Serpent.

Gennady went to his knees in front of Kori. One hand lifted Kori's chin until she was face to face with him, but her eyes were closed. When Gennady let go, she didn't move, didn't appear to even breathe, but then she did with a long drawing of air between barely parted lips. Her hands clenched, nails clicking against the marble.

"I think I might see you after all," Gennady said, blinking coals for eyes, his upper lip raised to show long white teeth, dagger sharp. "Bad luck that I can see you. Are you bad luck Kori?"

With his words, Ulanda moved. "Lord Gennady," she said, standing by the altar where he had been a moment before, the streams of smoke mixing together in her passing. "If you would join me, we have much to discuss."

At her words Gennady hair flared into a crest and he turned his head ever so slightly. Rit felt the first lessening in what held him like a statue.

"The Vannsit Captain has refused to involve herself. The truce stands for want of change in the loom-master's captivity. Possibilities remain, Lord Gennady."

He didn't move.

"Things are missing from Kori's message, Lord Gennady." The words were ice against his fire, crystals of ice, shards in the sunlight, snow at dusk. Ice fog and hoar frost in the dawn, a cap of ice, a stone-skirting rim of ice in a winter stream. Rit hadn't seen her move like that except in dreams that he knew came from memories his mind couldn't use in any other way. "What would she leave out from what she took in the exchange between the Vannsit Captain and the Overpriest's people?"

There was another easing in the Zimmer and Rit felt as though he could move if he had any idea of what to do. Gennady must be responding to what she was, or in how she moved.

Gennady started to laugh and Rit froze again, deeper than before. "A gift from Cassa, perhaps." Rit's heart squeezed tight with each word and he forgot how to breathe from the pain.

Another laugh and the pain exploded and died. "How couldn't the Lady be correct - there are possibilities remaining. Clan a'Genn, only Clan a'Genn. Would you like that Kori? Are you a gift? Not bad luck but a gift to be here, now, with this news."

Rit looked to Ulanda, she had stopped moving. Then to Bolda. The weaver shook his head.

Gennady didn't appear to see anyone but Kori. "Would you like that Kori? To be a gift from our god? Would you be breeding dominant? A good joke, Cassa

would like that. One chance for you, for me, then walk away. Her kind of odds. Are you what she's given me out of all of this? Are you all the prayers?"

"More than one chance left, Lord," Kori whispered, her eyes still closed. "If we stay here, or if we go through the portal. Better than this one thing. Better than me."

"Better?" He dragged the tip of one bone thin finger along the side of her face. She flinched and her eyes opened enough that Rit could see the pale gray blue of her irises and he could feel her longing grow entwined in her terror. The long slits of her nostrils flared and her eyes opened more. "Better?" Gennady whispered again, staring into her eyes as though the others in the room had vanished. He dropped his hands to his lap.

Bolda coughed. "I could use something to drink. Anyone interested?"

Rit stepped past him. "Kori?" he said gently, not quite touching her arm. Her eyes were still open and looking at Gennady, her breaths were sobs in her throat. Stripes darkened on the flat planes of her face, her hair whipping white then red as strands brushed skin then crested in a quickening beat. A heady smell came from her, the smell of a hot summer afternoon in a garden filled with roses.

All around Rit, the room flickered. Possibilities were settling out around Kori like petals falling, their scent strangling him. "Come away from him," he said, angry that he was the only one who felt they had to interfere and angry with her for not doing something, anything, to save herself.

A hand was on his arm. "Different ways," Bolda said roughly, pulling enough that he was noticed.

Rit ignored him. "Kori, please. You don't want this." And louder: "You know you don't." Nothing. Turning to Ulanda for help, he found she wasn't by the altar, but sitting on the floor on the far side of the room. Alicia was with her, his wife talking softly, he heard the words as noise but Ulanda's pain hit him like a blow in his stomach, taking his breath again just when he had found it.

Then Eunni was beside him, pulling Kori up, the Zimmer woman struggling weakly as though she were drowning, half dead already, but fighting the rescue more than the water.

A bubble of threat was growing from Gennady. It would be explosive. Rit stepped into the quickly narrowing potential, hanging his actions on a knowledge he didn't understand at all. "Dare you?" he asked and crouched next to Gennady, his words sharp with laughter he didn't feel. He kept his face averted and didn't make eye contact. "That one would bite your spurs off if you tried and then get mad." Empire plain-tongue, a language he knew hardly at all.

The room changed around him again as though he had fallen asleep in one place and woken in another. Pale blue eyes stared at him from a face that could only ever have been plain ice-white. Rit was seeing the Zimmer as he had the first time.

"Cassa would say that of Tillessan, my sister," Gennady said. "She would, she..." The words stopped. When he stood, his eyes were almost as white as his skin. "Keep her, I don't want to see her again."

Rit watched him leave by the main entrance, still feeling near paralyzed, as though he had woken unexpectedly from a deep sleep. He closed his eyes a moment, more to rest than to see the images unfold in the Net. The moment the door closed behind Gennady, the links had been released to the Security levels only, not domestic. Placement had Eunni in the corridor they had come in by, Kori with her. Nisstin faced the two women, his back to the closed door. If the door were opened, Rit could have almost reached and touched them. Just a door.

The paralysis that blanketed his body was going, he felt his strength returning in sharp jolts like static electricity. Nisstin's request for orders came to him, not Ulanda. He couldn't even begin to think of what to tell the Warrior to do with the two of them, where to take them. His responsibility? Eunni of course, but the Zimmer woman? From the walk through the corridors, or earlier, with her asking him to go with her... had it started then? I hardly knew her, he thought now in protest, but at the time, her asking and his response had seemed natural.

"You look like you could use this," Bolda said as he passed him tea bowl.

The rage that burned away the last of the numbness was as palpable as the warmth of the thin clay bowl on his fingers. Shattering against the lip of the altar, jagged fragments of the bowl landed among the smooth stones inside. The liquid hissed and burned. A large fragment of the bowl skittered across the floor, dragging a trail of moisture, to stop against the folds of Alicia's robe. Neither she nor Ulanda reacted.

"That's a bad habit of yours. Let me know before you plan on doing that again so I don't waste the good porcelain."

"You were just going to let her be raped?" Except the violation he had seen in the possibilities hadn't been rape, he just didn't have the words to fit the images. Her images? Or his interpretation?

Another bowl of tea. The man must have an inexhaustible supply. Rit took it. Not tea. The smell made him want to sneeze. Dry grass and leaf mold. An autumn smell.

"If it got that far," Bolda said, sitting next to him. "And if it did, she wouldn't have minded."

"Doesn't change what it was."

Bolda shook his head slowly. "I can't see what it actually was, only what it appeared to be."

"And that was?"

The bowl was emptied in one swallow and Bolda frowned into the empty bowl until his bushy eyebrows almost met in the middle. "You tell me." His voice echoed against the rounded bottom.

Rit took a sip. Honey had been in there once, a long time ago. I can't let this happen too often, he thought, running a shaking hand through his hair, having to balance the tea bowl on one knee to keep from spilling it. It hadn't come over him this strong since the Choosing at the Presentation and the aftermath of this was worse. Or, it's the anger, he thought. An ordinary reason, except he'd almost forgotten to expect anything ordinary. It had been a long day already and it wasn't over.

An open book of blocker circles fanned empty pages on the marble floor beside his wife. I should try one, he thought tiredly. Probably work better than the mead, faster anyway.

He took another sip. What had he seen - or done? Nothing. Eunni had... Ulanda had. Alicia was quietly rubbing the back of Ulanda's neck, all her concentration focused on the woman with nothing left over. What had Alicia seen in this, he wondered, or made of it? Any basis in her inner reality? It did in Eunni's, he realized quite suddenly, blinking, seeing a meeting in the pattern threads that he had missed in his focus on Kori. Had she seen anything? He didn't think she could sense pattern any more than Alicia did, but... he just didn't know and already the immediacy of what he had seen was fading.

"What happened?" he asked Bolda, closing his eyes as though that could slow the decay of the images.

The man had gotten up but was back a moment later. Rit smelled more of the mead but didn't look. "An Empire ship arrived."

"I know that. You know I know that, I already asked you why I didn't know sooner."

A glugging sound from the jug then a clump as the heavy container was put down on the marble floor. "This isn't the reality we left, ours was two back actually."

Another sip of his drink and Rit coughed to stop the burning. "Is there a reason you're feeding this to me in bits? Do you think my wits are so completely scrambled?"

"Well, hearing it isn't the same as knowing it and knowing it sure as hell isn't the same as living it. Ask Gennady some day when he's got it together again. Or Quin'tat and En'talac. What Kori tapped from the Temple ship - cute trick by the way - and what she didn't want to send over the relays, is that there aren't any Clan Zimmer in this reality. All of Gennady's family, los, wives, children, everybody, even rival Clans, they never existed."

Rit opened his eyes, needing to see. Bolda was serious. He shook his head, not disbelieving, but not understanding either. "What's that got to do with raping her?"

"Not rape, not like you're thinking." Bolda scratched his head. "It's part of what Zimmer is. Are. Whatever. Gennady is dominant Clan Zimmer; only the dominant

adults can breed. What they call freeborn Zimmer - and that's Kori - are immature forms, able to reproduce, but only more of the same. Freeborn or young Clan females, they need the genetic material packaged in the spurs, on the middle fingers of the breeding males, to finish their maturation. Most of those won't become dominant and those that don't, won't breed. Even fewer of the Clan males as well. Clan Zimmer don't reproduce very fast because except for the paltin, the breeding group, they might as well be eunuchs. There's lots of Zimmer around, but not Clan. Back home, I mean. And none now."

He tried to put together what else Gennady had said about luck and 'seeing' her. Briefly, it had made sense, but that was a subjective age ago. "So, just because she gave him the bad news, she wasn't to get any choice in the matter?"

"You need the spins on the Clan Zimmer culture to get all of it. And you have to know Gennady's past with Cassa." A loud snort and Bolda chuckled. "Hell, look who's talking about luck. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time and look where it landed you."

"I'm glad to hear someone else besides myself considers it the wrong place," he said as he rubbed his eyes until he saw stars instead.

Another chuckle. "Well, your majesty, like I said: luck."

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"Just the one," Ulanda said, speaking with a mouth that felt stuffed with cotton. Any more blocker and she wouldn't get off this floor tonight unless she was lifted.

"Didn't plan on more," Alicia said as she flipped the beaded end of her hair back where it belonged. "So don't bother asking." Hazel brown eyes danced as she wrapped a cord around the book of blockers and slipped it into the inside pocket of her overtunic. "If you're through sitting around here, maybe we can go to the party before it's over." With the words were the hand movements that offered an extension of privilege rather than an asking for it.

Ulanda found some laughter in herself after all; the mistake hadn't been one, the motion quite deliberate. She managed to get up on her knees with only a little help, then stretched, working her muscles in a slow warming progression as though she were preparing to start a dance rather than just finishing one. Everything was there where it was supposed to be. Rit seemed to have taken the brunt of it. Only tired, she decided.

"Another in his collection," she said. Alicia glared at her but the girl's own laughter bubbled through. "Should we go have a look at this Captain Slicanin? Perhaps she'll be next."

"Let's wait until Rit and Bolda get back. I want to see Rit's face when he sees her. He hasn't checked the Net links that far. Besides, you should have a decent escort. Maybe we can get Perron if he's not still busy with Ro'lin greeting people, or Nisstin might do..." Alicia let the words drift off, then giggled again. "Or Nisstin might not." Then more soberly, reluctantly tearing the bubble they had built with their banter, asked, "What happens now? Will Kori be okay?"

Ulanda nodded, hoping it wasn't a lie. Rit had her with Bissalta and the baby, several Temple servants in attendance as well as two high-ranking Warriors, those out of sight, the males not welcome in the Nursery section of the Chambers at any rate. A fuss even for Rit, even for the few moments he was there with her orders to back him.

"I don't know what we can offer her to even start to make up for what she has lost." The Zimmer woman had brought a small birthing gift earlier today while she and Alicia had been with Bissalta. A dish of dried fruit shyly offered but her desire to see the child had been very apparent. "Or even how much she has lost," she added. She didn't have any idea about Kori's relationships with the other freeborn on the Zimmer ship, or even if close relationships were allowed by their Clan masters. None of the spins she'd gotten from Quin'tat on Zimmer customs showed treatment of freeborn by Clan as anything other than slaves. She didn't know what the difference in how Gennady and his other crew had acted towards the ship freeborn meant, hadn't really looked for meanings at the time, it was just one more thing to accept and work around. And Kori made it easy to accept her without questions, quiet and with her skills very needed in growing the new Alisim Temple Net from a germ of the Temple ship's Net.

"Has she ever mentioned a husband or even someone close?" Ulanda asked.

Alicia shook her head. "Simitta said..." What the Zimmer had said was blinked away before she continued. "I don't know, she doesn't talk. I don't think she's said more than two words that haven't been to do with her work and even for that I have to keep reassuring her that it's proper to speak with me."

Responding to Alicia as though she were dominant, Ulanda thought. And different than how she reacted to her. A subtle difference. More like Gennady did, obedience reined in by worship, not instinct. And tempered by the Zimmer distaste for Temple. Gennady, at least, would prefer this aspect of his god to be more removed than not, and Bolda's habit of calling Cassa her mother, made it worse. Which is why Bolda did it.

"What did Simitta have to say about Kori?" Ulanda asked.

"He didn't, not about Kori. I was asking about Arasima." Alicia shrugged, her small face thoughtful. "I don't think he likes freeborn."

Ulanda got to her feet. Pushing a piece of broken tea bowl with her foot, she waited for the room to settle, the scent of mead competing with the joss sticks. No, Simitta didn't like the crew freeborn. Gennady's pets, he called them. If Kori had someone on board, she might ask Simitta first about getting the man released to them.

Alicia picked up a fragment of tea bowl and added them to those in the altar. "Have you thrown sticks tonight?" Ulanda asked. "Are some of those yours?"

"You know I don't." The smoke of the surviving joss sticks crowned her in a aura of gray. She attempted to wave the smoke away from her face, creating eddies that spread upward.

Ulanda pulled her eyes away from the smoke before she became lost in the mantric shapes growing there and began to supply others. And lost her eyes instead to the spiral formed of bits of colored stone on the floor. Finished two weeks ago, the design was to be repeated on the walls but in plain stone, the shapes formed by carving deeply into the surface of each piece. One spiral was just started; the others were only chalk marks. She had thought to have more time to establish herself here. Did she? Would the Empire ship remain neutral?

"Perhaps I should be the one to throw them. I seem to be blind to anything too close to me, especially tonight." Black sticks, she wondered? If any would work, they might. And what would she see? Would any burn - or would all of them be left well out of the pattern growing here. A Zimmer custom. Perhaps the Spann tops instead, she thought, then shivered. Alicia had spun them and said she had seen nothing, but Rit wouldn't touch them, not after a single glimpse that had him kick them half across the room. Alicia wore them as a barb more than a decoration, tending to play with them when he was around, twirling one between her fingers and humming tunelessly as though absorbed in what she was seeing.

Ulanda flexed her fingers, using the pain as a focus then tucked her hands up as far as she could. "If Gennady does have this Ri-priest on the Ladybug..." She had remembered quite suddenly, during Kori's message, of having seen her before, a memory taken from the portal opening that led to Cassa's Initiation. And remembered from the world-altar on Lillisim, just before the overpattern spiral bloomed and shut everything out of her mind. And wondered why that particular memory would surface just then, even as the overpattern fell around her and she knew why.

"What's wrong?" Alicia asked as she folded the cloth.

She shook her head. She hadn't cared to challenge the Zimmer about the holes in Kori's message to him other than having used them as a prod to make him respond to her. She needed him and his ship to protect her. Alisim Temple needed them. But the only reason that Gennady would keep this woman a secret was if she could access overpattern.

And Rit? It wasn't only Altasimic pattern that he had access to, but overpattern. How much and how deep? He was a blind spot in her mind; he confused her. Memory and mind.

"I should have killed you," she whispered again, hearing her own voice as though it were from a dream.

Very competent hands, scented with fermented honey and warm cotton from the cloth, checked the g'ta points along her neck. "What are you talking about? Do you mean Gennady?"

With the blocker fresh, Ulanda felt none of the vagueness that she half feared and half sought. She felt too human. Felt like laughing and felt like crying. Rit, not Gennady. She hated him. She wanted him in her bed; she had since first seeing him at the Mound, Garm's hands on her, wanting it to be Rit's hands instead. How could a Priest be so mixed up?

He had a wife and a mistress and she was a Priest. She didn't know what he was, but he wasn't hers in the way she wanted. She had made a choice.

Smiling to rejoin their earlier play, she said, "Perhaps Nisstin would do at that." And said it loud enough for him to hear.

The Senior Warrior left the door open behind him after bowing Eunni into the room. "He would not," he said firmly in Xintan, but with a fair and deliberate imitation of Quin'tat's deep rumble. "A poor male is this one, and used shamelessly by females."

He stopped before her. He was all the color in the room, Ulanda thought, feeling the warmth of his lean body, enjoying his scent over that of the joss sticks. Bright reds and greens and blues in the embroidery of the crests on his dress tunic, colours doubled and tripled in the reflections from the tiny mirrors sewn into the fabric. She liked that he hadn't changed his way of dress as many of those serving Temple had. "Very shamelessly," she agreed.

Eunni had stayed by the door, back against the wall. Hair that was bath-damp had separated into distinct curls, the look suited her more than the brushed out fuzz had. Bolda had chosen well, a good lady's maid among his other talents. The earth tones of the silk chenille robe looked better on Eunni than on her. Shortened from one of Garm's, one of those brought from Palace. Bolda's weaving. Tufts of cut silk traced diamond shapes, the same pattern as the reeds in the door of Garm's room. Through the row of off-center fastenings was woven a dark brown and cream cord, the ends left long to the floor. Fur lined a muff fashioned from the leftover fabric and Eunni had both hands tucked in and was enjoying the warmth much as Ulanda did Nisstin's scent. Complete, regardless of other concerns. There was something in her of what Rossaliana had, but tempered. And something related, but different, something she couldn't quite catch to see. Something wild that was hauntingly beautiful. She could see why Rit loved her.

Ulanda looked back to find Nisstin still watching her. "Have you thrown sticks tonight?"

"Should I?" he echoed, with a look to Alicia, only to get a shrug in return. His touch burned through the silk as he put his broad tanned hands on her shoulders, his Alisim Temple oath cord on one wrist loosely tied and hanging free, the tattoo like a shadow under the braiding.

"What do you want to do now?" he added, sounding bemused. "Everyone has had a look at this Captain Slicanin and decided she is a rather large, well trained river otter, none of them having seen one other than the fur. And those who have spoken with her don't know what to think. Lord Gennady has taken his pod but left the flitter which the Overpriest's Chief has said that the Overpriest won't leave until you're ready to receive him... and which explains why the Zimmer left the ship here. And my request for increased security has been ignored."

He glanced to Rit and Bolda as they arrived, giving a reserved nod to each, careful as always to her own people, and more than care to Rit, his reaction to the other man constantly evolving. "The Curfew guard have brought the two young ones in without incident or at least without incident until they reached the Chambers and ran into Rossaliana." Ulanda bit her lip to keep from laughing. The young girl was in exile from the Blessing, was supposed to be in bed, but her punishment was turning into another adventure.

Nisstin continued quite soberly, but his gray eyes sparkled, sharing in her amusement. "The Lord Priest Panntin is staring at a bowl of the wheat the Ocea ship brought this morning and he has been for the last half hour. The Lady Viy'lana is still in a foul mood about the Lady Ramsini and her ankles are swelling from standing too long. My Lady, what else would you like to know?"

She let the laughter show, not that he would be unaware of it even hidden. He had a dry sense of humor and looked for it in others as a way of sharing. And as a way to hide. "That seems quite enough, or did you have something else you wish to comment on?"

Nisstin dropped his hands, leaving a void in what she could feel. "If you will tell me what you want..." he said again but his tone had changed. Obviously not amused that he had to drag this out of her. He sounded tired.

"I want you to secure the grounds as you wish. I allow you the full responsibility. Use whatever warding and check points you think necessary." She put the authorization into the Net, using her signature as ranking Priest. "Assume for now that the Zimmer are still allies and will keep the orbiting Empire ship under control. We couldn't hold against them anyway."

"And the Overpriest's people? Will their actions change in the face of what has happened?"

"Nothing has changed that would let them challenge me or this Temple."

At that, she felt Panntin in the Net. Did he sense anything of this, she wondered? He was still looking at the bowl of wheat and through him, for an all too short moment, she tasted how the ice of the frost-touched sowing gave way to spring rains, and how the green shoots reached to a blue sky. Then the roll of hard grains in a callused palm, a float of chaff across skin with the dry smell of harvest on the light breath. A very brief moment. What he had, she didn't, and all the trying of the last months hadn't worked.

With a hand, Nisstin traced the cross of her robe, near her throat, a gentle smile added to his tired look, formality forgotten as it always was in their private moments. She felt Rit stiffen, he thought Nisstin was marking her in front of the others, a claiming, but he was wrong.

"Anything else?" Nisstin asked, still touching, giving her his strength. The additional watch-wards had already flared blue on his orders, the pillars of light beautiful in the rain, sparkling crystal shapes of blue.

"I want Tennin taken somewhere, not here, at any rate."

"Why not just order his death?" Rit said coldly.

Nisstin waited. She shook her head, wanting to cry all of a sudden. "And if I did?" she asked Nisstin, not Rit.

Rit turned and started out. "Wait," she called and he turned at the doorway. He could leave or stay; paths lead out from either, but both ended in darkness. His death? Her death? Far enough along those paths, there weren't any possibilities, they all felt like one.

She wanted this land that she couldn't seem to possess. The frost had always melted under her hand, she remembered. The sun and the green dawn and a covered mug of buttered tea waiting for her.

"Humour me, please," she said, holding her voice steady, and wondered if she fooled any of them. "I can't see you..." She couldn't see herself.

She turned to Nisstin. "I want you to be my eyes." The feel of his touch still lingered, part of a gift that would eventually kill him and she still wanted him.

"And Tennin?" Nisstin's tone was neutral.

"I'll decide later, do the other now."

He bowed deeply and left.

Ulanda looked in turn at each of those remaining. Silent. They all waited on her and she had nothing - not for them nor for herself. "What do you see, Rit?"

He shrugged. After moving to let the Xintan Warrior out, his eyes had returned to her, his expression distant more than angry. "Same as before. Nothing has changed." Another shrug.

Bolda balanced the tray on the lip of the altar as he fished out the broken pieces of the bowl, using an unburned joss stick to pull any away from the heat, making a mess of the design. Dark eyes were sideways to her and shadowed

besides by his eyebrows but the wry grin on his fleshy face said he knew exactly what he was doing.

Eunni edged sideways in the direction of the door. "What the Warrior said, about the children, I'd best see to them."

"I'm sorry," Ulanda said. "They're being looked after." Her progress towards the door slowed in uncertainty. And curiosity, Ulanda saw.

Rit fingered his oath band. "Any reason she needs to be involved in this?" he asked softly, still under tight control and his eyes on her, not Eunni, not Alicia.

He had found his second focus of concern fast enough. "The involving is already done. And not by me. You are very much aware of what you are, if you choose to forget it..." Overpattern sparked deep within her, she knew he could feel it. "Or not choose."

His eyes narrowed - there was little patience between them. She looked away, her eyes finding instead a fragment of hardened clay in the shallows of the altar, one of the pieces from when Rit shattered the bowl, not from Alicia's tidying. A flare of black showed on one red side where a joss stick had more smoked than burned.

"Eunni, what do you know about this?" she asked.

She gave a quick look towards Alicia, not Rit, and Ulanda almost smiled. "The Xintan had Rit doing Council work, negotiations and such. Strom are supposed to be good at that sort of thing. I've heard he is, good at it, that is. He told me the rest this afternoon." Another glance towards Alicia and for a moment she was silent. "About here, the Xintan Temple, just rumors. Even from the Xintan, almost anything about this place and what it means, the... strangers... is debated and talked over, sometimes fought over. Then what I've overheard tonight, that's all."

Her expression added: what I've seen tonight. Some of the rumors would have become more than talk. "We're not from this world," Ulanda started and then watched the play of emotions on the woman's face become the blank expression of concentration as she told the rest of it.

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What a mess, Rit thought, as he listened to Ulanda. A round-about telling, leaving things out apparently at random, or just from forgetting - except he couldn't believe that of Ulanda - then next, wrapping the tale back to tell again something that appeared quite unimportant. Alicia looked to be close to tears, one of those damn tops between a thumb and a finger, twisting the design into faint lines that were and then were not.

"Is all this true, Rit?" Eunni asked.

"Yes," he said, looking at her. A glance at Alicia showed her clicking the point of the black and white top against one front tooth, the crooked one, and with a strange look on her face. Copied from En'talac's ring clicking, he thought. Much of her teasing of him was very deliberate, a game that Ulanda encouraged to his disgust and everybody else's amusement.

He pushed away more Net inquires, only checking a priority flag from Garm. That he put a wait on, signing indulgence with his mark over Ulanda's. She had ignored the calls as only she could, leaving the Net buzzing in confusion, unsure if she still existed. A mournful query, as though the Net were alive.

"Can we get on with this?" he asked Ulanda.

She turned to look at the altar again and spoke to a rise of gray smoke: "She stays."

"So you've already said."

"I'm saying it again. Try listening this time."

The smoke shattered in a starburst shape, or it was the lines of blood on her face that he saw. Then smoke was in a thin stream in the air and on her skin, only shadows.

"Well," Eunni said, "I don't want to stay. I'll be with Tam and Willie if someone will show me where they are. Or Endica will do fine and I'll find my own way out. It's been interesting."

"Eunni," Rit said as gently as his anger would allow. "You can't leave here if she says you can't. There is any number of Warriors to stop you, or servants even, or, well, barriers, some of which you wouldn't be able to see until you walked into them. Like the locks on the doors for Tennin."

"But why?"

"She doesn't know. It doesn't even have to mean something. Or only that she's angry with me."

A Spann top clattered against two others and he flinched. "She's collecting people," Alicia said. "You, me, Kori." She laughed but the sound turned wild, then broken, but when she continued, her voice was clear. "Each of us is a different part of what she's shaping here. Like music. What happens to you doesn't matter, or what happens to the people around you."

Her hazel eyes were huge; her lower lip trembled. Rit tried to move, to go to her and he couldn't. Ice was all around him, freezing cold.

Blue flared and the double doors at the far end opened. Garm stood center at the end of the double row of spiral milled wooden pillars. From the Audience Hall, only a narrow slit of vision into the anteroom was possible: the pillars and the marble mosaic, and in an echo of that shape, the altar.

From the Hall came the sound of flutes, the rustle of the ci'ci drums combined into a whirling music. And more distant, the rain could be heard in a slower beat

and from all around, like a giant heart. But it wasn't the rain but the ocean, Rit suddenly realized. Beyond the blue columns of the warding line, his mind reached out, skimming the grass, the air frosted, hard diamonds in the grass, a crystal forest of golden blades. And above: the sky had cleared, stars in a sweep of light from the sea-touched horizon to the world-altar. The moon had risen, high, full, a yellow moon. He tried to shake the image out of his head but failed, everything was doubled, this room and the huge empty plain falling away under him.

Alicia's eyes had gone to Garm as he stopped at the first pair of pillars, but then she turned her head to Ulanda. "You know what a Zimmer Clan does when they take someone from a non-affiliated freeborn family to serve them?"

"I know," Ulanda said very softly with a glance to Garm. Alicia hadn't waited for a response and didn't pause at the words. And wouldn't have seen the change in the Priest, Rit thought. Her words had been in time to the sound of the water.

"If they don't want the whole family, they kill the rest, spouses, children... three generations so that there won't be any division of loyalty. I had asked about Arasima, what it meant that she became Clan, and Simitta told me that, even though it wasn't what I'd asked."

Rit did move then in a pulling that left part of himself in place momentarily, a part he didn't want but which followed relentlessly. Alicia didn't look at him, didn't respond to his touch.

The sound of water was all around him still, whatever was happening to him kept its own time, the rest had to be fit around. Was it a wave against the shore, he wondered? The ocean beating at the cliffs where they had ridden this morning? He could see from much higher up now: the ocean, the ragged line of granite columns above the water, and faintly, an opal tear in the darkness, Alicia's prayer flag for Bissalta and her baby. And in the distance, the Holding, surrounded by columns of blue light.

"Damn her to hell," Alicia said in a breath of words. Lines from what Rit had seen earlier swirled in a curtain of black. Black water, black night - he was drowning suddenly, losing the vision. He held onto Alicia for his comfort now, for something real.

"There is no hell," Garm said, stepping to Ulanda's side. "Only here, always here, and always now." His long fingers moved in the silk of her braid ends, turning the simple touch of cloth into a caress that Rit had only seen from him to Ulanda. "We're all us hers. All of us, here and now. And in the diamond, that's here and now as well."

His eyes went to Eunni, and then touched Rit's before dropping the short distance to look at Alicia. Rit felt the change in her, a shivering as though she felt the cold now as well. Or it was a coming down from nerves, he thought as he held her tightly. A soft hand touched his, a gentle brushing that ended with slender fingers wrapped into his.

Garm's eyes were back to Ulanda. "Sarkalt is waiting for you," he continued, lifting Ulanda's chin gently, cords still entwined in his fingers. "Niv says you always keep him waiting."

"So this is where everybody is hiding," a voice peeped, the Hegemony words actually spoken, but well chewed from a slightly earlier clear Net translation of a warbling sound such as a songbird might make. A creature dressed in darkly iridescent cloth was between the wooden pillars, one of the two Xintan guards that had been standing honor outside the anteroom was behind it, his Zimmer rifle drawn but crossed over his chest. Rit heard his security link with Nisstin but saw quite plainly the man's uncertainty. A large river otter except that river otters didn't have fur shading from black to gray on the face, the gray thinning to diamond tipped scales, the point of each slightly hooked. Scales were on the long fingered hands as well but smaller and smooth, black in bands over the dark gray.

"May I present Captain Slicanin," Garm said just as Rit pulled the information from one of the Net flags he had ignored. "Of the Temple Scout ship Nibbled Tail."

"It wasn't called that until he named it so," she said, flexing the thick bristle of dark gray whiskers on either side of her pointed nose. Liquid black eyes, no whites showed, and the twin pupils were a double slit across each iris. "What the Zimmer ship would do to us, I told him." The whiskers settled with a smoothing from the back of one hand. Then she bowed to Ulanda in a deep ripple that looked as though she might end up on the floor. Her hands moved in complex signs, the Net offering translations that Rit lost as she continued speaking. "Your San, Lady Priest, he is a tease."

Eunni eyes were going from Ulanda to Captain Slicanin to Garm and back.

"I have always found him to be so." Ulanda added her own hand motions but in an abbreviated form that barely disturbed the braid ends. The alien Captain bowed again.

The introductions from Garm were as informal sounding, but the hand motions the old man used weren't, they spoke of ranking and oaths taken and of possession.

"If you are going to say it," Rit said after Garm had introduced Eunni, "then you should speak it." Cold emerald eyes stared at him and Rit heard the sound of ice breaking, but held the gaze, hoping his own was as cold. Then to Eunni: "The hand motions are another kind of language."

She nodded somewhat absently, her eyes still making the rounds. Garm bowed to her in a graceful motion. "My apologies, perhaps I speak of possibilities only. What is certain is that I would be honored to share service to my Lady with you."

Anything wet - and most everything was - had a thin just-formed layer of ice over it. Rit was glad of his heavy tunic; the weather had gone from a cold damp to ice, very quickly. He ordered the Honor guards to remain by the Audience Hall doors when they would have followed him. Nisstín wasn't there.

Rit saw the Overpriest first, his eyes drawn to him. Sarkalt was a little ways away from where the two flitters were. Blue from the warding column next to the flitter glinted pure color off the raised texture in his white lace overrobe and darker, off the fall of his long black hair.

The moon was lower than he had seen earlier, confusing him, and the sky just starting to clear, or becoming clouded again. Rings around the moon, the clouds, or ice. The difference in how it looked from before might simply be a change in the perspective.

"Will it be much longer?" Pida asked, giving Rit the focus he needed to look away from the Overpriest. The tass'alt stood in the door of the flitter, also wearing white, but with his usual skirt replaced by a heavy wrap of stiff material around his middle. Coarse as burlap, the wrap went from under his arms to his ankles and had a green band at the top, the cloth knotted in the front and left loose to hang, becoming a fringe by waist level.

"That's new," Rit said, then to Pida's puzzled look, added, "The makeup." Around each eye was a heavy band of black, then small circles, also of black, followed the curve of his jaw. The marks looked strange and the clothes ambiguous. Rit hadn't seen him since they had left the world-altar after the first cycle of storms. Sarkalt's ship and a Hand of Xintan was all that was left there, and the Xintan well back, on the far flank of Dog Mountain where it curved towards the site, safe from the flash floods that could sweep the area in moments.

"The style when we left, the wrap also. Very expensive. From the Gineri system, very 'in' in the Tass' Holdings, anything from that system." He smiled briefly. "I don't know about the style now, this Palace I mean." He looked towards Sarkalt a moment and lost what little expression there had been on his face. "The Overpriest's tass'alt insisted on coming, he's in the flitter. He says he'll stay there, but Bitilan can't stop him if he decides to leave, he can override any orders from our Security. Jini's orders too, although she can usually settle him. Niv has no concerns other than Sarkalt; he's not a danger to anyone. You might want to alert your people not to shoot."

"I might at that." Rit gave Nisstín the information through the Net security link along with an image of the Camerat tass'alt taken from the link Pida gave him.

"Otters and giant blue lizards," Nisstín echoed back. "Why not." Rit felt the extra power that the additional watch wards gave them organize to surround the flitter even closer than before. The excuse was welcome, he wondered if Pida realized it. Another shift in the placement of guards occurred in the Assembly Hall, this difference more directly associated with Niv. A closer watch over those non-Temple people who were the most capable of trouble fueled by panic, even unarmed. All weapons - ceremonial for the most part, swords and knives, but some others hidden under clothing - had been politely requested and taken before each person was allowed into the Holding.

Pida drew to one side to let Quin'tat and En'talac pass. "Are you people finally ready then?" Quin'tat asked, his breath hanging in the air. Small white glow globes had followed him out, three of them. "You might allow us some access to the Holding's Net."

Nisstín had only allowed the domestic Net and that much shielded as best they knew how, but Rit asked for a higher link and got it. They would be able to reach Niv with a private lead if they needed to. "If you want more," he said, "Nisstín's handling security. You'll have to ask him."

Then to En'talac's comment in the Net, he smiled. "I understand the protocol to be standard for Temple."

She shook her head. "This Net is half Zimmer, same as the customs you follow, I don't think it really appreciates Temple protocol. How is Kori by the way?"

"Fine. Visiting Bissalta, you might see her later if she can pull herself away from the baby."

En'talac took his arm, testing the slippery cobblestones with one foot before walking him out a few steps. Her rings were cold on his arm, then hot. "You don't lie very well."

He shrugged, feeling her weight on one side as she held tight. Was she worried? He couldn't tell, she looked totally alien again, as she had that day he first met Alicia. "Everybody is alive and in one piece."

Pida was there. "We didn't know Kori had tapped into our Net link with the other ship until they had run a diagnostic and alerted us."

"And we still don't know what Lord Gennady intends," Quin'tat said.

"Ulanda says that he won't attack the Temple ship unless provoked. What of the Temple ship against the Holding? Gennady's arrangements with us stand."

The big man looked steadily at him for a time, glanced at En'talac, and then nodded. "The Overpriest says that our arrangements also stand..." The words trailed off, Quin'tat's attention gone from him. Sarkalt. Green fire had been added to the blue of the warding.

"The ship rises," Sarkalt said and suddenly Rit saw the world-altar with rings of light beating out from the Temple ship, rings as green as new grass. Then eyes as green, burning into him. "What does she want?"

"Who?"

"The bird. You fly with her."

Rit swallowed. "What's happening?"

From far away, Quin'tat said, "Anga."

En'talac had his arm, shaking him until he looked down at her. "Get your people under cover," she screamed. What she could reach of the Holding Net echoed the same message. "He'll attack here."

"No!" Pida screamed and En'talac's message in the Net died at the same moment. Red had been added to the green, red rings, and not only in what Rit could see from the vision Sarkalt gave him. Above the stone of the Holding, red fire rose in the distance, coming from the direction of the world-altar. "Arasima," the tass'altin whispered and fell to his knees on the ice-skimmed stone of the courtyard.

Red bloomed, a flattened line capping a column of red, stretching out in a disk to bloody the moon. And was gone, as quickly. Rit expected noise, but there was nothing, then he remembered the distance and knew it would come.

Green eyes still stared at him, and for a moment, Rit saw black lines in them to make the green appear faceted. People moved around him but he saw them as though they were part of a placement pull from the Net, but with flesh added. And more than flesh if he tried harder to see them, but didn't past the first attempt when he felt himself fade as the other person became more real. Jini, he saw her... a history of her, a future of her. Quin'tat? A past and a future between the two, except the past he saw hadn't existed, he knew it hadn't. Then just Jini at the flitter door, and a second later, Pida. Then En'talac, except he hadn't noticed her leaving his side. Crowding behind was a man he didn't recognize, the Camerat behind him, the tass'alt strangely familiar. Bitilan, Rit remembered the other man's name quite suddenly but couldn't remember ever having met or even heard of him before Pida had said his name.

The other flitter opened, two people stood at the door, one a Zimmer in a uniform like Captain Slicannin's. Behind him, the Honor guard had spread out but was still in a defensive order at the main door. Eunni tried to push through and Rit heard Bolda's order that told the Lead Hand to let her go.

"Our ship," Quin'tat said heavily as he shook his head.

Bolda snorted. "Hell, I knew that."

"Anga, it must have been." Quin'tat hesitated and looked towards Bitilan.

"Arasima stopped him."

"A hard stopping," Bolda said, soberly. "Has it set anything else of Anga's off?" Rit felt the Net open again, but with a tight link this time that pushed him away.

Quin'tat squeezed his eyes tight then rubbed before opening them. "Not that the flitter can detect."

"Rit?" Eunni said, reaching him. Then to Bolda, "What's wrong with him?" She spoke Hegemony and Rit felt a release as his mind reached for the familiar words.

Sarkalt walked past Pida and Jini. He stopped in front of Eunni, facing her.

"Eunni, I'm okay now." Rit tried to pull her away from the Overpriest. It was like she was rooted. "Bolda, don't just stand there, help me."

Sarkalt moved again. "I've lost someone. Are you her? Would you dance with me?"

"Niv!" Bolda shouted as the small man tried to help him pull, the two of them failing. Then Niv was between Sarkalt and the three of them, a simmering of sounds coming from the creature. The translation fell in pieces and Rit recognized the language. Old-tongue, not the sound of the words but from the effect on the Net.

Rit landed on the cobblestones, Eunni in his lap, his arms still around her waist. "You know the damndest people," she said, shivering against him. "What the hell was that?"

He got up first and half carried, half walked, her around the nose of the small ship. The white glare of the globes was eclipsed, allowing the yellow moonlight and stone shadow off the black tiles to surround them.

"Who? What?" Eunni whispered, the furry muff up to her face.

"A large blue lizard?" he offered.

"The other one," she said, wiping her eyes with the cloth. "He asked me to dance."

Spoken by Sarkalt in Empire plain-tongue. "You don't want to dance with him," Rit said harshly against the longing he heard in her voice. It was the second time that night he had heard something like it. "Take my word for it."

En'talac stopped by the nose of the flitter. "He's leaving now. Can you two make it?"

He stared at her stupidly. "Leaving?"

"The Blessing," she said to him, but her eyes strayed to Eunni. "Your Lady is waiting." Rings clicked, one hand was to her mouth. Then she stepped to Eunni before Rit could react and began to check her g'ta points. Eunni started at the sudden movement, then slapped her hand away.

En'talac straightened. Rit still couldn't read her. "Pida is sedated, Niv will go with Sarkalt. We can't stop either of them."

"What happened?"

"Our security obviously failed. I think Anga would have attacked the Zimmer vessel, forcing the Temple ship to assist him. They might have been able to at least disable the Zimmer and would have been here soon after. Arisima..." She shook her head tiredly.

A hot morning over three months ago. Two women in identical green robes, Arasima and En'talac, and in the Zimmer woman he remembered the same hesitancy he had seen in Kori. Freeborn. Had she wanted to be Clan, he wondered, seeing the fear again, but as clearly, how she had urged En'talac to hurry.

"Were more people wanting that end than died on the ship? What about those here for the Blessing?"

The look En'talac gave him was as frozen as the air. Unclenching her hands, she rubbed them on her robe, the silver rings flashing. "Anga had no oaths to the Overpriest, the rest of us do. And Sarkalt... he says he's still dancing with the Change Phoenix and that apparently includes letting Ulanda do whatever she wants. I suggest we argue about this later, there's no time now."

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"Have you dressed like that for her?" Arasima asked him. Sarkalt saw her kneeling before the small altar on board the ship, a single stick over the stones that weren't from Zimmer. She hardly needed more than one stick, or needed stones at all. Her hands wove a complex telling around the words in shapes that scarcely moved her slender fingers.

A memory? "You hardly need more," he thought he might have said, and thought he might have meant Pida instead of the joss sticks, but she laughed regardless of any words. The crest of her hair rose up to spread like translucent strands of spider silk about her and sapphire eyes laughed at him through a veil of red and blue and silver.

He stood on the cobblestones of the courtyard before the Assembly Hall; the sound from the ship's death fell around him.

"Wait for them," Niv said, a hand on his arm.

Crystal falling, or it was ice?

And another memory came: a scent of fruit in the market, sun-warmed, the air as still as shadows in the noon. He should have taken the bread, had meant to, he remembered. A heavy loaf, pebbles of coarsely-ground nuts browned on the surface, the crust slashed in a rough Alba mark for luck, for the Emperor on Ri. But the apples had drawn him, their scent filling his mouth where the flesh wouldn't fill his belly for long. He had run from stealing a shirt full, a crowd growing after him like thunder. He had been too slow. As breathless from hunger as from the chase, he climbed over a wall, and trying to use the vines as handholds to climb down, had fallen.

In the shady courtyard, the small apples spread out around on the stone flagging, bruised, flower petals from the vines as bright as the drops of his blood scattered with them. There was a deep cut on his leg but he felt no pain from it. He tried to clean the cut with the spit-wet tail of his shirt but the blood wouldn't stop. Then the cloth snagged and pulled bone.

And the memory past that point in time? There was the sound of water, he remembered, and the smell of wet stone and leaves and the sound of birds in the vines. He had seen the small birds before, their colors shining as though wet, the birds crowded in a reed cage in the market. He saw them there, felt the change in the day - he could go back further into his life as that boy, but not forward.

He stood in the cool air of the Alisim night, Niv's hand on his arm. "Allow a conceit. Have my body taken home."

Home, Ulanda thought, lost for a moment in the memory she received from Sarkalt. Air with the scent of vanilla tea. Home? But not Ri, the sky had been a dome of watered gold deepening to bronze at the surround of the utterly flat horizon. Then with a return to now, she hardly dared believe: Anga dead?

Even as she knew it for the truth, it somehow didn't feel complete. She wanted to see his body, to watch it decay. The need surprised and sickened her, but she didn't have time to examine her feelings. Nisstín stood at her shoulder, Alicia beside, her personal guard close, separating her from the guests. The arrangement was for show - she felt as though every eye was on her - the real guard was through the Net controlled wards. But nothing, not even her own will, could protect her from what Sarkalt offered: both his memory and the death of Anga.

The destruction of the ship finally reached the Holding. A sound like ice shattering on a tile roof grew around them and the Xintan drummers included the sound in the other, as any Temple drummers would. The Offering from the Harvest Blessing was about to begin.

The Honor Guard marched in unison to split the crowd, forming a double row open to Panntin and Viy'lana at the doors, Garm opposite, the Vannsit Captain nearby, a hollow of uncertainty about her. Panntin looked back a moment towards where she stood, his russet eyes calm and unquestioning. Viy'lana had both her hands cupped under the slight swell of her belly, the cloth of her tunic smoothed to show the curve.

But Ulanda's eyes held more tangibly the sight of a skinny boy dressed in rags. He had gathered six of the small apples before fainting from loss of blood, all he could reach of those dropped, and held them clenched to his chest, and was still holding them when he was found. Bloated flies the color of oiled steel tracked into the blood and drank from his half open eyes. Eyes that were an unblinking dark green behind a lace of black lashes. A Wa'tic gardener, advanced years showing

in a frost of gold over the brown chitin, had gone from a steady rhythm of sweeping leaves with a twig bundle broom to a shrill chitter, the Net forgotten in its anguish at finding the boy.

Not just a memory now, she thought, or not Sarkalt's at any rate, she had felt the limits he had found for himself. The boy had died there.

Sarkalt stepped from the Alisim night, through a noon of burnished metal, to the white light of the Assembly Hall. "Welcome to Alisim Temple Holding, Overpriest," Garm said and bowed deeply. Panntin and Viy'lana mirrored his action. "Welcome to you and your people."

This Sarkalt wasn't in rags, despite what her eyes persisted in seeing. He was dressed as he had been at the world-altar on Lillisim, in the spiral at the center where they had met. Niv was beside him, wrapped in a heavy cloak against the cold and with the hood up. As well he was covered, she had caught Rit's sending of how he had seen Niv, and only the lack of other possibilities had told her it was him and not some monster from a nightmare.

People milled, their whispers mounting in volume, most shocked at what they saw. A very few were quiet - and those ones saw much more. Lord Wilntinn, Rit's cousin, was one of those, his stepmother was another.

Rit with En'talac followed Sarkalt, Eunni with Quin'tat behind them. This first Blessing would be almost entirely Xintan, a political event with harvest rites mixed in. And a different kind of harvest: the pattern deaths. This part, the formal Offering of the Blessing, was all that had been planned as a ceremony, the rest only a party. Garm and Perron had worked with the Xintan Assembly Protocol Hand for Foreign Affairs and Ro'lin quis'Palltin, the Elder Bluestone priestess, to finalize the roles to be played and who would be invited.

She met Sarkalt halfway. "You do this Temple honor to share the Autumn Blessing with us, Overpriest," she said in Xintan, and then repeated it in Hegemony. His words to her were in old-tongue, voice and hands, and she held the Net closed to those who could hear it, allowing only the music in the sound to get through. What he said was one with the ice storm, with the drums.

"There's a yellow moon in a clear sky," Rit said softly to her as he moved to Alicia's side. "I saw that earlier."

Half into the darkness, a quarter of the day until dawn. She glanced around, grateful that Sarkalt had stolen everyone's notice. What she had felt earlier in a diffuse way, was becoming focused. She put the change of orders into the Net. What was going to happen could happen in the relative privacy of her anteroom and, besides Niv, only En'talac and Quin'tat of the Overpriest's people present.

To Panntin at the door, the night sky with a single moon above his head, she said, "Would you begin?" The music changed.

Standing in front of the altar, in a room of triple spirals, Sarkalt raised his eyes to see Arasima standing opposite, in a line of smoke, in a breath of scent. A bowl and stones. A much larger bowl and different stones again, but thought they might be from Zimmer in the way a flower is from the seed it bears.

"There isn't any more," he said. His words made her dance and he laughed. Then turning to Ulanda, asked, "What does your Altasimic Priest see in this? Does he see his dead?" One step into the dance, he took the scent of roses with him, he drew the smoke with his arms to move about him. Ulanda knelt at the far curve of the marble spiral, at one of the opening of the lines, Garm standing at her back. A tea set gave the scent of lemon to the warm air. In the room beyond, someone was speaking of death and birth. He had seen a woman there, twin fires around her.

"He sees Alisim," Ulanda said. "What else should he see?"

When he noticed her again, the smell of lemon was gone, but that of roses lingered. From beyond the door - open again or still, he didn't know - came music and a clapping in time, not talking. With the sound was the scent of grain being offered to fire, and beer, roasting apples and the sweet burning of almonds. To a fire? Or to the woman who burned?

En'talac passed a mug to Niv and his tass'alt offered it to him. Mulled beer. "Am I fire as well?" he asked. A finger of the taste then a sip. His body sparkled, confused. Ri and not-Ri.

"What do you see that your Altasimic Priest does not?" he asked Ulanda, but of course, hadn't. The words unsaid between them. "Do you see me?" he whispered and was sure he had said that much. They were waiting for him to die and he didn't know how.

"I see you."

He knelt before her, across the colored spiral, at the smooth curve. He knelt in snow and Ri-altar was all around him, they were turquoise shadows against the snow. Fires shone in the green twilight, six points of fire.

"Is this real?" Rit asked Bolda.

"Are your feet cold?"

He nodded, clutching the warm beer.

"Then it's real," Bolda grunted, still eyeing the two women.

Eunni giggled at Bolda's words - definitely a giggle, not a laugh. A snowball held for throwing was in one hand, the other hand tight in her fur-lined muff. She wore a patch of snow - Alicia's doing. Bent on taking revenge, she had tried to chase the girl but floundered in the drifts.

"Is it real?" Eunni said to him, but as a different kind of question, as though she had just asked what kind of idiot he was trying to be. And would have thrown the snowball at him instead except for Alicia's second shot.

The two of them chased each other through air where there had to be a spiral cut wooden pillar, then through the stone between the anteroom and the corridor leading to Ulanda's Chambers. Small evergreens bent by a burden of snow added easy fuel and a hiding place both. Vestiges of a sunset glowed behind them, darkening tangerine clouds over jagged peaks of snow crusted rock, and something else, higher yet, rode the last fanning rays of the sun.

For the fourth time in as many minutes, Rit turned to check: only a sliver showed of the door into the Assembly, as though the pillars were still there to block the view. The people crowding the door cast long shadows in the white light from the glow globes illuminating the Hall.

He was afraid of being lost in this and was only reassured by Bolda's morose presence. Quin'tat and En'talac waited near the closest fire, as quiet as Bolda was. He would have expected the medic to join in the game, or failing that, to be absorbed in watching the pattern lines. She was watching him.

What do I see that the others can't, he wondered? One area in what had been the anteroom was clear of snow and all the pattern threads he could find in this suddenly alien place met there. The triple spiral mosaic on the floor. Snow was melting at the edges to follow the three curving lines to the thick walled triangle that made up the center.

Only moments before, Ulanda, Garm, Sarkalt and Niv had been there. "Where did they go?" he asked.

Bolda shook his head then shrugged. "How the hell should I know?"

Ulanda knelt again, facing Sarkalt with Niv beside him. To one side was the ocean, a velvet black split by ripples of gold under a full moon. High tide, a different smell she looked for, still finding it a novelty that this world had tides where Ri didn't. The Holding was a distant blue fire opposite. As Rit had said, the night was clear and cold.

"I thought I could take you there," Ulanda said. She had never done this before, not a pull this complete; the closest had been the maps on Lillisim. Once started, she hadn't been able to stop it or control the extent of the pull, all of it had come down around her like rain falling. She knew she had to be doing it but how?

"Perhaps I only dreamt it," Sarkalt said. "Did it happen once? I don't know."

Perhaps. Beyond the pattern-pull of the world-altar on Ri, searching for what she had seen in his memory instead of what she still saw in him, they had come here instead. The edge of broken granite cliffs above a swelling black ocean, one

of the Alisim Temple standards above them. Alicia's prayer flag crackled in the wind, gold now in the moonlight, not opal.

If I walked back, where would I be, she wondered. Could I go full circle, from the spiral to here and back, but through distance instead? She wished she had stayed at the Blessing, that it had been possible, but their being here was the inevitable conclusion of what she had sensed this morning and the distance back to the Holding was more than a simple matter of how far it was to walk.

"It is different here," Sarkalt said, as though she had spoken her doubts. "Ri is close here, closer than in the snow. The other, Ri-altar, was more you, or your memories of me. I forget sometimes that I don't know you. Sometimes I thought we should talk, but there wasn't anything to say, as though all the words were taken and used long ago."

She didn't respond other than to trace the fingertips of one hand over the thick pile of the wool rug, trailing black silk cords over roses and vines and small birds. The rug that was in Rit's bedroom - where Tennin was - and had been in Garm's suite in Palace at Ri. She knew Rit had it, but hadn't made the connection with Tennin being in the same room. And she had been there.

"The memories," Sarkalt said, his eyes following the movement of her hand. "Or more than memories. Once I looked to see them, now they surround me in their fury." Filtered by the long black lashes, his eyes were the green found in the heart of a wave. Had the stone changed to water, she wondered? And her? A nest in the reeds, she remembered that as well. But also, that both this man and the one she had known, had, each in their own way, given her a chance to survive.

"A way back to being human?" she asked.

Even as Ulanda spoke the words, she lost their origin, but Sarkalt looked up to her and nodded. "This is taking a long time, I'm sorry."

Niv was by the Overpriest's side, stoking his arm, a song in voice and touch that ran as wild as the memories must. An offset chant, a Camerat song, meant to be sung doubled. Ulanda had heard it before, a lullaby she thought, and cruel as such things so often were.

... in the grasses, the suns setting - blackening water
two reeds, shining waters - singing of night
black waters, mouths of crystal - stars on the waves
dancing from ripples, the songs stolen - two baskets
two baskets, two children..."

"Of all the memories," Sarkalt said through Niv's song. "I don't remember waking in that place. I wonder if I ever did."

"Someone did." A rose bud was under her hand. Was the rug here as part of the pull, or really here? Don't be an idiot, she told herself as she drew her fingers in to make as close a fist as the braiding would allow.

"Someone," Sarkalt repeated, still watching her, then smiled, then laughed, frightening her with the sound. And said the word again, in old-tongue, meaning friend and stranger both and in the form meaning lover. Niv hissed sharply and his stroking showed claws as his other hand turned Sarkalt's face away to spare her his look.

"You should take us back now," Niv said.

Garm was standing apart from them on a ledge of stone worn bare of soil, the grass a fringe around the weathered platform. Looking at the ocean. She opened her mouth to call him and was stopped as the cry of a bird from high above took his name from her...

...they were kneeling in snow melt on the marble spiral, but the bird still cried. The barrier-wards strained, then faded and reformed, all in an instant that she felt Nisstin blink around, startled.

The rug was gone. She used the link to Nisstin to pull hard at a lead of the Net. "Check on Tennin. Make sure that warding is secure." Then she changed her mind. "No, have him taken somewhere else, away from the Holding." I don't feel safe with him here, she thought, wondering if anyplace was safe. What part did he have in this? Coming full circle, primed by Rit's actions. Just chance? She knew only enough to trust to her feelings.

"And the rug by the bed, check it, don't move it."

From Nisstin she got back what amounted to a raised eyebrow. "Anything else?"

Anything? A cage of reeds perhaps. How long would it take for a small bird to fly from the world-altar to here with the force of the ship's destruction behind it? This long? She let the lead break.

Sarkalt still knelt, but now with his head against Niv's chest in a blank-eyed repose. Niv sang gently, a crooning sound more than words, his body weaving as though the simulacrum of life it gave to the man he held might somehow become real.

Sarkalt breathed, but what had she brought back? One change at least: Niv and Sarkalt were now in the center of the spiral.

"Garm?" she said again, her voice breaking in a rush of fear. The rin'cass wu, the rider of the Change Phoenix. Suddenly, she knew what was going to happen.

Rit blinked and Ulanda was back as though never gone. He found it an effort to think that she had been gone, like a memory that might not be one, or like a waking dream.

The sunset had faded, leaving the sky a midnight color of green without stars at all. Streamers of black cloud drifted over the single huge crystal floating over the peaks. In the dark green were spots of orange: the almost spent fires - six fires - brighter for the failing light but adding nothing past a flickering glow. A single narrow line of white grew out of a base of shifting shadows as those who watched from the doorway moved about. The tip reached almost to Ulanda.

Bolda puffed out a cloud of frozen air and through everything else, Rit felt his relief. He felt the same, even as he had to concentrate on what he was relieved about. He heard Ulanda say something to Nisstín through the Net, and the Warriors' reply, but the words wouldn't take shape in his mind.

"Garm?" she whispered and he heard that like the sound raised blood.

The snow was real - the stray thought came as he stumbled through the crust on the surface in an effort to reach her. Garm ignored them both. En'talac was closer than before, he hadn't seen her move but there were hollows in the snow-skin of emerald leading back to Quin'tat by the nearest fire. He didn't know where Alicia and Eunni were, or even if they were still here.

Pale green fire flooded the spiral, following the three arms in towards the center like burning oil on water. "Garm!" Ulanda screamed. Green flames licked at Niv and Sarkalt. Or had the fire started with them and backed up to reach Ulanda?

Rit had stopped several steps away from her, confused as he watched the fire, his heart pounding. Only the raw fear in Ulanda's voice got him going again. Garm hadn't moved; he hadn't even looked towards her.

The fire didn't burn; Rit felt the icy water around his knees more. She didn't resist his being next to her, but he didn't know what to do. Fear? He was wrong - her voice had held as much need as fear, and he didn't know what to do about that either. She wasn't pulling pattern in any sense that he could touch. There must be something for this place to exist, but what she was doing wasn't anything he could share as he had at the Presentation.

One hand brushed her face but the action felt strange, it was almost as though he was touching himself, there wasn't that sense of 'otherness' there should be. Suddenly, she twisted as though falling. An arms length away, at the point of the white light from the Assembly Hall, a tiny bird had dropped to the snow. Wings spread, it struggled a moment, then lay there panting, its beak open. A sage-

hopper. In its dark eyes was a reflection of the shimmering curtain of green light rising from the center of the spiral.

The Holding and the plain, seen as though he was flying. "You fly with her," Sarkalt had said. But a sage-hopper? Garm picked the bird up and carried it away from them, holding it gently, the bird very quiet in the cupped palms of his hands. His face bowed slowly to touch his cheek to the smooth feathers of the bird's back and he lowered his eyes.

Ulanda tried to stand, Rit supporting her, but he thought she didn't realize he was there. Her eyes never left the bird. A sage-hopper. He closed his eyes a brief moment, feeling dizzy.

"Don't you bother," Bolda said as he wrapped an arm around Ulanda's waist from the other side. "You can stay here. Unless you mean to wring its neck. That's one bird whose neck just might need wringing."

"You might," Quin'tat said, "if it would make any kind of difference."

He had followed En'talac. "Difference?" Rit asked him.

"The Empress," Quin'tat said. "Or part of her." He rubbed his face as En'talac looked up at him, her eyes narrow slits. "Or all of her, I don't know, but killing it wouldn't do anything." The last came in a slow booming that sounded of defeat.

"We've seen this in dreams," En'talac said. "Other peoples dreams, not our own."

"Yours now," Bolda grunted as he kneed the back of Ulanda's leg to have her sit, Rit helping him support the dead fall of her weight. Ulanda's arm where he held her was ice cold through the silk; he felt the ridges in the healed burn and moved his grip higher.

Her landing was cushioned in bright white snow, the tip of the arrow of the light from the door. Bolda held her down when she would have risen again.

"Whatever you want to do, you can do it from here."

En'talac knelt in the snow in front of Ulanda, rings flashing as she rubbed her fingers gently along each braided forearm.

"Let the pull drop," she said firmly. "Strip it back to Alisim."

"What?" Ulanda whispered, her eyes trying to fix on the medic and failing.

"Ulanda, you have to drop the pull. I can't see the pattern threads; I don't know how much of a link you have made here to Ri. Anything the Empress does could contaminate Ri-pattern, and through Ri-pattern, the Unity. You've been through that, remember?"

A slender ringed hand was raised in front of Ulanda's face, as though En'talac was about to snap her fingers, when Rit pulled her arm down, the heat of it so different from touching Ulanda. "What about Alicia and Eunni?" he said. "Where are they? Do they have to be here first?"

"I don't know. There's too much I can't be sure of." Her hand tightened on Ulanda's arms and Rit felt the force of her will. "Ulanda, where are they?"

"There's no time to look for them," Quin'tat said. He had a disk in his hand similar to what Pida had taken from his pendant to scan Alicia.

Rit knocked it out of his hand. "Make time."

"Eunni?" Ulanda said, as though speaking the name for the first time.

Rit let go of En'talac and stood. "Give me a few minutes to find them." She nodded and then looked at her husband.

Where there had once been the beginnings of a carved spiral on a wall was a path weaving down into a stand of evergreens. The path was older than Eunni and Alicia's play; he slid on snow packed to a layer of ice. "Eunni! Alicia!" Under the echoes from the taller mountains was the distant shuffling of snow dropping from boughs. The pop of coals from the fires. He couldn't hear anything from the Assembly Hall. Brush and trees started in a few more steps and he would be as much outside the room as Alicia and Eunni were.

Something white waved from the darkness of the path below him. "We're here." Eunni's voice. Her teeth were chattering. Alicia and Captain Slicanin followed her. Alicia hesitated before each step, the Captain helping to support her. Rit hadn't known Slicanin was with them, had last seen her by the Assembly Hall doors.

He took Alicia's other side and half carried her the rest of the way. "What's going on?" Alicia asked, her voice hoarse as though she was winded. Her pale lavender overtunic was stained with black. Her eyes were on the column of light that contained Sarkalt.

And it changed again. The air flooded warm around them. Glow globes lit the anteroom with a clear light, not as bright as the Assembly Hall but bright enough to show the dark on Alicia's tunic was mud. Ulanda and En'talac knelt in a growing puddle from their own soaked clothing. Temple Net had returned, tentative, questing, and keeping well back of the spiral.

"Did we miss something?" Alicia added after looking around, settling for looking at him. She had mud on her cheeks as well. So did Eunni.

"Would you take her out of here, please?" he asked, then wondered who he had asked to do the taking: Alicia or Eunni or Captain Slicanin. He repeated the request to Alicia.

She didn't move. Through the Net, he caught Nisstin's return but not her original order. The doors closed a moment later, shutting out the guards.

"This is Ri-light?" Captain Slicanin asked. She started to circle the column of light. He caught Quin'tat's sign to her, a request that she stop moving around. After bowing her acceptance, she continued circling.

En'talac's attention was back on Ulanda. Sparks flew from her fingers. "Can you break the draw of Ri-pattern off? Is any of this you?"

"Me?" Ulanda whispered, her eyes wandering, lost. "Who?"

"Rit?" En'talac asked next. "Are you picking up anything that we aren't?"

He knelt back down in front of Ulanda. "I'm not getting anything." He didn't know what the others were seeing or understanding from this. He couldn't see anything here more than what his eyes did, his head buzzed when he tried, the buzzing becoming a vortex of sound when he persisted. Eunni was staring at him, the same look on her face as before. She stood in a pool of water; she must be soaked.

"The last time..." En'talac bowed her head an instant before looking at him. "When this happened before, overpattern started to bleed into Ri-pattern, it would have destroyed all the world-patterns eventually, destroyed the Unity and Empire with it. It's one of the things Anga meant to prevent."

"Would it be such a bad thing?"

"Yes, it would," Quin'tat said.

His tone didn't leave room for disagreement. "What about him?" Rit asked, nodding towards Garm. "Can he do anything?" The Simic hadn't moved or reacted in any way to the changes. Almost hidden in his hands, the bird rubbed its head against Garm's nose, against the curve of one nostril. Its eye blinked green in reflection, then black.

Bolda snorted. "He's doing it." He got to his feet, his trousers soaked at the knees.

Garm looked up at the same moment the tiny bird stretched its wings out. A hurricane roar of wind hit and Rit pulled himself into a ball, arms pressed against his ears. Feathers against his face... wind and feathers.

"No!" Alicia screamed. Rit looked only to see her fall before completely up, one foot caught in her skirt.

Then nothing. The bird was still in Garm's palms, wings outstretched, motionless, looking the same as when it first landed in the snow. Panting. Alicia was on the floor, Eunni's arms around her shoulders.

Ri-light had died. Niv knelt where he had been, holding Sarkalt as before, but across the brown skin of the Overpriest's throat was a slash of red, with more blood sprayed on his white robe. Niv held Sarkalt's head against his chest, but the blue scales of the tass'alt's chin dripped blood and his rictal grin showed dagger ranks of bloody teeth.

"Not so long at all," Ulanda whispered. She sat back against him in the same breath that brought the words. And in the next, was on her feet in a totally unexpected motion. Rit reached to grab her but Bolda pushed him down.

"Stay put," he growled and Rit felt the Net snap past him in a fine line call to Jini that ignored the security barriers.

Black silk cords trailed in the blood as Ulanda reached to embrace Niv. From her came a song, a chant that matched the movements of her body against his. The tass'alt let Sarkalt go, twisting so that he was holding Ulanda instead, that bloody mouth against her throat.

The words she was speaking didn't make sense to Rit, or he wasn't hearing the translation properly. But he could see her now, all of her in a way he never had before.

"Lovers?" he mouthed as he tried to pull free from Bolda's grip.

Bolda didn't let him go. "They've been lovers, and friends before that. You got a better idea?"

Idea? His head was shaking no, but not to Bolda's question. He had a hand free and was reaching for his Zimmer knife when En'talac did something to him in a flash of rings and he couldn't move at all.

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Blue and green marble. White closest to his nose. A flower in the mosaic that lined the pool in his bathroom. He was in warm water to half way up his chest, a slope of prickly mosaic against his back. He blinked, or he was almost sure he did. Then moved one arm, every muscle protesting.

"Take it slow," Eunni said, her voice hollow with the sound of water all around. "En'talac said it would take some time to wear off."

He moved his head. She was next to him in the water, naked, her hair wet. I should say something, he thought, but his mind seemed as slow as his arm. And his tongue slower. Say what? She splashed, going deeper away from the sloping side of the pool until only her head was showing.

"I think I'll stay here forever," she said. "The hot water was for you, we couldn't get you warm, but now, I think I need it more. First time I've been warm in ages."

Glow globes shone bright through the steam, two, no, three of them. The air was cool on his face and held the scent of lemon oil. "What?" he managed.

She'd gotten closer again without his noticing. Cupping water in her hands, she smoothed it over his chest. Swirling steam followed her movement. "Everybody else is busy. I said I'd look after you. Well, Slicanin offered, but..." Reflections from the surface of the water sparkled on her skin. Lines deepened in the soft skin of her face as she smiled. She is beautiful, he thought. "This, I know how to do," she added and moved closer as though to warm him.

The door to the bedroom was open, the shutters drawn back. Dawn. From close by came the sound of hoof beats on cobblestones and further away, singing. A drinking song.

Where was Tennin, Rit wondered, trying to feel more alarmed than he could manage. He couldn't have escaped, he was too weak. But when he tried for the

Net to find out where he had been taken, all he got was a crackle. The bath was shielded for privacy. I could break that he thought, but didn't. Not for the warmth like Eunni, but he also would like to stay here a while longer. Away from places that had large blue lizards...

He squeezed the image of that creature and Ulanda out of his mind. Then another, but more impression than image. His hand had never reached his knife. "Where's Tennin?"

Eunni shrugged. "Nisstin said that they moved him out. He couldn't have stayed anyway, for his sake as much as anyone else's. When he's better we can figure out what to do about Willi and Tam. I think he'll agree to Susi keeping them. I can't see him wanting to raise two children." She shook her head. "They're safe now, that's all we can do. One thing at a time."

"Where is he?"

Don't you remember? Nisstin said..."

Nisstin's mark was on the shielding around the bathroom. What had the Xintan Warrior made out of Ulanda and Niv? Probably relieved, a part of his mind answered slowly as though just awakening. Probably he had been very careful of her in bed, it added, quite awake now.

Eunni was shaking his shoulder, the pain in his back waking faster than his mind. "Ouch, damn..."

"Sorry. I thought you'd gone to sleep again, I promised I wouldn't let you drown. Can you move yet?"

He tried and managed to straighten up by pushing against the mosaic, doing worse damage than Eunni's gentle shaking had. Bending his legs, he rested his arms on his knees and tried to get his breath back. The skin on the backs of his hands was almost as pale as his legs. And his legs didn't fold up as far as they used to; he had gained weight. Just three and a half months, he thought as he rubbed at the small tattoo on his wrist with one finger.

"I don't know who it was that I intended to kill."

She smoothed water over him, avoiding the bruises. "Now, when would that have been?"

He shrugged and she looked up. A knowing smile touched her lips. "Eunni, I really am sorry to have dragged you into this."

"I think I understand better now why you did." More water splashed over him and a warm hand lingered on his shoulder. "Nisstin explained a few things." She chuckled, her mouth against the skin of his chest, just above the mat of hair. "I know the Xintan Lady told me, but it didn't sink in. I might need it said a few dozen more times by different people to get it all straight. Nisstin has an interesting idea of what's important and what he couldn't bring himself to say, the medic did."

"En'talac."

"That's the one. She's not from around here either is she?"

"No, she isn't."

"Didn't think so." Eunni stood up, holding onto him for balance, dripping water as she yawned. "Whatever it was she gave me is wearing off. I can hardly keep my eyes open."

After stepping out, she took his bathrobe off the ledge and draped it over her shoulders, the white terry blending with the steam and the gray walls. "You are beautiful," he said softly.

She had opened the door to his study, just a crack that sent the steam swirling, then took a towel from the ledge and wrapped it around her wet hair. "What did you say?" she asked, frowning at him as she turned around.

The door pushed open all the way. Bolda. "Seems to me I promised you a bed," he said to Eunni. "Found one if you don't mind sharing a room."

"What's going on?" Rit asked.

"Sharing is fine," she answered. "As long as it's warm."

"Well, that depends on who you're sharing it with, doesn't..." The last words were lost as the door shut behind them.

He thought about trying for the Net again, to see where everybody was, what they were doing, but the white steam was as much in his mind as in the room. Then go to bed, he thought, but he didn't know if he could get out of the pool. He could drown breathing this air, he thought as he let his eyes close. Then the door closed...

It already was, he thought, and looked. It was.

"You much be poached by now," Alicia said as she waved a hand through the air. "The heating coil is set way too high." Putting a rectangular basket on the edge, she sat down beside it and began feeling along the inside of the pool. A moment later, she had the coil out of its grill. "I don't think we'll need this."

Leaning back on the mosaic, he half closed his eyes. Through the steam, a fish shape glinted at him from the basket, shiny to the mat reflection from the rest of the woven surface. Bolda's work - despite the cloudiness in his mind, he knew it like he knew apples and horses. With the tip of a finger, he touched the fish, feeling what his eyes had told him. A fish. No scales, no slime, no purple rods. Just a basket.

Alicia took his hand in both of hers. He pulled away. "You should be sleeping," he said, looking at her for the first time. Her face had a scrubbed look that accentuated the dark circles under her hazel eyes.

"I will be soon enough." The robe ties fell to small white fingers, and then the robe to the floor as she stood.

"I don't think this is the time or place."

She was in the bath, leaning against his bent legs, he didn't remember her stepping over the lip of the pool. "Time or place for what?" She didn't look at him

as she opened the basket. Nestled into a rough blue towel was a round bar of white soap. Small jars tucked along one side. Almond scent was added to the lemon.

He reached for anger a long way through whatever En'talac had done to him. "I won't be handled," he said coldly. Then thought tiredly: wrong person. Alicia wouldn't know what he was talking about.

Knowing or not, she ignored his anger. There was a flicker of light as she shook the blue towel out and another when it touched the water. "This will help to get rid of the residue of the field En'talac set up." She rubbed the bar of soap it into the cloth until almond scented bubbles hid the blue color. "A stimulant."

She was slippery against him, her skin like satin. The last of the haze sparkled from his mind as she began scrubbing his chest. "Alicia, please..."

"Would you just shut up."

He took the towel from her. "I understand you like someone to do your back."

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Garm bowed as she accepted the small bowl of tea from him. He smelled of horses and soap. Balancing the white porcelain in the cup of one hand, Ulanda ran a fingertip through the beads of moisture on the thin edge, and then nodded in return before taking her first sip. From the kettle on the brazier, he freshened the pot with more water. In his handling of the dipper was a formal ceremony of small movements. *Silk on the Shuttle*. The tea ceremony she had performed in his study in Palace. He had taken the primary role.

After turning the newly full pot, he bowed again. Polite words from her were supposed to fill the silence after the sound of the clay bottom grating on the lacquer tray. She knew the words, or the general form they should take, and had to bite her lip to keep from falling back into her training. The white warming towel received his attention next as he folded an elaborate loose knot around the red pot, leaving only the tiny spout erupting steam at one side.

"Did you both sleep well?" he asked when it was obvious she wasn't going to participate. A break in the form, but said in High-formal and more with hands than mouth, as though he was afraid to disturb Niv.

"He's not just asleep," she said in plain-tongue. It scarcely seemed possible that she had slept at all, or woken to this. "You don't have to whisper." Niv was curled in back of her on the pallet, only his head out from the covers. His crest showed deep blue against the cream of the bedding.

Mild green eyes looked at her until she dropped hers. "I thought you might have kept going," she added.

"No place to go." He pulled his long legs around to sit more comfortably. He had changed from pants and tunic into a plain narrow cut robe, a dark gray-green wool, and thick for warmth. Short leather boots, not riding boots. Staying for now, she decided, watching him arrange the fabric so his thinner cotton underrobe was better covered. Her room held the cold.

She wondered when he had changed his mind. Riding off hadn't been a sudden impulse, he had changed from his Blessing robe into riding gear and ordered Heni saddled, and water and travel food put into the packs. Two escort riders had stayed with him, keeping back only a short way, and maintaining a tight Net link. He was never outside their security. Nisstin alerted her the moment he turned Heni back towards the Holding, waking her up. Then woke her again when Garm started towards her Chambers.

At the edge of her vision, Net flags sparkled, the signatures prominent. Nisstin and several from Viy'iana. She left them and took another sip of tea. People were starting to wake up. Another sip and she frowned. Not lemon tea, not even plain black tea but unfermented leaves of some kind. Not from her tea chest, he must have brought it with him from his own supply or from the kitchen. It wasn't very good.

"I need to talk with you about last night," she said. "About what it meant."

With a scrape of wood on rough stone, Garm pulled the tea tray he had arranged closer to him, then hesitated with the pot stopped over his larger tea bowl. She signed permission for him to join her, annoyed that he had insisted on adding even that much of the ritual.

She felt his familiar enjoyment of the pale liquid. His own stock then. "We seem to be paused here again," he said, still quietly but speaking as plainly as she had. "But at least you'll have Niv, if you can keep him alive."

"I can."

She felt him enjoy her anger much as he had the tea. "I wouldn't be at all surprised." His hands were graceful in the signing that would normally accompany a more formal phrasing. "Niv's needs are really quite simple."

"And what would you know about what he needs?"

And immediately wished she hadn't given him the invitation. But he only smiled, his eyes gentle to hers, a mild green. His hands were as gentle as his eyes as he took the tea bowl she hadn't noticed had tipped, then placed the warming cloth over her lap in place of the much smaller napkin. This time, his fingers lingered on hers, his amber skin glowing against the intricate weaving of the black cords in the braiding. He had lost much of the softness in his hands from the fresh air and the riding. Would there be a difference in how he made love, she wondered.

Her braid ends sparkled faintly as he drew them out with his fingers. Another thing he did to her: his touch made her feel both more and less than herself. It always had, her body finding him so familiar from the start, the first touch, the first time they had made love.

The opal and black of his oath band had mingled with the black of her braid ends. "I'm surprised you still wear it," Ulanda said and pulled away from him with words where she couldn't seem to manage a simple movement of her hands.

He let her go and reached for the bowl, but he watched the pattern residue more than what his hands were doing in pouring the tea. "And who are you to question that I wear the sign of my oath to my Lady?" He put the filled bowl in her hands and held them until sure she had it steady. Sparks worked between his fingers and mixed with his oath band.

She had meant the braiding with her House colors, not the older tattoos. How could she be angry when she knew what he was and how little he had control over it? The evidence of her emotions sparkled around them, and rather than answer, she watched the mix of colors bloom and fade against the stone.

Long ago, it had pleased someone to make a floor with the impression of ferns and winged insects in the stone. It had pleased her to choose this room because of it. The same insects had been at the spring at the world-altar and she felt the same thing here, in the gray stone, as she had there: the circling hunt, for prey and for others of their kind. Territorial. One had looked at her for a long moment but without curiosity. A narrow body, shimmering blue, and four transparent wings. Then saw her as not prey, not kind, and she hadn't existed anymore. But it still had, a simple existence, almost mindless, but huge. She had seen the lavender reeds of Camerat there, and further back, Lillisim. A silent world except for the pitting trill of the insects and what noises the wind and rain made. Very far back, before the Simic.

Little more would turn the memory into a pattern pull; she seemed to have learned that trick rather well. "I wish you *had* kept going," she said to Garm even as she pulled in hard. "I wish you had kept going even if it was to nowhere. All you want is her."

"You are her, a part of her." He drew his legs around until he was kneeling and then sat back on his heels. "A part of herself that she gave to Sarkalt. You've always been his creature. For proof, you need only look to last night."

"Shut up." Ice fell with her words, but he simply watched her.

"Not a part of Cassa and not Sarkalt's pet." He shook his head as he lifted her chin. His fingers were cool against the heat of her anger. "If either thing was true, I would be dead and you would be an Altasimic Priest."

All her will was needed to turn her head away from his touch and he didn't try to stop her, or to keep his fingers on her. "My needs are as simple as Niv's. How is it that you can't seem to understand this?"

With the words, he ran his fingers along the side of Niv's head where gland slits were, then placed the same fingers to her lips. Spiced wine. Her throat closed suddenly, and then eased almost painfully, a spasm that made her gasp and draw the scent deeply into her lungs. "Part of what Niv can offer you that I can't. Is it the drugs En'talac gave him that arouses him?"

"Get out. Or is that you're asking to die now?"

"Ulanda, he was cobalt with Sarkalt's blood on his chin, a blue ember to Sarkalt's vanished green fire. Was your need more important than his? You wanted him because Sarkalt had him. Well, you have him now."

At her silence, he stood. "As I said, my needs are very simple."

Her white porcelain bowl sounded like a bell against the stone. The bowl didn't break. It should have broken, she thought wildly as she covered her ears with both arms at the sound. Garm was still there when she opened her eyes.

"You don't need me here. En'talac can head your House - if you can trust her even with the oath she took last night, Or better, stop the pretense of going along with the Xintan plans and set Rit to it. Nothing less will satisfy you but to make his needs as simple as Cassa made mine."

Ulanda could feel the tears burning tracks on her cheeks but capturing what emotion caused them was beyond her ability. "Get out of here before I kill you."

His eyes didn't change with her words, nor did the look on his face. Gentle, but a remote gentleness. "I thought I'd get some breakfast." He turned and left.

She still tasted Niv on her lips. "Damn you," she whispered even as she let herself open to overpattern like a flower unfolding to the sun.

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"Drink it," En'talac said, putting the large tea bowl in the nest of her lap. A glass straw poked up, the length jeweled with condensation. Ulanda sniffed. The steaming liquid smelled foul.

"I don't recall asking for a medic." Ulanda gagged on the first sip. "How could it be that someone thought I might have?" She watched for a reaction to her words. Nothing. En'talac was doing busy work, picking up clothes that had been shrugged off this morning and left on the floor where they had fallen. Nisstin leaned against the wall by the door, watching her.

Ulanda took another sip. The bird had flown away, she thought, and shivered with a cross between laughter and horror. And she had almost driven Garm to follow. An image from the security link earlier: Garm at the edge of the cliff overlooking Endica harbor, the HighPost nearby. The bird was still in his hands,

but just a bird by then. With the sunrise, the crystal blue of the warding surrounding the Holding had dulled, giving way to the rise of gray smoke from the offering fires set there each morning.

Niv stirred at her back but didn't wake; whatever En'talac had done was slow to wear off. One more swallow of the mixture and she hoped the medic would be satisfied.

Apparently satisfied for now, En'talac occupied herself by opening the window shutters. With the daylight came a blowing cold, the air rain washed and frosted. Brilliant sunlight in skewed yellow squares on the walls.

"Keep drinking," En'talac said without turning as she arranged fresh coals in the brazier. In the ashes, away from the new coals, she set a single black stick on end, not flat across in the Zimmer style that was more common in the Holding.

A pungent scent, something from Lillisim, not lavender. Bolda kept a stock of them here, always a few in the box. Nisstini liked to burn one in the mornings while she still slept. She would wake up sometimes to see him kneeling there, caught between watching the smoke of the joss stick and the larger plume from the offering fires, one usually visible through the window, allowing for the wind. His long hair would be loose around his shoulders, as she liked it, a graying blond frame to the sharp leanness of his face.

"You never say anything in prayer," she had said to him once.

His gray eyes looked silver in the morning light as he stretched out beside her again. "Is there something I've left unsaid?"

They were too late for the offering fires today; the thread of bluish smoke was alone, and rose only a short way from the tip of the joss stick before being torn away by the fresh breeze. What could she say to him in return, Ulanda wondered, watching the smoke ripple. She shook her head. What could she say to any of them?

She tried lifting the tea bowl from the cradle of her lap, but only managed to spill the last of the medicine all over her braids, oily drops on the cream sheeting as well. It still stank. Letting the bowl slide as quietly as possible to the floor, she pulled the cover up, tucking her hands in the folds of the generous blanket. "All finished," she said, glancing at Nisstini, as though to dare him to say anything.

"Where's the straw?" En'talac asked as she bent to pick up the bowl.

Under the covers.

"She swallowed it," Bolda said as he walked in. "Can't keep straws around."

"Chewed it first though," Nisstini said, crossing his arms, turning the leaning into a more relaxed lounging posture. "I could hear the crunching from here."

En'talac looked at him, clicking a ring against her teeth. "You two are impossible."

Pida had followed Bolda in by moments. "How are you?" Ulanda asked. After a deep bow to her, the tass'alain knelt next to the brazier, his eyes on the stick. She didn't think he was really aware of the other people in the room.

"Lady Priest, would you say the prayers for her in the Zimmer fashion?"

"Yes," she nodded. And the Temple rituals for Sarkalt and for those who died with Arasima on the ship. For Anga, if such things meant anything when given for a loom-master. Perhaps the ritual would make his death more real to her. "You are welcome at Alisim Temple," she added, watching Pida closely, motioning En'talac back when she would have gone to him. "A sanctuary for as long as you wish, or a permanent home if you decide to take the oaths." His hands had followed his eyes to the joss stick, cupping the end to let the smoke drift between his fingers.

"You do me honor, Lady Priest." His words were toneless and his brown eyes never left watching the smoke. A different smell and she closed her eyes a moment. A familiar smell.

"Do you accept?" she asked again.

"Yes," he whispered as his hands dropped and she let En'talac go to him.

Bolda knelt across from her. "Quin'tat is asking to speak with you at your earliest convenience." He kept his voice low.

She made a motion of allowance. "I offered him the same courtesy I did the others." A look to the medic with Pida. "He can stay regardless, his options here are limited."

Niv stirred again, his eyes opening to show deep cobalt blurred by the inner eyelid before closing. A grinding sound next, but more from his throat than a meeting of teeth. Watching Niv, Nisstin was like stone. And his need, she wondered, feeling the tension in the Warrior.

Bolda held a bowl of tea to her lips. "Get the taste of the other out of your mouth." More like water than tea and little better than lukewarm, but she drank it gratefully. He rubbed at his back as he straightened, frowning at her, and shook his head in disgust. "I'll strip your overbraids off before that stuff sets in permanently."

Niv blinked more rapidly, trying to wake up. She turned slightly to see him better, his eyes to hers and almost focused. And managed to raise himself onto one elbow, his free hand on her arm as though only touching could make her real to him. Then, with a serpent twist of his body, he knelt, facing her. Bolda stepped in front of Nisstin as he started up.

"Was it only my pride to think I could keep my promise to him?" Niv searched her eyes with his. "To think Cassa might let me?" He looked at the other two and his crest peaked like a wave reaching shore. Then to Bolda: "She liked Ri-altar, do you remember?"

"I remember," Bolda said as though begrudging the memory.

"They would meet there, but after the greetings there would be no words between them. She would sit on the rocks but not quietly, there was a restlessness to her like the ocean she liked to watch." Bottomless blue eyes stared into hers. "Would you take me there again? I wish to give her an answer I didn't then."

"What did she ask?" Ulanda's words were as soft as his had been, but the softness was from a sudden distancing, not the desire she felt in him. A wet morning, Ri-altar in a gray cloud, not the snow she had created last night. A slight woman, shrunken in a too-light robe, and withdrawn, strands of wet hair in dark rivulets against her pale throat. Sitting on a ledge of granite in the rain as she picked at a fingernail. Sarkalt was close to her, and as wet, but standing. Water dripped from the white silk braids around his wrists. Then Cassa looked up suddenly as though at a noise, and in the panic of a moment, Ulanda thought she might have seen her.

"Is this wise?" En'talac said.

"Not wise at all," she said, pulling out. Had it been a trap, she wondered, repressing a shiver. Cassa's eyes had focused on her. Of the little that stayed with her from the aborted pull, that had grown into a certainty. Where had Garm been, or Bolda, or Niv? All she had seen was Cassa and Sarkalt.

Niv had bowed his head at her answer to En'talac. "There is no time in overpattern," Ulanda said to him and reached to touch his hands, feeling the tiny ridges of the scales along his fingers. "No distance either. Ask her what you want and if she wants, she'll hear."

He shook his head. "She asked me something about a Justice Case that I didn't understand. She asked in old-tongue, and I didn't know it very well then, and I couldn't reach the Net for a translation. Sarkalt was angry with her and we left soon after."

"Bolda?"

He shrugged.

"What is a Justice Case?" Nisstin asked, speaking to Bolda, not Niv.

"He means a High Justice Court Review. Like the Xintan Assembly Review Court here, it doesn't go any higher. Most things get handled locally, usually the government or what passes for it, but if there's a Temple around, the Priests will do a judgment if asked. Some cases are picked up without being submitted - it's part of what Priests do. If a case gets noticed, it needs to be. Usually very badly."

"Niv, what was the case?"

He stroked her braids, the scent of musk made her want to sneeze. "The Eki boy... I don't know, all I know is her question."

"Bolda?"

"That was one of half a hundred cases put aside for further discussion at the Assembly that day. Nothing was decided and the case was one still on Cassa's

desk when the place turned to stone. Later, everyone lots of opinions as to what was significant, but damn few facts. Only Cassa's link to the Spann made that case stand out." Bolda was timing his work on her braids to Niv's pace, slower than his usual. His words followed the same beat.

"Spann? How? Do you remember any details?"

"Some. Originally, it was a complaint to... well, a local mediator in an Eki Enclave on Pinnquill-65 Gate Station. An Arami merchant had sold a young Eki boy a lizard. It bit his finger and got stepped on for its efforts. The parents complained that the merchant shouldn't be allowed to sell dangerous animals."

"What was the ruling?"

"That the merchant couldn't own the nature of an animal as they could something less mutable in nature like a rock. The whole thing ended with a riot."

"But it ended last night."

Bolda looked up from his work. "Maybe."

"What happened between the beginning and the ending? Other than Cassa's question. How did the case involve the Spann?"

"The local Temple got involved, supposedly to smooth things over. Their judgment listed two notes of error that were added to the Record. Not procedural error, but conceptual. The first was that there was no difference in Empire Law between an animal and a rock. The second was that the term 'responsibility' implied ownership, rock, animal or person. Several years later, another note was added by two ti'Linn Priests at the same Temple."

"What are ti'Linn?" Nisstin asked.

An image appeared briefly in the Net. "The ti'Linn are bred out of the Wa'tic," Bolda said. "Same as the Spann are, but the ti'Linn throw Priests and every aspect of their government and civil law is based on direct accessing of Empire Law. A ti'Linn Consortium later used the notes as part of their presentation to the Station's Azmun Adjunct-council in a trade dispute with a Spann backed company. The Azmun Adjunct-council..." He looked to Nisstin. "The Station Administrator for Trade Relations. The Adjunct-council referred the matter to the Ranking Priest at the main Temple on the Station. The Priest Kat'it'it - also ti'Linn - asked for a Review Court decision, and eventually it was noticed by a Watcher for the Office of Forms."

"Your Empire must have considered the moral basis of ownership before," Nisstin said. A look to her, amused, and then back to the weaver. "Of rocks, animals, large insects, or people."

Bolda grunted. Down to the underbraids on her first arm, he started on the overbraid of her other and as slowly, keeping to what Niv could handle. The underbraid was white with silver woven into the pattern of the primary cords. Hann had done them using Xintan silk from Cicinia. They felt different than

Cassa's from Palace. Leaving off winding the soiled cords, Niv started rubbing her arm, the blue of his fingers darkening against the white braid as he worked.

She bit her lower lip at the feel of Niv's fingers. "Slowly," she signed, using fingertips against his wrist. Bolda snorted and dropped soiled cords over top, like black worms. He didn't stop with the underbraids on her other arm and white cords were added to the tangled black ones.

"It was apparent to the Watcher-Priest that the concern from the ti'Linn was about the spread of the Wu'similini religion from the Spann, and Trade only second." Bolda looked to Nisstin. "To the Spann, the Emperor is the personification of overpattern, well, essentially god, but god made captive by flesh, by Temple. Worship but not necessarily obedience. Whereas the ti'Linn keep Temple hierarchy very strictly, but consider that any particular world-pattern is as important as any other, or even as important as all of them. Obedience to and respect for Temple Law and the Emperor, but not worship in the way you mean it, or in the way the Zimmer do."

"Burning the black sticks," Nisstin said, looking at her again, his gray eyes so carefully empty of expression. Niv's rubbing of her arm was being accompanied by a soft crooning sound.

Blood flooded her cheeks, her skin prickled from the heat. Nisstin had to smell the musk from Niv, she did, the richness was making her light-headed. Her belly felt on fire and Nisstin would feel that heat too.

Bolda sneezed explosively. "I must be allergic to something."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Ulanda said. Then to Niv: "What did you want to say to Cassa?"

"Arasima prayed to you." Nostrils fared full open and deep blue eyes blinked slowly. "Did you hear her?" Scented fingers smoothed her hair back from her face. "You could have heard her if you had wanted to."

A glance at Nisstin showed the same look from him as before. Ulanda stared at her wrist, at the marks on her skin the underbraiding had left even with the heavy pad. From a green vial in her braiding box, Bolda tapped out several drops of oil. Cool then cold in distinct spots until he rubbed the oil into her skin. Moments later, he had her second arm free of the underbraids, then soft knit sleeves over each to protect the skin during her bath. With oil on both arms, the scent tickled her nose, overpowering on top of Niv's musk. She wanted to run into the cold wind, to fly away. She could hardly catch her breath.

"What did you want to say to Cassa?" she asked Niv again, but this time signed privilege.

And found her fingers trapped in his hands. His nostrils opened then pinched tight with the smell of the oil. "Am I yours then?" His breath was warm on her skin, then he let her hands drop of their own weight as he signed a negative in

High-formal. "I think there is nothing more to this than what I once gave a young girl."

"It was always more than that."

"No. Only a gift when she was alone and frightened. I thought the gift returned."

Then the strength in him failed, his deep blue colour bleaching to lavender. His nails clicked as he drew the blanket up as though to hold it. "She asked what I would do if I were her. I had the taste of Sarkalt's blood in my mouth before I thought to answer. The words wouldn't take form and then you were there." His head turned away, floating strands of his crest moving in the breeze.

"She asked you again last night?"

"She turned to me, the rain on her face like tears. Sarkalt stood near, watching. Her tass'alt was where I had left him, but I saw him like he was the stone all around her, like the cloud."

Ulanda tried to stand. Wobble kneed, but Nisstín held her steady, both arms crossed around her waist. "You don't need me to take you there. You gave her your answer."

She watched the blue sky through the window while waiting for Niv to do anything other than kneel in silence. The air was softer and warmer now and with a dry grass smell. His answer had been to keep Empire, an Empire she still wasn't sure she belonged in. She had come a long way from Ri-altar but not far enough. Niv still belonged to Sarkalt. His last act had been an affirmation of his oaths.

Bolda clunked the lid of her braiding box closed. "Well, I've got things to do. Are we through here? You want your bath now?" As he talked, he gathered the litter of soiled cords together and tossed them one at a time to land in the water pot, or some of them at least, others close by.

"Niv?" she asked. He didn't move. "Niv? I put up with Garm, I can put up with you."

He blinked at her in confusion and she felt ashamed for wanting to hurt him. She wondered if what he had done was Sarkalt's will, or Cassa's or his. Who would claim the ownership of his action? He couldn't have existed in the reality he had, or still been her Niv when he had woken in still another reality. And she personally owed him more than this cruelty.

Nisstín's hands released her to go to Niv. "A long path together already," she whispered to him, her mouth against his chest, the smell of him making her faint. He had stood up to meet her. "A bit longer still, if you wish. And words or no words, all as you wish."

His hands made his answer. No words.

"I guess it's later for the bath," Bolda said as he stood. Nisstín followed him out.

Ulanda's robe fell at her feet. She barely noticed En'talac pull the braiding box over to a patch of sunshine and sit down. Silver rings flashed once, matched from across the room by the blue of a warding lock, the medic's signature on it.

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A working breakfast, except it was past lunchtime. Rit turned the sheet of paper and added his signature to the next in the pile, remembering to blot it afterwards. The last of those for the City Councils in Wilni Province, giving his authorization as king to their Charters. He squared the stack before slipping them into the folder. If the previous plans were still intact, Olloss could take them out with him when he left. Or he could. His anger at Ulanda had died sometime during the events of the night - from exhaustion or overload, or from some resolution he couldn't yet put into words - but there still wasn't any reason to stay in Endica and many reasons to leave.

His secretary hadn't shown up. Kamill was probably sleeping it off. Or he'd come and gone already, unable to get into the room. Rit hadn't checked for messages in the Net, leaving Nisstin's privacy shielding intact, he hadn't even checked the inner door for a note and there hadn't been one on the outer when he had gone to find something to eat. The taste from last night, the events in the anteroom and Sarkalt's death, was still with him. Like a different kind of hangover, he thought, queasy stomach and all, except he hadn't had anything to drink. Perhaps it was just the remains of the energy field En'talac had used on him.

"This place could use a good airing out," Bolda said, his arrival announced by the thumping of the bedroom door against the wall. Behind him, the door to Rit's private courtyard was open. Nisstin's privacy shielding was gone.

"Would you get out of here?" Alicia said, sounding as sleepy as she did cross. Very.

Bolda slid the service tray to the edge of the desk as he peered into the used bowls. Most were from yesterday. "She wants some tea," he said as he chipped at a dried ring of tea with his fingernail.

"I do not!"

Two cake fingers from the plate on the desk went onto the tray next to the cleaned bowl. "She does so." Rit's half eaten roast pork sandwich was added next. "How did you get this stuff?" Bolda tried for the kitchen and from his grumble when the call bounced back empty, it wasn't the first time.

"I don't want any tea!" Alicia yelled as she slammed the door.

"I went and got it myself," Rit said after the noise had finished echoing. The food was leftovers; he thought it might help to wake him up. Only two of the kitchen staff had been there and neither of the women could handle Net. They wouldn't have heard Bolda this time either. The smell of boiling meat stock was adding warm steam to the large room; pork stew tonight for anyone who wanted to eat, he thought, watching the expert, if tired, chopping of vegetables. He hadn't been the only scrounger; a hacked-at leg of roast pork was out on one counter, with half a loaf of bread next to it and crumbs on the floor.

Bolda unwrapped the warming cloth from the teapot, lifted the lid and peered inside. "You didn't drink much." He stuck a finger in. "A little thick, but hot enough. She really does want tea. Do you have any milk?"

"Do you have any purpose to this?"

One of the cake fingers disappeared. "Do I need one?" Bolda said with his mouth full. "I don't know why everybody is in such a grumpy mood today."

Rit leaned against the back strap of the saddle stool, tapping the table top with the end of his brush. "How is she?"

"Who?" The remains of the roast pork sandwich followed the cake, two bites to the one.

He tossed the brush onto the folder. "Bolda..."

"You could have asked her yourself if you wanted to." Bolda flicked at a crumb on his jacket. "I don't know which of you is more stubborn than the other." But then he shrugged. "She's worried, but that's normal. And, expected. She had another blowup with Garm. Tired, I suppose, also normal."

"What did she fight with Garm about?"

Bolda stared at him. "Seems to me you were there last night. Maybe you slept through it, just seemed awake and ready to slit my throat if I didn't let you go. I guess I'm wrong. Niv and her sure held my attention, but who knows - maybe I'll have ask Alicia what it takes to get you to notice certain things."

Rit laughed shortly. "Every time I think I've got a handle on what's happening, it changes again."

"Yeah, well." Bolda shook his head, sending his long ear lobes jiggling. "You did have a busy day. You'll like Niv once you get to know him. Hell, everybody likes Niv. Even I like Niv."

"It's just that, well, I wasn't sure what..."

"Look, you don't have to explain, you were just trying to protect her."

He was lying. He had been sure, absolutely sure, and he knew Bolda didn't believe him. Seeing the needle sharp teeth against Ulanda's throat, he could feel them on his own. He'd woken up dreaming of it, but only remembering that part, the dagger sharp teeth at his neck. The rest of the dream was a jumble of images and noise. Had it any relation to the image he had earlier? The stone room,

Ulanda... and the same teeth at his throat. Or his fear had added that last part, not memory.

Bolda was watching him. Checking on the progress of his damage control, Rit supposed. He should have stayed with Alicia, waited until she had woken up still curled next to him. Her eagerness in the bath had had more calculation to it than passion; she was awkward with inexperience and made more so by trying not to look it. Someone had coached her and his suspicion that it had been Eunni wouldn't go away with him telling himself he was crazy to even consider it.

He had carried her to his bed and found fresh sheets smelling of sun and wind, and strewn with late rose petals, the edges brown from the frost, but still sweet. She hadn't known about them either, and was touched with gratitude for whoever had thought to follow the Heg custom for the wedding night. And was, for a moment, a woman he would like to know. And was, too quickly, the woman he did know, and shivering with fear as he sat beside her. He couldn't blame her fear and after making her as ready as he could, had finished quickly, leaving her crying with relief. Then held her, stroking her hair until she had fallen asleep.

"Simitta didn't seem to bother you," Bolda said slowly, scratching the back of his head with one hand. "And your people are much closer to Camerat, which Niv is, by the way. Practically the same. If you guys were a language, Niv would just be a different dialect. Zimmer? Like a fart to a whistle."

Had he minded Simitta? Rit sent that thought back where it belonged. Next to those about Nisstin. He had no right to mind who she took to her bed, whether out of necessity or desire. Necessity? He thought about asking Bolda who had been responsible for orchestrating Eunni and Alicia this morning, and more, what had happened between the two. And took the safer ground, asking: "What will happen to Niv? From his killing Sarkalt."

Bolda leaned against the desk. "Might thank him. Part of his job, anyway." Eating another piece of cake, he talked through the crumbs. "All tass'altin learn how to kill, most, almost all, never have to, probably don't ever think about it again when the lesson is over. But those who are tass'alt to high level Priests learn it very well."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Things can get messy. You were out cold during the worst of it when Ulanda was recovering from the Opening. Lucky you as Jini would say. Ask En'talac if you really think you need to know the details, I sure as hell didn't want to."

"And Garm could have killed her?"

"Probably the first things he was taught were the ciop'tin ici holds."

"The what?"

Bolda shrugged. "Before my time, but later, I'd come into his room in the morning, to start the underbraiding if she had some audience or other and she

was due for a change. Or just the overbraids even, she'd trash them and I don't have to tell you how long they take to make from scratch. Or just work on some cording. I kept a small loom there, same as in her rooms. She didn't care what I did as long as I was around some place near. She collected people too, all Priests do."

The small man stopped, his eyes distant with memory then let out his breath in a puff. "Well, she'd be sleeping, hated mornings, but Garm sometimes would be awake, lying there, tracing the holds, his eyes dreaming as though his fingers were just smoothing her skin. Don't think he really knew he was doing it. He wasn't allowed to hate her, not consciously. I don't know what's left of that original part of him now. How much isn't what she's made him to be. Well, you've seen him with her."

Rit took a sip of cold tea. He didn't remembered picking the bowl up. "The bird." A sage-hopper.

"Whatever." Another piece of cake, but studied instead of eaten. "She knew."

The surface of the tea shivered at him. Images and dreams. He should be remembering something. He put the bowl down carefully. "Cassa."

Round dark eyes were back to watching him. Rit took enough of the Net leads to tell that Bolda was watching whether he was pulling Net or not. A circle of sorts but the reason beyond him. Bolda caught the return and grinned. "Yeah, Cassa knew. I've often wondered what she had been like before Initiation."

Rit let his mind open to the Net. A stack of flags waited for him and he pushed them away as though they were cake fingers being offered him. "Were you allowed to hate her?"

The cake finally disappeared and Bolda grinned. "Sure."

"Why?"

"Because it didn't matter. For one, I wasn't sharing her bed."

"Did you hate her?"

The bathroom door opened and Alicia stuck her head out and looked around, her hair dripping around her shoulders. "You said something about tea?" Rubbing at the wet curls with a towel, she walked over to the desk. Wearing one of his tunics, plain black cotton, hem almost to her ankles. The slits on each side reached half up her thighs.

Bolda let out a long whistle and she dropped her head shyly. And smiled. Rit poured a bowl of the over brewed tea and handed it to her. "No milk," he said.

She smiled at him too, her hazel eyes laughing. "I promised myself I wouldn't tease you," she said then tossed the damp towel in his lap before taking a sip of tea. The laughter on her face turned to a grimace. "I'd better get dressed..."

"You look fine to me," Bolda said.

Rit pushed the plate with the nut cake fingers over to her. "How about something to eat first before starting to work."

She shook her head. "Not if what you're offering is as bad as the tea," she said, peering at the cake with an overdone look of suspicion. She smelled like almond oil from the bath.

He wished Bolda would disappear. Whatever game it was they were playing could be played another time. Right now, Alicia was flush with success and he wanted to build on that. "I can get you something else," he said to her.

"Promises, promises." She laughed as she walked to the windows and opened one of the shutters. Blue sky and fresh air. Then she turned to him. "My promises, I mean. I won't tease you. Very much."

But her teasing didn't last near long enough, he felt her pull Net as she opened the other shutters, getting several spins tagged for her immediate attention, then going for placement on the people. The bright light outlined her slim body, the cloth of the tunic a dark gray haze around her. He let the glow globes dim to nothing. He could smell wet stone and all through that, the ocean mixed with the autumn scent of grass. Someone was talking in the distance, the words obscured by the sound of hooves on stone. He felt another barrier shatter as his world grew past this room.

"I'll get something later." She sounded distracted. Then with another look at Bolda but with a frown this time, she added, "Quin'tat can't stay there."

"Well, excuse me."

"Excused." She grinned again as she leaned back against the desk. Rit could see the frost bumps on her pale arms as she reached to one side for a cake slice. "Eunni with Kori was a good idea though. Placement has them both in the Nursery Commons. Hann is with them, Rossa and the other two children as well. I'll check with Ulanda, see what she wants done about the..." She hesitated while she waited for the Net return and the smile died. "I'll check with her later." Rit caught the signature of the return: En'talac, not Ulanda or Nisstin.

Bolda stretched, a smug look hanging on his jowls. "Some of us have been busy already. Some of us didn't sleep half the day away."

She threw the cake at him.

Bolda picked a crumb off his jacket and ate it. Then winked at Alicia. "There's a Security Meeting set for when you two get off your duffs, we won't wait for Ulanda. If she's not already sleeping, she will be. Nisstin is coordinating... oh, keep it to Command level Net."

"I'll be busy packing. Or are you forgetting..."

Bolda shook his head. "That Temple ship up there changes too much. Ulanda can't afford to have her concerns fragmented with you in Wilni. Gennady is enough of a problem for now."

"We have to discuss what happens with the Overpriest's people too," Alicia said to Bolda. "En'talac took the oaths, but last I heard the others hadn't."

"Pida's in. I'm more concerned about local trouble. We don't need people thinking that one ship down means the Holding is vulnerable. They were bringing in fresh bodies when I left Endica yesterday. The Princip means well, but he's out of his depth."

"He might do better weeding out his own troops," Alicia said. "Blueknife is more of a problem than a few old men hiding out in the dryland ruins. It's the Xintan this, the Xintan that, nobody dares say boo about the Bluestone factions." Wisps of her fine brown hair had dried and were curling at her temples, shining gold and red in the light.

"That's hardly an uninterested opinion," Bolda growled.

"Why should I be uninterested?"

The argument had the feel of being well worn. Would she be familiar with the security details? Rit didn't know one way or the other. "She's right about factions within the Xintan." Briefly, he told them about his guard yesterday.

"Told you so." She reached over and kissed him on the cheek then yawned. "I think I will get some breakfast. If Bissalta is up to form, the nursery will have better service than the main kitchen, especially with all the guests. Besides, Garm's there and from En'talac's spin, he might need some coaxing to get to the meeting."

"You're welcome to him," Bolda said.

"She doesn't try."

"She shouldn't have to." One more cake crumb found in a fold of his jacket and Bolda scowled at it. "Don't tell her I said that." His eyes narrowed. "You can tell him though."

Alicia reached for the last piece of cake. "Before or after I try coaxing him to the meeting?"

Did they always banter back and forth like this? He didn't know that either. Rit pushed the plate closer. "How long until the portal is ready? I can assume Gennady won't stay here, not after what Kori told him. Does Cassa showing up last night change things?"

Bolda shook his head. "There's no way of knowing without going out to the Mound and maybe not then. Gennady might know, I recommend waiting a few days before asking him though. If he's around, which I doubt he will be. Try Simitta instead."

Alicia wiggled until she was sitting on the desktop then crossed her legs. A moment was spent examining one narrow foot while she flexed her arch. A purple bruise was spreading into her instep. "I think the portal will open right after Viy'lana's twins are born."

Bolda nodded. "The timing would suit Cassa, it's the kind of thing she'd do. Quin'tat says that back home, they hadn't decided on whether the changes are from sequential reality shifts or if they're running parallel. Might be the same

thing if you look at it from far enough away.” He snorted. “A place I might try for.”

Alicia stared at the cake, an outside piece, icing thick on one side, the surface hard and dry. Icing broke under her fingers into flakes. “Will it be like in the snow last night? I mean, when Garm and Gennady go through the portal?”

Bolda looked thoughtful. “I don’t think Garm plans on leaving the diamond. And Gennady... he needs someone with access to overpattern to open one of the points. We think he does.”

“And if he does, I mean, would it be like the snow in how real it seemed. Sometimes I wonder...” Licking a finger, she pressed it over one of the larger bits of icing. “I used to think, you know, dream really. If I could reinvent my life what I would be. Maybe a princess.”

Rit watched her mouth move, there had almost been a smile to match the lilt in her last words - he thought she meant it to sound like a joke - but her hazel eyes were sober. He felt his awareness expand as though tied to the complexity of her feelings. Sunlight splashed across her leg, her hand lingered over the cloth and he felt the texture of the weave and how the sun heated cloth gave warmth to the cold of her hand and how her own heat was centered in the core of her body. Reinvent, she said. Both of them had been reinvented.

“The Opening was like that,” he said quietly, rubbing his hands on cloth, wanting the feel of his own skin, the same as at the Presentation. “Ulanda said it was like a chorus of voices, all a different song, then gradually blending into a harmony, then the same song, then finally, just one voice. If we’re not remade, then we’re at least a selection from other possibilities.”

“Not any that you or I are likely have control over,” Bolda said in a grumble. “Back then or this time. Not control. Even a joke can go sour. You get what you get.”

“But it’s something,” Alicia said, her tone insistent. Then the insistence darkened. “It’s hope.” Then more quickly, as though she might not say it at all if she waited, she added, “It’s more than going through the motions, or wanting to stay in bed where the dreams are better than what faces you...”

“Dreams?” Bolda interrupted with a flare of his thick eyebrows.

“Not those kind. I’m not very good at seeing some kinds of things, or maybe it’s that I see them, but I don’t trust myself that I’ve gotten it right. I keep looking and looking until I don’t know anything anymore.” She chuckled roughly then coughed again. “There’s this emptiness inside me. Like a bubble maybe, only it keeps growing no matter what I do. A couple of weeks ago, I woke up one morning early, before dawn and it seemed like the emptiness was outside of me as well, it felt like I was being squeezed down into nothing. I couldn’t breath, everything was black with sparkling lights and my heart felt like it would pound right out of my chest.”

She looked up at him. "And I knew it wasn't just this, the war and all, it had been there as long as I could remember, as though I had been born with it. I'd cover it over, hide it by planning that I would do this when I was older, or that, when I married. Games, like I said. Or I'd try to live Gannet's dreams: her children, her husband. Even the Xintan killing her..." Alicia's voice faltered and she stared hard at the cake in her hand. "It was like I was just dressing it up so I could see it better. Gannet..."

"When, a couple of weeks ago?" Bolda asked.

"Nothing to do with pattern," Alicia said, exasperation winning in her voice. "Just fear, nothing fancy like pattern. Fear that there won't ever be anything. That I'll always be waiting for something bad to happen or for someone I love to leave or to die."

Rit leaned forward to take her hand. "There'll always be me," he said, and smiled. Then looked eye level to her, adding the smile to his voice. "You can come to Wilni with me now. Or was that part of what you would like to reinvent?"

She kicked a bare foot at him. "I might." He wondered how much of this she had meant to say, or if it was a deliberate continuation of last night. He felt himself going deeper into the maze of her emotions.

"If this is getting soppy, I'm leaving," Bolda said but didn't move.

Rit wanted to stop this, to just hold her, she wanted that, expected it to follow her words as naturally as sunlight warmed dark cloth, but he couldn't stop. "Do you think I don't know that what happened between us this morning was simply you taking advantage of an opportunity?"

The second kick was probably a reflex, what he had said taking time to come together in her mind. He could feel it like he could the plume at the world-altar, almost random appearing things condensing out and being held in air to see: a shaping. It made his head hurt as though the spinning was a part of himself, he wanted to turn away but kept his eyes on hers, waiting.

And it did come together. "Why does it have to be only one thing?" she said, looking at him calmly. "You're married to me now, really, I mean. You can't have her, you know that."

A moment, then he realized she meant Ulanda, not Eunni. "Nothing else was ever an option."

Alicia slipped off the table and walked to the bedroom door before turning. "Why? Because you and Ulanda fight all the time? Do you think I'm that naive? Rit, I don't give a damn if you have a mistress, even Eunni if you want to make a laughing stock of yourself in Wilni. Have your bastards, too, just keep them out of my sight. All you have to do is remember I'm your wife. Cassa took my family, took everyone I loved, but she won't take you."

She slammed the door behind her.

He let his breath out slowly. "I keep thinking of her as a child."

Bolda snorted. "You're out of date on that one."

"Does Alicia differentiate between Cassa and Ulanda?"

Bolda pulled on one ear. "Remind me keep away from Stroms asking questions."

"Does she?"

Bolda's nod was reluctant. "She makes it up, same as the rest of us do. Ulanda's the friend she can talk to, try to copy, look after when she's sick, even mother a bit. Cassa's the god." He got up and stretched. "Unless you intend walking to Wilni, you aren't leaving today."

"And Eunni?"

"Rit, let things settle for a few days. Worry about it then. I thought you were good at waiting."

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The gate wasn't locked. Eunni had half expected it to be, although the rails were easy to climb, and the high dry-stone wall only slightly less so. Rossa and Tam were over the gate in seconds and running through the long grass, the boy lumbering but keeping up. All the shrieking was Rossa's. Eunni looked back the way she had come. Willi hadn't moved from the doorway.

She was tired of coaxing the girl. Swinging the gate open, Eunni took a single step out, one hand on the wood railing. "Kori, should we try to catch them?" she asked and looked back at her new shadow. The alien woman kept to the shade of the wall, everything about her stark white against the cool gray except for eyes that were the uneven blue of poorly dyed indigo cloth. At her name, she shrunk down, her face turned away.

"I guess not." Eunni repressed a sigh as she stepped back into the courtyard and pulled the gate shut behind her. "I'm afraid I've lost my bearings. Do you know where we are?"

The answer came from behind her, their Xintan tour guide. Hann qu'ilRostrinassa - a puffy dumpling of a girl with permanent looking baby fat over strong bones. Dark coloring for a Xintan, black eyes in a round face, the sharp sunlight highlighting a thick haze of facial hair - long coarse hairs along her jaw where they seemed to be fugitives from her tight braids - and a smudge of a mustache. She had followed Rossa in this morning, Tam and Willi coming with her. Introductions followed sporadically as a stream of women made their way as though by chance, a couple of high-born Matrons among them. Eunni hoped she had looked suitably intimidated when mostly she was just tired.

"The stables are there," Hann said, scrunching her eyes into raisins as she pointed towards a red and white striped tent. "From there to there..." More pointing. "...is the Lady's suite. This area here is still part of the Priest House - that's a Temple way of putting it - and the Nursery."

"And that's the Xintan way of putting it?"

Han shrugged and twisted her wide mouth into a smile as though sharing a joke but her surprisingly slender fingers worked hard at mutilating the longer of her beaded braids.

Pale and dark coral beads tipped the string-thin braids; when she moved her head, the hard rounds clicked together. Two beads, larger and darker than the others were at the ends of the two strands that hung longer down her back. The center panel of her black tunic had smaller beads in the same range of colors to form interconnected diamonds. Her best clothes for the tour or high enough ranking that this was what she ordinarily wore? The girl lacked the arrogance that she would have expected from high rank, as shy as Kori in her own way, but enough was turned around here that she wouldn't be surprised at anything.

"The cliffs are to the left, the ocean side, I mean, not Endica, that's on the other side of the Holding." The braid got a pull as her cheeks reddened. "About half an hour riding but they're within our security lines. The mountains are longer away."

Grasslands were golden in the sunlight, the mountains low purple mounds rising from them. "More blue lights?" she asked, as she crossed her arms and wiggled her fingers into the only warm part of her. Frozen cold, and they ached.

Hann's cheeks reddened more and she didn't answer.

Wasn't she supposed to know? Eunni could make out a blue shimmer, or four columns of almost blue, they were different than the color of the sky but she couldn't have said how. Nowhere near the cliffs, these were close to the Holding. They had looked different in the dark last night. Now, she couldn't see where they started, or ended. They hurt her eyes when she stared too long, then disappeared. Barriers, Rit had said. They probably didn't need to lock the gate.

Rossa was back, thin face red from the cold and her dark hair springing loose from their single tie and tangling into ropes. Her huge golden eyes glowed. "We can go riding later," she said eagerly and climbed onto the bottom rail of the gate. Tam had followed her, puffing, sweating into his borrowed tunic. "Do you want to come?"

"Not today," Eunni said. Not tomorrow either if she could help it. A snowball fight. She could hardly move. And tomorrow, she'd be gone. Maybe tonight if she could ever find Rit and get him to let her through the barriers. "Perhaps Tam and Willi would like to see the stables. Would you show them?" The girl paused, then her face broke into a wide grin as she nodded. Then a few more minutes to convince Willi to follow her brother. She appeared to be making her way in steps,

resisting until threatened with being alone, then following, only to stay behind again.

Eunni started back to the Holding as soon as the three children left. Kori followed close but she was missing Hann. The Xintan turned just then, her face naked, then quickly closed with a smile when she saw Eunni watching her. "Rossa will have the stables turned upside down," she said lightly. "She'll probably wheedle the grooms to give her Ladyspot, the Lady's mare, and they will, just to be rid of her."

Hann had been watching Willi and had been all along. The girl had Tennin's coloring and build, but where he looked like a drowned rat half the time, she looked anything but. Fine pale blond hair, straight and cut very short, should have taken from her looks, but instead accented her delicately molded features. Large almond shaped gray eyes, framed by startling dark lashes and eyebrows. The kind of looks that never lasted past the first few babies, Eunni thought, her sympathy with Hann. And was amused at herself, as though it was a fault of Willi's that she was beautiful. She didn't even know she was, she had been a homely gnome of a child, with an attitude to match - sullen. Just like Tennin, only in him it came out as a slow deliberate manner that both begged and expected to find something wrong.

Once inside the Holding, it seemed warmer and colder at the same time. Kori had followed as silently as before. Only hers and Hann's footsteps echoed then were lost in the occasional rug that brightened the wide hallway. The original flagstone floors, polished but uneven and cracked in places, and with a path worn along the center. The beams of the high arched ceiling were blackened, original as well, and a sour burnt smell came from the massive support pillars. The walls looked new, or rather, the filled in spaces did, smooth white plaster. Doors on either side, the same heavily carved wood that Rit's had been. The room that Kori and her had shared was near the end, a small room that obviously had been someone else's bedroom.

"Who did Rossa ask for permission?" she asked.

"Wandassa qu'il'Samm." Hann kept her eyes down. "She's the highest ranking of those of us who have taken oaths to Alisim Temple and second to Viy'lana, Panntin's San... who heads his House. She was the Senior daughter of Greywolf Clan." She hesitated but didn't look up. "There will be a guard with them when they ride out. Wandassa wishes to know if this is suitable."

"Not a problem." The hall flared out abruptly at the end, curved walls opening into a large circular room. The ceiling was shaped into a dome by wooden beams but the rest of the ceiling twisted her eyes out of focus when she stared too long. Overlapping tiles of some sort, she supposed, but the effect on her head was much the same as the blue lights.

She picked up a thick wrap from one of the chairs and put it over her shoulders before sitting gingerly, careful of her hips. Someone else's shawl, but even the short time outside had left her chilled. She motioned Kori to sit as well. A Senior daughter. This woman as well? She didn't act it, but Eunni was very surprised to have a woman of the Blood ask her anything... or have Xintan Matrons parade through her room as they had earlier. "I am surprised she asked me."

Hann didn't look up from adding coal to the small tile stove in the center of the room. "She doesn't know what you are to the Lady."

Makes two of us, Eunni thought. Arranged around the stove were several more saddle stools, a few chests in-between serving as tables in the Xintan style. On the chest beside her was a folded cloth embroidered with bright red thread and a couple of books with Xintan writing on the covers. A small drop spindle wound with fine cream wool leaned against the side of the chest, a coil of roving still attached. Carved into the base of the spindle was the Greywolf Clan crest. If the Hegemony people who worked here had made a mark, she hadn't seen it yet.

One side of the room opened to another courtyard, small panes of glass in a curved row of doors that looked as though they could be folded back. A few squares of sunlight warmed the flagstone floor, but there wouldn't be time for much heat to build before the sun moved on. There wasn't anything interesting to see out the windows, just yellow grass to the start of a high stone drywall or another side of the building.

Hann was a couple of years older than Willi, close to Alicia's age. Were they friends? If not, then the right poking might get her some answers she needed. The local Endica rumor-mill had lots to say about the girl surviving the slaughter of her family, none of it good. A colorless wisp of a thing compared to her cousin... the kindest talk said that you couldn't always tell from looks, and that cats land on their feet.

Eunni picked the spindle up, careful not to break the roving and twisted a length of the thread between her fingers until it doubled in the middle when she gave it some slack. The spun wool was almost fine enough to sew with.

"Do you know where Lord Strom is? Can you ask him when he will have time to speak with me?"

Hann hesitated as she had before but didn't look up from arranging the coals. "The Lady's people are using a level of Net that I can't access without being invited. I put a flag in for you, but he's ignored those from everybody else so far."

Maybe not friends. Separate groups, it seemed. "Perhaps Lady Alicia has more time..." Hann just looked at her and she decided on another approach, a flanking maneuver. "If Lord Strom isn't available, then someone with..."

"Will I do?"

The voice startled her, and then Kori startled her again when she slipped from the stool onto her knees, her head to the rug. "San Garm," Kori whispered, the first unprompted words Eunni had heard from her.

Hann straightened from her crouch in front of the stove. "San Garm," she said somewhat stiffly.

His skin was the color of the sunlight on the stone floor and his loosely tied hair like sun glinting off water. Eunni bit her lip to hide a too-easy smile. "I'm afraid I don't know the customs." She smoothed her wrinkled dress and wished the robe from last night had been dry, or that she had worn it even still wet.

"No need," he said, smiling, looking only at her. The other two women might not have existed. Her dress might not have existed. "Have you eaten?"

Sweet cakes, brought by one of the Matrons, hadn't done more than make her realize how hungry she was. "Yes, I have, thank you." He was looking at her the same as he had that bird last night. "I couldn't eat another bite."

She put the spindle back on the chest and let her breath out slowly, glad she was sitting. "Hann was showing me around, but I really should go get Willi and Tam." A quick glance showed the reddened face of the girl, and the guarded look of her eyes. A double hit, all within a few minutes. Kori hadn't moved from the floor either.

So? What am I supposed to do about it, she asked herself. And still felt angry. At Garm, at herself. At Hann for letting her feelings show.

"I'd like to get them settled, and they'll be hungry even if I'm not. Maybe the kitchen could be next on the tour after all." Babbling like an idiot, Eunni thought and took a deep breath to steady herself. "I think I'll go find them right now." She tried to coax Kori up by pulling on one arm, but it was like trying to lift a heavy stone. Pain shot through the joints of her hand.

"You're all moving too fast for me," she said a bit more slowly, massaging her fingers, then nudged Kori with her toe, and whispered, "Get up." And suddenly remembered she wanted to go home. "Home," she startled that she could have forgotten. "I mean..."

Hann was staring at her like she was crazy but the man laughed. "You're endangering my reputation. Bissalta has only recently declared me harmless. Perhaps she only meant around newborns. What do you think?"

Bissalta hadn't been standing in the snow last night. "Probably," she said, seeing again in her mind the wet circle of colored marble, and how it had glowed in the strange white light of the room after the green darkness. And in the center, what looked like a beautiful boy but wasn't, but with his throat ripped out regardless, and this man standing there holding a bird in his hands. And Rit struggling to get to Ulanda, not to Alicia. Much too fast for her. She had been relieved to have Alicia scream, to have something happen she could understand.

The emerald eyes blinked a little bit softer. "At any rate, the baby is sleeping now and I've exhausted Bissalta's patience with me by sitting there overlong just to watch him breath. And Ona, the Yellowstream Matron, you've met her, she isn't as sure I'm harmless, having greater experience of such matters than Bissalta perhaps, and even more impatient with me as a consequence." A look at Kori and he smiled, a deepening of lines around his mouth to show age that Eunni hadn't noticed until that moment. He bent forward and his touch had Kori stumbling up, stiff appearing, off balance. "A recent failing of mine, exhausting other people's patience."

Kori's mouth was open, she was panting lightly, her narrow tongue bright purple. "May I be of service to you, San Garm?" She glanced towards Eunni and ducked her head. Was she worried that I might object to loosing my shadow, Eunni wondered.

Footsteps on the stone and Kori knelt again like a leaf falling. "So this is where everybody is," Alicia said. "Kori, don't do that, please get up." She sighed. "Garm, I'm supposed to coax you to a meeting." She went distant a moment, then said, "Hann? Bolda says you too, I don't know about anyone else."

The dark girl nodded as she twisted the longest of her braids, picking at the blood red bead on the end. "There's nothing from Viy'lana, I can't say what she has the others doing."

"That's their..." Another distant look. A sound, a sputtering rumble from all around. The windows should be rattling, Eunni thought as the sound grew. And the tea bowl on the chest, the leather slings at the back of the stools, that much sound should be moving things. Sound and then as suddenly: light. A shuddering of blue color over the windows as though taking the place of the rattle, and a net of blue flickering from the tiles overhead, like being in a cave with the ocean lapping at the mouth.

"What is it?" she shouted over the noise as she got up, looking around her. Gunfire, she thought, but too loud, and too muffled for how loud she was hearing it. Hann looked startled.

Alicia came back with a snap of her eyes as the noise stopped. "Net feed. I pulled it too hard. There's some trouble at the warding line. Extra shielding has come on." She pulled her arms close to hug herself and shivered, the young woman a child again in those few seconds. "So fast," she whispered, her eyes following the blue flickering at the window.

"What about Tam and Willi? They're out riding with Rossa." Round hazel eyes stared at her without understanding. "Damn it," Eunni spat. "What the hell's going on...?"

"They're fine," Garm said. "Frightened - they can hear the gunfire - but unhurt. They're still in the stable area. A Warrior is with them."

Just enough time for the start of an unthinking relief then more shots. Close enough to hear the pinging of bullets bouncing off stone. With the sharp sounds, a drawn out sizzle or a searing sound, like fat on a white-hot stove. Again and again. A long gurgling scream, someone was hit, then quiet, the scream cut off. That had to have been real. Eunni backed away as blue sparked through the hall, joining the shimmer from the ceiling tiles.

At the first close gun shot, Hann had run towards the hall, her heavy frame moving like a dancers, in one hand a knife that had appeared from nowhere. A white blade, Eunni saw, confused by that as well and by the blue light reflecting with every movement of the girl's hand, like the blade was alive. Hann pulled up sharply, stopped by the curtain of light, bouncing on her toes, a look of frustration on her round face.

There had been a hum that Eunni hadn't heard until it was gone. Kori hissed, white lips drawn back, at the same instant as the flickering blue light died. Hann was gone at a fast run, Kori following.

Cold stone was behind her, she'd moved back all the way to the wall without realizing it. Alicia pushed at Garm with her body to get him to move and Eunni took over, pulling him to land up hard against the rough stone, Alicia between them, her eyes were wild with terror. Eunni crouched over her as the young woman slid down to make herself small. The thin shoulders under her hands were shaking, her whole body was.

"Do something," Eunni whispered up to Garm, furious at his calm and unconcern. The three of them against stone. Quiet enough after her words to hear her own heart beat, then more rifle shots mixed with the searing noise, several directions at once, and shouts.

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The sea had broken through the aging stone seawall, a single break that had probably started as a tumble of rocks and grown year by year. Poss a'ltic remembered the storm, not from this vantage point near South Bay, but from her parent's farm and with much of the force of the wind spent against the land in-between. It was years later now and the drag of water from the retreating waves had created a large pool in the landside of the seawall, a wooden plank bridge spanned the neck of the break to continue the walkway. An hours walk from start to finish, a banding in stone of the headland from the near end of the crescent beach down from Ri-altar, to the docks of South Bay where the fishing boats were moored.

The ocean sucked noisily against the crumbling rock wall on the exposed side, but here it was relatively quiet, the pool as calm as a lake. At the water's edge, she sat on long meadow grass, yellowed along the narrow beach, an unhappy mix of plants and sand and salt, but her toes were pushed into the warm sand. Summer, she thought, it must be early summer, the balance of the grass in the field was tender and still green, not the mix of autumn with the seeding heads nodding through the new growth from the rains. And the flowers were spring flowers. Did I change them just then, she wondered briefly, and in as short a period of time, decided she didn't care.

Perhaps it was too quiet and she caught herself timing her breathing to the further ocean waves. One to three seemed best, and she forced the breaths down past where they felt easy. Moist salt air felt like it should help her lungs, except it wasn't of course. Moist or salt.

Gennady stopped next to her, the toe of one white boot licked by the water, the sand drawn out from around and pulled away. He didn't move or change his balance. "An improvement."

She looked out from his shadow to behind her: a door open where there should have only been a slope of grass and wildflowers. Blue tile roofs of several buildings showed just above the corridor into the ship.

She left the white rectangle against the dark green grass; it wasn't worth the effort to mask it. "I'm glad it pleases you, Lord Gennady." Her voice was husky from the scarring inside her throat. And from not being used. She wiggled her right foot clear of the sand. The grayish-white skin sank under the mass of purple ridges and the little toe was gone, another scar but a pinker one. Voice and foot - neither one had been worth the effort of masking. Gennady still hadn't moved from standing in the water. Did he see the sand or the water? How real was this to him? An improvement, he had said. Maybe his boot was waterproof.

A pattern pull, but still having to be prompted by her own memories. The last she had seen the docks at South Bay, dune grass had seeded along the salt-line of the break and sea-foam during the last summer, adding white blooms to the clumps of coarse grass. There were people in the memories but not in the pulls, she created little more than the bones of this place clothed in plants. Or if she tried very hard, the occasional insect or fish or crab.

"I can see changes here," she said softly, watching the sand roll away to start a tiny cave under the white sole of his boot. "Not the same all the time like the room."

No answer but he put a basket on the grass next to her and stepped back. Water filled the hollow of his footprint. He bent over and started unpacking food and she forgot to watch the water. Days since someone had been here with food. Or it seemed like days. When she was first trying this, some of the pulls had gathered time from her mind then spat it back. Dropping out, she would sit for

what seemed forever, shivering in the room where she was kept. And still the center of the room, with walls she had never touched for the wards that caged her there.

A golden round of bread, a dark blue ceramic bowl containing three thick slices of creamy white cheese with dark seeds in it, a small bunch of carrots, left whole and with the smell of earth on them still. Two bottles of water with seal straws. A cloth wrapped package of papers for cleaning herself.

She kept the sight of the food as a promise but waited for it to be offered. "Where are we?" she asked as she did each time. That question at least was allowed, probably because it had been constant enough not to be heard any more. They were somewhere, the food had changed.

The Zimmer pushed the carrots across a hands width towards her and she took that as permission. Using both hands, she tried to lift one of the roots, the burst of leaves like a veil of emerald lace over her soiled mittens. She dropped it. Sand with the earth and the green top floating in the water. Was either thing real?

"You're on the Ladybug," Gennady answered, picking the carrot up, shaking sand and salt water into the bowl of cheese. "Still here."

Two words added to his usual answer. His voice was different, she thought. A distant edge to it, something was wrong, or more wrong. She took some courage like she wanted to take the carrot and said: "The last bread you brought, or Baltin rather, had whole grains in it." Chewy and fresh and had stayed fresh longer than most. "Similar to skvill grain, but not the same." She tried for the carrot again, scooping it onto her lap with the edge of her hand.

A very quick glance showed that his eyes were the palest blue, all the green light all around them, grass and sky and sea, didn't touch that blue. He ignored her words and question.

The carrot in her mouth at last. She hadn't let herself think of how hungry she was. Except it should have been the cheese first, she thought as she chewed. In case he gets angry and takes the food away. She shouldn't provoke him like that. Her mouth had filled with saliva at the taste but suddenly the carrot tasted as dry as straw.

"You will try something different than Ri. He took the carrot. Her teeth bit on air. She couldn't swallow what she had already chewed.

"You will try Zimmer." Blue eyes to her again, his other hand turned her face so she had no choice of where to look. "When you can manage it, then you will have certain rewards."

"Lord?" she whispered against the pressure of his fingers and a mouthful of dry carrot and tried not to look at all.

"Someone to look after you, someone trained. A room with a proper bath. Do you want these things?"

Did she want these things? What choice but to want whatever it was that he offered. Poss a'Itic tried to moisten her lips, feeling the shreds of the carrot roll against her tongue. "Can I eat before I make the decision?" And tried to smile as though joking.

And knew instantly her words had been a mistake. The bowl of cheese slammed against plain air half way across the salt pool in a rain of pottery, most of the pieces as tiny as those of carrot she choked on. Splashes made rings like Ri marks, a crazy quilt of green rings. Each slice of white cheese paused on the waters skin before slipping under, the dark seeds lingering in an afterimage. I must have managed one fish, she thought as she turned her eyes to the side away from the Zimmer. A cheese eating fish. The gulp of air and the flip of the fish's body on the surface was a familiar sound for her memory to provide and were plainly audible over the noise of the waves. She didn't need to see it.

One more breath of salt air and she released the threads that held this place whole. A memory, she told herself, even knowing it was more than just that. Not much more. The food was more. A promise of clean clothes and water enough to wash in was more. Someone with her, someone to touch, warmth... that was more.

When she opened her eyes, Gennady was gone. And the food and water. No door, only the haze coming in from the plain white walls of the room. The layers of warding, stronger again. She couldn't do any pattern pulls while it was set like that but tried anyway. Something simple. Could she create food? One of the first successful pattern pulls had been a single evergreen tree, a small tree no higher than to her waist and amber colored so it looked carved out of its own wood. She had watched it fade moments later, joining the fog, but the cold air remained scented with the resin much longer and she wished she had touched her face to it to get the scent on her skin.

She took as deep a breath as she could. Cold air and dry, not scented with anything usually but herself and fortunately she couldn't smell that anymore. Now - herself and cheese, the last one making her mouth water. Bits of pottery were all over the white floor at one end, dark blue from the glaze and red from the clay body, the soft color hardened to that of blood by the cold light and contrast. Two slices of cheese seasoned with clay. A hungry fish, Poss a'Itic thought, feeling crazy, the residue of the pattern pull dancing around her. It had to be there somewhere. She ate the first two slices while still looking for the last, cutting one knee on a larger fragment of bowl before giving up the search.

A very long time. She remembered searching again and again, sucking on sharp pieces of clay that might have tasted of cheese but probably only her own blood.

A straw was to her lips. "Drink it slowly," he said. Gennady. Poss a'Itic kept her eyes closed. Water.

The warding changed and she tried to scream through a swallow.

"Another try," he said and she felt the straw against her lips again. "Or should we wait longer?"

Her lips searched the end of the straw as though it were a nipple. He let her swallow first.

Then the warding changed and she tried to scream.

Time slipped around her, as crazy as missing cheese slices. Gennady came and went, or it might have been one coming and going, only he was there again, so it must be another coming. Or he hadn't left.

Water. Sweet and sour water. "Drink it," he said, pinching her mouth open. Swallow or drown was the choice.

... warding changed...

Water. Water with the taste of rose petals in it. And ashes, black ashes on the red bloom. She started to slip away with the slipping time, crazy time like cheese, but hands were on her skin, confusing her...

Webbing held her down, a fine mesh over her eyes. A fish, she wondered? "Am I a fish?" she asked the man sitting on the floor, his back against the bed.

He had a round white face like a balloon or it might be a mask. Too startled looking to be a mask, she decided, but still tried to see the start of one from under the thick fall of hair over his forehead. His eyes blinked black and silver at her. "Do you want to be one?"

"No."

He nodded, looking relieved, as though she had decided against something possible. Her head felt light, as though she were the balloon, not him, the webbing holding her down where she would have drifted.

"Not a fish?" she said, not really intending the question it became.

"No," he said, his face smooth again. The word sounded final, and as sharp as a prick in a balloon. "My name is Clanny. I believe I'm part of a payment promised to you."

Someone to touch, she remembered. Someone warm. Suddenly embarrassed, Poss a'ltic would have turned her head away if she could have moved. Her lips were moist, she realized, and her throat clear as though she had been drinking. A promise made flesh, a person.

Gray speckled eyes glanced down a moment as though he was shy about this as well. "I've seen you before, at that meeting you attended, at Palace, in the Empress' Audience room. I was in the hall outside." A gentle smile moved his lips as he held a bowl to hers. Water flavored with honey. "You had a bowl of spawning fish tea served to you. Do you remember that?"

"Three tea leaves in a paste bowl."

"Three fish. One of Anga's jokes. I saw you again, but you wouldn't remember the second time. When they brought you into the ship, you were badly burned, unconscious. I don't think anything I did helped you but probably didn't do any more harm than had already been done. The attack on the Zimmer ship wasn't aimed at you, you just got in the way."

The bowl to her lips again and she had the taste of his fingers this time. A taste of smoke deliberately given. Had he agreed to be a promise? "Who are you?"

"Overpriest Mullaki's tass'alt. She's dead. Very shortly after you were burned. A long time ago now. You had an aide with you at the meeting, a young woman..."

"She'd dead too."

"I'm sorry."

The words were for form, she thought at first, but the man's eyes seemed to hold more sympathy towards her than she had showed him on hearing of his Priest's death. "The webbing that's holding me," she asked to change the subject, "could it come off?"

He hesitated, working his fingers into the sponge. "The webbing has warding lines set into the fabric. I was told I could change the settings or even remove the entire thing if I thought it safe to do so. How under control are you? I don't know you at all, I'm not sure what you're apt to do if I accidentally hurt you."

Fingers as white and smooth as his face touched her lips again. His skin was damp and cool. He frowned then drew the fingers along her cheeks. Checking points, she thought, but couldn't feel the touch anymore. He moved his body as though he reached to touch more than her face and she couldn't feel that either.

"I've met Selects and spoken with their tass'alt," he said quietly. "There are differences from regular Priests, in the handling that is, I'm not sure..."

"Is that what I am?"

"Oh yes. Simic predominantly, or Simic crowning Ri, that can happen occasionally, I've seen it before, the breeding is so close. The higher-level Ri-Priests, if they de-stabilize, they sometimes pick up Simic, revert to the older form. But the overpattern mark on your skin is unmistakable, a seeding of black on the dark green. More lines of green than rings..." He smiled again. "...like a game of rings but with many of the pieces lost and replaced by sticks. Like the Simic game, not Ri."

Poss a'ttic looked past him to what she could see of the walls and his eyes followed. White walls, as before, but a different room. Smaller and the doors showed. Two of them. A faint gray fog touched the walls, hard to bring into focus but softening the gloss. Control? For this man in here with her and sounding as though he had learned to wait on orders as she had. A long time since Mullaki had died, he had said.

"I don't know what I can do," she said, reluctant to give a more definite answer. What she would be allowed to do was what she would have said, but didn't want to provoke the Zimmer Lord. He would be listening.

Clanny nodded. "We can take this slowly. We have lots of time." There was a tickle on her cheeks, then a sensation of sparks against her skin. She blinked and felt herself blink.

Very slowly, she thought, blinking at him just because she could. A very slow, very cautious game they could both play. And perhaps survive what the Zimmer wanted from her. His price, she remembered him saying. For the death of two of his crew.

Simitta tossed him the towel. Still wet and more pleasing with the scent of his los mixed with the oils. He had woken to the need for his paltin and his breeding spurs itched. He shouldn't have left Kori there. He could chew air until it bled even thinking that he had.

Simitta offered the Net pull that he had been ignoring. "Will you interfere?"

"Clanny doesn't know anything worth telling her." Gennady rubbed his chest with the rough cloth. The small scar ached to the touch as it always did. "Not with Sarkalt dead and his ship destroyed. The scout craft alone is no problem and we'll be gone before any others arrive. The Vannsit Captain was most cooperative with her offering of information."

Sim didn't answer, dressing still, being over careful in how he fit each boot over the pant leg. Don't go old on me, Gennady thought. Not now, especially not now. His uncle looked as though all the waste of flesh had gone, only the essence remaining.

His own boots on and he looked up to see Simitta's green tinted eyes on him, expression hidden away in the formal setting of his features. Don't bother going polite on me any more than old, Gennady thought, past being mildly annoyed. At waking up unfulfilled. At the effect of time and most definitely at his los.

Gennady selected a short robe instead of his ship's tunic. Jamini cloth, a shot silk that whispered a rose color into the white. Sim hadn't moved yet, or finished dressing, the plates of cartilage under the translucent skin of his chest catching the light in the same way as the silk weave did. "You might as well say it."

"You're past hearing."

"Am I?"

"Gennady..."

"Am I?"

"Past listening then. If you hear at all, it's only what you want to hear and only to make it mean what you what it to."

"Is that an improvement over being past hearing?"

"Gennady, we can start over here. Temple will have to support any claim we want over the freeborn. We exist here now; our form of Zimmer is part of the Unity. They can't deny the Empire Law that says we have blood rights. It's how the freeborn and Clan were made."

Not deny, Gennady thought, watching his los as he spoke. Still not showing expression to match the meanings of the words he spoke. They wouldn't have to deny it, only to delay it the length of their lives and there would be no hope of Clan a'Genn in this reality. No Clan Zimmer at all.

"Have you taken a liking to freeborn all of a sudden? Should I beg for Kori to be given back?" The green didn't change. No black showing where there should have been some challenge. "Perhaps I should have known when you agreed to Arasima without waiting for my saying yes or no. I would have allowed you the gin'tala if I had known." He let it go at that. He wanted some kind of response to see his los alive, not the fight that would come at a deliberate taunting of Simitta's out-Clan breeding.

"Gennady, let Poss a'Itlic go, or kill her, one or the other. The warding barely held when she flared into overpattern. You weren't here and a Net pull isn't the same as seeing it. She's not freeborn to respond to who you are; she's not even tamed to the hand much less broken. Take that warding away and she'll kill you like swatting a fly."

"Most of the power would have been from Cassa coming through. Not Poss a'Itlic." A gift to him from Cassa, he thought, intended or not. Poss a'Itlic would have died soon - days, Baltin had said. And as Sim said, not broken. She would have died with polite words on her lips, but watching, fighting him, always a step past what he would give her freely.

"You can claim tacit consent," Simitta said. "That the Overpriest's people knew you had her, that Alisim Temple knew, and that neither challenged you on your actions. That the circumstances were exceptional."

Which was he to claim: consent or chance? "If I was to let Poss a'Itlic go, I'd be answering to a Temple Justice Court, not some trade tribunal."

"Olumka says..."

"Olumka is the one who won't hear." As though anyone could have gotten a word in with the noise the Spann had been making, Gennady thought, breathing with his mouth open to let the air pass over his points. A stack of Net flags, the burden of translation from the Spann threatening to topple them. He sighed, wanting to bite something. His teeth itched. "I would never have taken Olumka as being overly religious, not where it wasn't of benefit."

"Can you tell what it thinks beneficial?" A wry tone had been added to his voice. Not as polite. An improvement.

Gennady smiled. "If Empire can hold captive the image of the Wu'loss in their Emperor, why not me? I've had practice at it after all."

His points were buzzing with the air of his smile. Simitta had raised challenge at his laughter then, where he didn't now with more provocation. "I'll give her back to the Wu'loss cass when we're done. Better than a joss stick? What do you think, Sim? What pattern would she make on the stones as she burns?"

His los's eyes left his but only to look the altar. A freshening of the stones last night, a single stick fully burned was over them, black to the melody of reds. Cassa had been so close during that burning, he could feel her, same as he did in the jump-web. Or had it only been Poss a'ltic, burning with the touch of overpattern? Or was there any difference? She had stabilized and the bird had flown away.

"She might welcome that flight," he said, amused. Poss a'ltic or Cassa.

"I think Cassa plays with us," Sim replied, looking back at him, as calmly as he first had. "Like a falintin'il does what it would eat. The food moves, the falintin'il chases. A stone moves, and the falintin'il chases until it doesn't move anymore. Cassa sees us now but if we stop moving, she won't. I don't think there is enough of her left to see us as what we are, or were to her. At the last, only her own people, the skin of her after all. The Opening for them and then she could shed that last bit of skin and just be what she is. What she has always been."

"Is that what she tells you? Ulanda?"

Simitta hesitated a moment. "Your choice in that," he said very softly, the words edged in the black that his eyes still denied. "You as good as gave me to her."

"Not what I remember. Who was I to withhold from you that show of pride." He could feel the bloom on his skin, he didn't need to look. Or look at the altar either, this one or the memory of the one in the Holding where he had waited for Kori. Cassa. All he had held of his future had died months ago and he hadn't even known. Starting with Chanko, his future had died. His teeth snapped together.

Something to bite, but he hadn't ever thought it would be Sim. He didn't take his eyes off his los and the angry words came without any attempt for the kind of control Sim was showing to take the conversation this far. "Only fair that you take out what you owe to her in that way. As you have in what you owe a'Genn." He would take the submission in blood this time.

"All of me is owed to a'Genn," Simitta said, dropping his eyes.

No fight from him at all? "I *am* a'Genn." At a touch, the buzz of the Net flags dissolved and the room became very quiet. "You're only two generations blooded into a'Genn. The Clan had waited overlong to add fresh blood to the line and under more favorable conditions, the Senior wife would never have allowed a male child to live from that close an out breeding. And never, never allowed it to breed."

"Gennady..." A muted sound, it didn't reach him.

He reached out to Sim instead and moved as though he had all time to get there. Simitta's eyes were still down, his skin a pale shading of rose and white, and so cool. "She's not here, we've no Senior wife to make the decision so I must and I want more for a'Genn than what I can get with just freeborn to mate with. I'll force this decision... on Cassa, on you." His fingers ripped across, throat to middle, blood and Zimmer light mixed and dripping as he put his arms on Simitta's shoulders, his uncle's head bowed to rest against his throat. Sim hadn't moved.

His fingers played with the bones of the spine through the thin layer of skin, the line of hair sleek in repose. It had been white. "Won't you give me anything?" he whispered into the crown of Simitta's hair.

Finally words, warm breathe into the crossing over of his silk robe. "In giving Kori away, you've denied me any chance of it. And Cassa has taken everything I gave before. I won't live to see the portal open."

"So you would have me kill you here?"

"Out-blood or not, I'm a'Genn paltin. I'm owed the honor of a clean death from my Clan Lord."

He was. Gennady traced the shape of the sheering bones as Sim turned his head the slight amount necessary to expose them. So easy.

The door opened. Gennady kept his cheek against Simitta's hair. "Are you insane?" he said softly, the progression of his actions halted, momentarily eclipsed by the passage of wonder. Allykh. The smell of the man and his fear came into the room with the air from the door opening.

"Alisim Temple Holding is under attack. Their warding and Net have collapsed. Captain Slicanin wishes to consult with you on the appropriate response."

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Rit lowered the Zimmer rifle as Nisstin backed in, then backing still, moved to one side, away from Niv.

"Blueknife at least," Nisstin said. "Maybe others. Besides some Holding rifles, they've got Denman Guard and Patrol issue as well as Northern Hand stock. This was coordinated with the warding disruption, they couldn't have brought those rifles in past even the outer perimeter without being noticed, not that much metal, especially with the extra security for the Blessing."

From Niv, the Warrior's notice had gone to the corner and Ulanda. Lying on her side, her eyes would have been open except he had closed them. From Ulanda,

Nisstin's gaze went to the four bodies piled against the far wall, searching them with his eyes as though his hands might have missed faint signs of life.

"They'll know the layout," Rit said, not adding his own examination. There had been many improbabilities in the past two days, but those men were as dead as Sarkalt. "Not only these ones would have learned it."

Nisstin's attention went from the bodies of the rebels to a smaller form, wrapped in a blanket where the others weren't. Rit didn't look there either. He had seen enough the first time. The bullets hadn't left much of her face, but there was no doubt that it was En'talac. As she had said: not human. He had finally returned her touch. Skin frosted with blood, and even the blood different, red touched amber and thick, like cream and with a faint scent he couldn't put a name to but which lingered on his hands. Under her body, the blood had pooled, curdled foam surfacing in a thick mat and a thin fluid had seeped out to fill a leaf pattern in the floor, a fern. The floor was uneven with fossil prints; a dragonfly had been at her outstretched hand as though she had been reaching for it as she died. He put her back in the same place wrapped in a blanket from Ulanda's bed, remembering the fossils he had seen deep in the stones at the world-altar. The stones around the host fire in front of Ulanda's tent.

The Warrior's gray eyes came from looking at En'talac to meet his again, cold. "Knowing the layout is different than making it through to here." He slipped bullets out from the double banding, holding them in the same palm as his fingers worked. "The longer it is from their first try, the less chance there is of them making it all the way a second time. Their main advantage was surprise."

More of an advantage that most of the Holding was either asleep still or hung over, Rit thought. And that they had already learned to depend on the Temple and Zimmer systems. He rubbed his back against the stone of the wall; sweat had dried to an itch over the scabs where he had hurt his back the day before. He rubbed harder, wanting blood, even his own. His body screamed to get moving, to do something. A deep slow breath, then he asked, "What happened? Do you have any idea yet?"

Nisstin looked up from loading the rifle he had brought back with him. Patrol issue, one of the rebel's most likely, perhaps even the one that had shot En'talac. His hands wanted to do that, Rit realized suddenly. Load and check, not hold this soft tube. A weapon shouldn't feel like skin.

"Blueknife cult had been infiltrated by Assembly agents." Nisstin slung the rifle to hang at his back. "They weren't oathed to the Holding, but..." He hesitated. "Our men were stonewalled, that or bought." The last possibility had come out hard but he shook his head as he said it. "Those bastards couldn't have done this on their own. Not the warding and especially not the Net."

A warbling from Niv and Rit had to concentrate to hear the noise as words. Plain-tongue, but too fast. A name he had heard before: Anga. Then more noise.

The tass'alt was simmering with a midnight blue color. Rit could feel the primacy of his rage.

Rit pulled his mind back as Niv paused next to Ulanda and crouched, his nostrils flaring. He didn't need what else was coming through with the anger, the air in the closed in room stunk enough as it was. Being dark seemed to make it worse; the shutters were locked, with only enough light getting between the slates to make it twilight in here. He couldn't see the shielding along the outside wall, something Zimmer made, Nisstin had said, trade samples from Gennady, not part of the Temple warding system and not dependent on the Net. And not enough of them. Nisstin had been wearing four as hair beads, large deep red beads. A new fashion, Rit had thought, seeing others wearing them last night. Hann and Viy'iana. Perhaps Wandassa, he couldn't remember.

Ulanda groaned with a low sound deep in her throat. It wasn't the metal from the rifles being too close; she had been doing that before Nisstin brought them in. The drug, he supposed. A pinpoint wound on her upper arm, hardly noticeable except for the swelling and the heat. Next to the brazier, a tea bowl held a tiny dart, the end stained ochre. Did she know En'talac was dead? Had the drug left her enough time to see, but not enough to do anything?

Rit's fingers itched. He wanted a rifle, a real one. "Any chance of my being able to make it to the Holding Center?"

"No. They've got a line close to it, with access to the grounds for reinforcements. That long corridor is a trap. I've lost three people there already, I won't send more in, I don't have the men or the weapons to spare. It will have to be retaken from the outside." Nisstin had another rifle loaded and at his back. He looked over, amusement showing through the strain. "Even if you made it, you wouldn't know what to look for, what to fix. You don't need to die just to be doing something. Your talents have never included being stupid."

"Really?"

Nisstin's smile carved deep lines around his mouth. "Only worrying about being stupid. Different thing entirely." He sounded like Bolda for a moment, Rit thought. An easy imitation. But he continued in his own voice. "The Assembly didn't agree to you just because the Strom Archivists and Bluestone had it all planned. Your place is with her, you knew that earlier without having to think, so don't bother thinking differently now." Nisstin's eyes went to Ulanda again and to the smile was added something much deeper and sadder.

"We're lucky they don't have her."

"Lucky?" the Warrior said. "The Overpriest has gone to prepare the Lady's way in heaven. En'talac?" He shrugged. "She was a handmaiden to the Lady from the moment she accepted service, she can't die. The others failed; they'll die here in an ordinary way, their fate unfulfilled. A winnowing, that's all this is."

"Damn it, she's dead. She's not a stick on an altar. Even alive someplace else, she won't be..." He stopped words that were turning into a shout. En'talac's death wasn't staying where it should. The compartment he kept for that purpose. All his dead – starting with Tirreniti – and then his Patrol dead, years of them and usually no time to mourn until later. A luxury to mourn, something for the sleepless nights when he tried to find the person somewhere in the gap they had left in his life.

Rit managed a tired smile. How could he have expected her to stay put anywhere in his mind, she never had in the short time he'd known her.

"You're right," he said. "Who am I to talk about luck?" He'd seen men go into battle with the same look on their face as the Senior Warrior had now. Fanatics, willing to die to serve something greater than themselves, eager too. And didn't have to look very deeply to see the carefully cultivated shell it was, look and attitude.

"More sharp teeth than luck anyway," he added to Nisstin's grin. A knife taken from the first had killed the other three. "They obviously hadn't expected Niv to be here or they would have shot him right away. Or not have known how dangerous he was. Or En'talac had distracted them for the critical moment."

He had dragged the bodies to the wall, out of their way while Nisstin stood watch. The first man had been about his own age, but with a dirt-worn hungry look to his deeply tanned face. The look of someone who had lived on the land for some months and from the small things he had with him, most likely Hegemony. A City Guardsman key loop and a soiled brocade money pouch. Denman minted coin and a medallion Rit didn't recognize. The man's head was attached only by a scrap of skin, his neck bitten through. Sharp teeth and a dream, Rit thought as he closed the man's staring eyes. Had he seen this last night? Should he have?

It had been over before the two of them had gotten there, less than a minute after the first shot. Wandassa had been with them in the anteroom. She would be with Panntin by now, or dead. They had no idea. That part of the Holding was cut off. Anywhere that one person could hold off passage had been taken by the rebels. Obviously well planned, and they had no way of knowing how many people were in place here, how many more were already on their way from the mountains or from Endica.

"Did you get any kind of summary from Quin'tat or En'talac about what happened last night? Could this be connected?"

Nisstin shook his head. "I was promised one but didn't get it. I don't like what that says about Quin'tat's part in this."

"There wasn't much time last night."

"This wasn't done in one night, which tells me that at least one of the Overpriest's people was involved."

"There haven't been any Temple energy weapons used against us, only against the Net and just that once."

There were shots and then the frying sound the Zimmer rifles made when their blasts hit stone. "Stay here," Nisstin said, including Niv in his look, then left.

Direction was difficult to tell. Towards the Priest House again, Rit thought. Alicia and Eunni, or the last he knew. Most of the random sounding shots had been coming from that direction. A few explosions as well and he hoped those were all the bombs the rebels had brought. Hegemony made - explosives weren't the Xintan's style. The rebel reinforcements would reach the Priest House first. Open to the plain and the mountains beyond that, it was what he thought of as the far side of the Holding, not enclosed by layers of walls as it was here.

Then more shots outside, not the isolated gunfire that hardly ever stopped, but a concentrated burst. The stables. Someone yelled and was answered, and in the middle of shouts, screaming started, a peak of raw terror in a moment and in the next, a rough gargle. Eclipsed immediately by the bellow of a horse. The shots were closer, then hitting, each a whistle stripping to a leaden thud. Dust bloomed from points in the outer door, a panel of dust forming against the inside shielding, obscuring the wood. Then the shutters, the light slates at the window shattered into kindling, bullets flaring against the shielding like bombs as metal hit the energy field. Blinding white light, jagged lines of lightening streaked across the entire wall, blinking white then red, then purple. Niv screamed, louder than the horse, his nails raking sparks against the wall. The shielding held.

The young Xintan guard stationed at the outer doorway made the corner at a run, his rifle cocked. Rit slammed the barrel up, knocking it from the boy's grip, then blocked Niv with his body, the boy sandwiched between him and the wall. There was the smell of blood as Niv hissed against his cheek, but the claws hit stone again. Rit blinked from the sparks in his eyes: Niv's claws or the bullets or moving too fast. The last, he thought, his head was swimming.

"He's upset, don't antagonize him," Rit said gently. He could see Niv in the boy's eyes, two blue lizards reflecting from the light brown and then gone as the boy's eyes rolled back. He hadn't blinked at all. Rit stepped away to let him slide down the wall.

A question was shouted from the corridor, the voice sounding choked by fear. Two guards then. "We're fine in here," Rit yelled back as he looked out the door. A round white face looked back from around the far corner. One of the squires, pale blond hair and dark eyes. He couldn't be more than thirteen years old.

Niv warbled, the other guard was waking up and starting to hyperventilate. Rit kicked him hard. "Get to your feet," he said sharply then waited until he got the focus he wanted before offering a hand to help him.

"Lord Strom..." The back of his hand wiped a line of spittle from his chin. Then he remembered to nod his salute, looking dizzy at the sudden movement.

"What's your name?" Rit put steel into his tone.

"Medeen, sir. Medeen quis'Youlin of Redleaf."

"Niv?" Rit said, looking to the Camerat and signing a request for indulgence. The tass'alt might be familiar with the sound of Xintan names even if he didn't speak the language without a Net to translate.

His nails clicked. "Medeen Redleaf."

Rit grinned. "Close enough?" he asked the young Warrior. The boy nodded, his eyes straight ahead. From his look, he didn't know which was more real, the grin or the hard tone. Rit softened it a shade. "Good. He won't hurt you unless he thinks you're a threat. Don't let him think that. Do you understand?" Another nod, faster this time but he still didn't look at the alien. "Your job is to make sure that anyone coming through this door understands that they don't want to have Niv think them a threat. Anyone on our side, that is."

Niv spoke again, the words coming slowly to make them distinct. "Kalduka d'Nivkhs," he said.

Rit allowed a wider grin. "Niv Kalduka?" he said as he looked over at him, easing the name as Niv had done with the Xintan's. Niv was standing over Ulanda, watching him back. He signed honor to the tass'alt and held the shape with his fingers until the man's cobalt eyes blinked. Niv added a wordless hiss then nodded. Rit turned his attention back to the Xintan. "Warrior Medeen of Redleaf, do you understand this?"

"Yes sir. Lord Strom, sir."

He would be Redleaf, Rit thought. The lilt of the southern Clans was in his words, putting lie to the Silverfox pattern of the embroidery band along the hem of his wool tunic. It didn't fit, too roomy on his lean frame. He was all stretched out, but with big hands and feet, bones too long looking for the flesh covering them.

"You're not with the Holding, are you?" Rit stepped around, forcing the boy to turn to keep facing him. Putting Niv and Ulanda at Medeen's back. "How did you end up here?"

The boy's broad mouth grinned, but he was shy with his eyes, the staring over with now it was safe to let his vision wander. "Came down with the Marshall from Wilni last night, sir."

"And not with him now?"

"There was this Holdings girl, well, we had too much to drink, anyway, I had to see her back to her room."

Rit picked up the Zimmer rifle and handed it to the boy in place of his own. "Can you use this?" The boy's face lit up - Niv out of sight and forgotten that fast. Did he even realize how frightened he was?

"All of the Marshall's escort got the training, sir." Medeen handled it both expertly and eagerly, one broad palm flat against the smooth side, fingers ready at the firing loops. He didn't appear to mind that it felt like skin.

He wouldn't be stupid, Rit reminded himself, not if Nisstin left him here. Just very young. He wouldn't have to force being willing to die; he wouldn't believe it possible.

"Do you know whom you're guarding?" he asked softly.

Medeen fought to keep his eyes straight ahead again, the effort showing in the sudden slide to awkward in the handling of the rifle in the salute that accompanied his words. "Sir? The Lady, sir."

"She is what they say she is." The boy's throat slid up and down under the pale skin in a succession of attempts to swallow. "Do you understand what that means?" A quick nod. "Look at her," Rit whispered and had to repeat it twice more before the boy turned. "The rebels drugged her to keep the god trapped inside the human body. When it wears off..." Rit pulled at Medeen's shoulder, he was close to fainting again. "Look at me! When the drug wears off almost anything can happen. A different place, a different world. She'll be frightened and angry. She is human, besides the other, and she won't know you. Let the others know this could happen and if it does, stay as calm as you can. Report to me or Nisstin. Medeen, last night I knelt on a mountaintop in snow, and when it was the anteroom around me again, my tunic was soaked and my feet were cold. Do you understand?"

A whisper back. "She could be hurt there."

Rit stared at him. "Yes, she could." He tried to keep the sudden exhaustion from his voice. "Return to your post then."

He pushed the door shut behind Medeen, leaving a narrow crack to listen through. They didn't need it open to share the light from the single glow globe. Nisstin had left it in the larger room of Ulanda's apartment so that any attack making that far would be coming from light into dark. One more room away from the rebels, almost their only advantage in staying here, that and a chance to make it outside if given that as a last chance. A chance to get shot running, Rit had thought but he didn't have a better idea, then or now. They had lost the dark at any rate - daylight flooded the room through a filter of dust and debris from the remains of the shutters. Late afternoon.

Like looking through gauze, Rit thought as he checked the small windows. A single bullet hit flared to one side and he almost wet himself jumping back. Then it was quiet again except for Niv clicking his nails. The rebels shouldn't be able to see in very far, it was still too dark compared to outside and obscured by the dust that seemed to be attracted to the shielding. Like looking through gauze shot with silver threads, sizzling threads that flared to a point when he put a hand too

close. The metal of the rifle barrel caused the lines to move, a moiré pattern of sparkle and cedar colored dust.

He went back to near the door, there was no sense drawing fire. Niv continued to pace, but the interval was lengthening, the tass'alt spending more time with Ulanda.

Pattern moved over her, but tight to the skin. Like the moiré in the shielding, he thought, not the outward rise of energy usual when she pulled overpattern, even lightly. A while later, her eyes opened again but there was no life behind them. Niv closed them, his fingers infinitely gentle on her skin, and he stayed with her after that, murmuring in the same singsong voice he had used to Sarkalt in the spiral.

A strange quiet, no shots for a while now. Once: horses moving fast over the hard ground, quite a few of them in a tight pack, then nothing again. Rit found his mind drifting, not wanting to hold the analysis he should be attempting.

Children guarding them, he thought as he watched the shapes of the patterns grow more constant in the dust against the shielding. Except Medeen would be older than Panntin by a year or two. Probably much the same age as he was when he joined the Patrol. He had gotten himself a name for not liking to take on recruits and was senior enough - even if he had only been a Captain - to get his way more often than not. Panntin had been the first raw youngster dumped on him in years. Too big a space left in his mind when they died, he thought. Not memory, but potential. Broad daylight and he'd see glimpses of someone newly dead, talking to a woman perhaps and there would be a child at her skirts and the sun would be the wrong way, evening to morning or the moon would be bright overhead or it would be winter to summer. Imagination, he had told himself. What else could it have been?

Rit pressed his forehead against the metal of the rifle. Sunlight was an orange glow on the blanket covering En'talac. He should move her, he thought, but didn't. She would like the sun; her hands had always been so warm.

And Alicia? What kind of space in his mind would her death leave? He'd run here, towards Ulanda, not to his wife. And not to Eunni. He had trouble remembering to be worried for them. It might mean that they were safe... or already dead.

The metal of the rifle slowly warmed from being held, one arm wrapped across and the other hand on the chamber, the long barrel resting now against his cheek. He could feel it, a sum that was more than the smell of the oil and the gunpowder, even the salt smell of the metal so close to his nose or the wax caught in the cross-hatching on the wooden stock. He could feel it like an ache in his body, a buzz that grew slowly as the time passed.

Who had betrayed them, he wondered. If Anga's agent had been at the Holding last night and survived, he or she knew that the Zimmer ship obviously

hadn't been destroyed. But then again, they might not have been given a choice of stopping this.

At last, voices from the hall. Nisstín. And Bolda. Rit felt like he'd just let his breath out from holding it too long. He was stiff when he stepped out from the wall to greet them.

Medeen opened the door to let them in, standing back to hold it, his eyes searching what he could see of the bedroom. As he passed, Nisstín glanced at the Zimmer rifle the young Warrior held in salute, then raised an eyebrow to Rit, but didn't mention the exchange.

Pasi followed Nisstín in, the brindle bitch at his heel. A wet spraying sneeze, then the dog froze, her eyes finding Niv. Rit squatted, grabbed the loose flesh of her jowls, a fistful of blood soaked fur in either hand. "No," he said, her breath in his face. And got his chin licked as the deep growl became a whine and the stump of her tail wagged.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Gana," Pasi said.

"Keep her in the corridor. Will she stay with a command?"

"Yes, sir." The Warrior dragged the dog backwards, his hand wrapped in the skin of her neck as he had held the male dog at the Manor. Her nails scrapped against the stone flagging.

"He's to guard you," Nisstín said to him. "You're not to take a move without his covering you."

Rit wiped bloody hands on his pants. "Your man?"

"Yours now."

Bolda shouldered past, ignoring him, En'talac's body as well, going straight to Ulanda and checking her points. Niv moved to let him, a chorus of plain-tongue coming from both of them, then something else again.

"We're through to the guest quarters," Nisstín continued, leaning back, easing up on his right leg. A makeshift bandage, a torn up towel, was wrapped around his thigh. "Or as much, them through to us. The Marshall has things organized at that end, they've held it from the start, just getting things sorted out, same as we were." Only one rifle was left strapped across his back, it thumped against the wall when he moved.

"Any word about Alicia? The others?"

"It's pretty certain that she was in the Nursery, most likely Eunni and San Garm were also. There's no word from there yet, we're blocked."

Rit got the small jug from next to the brazier. The red pottery water pot next to it had broken into three pieces leaving pools to dry among the fern shapes of the flagstone floor. "Any answers yet about what happened?" He uncorked the jug and took a sip before handing it to Nisstín. Leftover tea, very weak.

Nisstin drank half of it before answering. "A Blueknife alliance with mostly Denman Guard, not Patrol, or not primarily. They found a common bond, at least for this. I wouldn't have counted on it lasting." With one fingernail, he traced a glaze drip on the jug. Blood showed in the crease of his palm and under the nails. "Most of the Blueknife fanatics are from Bluestone related Clans. There has always been a fringe group ready to fight with the standard orthodoxy, but the Lady's arrival gave them more and some of those were priestesses." He looked at Ulanda, then back. "They believe what they believe. Might as well argue with a cat. Apparently they made certain promises to the Hegemony leaders to get their support."

"They intended to take her alive."

"And you. Two targets. The original plan was a dawn attack."

When he'd been with Alicia. "What happened? What are our chances here?"

"Getting better." He sounded mildly surprised. "The delay in the attack isn't the only thing that went wrong. There were supposed to have been three waves attacking the Holding. The infiltrators first - for the Net and the Warding. Then what we see here: the second, all they could get into the area during the night without too great a risk of being noticed. They were supposed to take the key areas in the Holding and the HighPost gates, make sure you and the Lady were unconscious - or dead, that was an option if they couldn't knock you out immediately - and send the signal for the reinforcements to cut off Endica and the port and then circle around to finish any resistance at the Holding. Despite the failure in taking either of you, the signal was sent, but the third wave never made it. At least a double ten of Hands gathered from the Denman occupation and coming in from the mountains. A mix, mostly Warriors but a few Guard as well. Anywhere from a hundred and fifty to three hundred men. Olloss said the man died before he could be encouraged to say more."

Lucky him. Rit had seen entirely too much of what the Xintan considered encouragement. "Would the something be Gennady or Captain Slicanin?"

"Not from what has happened so far. More likely it's the Endica based troops. The HighPost was critical, I think the rebels either didn't take it or they couldn't hold it. I know the Princip quite well; he was as prepared for trouble as we were. Not prepared enough apparently, but the known Blueknife sympathizers inside his troops were being watched."

Nisstin pushed off from leaning on the wall and walked closer to the window, limping slightly. The shielding was still arranging wood and dust onto its outer surface. "We're blind to the outside. Except for here, the outer most rooms have been barricaded off. We can thank the Zimmer for this much. Gives some hope for the Priest House and especially the Nursery. All the ranking who wanted the beads got them."

"Which limits who was involved with Blueknife at this end." He hadn't known about them either. Negotiating in Denman at the time most likely.

Nisstin finished the tea and put the jug back next to the brazier, stopping to watch Ulanda. Niv blinked at him slowly, calmer now. "If they had known, they would have allowed for it. Olloss said the man didn't know about any outside involvement, only that they wouldn't have to worry about the energy weapons being used against them."

Medeen knocked at the open door, a Senior Warrior at his back. Rit nodded at the man's formal greeting, he didn't know him, Bluestone Clan from his tunic and relatively young for his rank. Behind him was Wilintinn, a rifle in his hand. His cousin managed a nod to Rit before Nisstin motioned them back to the outer room and closed the door.

From what Rit overheard, the strategy being talked up was already well discussed, just the main points confirmed and a check on anything new from Olloss.

Bolda walked over, wiping his hands on the back of his pants. "Niv says he's not sure what they used on her." He spoke slowly as though having to search for the proper words but his Xintan had less of an accent than Rit's. "She's alive, that's it. Full extent of our knowledge."

"She's pulling pattern. Different than I've seen before. Like it's going around in circles inside her."

"Don't know what difference that makes."

"Do you have any idea where Quin'tat is?"

Bolda shook his head. "No. Jini and Pida aren't where they were supposed to be either, Nisstin says. They might have been captured, handy for the rebels to have both of them in reserve if Ulanda had been taken. The flitter is another possibility." He sat down hard on the floor, his knees drawn up, eyes towards the window. "How did En'talac die?"

Bolda hadn't looked once at her body. "Took at least two bullets in the face. Maybe three. She probably didn't even have time to react. You can ask Niv..."

"I did. He said she takes a long time at it. That she's still dying and will be forever."

The Camerat was back to singing to Ulanda, not softly as he had before, but with a sound like wind driven waves breaking on rock. "Bolda, she was dead before her body hit the floor. Niv killed the four men. There couldn't have been more than a few seconds from the first to the last or he wouldn't still be alive. The first man in probably shot Ulanda with the dart as he came through the door and the second one En'talac, the other shots would have been backup or nerves or just because they could. I doubt they saw Niv until the first was dead."

Bolda nodded, then rubbed his face with both palms flat and working loose flesh into waves of pasty skin.

"Will you stay here with Ulanda?" he asked, checking his rifle to see that it was loaded. He hadn't before, and felt stupid when he realized it.

Bolda looked at him sideways. Small black eyes screwed up, the whites lined with red. "You're not going anywhere."

"Save it," Nisstin said from the doorway. He bent over and started to unwrap his bandage, turning the blood soaked side of the towel outwards. "We're going to move her." He looked up from inspecting the damage. From the pattern of blood, it looked as though the bullet had passed right through the side of Nisstin's thigh. Muscle damage, Rit thought, but it had missed bone and artery. "The rebels are running out of time and they have to know it. We think they'll settle for trying to kill the both of you before withdrawing. Or leave a core that won't mind giving their lives trying."

"Move her where?" Rit asked.

"The old palace cellars. Besides the Holding Center, some others had to be cleaned out in order to reroute the natural springs."

As much caves as cellars. Rubble filled them when this had been the Barracks and what portions hadn't been completely filled, harbored rats. He'd been in a couple of the holes the first years he'd been on the Border. Rat catcher, punishment for insubordination. He remembered the closed in feeling and the dank smell. Water dripping, echoing. Then a nest of rats under the first slab of rock he moved. Short stems of brown and yellow grass in a mat, a tunnel of soft gray fur in the center and a swarm of pink wormy things moving inside. The man with him had touched the torch to it.

He'd been to the Holding Center several times. Besides the three doors leading to ground level corridors, there were two other openings marked with the same color code. "One entrance near the Nursery, the other closer to the anteroom?" Nisstin looked up from wrapping his thigh. "Are they connected with each other?" Rit added, already picking up things they might need. The water bottle and two tea bowls he stuffed into Ulanda's braiding box.

"No, nothing you could get through, an underground stream bed with a reservoir in the lowest one under the anteroom. The current is against us in any case. There are a series of rooms there carved out by the water, like shelves. Under here actually, there's just no entrance at this end. She'll be as safe there as possible." A grin at his impatience. "You can carry her if your shoulder isn't too sore from falling off your horse."

"I'll manage." A heavy wool robe dug out from the bottom of the closest leather chest. Bright red, he hadn't seen her wear it. Bolda snorted as he grabbed it and threw it in the corner, handing him a dark gray one instead. "When?" Rit asked.

"Now would be a good time."

Rit looked to Niv. The Camerat was watching. He didn't know how much he had understood. "Bolda? Would you explain and ask him to stand guard on her as I do the carrying, or whatever version you think would go over with him." Two or three words later, Niv nodded.

"Anything else?" Bolda asked.

"En'talac's body. Could you manage it?"

Nisstin interrupted any answer. "Leave it," he ordered sharply.

Niv straightened, his crest blooming with color. Bolda scratched his head, watching.

"Some small indulgence might be in order," Rit said to Nisstin.

The Warrior rubbed his thigh as he looked from Bolda to Niv and back. Then he sighed. "It might at that."

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Garm shifted his weight and the bay mare under him responded, fighting the direction forced on her by the lead rein. Xintan trained, then. He hadn't been sure, he didn't recognize her from the Holding stables and the trappings were mixed, with no bit to the bridle, but no Clan markings on the leather or painted on the horse. And a Hegemony style saddle over a thick felt blanket. When he twisted in the high frame of stiffened leather as far as his bound hands would allow, he could catch brief glimpses of Eunni and Alicia, the women well back in the snaking line of riders, tied as he was and each with their own escort.

Following tracks that came out the opposite way, they turned into the hills they had been riding parallel to. From the sun being face on and eating mouthfuls from the silhouettes of those in front of him, to the relief of deep shade. The marks they followed had been made during the rain or soon after, the soil churned into mud.

A winding path led over a series of brush-covered hummocks, then into a valley, the ground on either side rising sharply to leave only a narrow trail alongside a stream. Despite the recent rains, the streambed was almost dry, pools of water in rocky nests. The grass gradually gave way to brush and small trees, the same sparsely needled evergreens he remembered from his and Gennady's arrival on Alisim. Before them, as though at the end of a tunnel was a mountain, edged by the sunset, rose and purple washed over the quilted green of its trees. The thick dust and the litter of needles made the loudest noises things of metal clicking together and of cloth rubbing against the saddle leather.

The shout came from behind, loud and blooming with panic. "Scatter! Under the trees!" The mare jerked at the lead, resisting the change in direction, then followed for the brief climb, nosing the other horse when it stopped suddenly. Behind them pebbles still rolled and the dust crawled slowly into the dry air. Horses were blowing all around, a neighing swiftly stopped, a muffled curse as quickly.

Out of the silence came a faint whine, then the shade deepened and a new sky moved over top of them. The Zimmer ship. Bigger than it had looked in the diamond, much bigger, and Garm felt himself start to catch the fear from around him. The passage took only a few seconds, too fast for the panic to grow beyond shouts and rearing horses. The belly was black to his eyes at first - so used to seeing bright blue - but resolved in the next moment into shapes and colors. The earth reflected darkly on the under surface: buried gold and fire burned green, flashes of light from the pools of water. Another world, he thought, he could ride there, upside down. Like a pattern pull.

Impossibly big to float like that. He took the image of Palace from Ri-altar and held it. Too long ago, you forget, your body forgets things like scale and contrast. Then - last night. Palace like a moon on a world that had none. He hadn't taken notice at the time of where he was, even now he took an image much more real from a deeper memory. Clearer in his mind was standing on the cliffs edge, Ulanda and Sarkalt and Niv behind him. He remembered waiting. And watching the ocean as he waited. Easy to get used to stars and a moon and tides. Or it was from Cassa. She had the tide in her blood; her world would have had a moon. He bowed his head to his rope tied hands, his thoughts as helpless as his body. The swelling of a black tide on a darker ocean.

The end of a rifle to his throat forced his head up to see the mute hate in the glare from the man holding it. The horses moved slightly against each other, still uneasy. Fear and defeat with the hate on the man's face, but a wild hope as well, when he looked at him. Like the reflection of the water from the belly tiles of the Ladybug, it was something liquid.

The pods had gone in earlier, two smaller skies. The riders had still been on the plain then, moving at a fast gallop and almost to the low mounds of grass and rubble that promised the mountains further on. Behind them, the pods had settled over the Holding, red rising like another sun where the blue warding had fallen. Moments later, the grass flattened under a hand of sound that pushed against them and was gone. At least two horses went down of those that he could see. They didn't stop.

The mare balked with the other man being that close, backing into the branches of the scrubby pine they had hidden near. Spiky branches caught at his robe and his hair and showered yellowed needles on him. He ducked as he guided the mare further away with the pressure of his knees. The hem of his cotton

underrobe - where the heavier dark green cloth had hitched - up was torn. And from the pain, a tear in his shin, he thought, but was at the wrong angle to see blood.

The pressure of the rifle was on his throat again. Garm looked at the man and tried to force what he saw past what he thought. He couldn't, didn't really want to try. The guard was a big man, covering his horse like it was a woman he was making love to and disdained to notice. His feeling of hopelessness made them all look heavy to him, brutish, even stupid but in a cunning way.

"The Zimmer lord will offer the Lady his life for what he will see as his own failure here," Garm said against the cold pressure of the metal. What he saw of the rider wouldn't keep any more still than the reflections from the curved surface of the rifle barrel would. "Are you planning on being his honor guard to hell? He won't mind. And see our deaths as nothing worth preventing, much preferring in his rage to extract revenge than a rescue."

"Shut up." Spoken in Xintan, but slurred with the sound of another tongue. Not Hegemony either, Garm thought, trying to match the sound of the words to those he had heard in the Assembly Hall and months of talks that had led to last night. Ril'mil perhaps but he didn't know that language at all.

In any case, he hadn't meant to say what he had. And spoke slower, trying for precision. "Let us go. Then split up. With no reason to follow single riders, he'll..."

Ducking the swing of the barrel, he took the force of the first blow on his shoulder, then the second, better aimed, across his ear. The ropes held. He came back to consciousness feeling the pressure on his wrists and ankles. The horse was still fighting against the reins, adding her shrill voice to the shouts from behind, throwing his balance away as she tried to use her feet and teeth against the man attacking him.

She broke away, bucked a couple of times then stood, reins trailing down, her skin flicking. He couldn't manage getting upright but did get more of his weight over her neck, the long red-brown hair against one cheek, as coarse but not as prickly as Heni's brush-cut mane. His hair mixed with hers, dust and horse sweat on both. He wiggled the fingers of one hand far enough to touch the thick coat under the mane, flattening his palm on the warm hair for a moment before the leather around his wrists cut too deeply.

"Do that again and I'll gut you myself," a woman's voice spat from behind. Not him, he decided, looking up with his eyes as far as he could without moving his head. The man that had been guarding him instantly bristled, his eyes going beyond his first focus to look for support and very obviously finding none.

Garm struggled to get his head up. "Will you talk sense then?" She had brought her horse alongside his and taken the reins. A Bluestone priestess, the folds of a Ril'mil head wrapping fallen around her shoulders. "Your people very

obviously didn't take the Lady on the first try and they'll hardly get a second. They'll be dead now, all of them. Or soon to wish they were."

She watched him quietly, none of the anger he had heard in her voice showed towards him. Still a young woman as the Xintan counted such, late twenties or early thirties, thick flesh over the sharp bones typical of her people, each dark spot of the tattoos like a dimple in her skin. Wearing an ankle length Ril'mil tunic under the large wrap, heavily textured cotton in pearl gray and white stripes, and covering a white shirt and dark gray pants. She was solid and heavy in the body to match her face, making it easy to accept that there was a man under the layers of loose cloth.

Instead of a reply to him came orders to pull out, the priestess' words passed back in a chorus set to the sound of horses moving under control. A couple more words from her to his guard and the man slapped the rump of his red and white gelding to get it going, the sudden movement setting Garm's bay mare skipping again.

The priestess still waited and as quietly. Her own horse appeared to be as stolid as she was, nodding easily against the bit, wearing Hegemony gear, not Xintan. "Is it sense you want or a miracle?" she asked when his horse had settled. "You had best hope we settle for sense. Alive or dead, free or captive, your Lady's miracles didn't save you from this."

The other riders were past them but for one. He heard the horse behind him but he didn't have the strength to turn. "The bird I fly with is the Lady's mother. Do you think anything you do can keep that one from me?"

Her dark eyes didn't change their expression. "I've stopped 'knowing' anything. Machines or magic, I can't see there's a difference with the people. You can die easy or hard, sooner or later. You, me, the two women taken with you. Think about it."

She motioned to the person behind them and other hands took the reins. A man, he saw. He looked familiar. Short hair, what there was of it, a fringe of black in tight curls. Heavy eyes, moist looking and engulfed in the swollen looking eyelids. Oily skin - darkest around the eyes - and pitted here and there with scars as though he had been pressed upon hard by small fingers, and had taken the marks permanently. Dressed so he could be anyone, anywhere and not stand out. Leather gloves, tan colored and well worn. Everything covered in dust now.

Was there an oath band under one glove, or had he taken it off? He looked familiar. "Who are you?" he asked but didn't get an answer or even a look. His head pounded in time to his heartbeat, it hurt more now and was getting worse. Alive. She would be alive. The words were a mantra repeated in time to the rush of blood in his ears.

They moved slower as the day darkened around them. He had long since lost any sign of a trail but the priestess moved deliberately, her pace set by the

terrain and by the growing exhaustion of the horses, not from indecision. Several stops to rest were the only breaks and each time, there were fewer riders. He heard shots once but whatever had happened was out of his sight. The priestess kept the three of them closer to her after that, nearer the lead.

At one of the stops he was given a swallow of water and a hard biscuit that moved the dust in his mouth better than the water but made his jaw ache. "Alwin," he said, using the name he had heard the priestess use once in a barked order that had been poorly received. "More water, if you please?" The Xintan polite form. After his own long dribbling drink, the man wiped a sleeve across his mouth and grudgingly held the canteen for him. And obviously regretted it, his dark face sour.

Much later he found his horse alongside Eunni's and he tried to say something to her but it seemed to him as though the words disappeared once past his lips; she didn't answer in any case, didn't seem to see him. Or he might not have spoken. As he tired he found his mind playing tricks on him, and his ears did too, hearing a hum set to the music beat out by the hooves of the horses. All of his strength was gone; he put his head against the back of the mares neck, the ear that didn't hum, and listened the throaty breathing, as labored as his own. He threw up, or tried to. Dry heaves. No one noticed.

The stars faded slowly. Garm watched the change between dozing off. Another trick of his mind, he thought at first. That much time couldn't have passed. They were using a shallow stream as a trail, like a path of sparkling lights, mountains on either side, ridges sharply defined against the nascent glow. He thought they might find another valley or a low crossing, but they left the stream to a long slowly climbed path of switchbacks as the morning brightened.

At the crest of the mountain, the priestess sat several minutes on her horse before dismounting. The checkered Ril'mil scarf was back around her head and had been arranged for added warmth to make a half-veil, but she took it off then, facing into the distance and the cold air. A cliff at her feet but she didn't appear to mind crowding the lip or the steep drop.

There was a different smell on the air. Garm straightened as his horse was brought up to the edge, beside the black mare. The land stretched out before them in the fluid light of morning, a broad flat valley, a wide meandering silver ribbon of water down the center. Hedge lines framed stubble-yellow fields, and edged still more squares with the dark earth centers freshly plowed and growing mist in rows like a winter crop. A single cluster of wooden buildings was on a rise of ground on the near side of the river, a red tile roof on the largest. There were people - smoke rose from the chimney like an offering fire to the morning.

More mountains on the other side, ranks of them, snow on the furthest higher peaks. This would be a tributary of the Endicastrom, Garm thought, running almost parallel and opposite here before joining for the journey to the ocean. Still

part of Denman Province. He had seen it from the air and not really seen it at all. Deni and Denman Capital were to the south, at the distant meeting of the two rivers.

Orders were being given by the priestess to her lead hands, two Xintan men, Warriors by their bearing, one dark, the other blond and young with the mature height that was always surprising when still topped by the face of a boy. A squire not long ago, Garm thought, he might even have earned his ranking in the war. He missed most of what was said, only a few words surfacing out of the silence that followed them: "Tell them the truth and let them go, just make sure they leave food behind when they run." The men led their horses on foot down yet another path he couldn't see, then the rest of them followed and he shut his eyes to the drop at one side, disorientated at knowing the balance to be the horse's, not his. Opening them only when they stopped again: a corpse of trees and a room-sized patch of level ground.

The ground he hit was dry and very hard. "Take the ropes off him," the priestess said. Then to him as she drew a broken branch through the dirt, rocks in the way making it an awkward circle with a lightening blasted tree in the center, she said, "This line, cross it and the guards will shoot you. Do you understand?"

His shoulders were the worst, frozen in their stiffness and when he moved them, the pain shot to his back and neck, then arms. A trail of blood showed down his leg where the branch had caught him, a gash mid calf, but in the fleshy part. His short boot was rimmed with blood, the leather stuck to his skin. He didn't feel the cut then did as soon as he touched it.

"Do you understand?" she asked again in the same tone of voice.

Alwin led the horses away. "Do you have a name you're willing to share?" Garm asked her, feeling a sharpness of mind return with the pain.

He thought she was going to ask him again if he understood about the limits and about getting shot, but surprised him with a name instead. "Sorsi quis'Pall, or it was," she said quietly and with a shrug at the end, almost apologetic in tone.

"Sorsi then, if you wish. My people go by one name. I'm known as Garm."

"I know that. Also what you're supposed to be." She looked back the way they had come. "The women here as well," she ordered, her voice cold now and commanding but only as loud as necessary to be heard. Eight men and her, two sent off already and probably a watcher on the crest. Less than a third of the number they had left the Holding with.

Eunni fell as hard as he had, but Alicia was lifted off, unconscious or asleep. "Bring her over to me," he said, making it a question that was answered by Sorsi nodding.

"Do you really think your two will come back?" he asked the priestess as he started to untie Alicia's hands.

He stopped listening for a reply when the girl woke suddenly, fighting him blindly. She slumped against him a moment later and he loosened his grip. Her heartbeat and breathing slowed as he gently smoothed the skin of her throat under his fingers. To calm himself as much as her, he knew, his own heart raced and his head pounded to keep time. He breathed deeply in an attempt to slow it. Breathing and touching. The scent of almonds and the feel of the oil in the sweat that moistened her skin. She was still a child in that, how she smelled, he thought. How she smelled of what she did, and not from her own richness. Dirt formed in tiny rolls under his fingertips. He wiped his fingers hard against his robe to clean them and winced at the pain.

But he began to smooth the delicate skin again, something almost unconsciously started, but had to move his position to hold her better, his shoulder and arms too sore to take much of her weight. Where he had pressed on her throat was red, rapidly forming bruises that rubbing wouldn't stop.

"A man of many talents," he heard and looked up, feeling both startled and foolish. Sorsi hadn't gone, she was still standing at the edge of the circle, the thin-ended branch in one hand. Most of the men were watching, stopped at whatever they had been doing. Eunni as well, sitting where she had fallen, rocking her upper body, her hands tucked under her arms.

His fingers tightened on Alicia's shoulder. If there had been an answer to his question, he hadn't heard it. "For the safety of the two women I can make certain promises," he said in Xintan and loud enough for at least some of the men to hear. "As San of the Lady's House, I can make promises to you that Alisim Temple will honor. Guarantees that can include those still with you, but bound by your word to me."

Sorsi tapped the stick against her tunic, slowly. Her eyes didn't leave him. Puffs of dust came from the hem with each blow. Sunrise climbed the way they had come and crested the mountain at near the same place. Garm felt the heat quite suddenly on the side of his head and his shadow grew into life beside him, amber as his skin in the golden dust. The trees blazed in the morning light.

The Xintan woman stood in the shade, a larger pine between her and the sunrise. An eclipse of heavy branches lay over the priestess, the shade watered by the flares of slender pine needles that the sun had licked. He had to blink to see her as more than the wandering of lines, branches and tattoos both like parts of the same vine, looking as though they were growing on her, over her, entwined in the skin and in the gray and white cloth. The lines made his eyes jump and he looked past her instead. The silver sky was darkening to blue, and smoke, not mist, lifted from the valley he couldn't see, gray smoke in a thick stream spreading into a flood. There was no wind.

Then she turned away without replying and set the guard.

"What else can you do?" Eunni asked in a roughened whisper. Under the sun-brightened cap of brown hair, her face was white and shiny, sweat washed. Her breath steamed in the cold air but it was hard given, held to be let out only in short gasps.

"Not enough." Alicia's head was cradled on his lap, his fingers trailing across her shoulder. "But I'll do what I can. Some shared warmth and I can wrap your wrists if the binding has chaffed. I'm a tass'alt, after all."

She didn't understand the Empire word, he thought. A meaningless break in the flow of the Xintan. But she managed to reach him. Hands swollen and purple, the skin of each wrist where the leather binding had rubbed was worn away to flesh where his had only been creased and reddened. Blood and serum had caked on the skin; he needed water for cleaning. Alicia's hands had been swollen and the wrists bruised but whoever had tied her had caught the fabric of her sleeves with the leather and the oath braiding had given still more protection.

"The horses can't go any further," Eunni said, speaking close to his ear as he ripped into the hem of his underrobe to make a bandage. "We'll be here for a few hours at least, depending on what's happened down there. If they find horses, I mean. Will she negotiate with you, do you think?"

Cloth strips very loosely tied. Ulanda. In the diamond. He shook the image out of his mind. "If she thought she could do so and survive her own people." The guard's eyes twitched; he must have heard.

Eunni glanced in the man's direction then continued, "The ones here?"

"A start." He pulled his wool robe off without disturbing Alicia and wrapped it around Eunni. And to the start of her protests, said, "Let me do this much. Before we were taken, in the common room, you told me to do something. Do you understand at all that I couldn't?"

She wasn't comfortable sitting on the hard ground, her constant moving told him that. "Something to do with the bird." She shook her head. "I keep saying 'the bird'. I can't seem to bring myself to say Empress. It seems so stupid."

Hegemony mixed with the Xintan but he knew those words in both languages. "Which?"

"Hell, I don't know. Both probably. Bird and god. That's what you really mean, isn't it? Will she mind my saying that?" She giggled, leaning against him. His sore shoulder. "A snowball fight." She looked at Alicia. "I was wrecked before I ever got tied onto that horse."

"Snowball fight?"

She turned back to see him, her brown eyes wide. "Where do you go when you're with her? Is it like a... well, whatever that was the Xintan Lady did? Lady Ulanda. En'talac said it was a pattern pull whatever that means."

"Ulanda. You can call her that."

"Like Rit does." She brought her knees up under the full skirt of the red dress and pulled the robe down to cover, moving her hands carefully, her face smoothed of any expression except the pain she couldn't hide.

"Yes. Except he calls her anything as little as possible."

"I noticed. And he's in love with her."

Not the holds he had used with Alicia but a rubbing that would encourage her body to relax. Eunni didn't comment on his touching past a questioning look.

"Falling in love appears to be a habit of his," he said.

"No, not really." The tone of her voice was as careful not to show expression as her face. Only the words disagreed with him. "Rit just worries about people he feels responsible for. There's a difference. Does she love him?"

"I don't know if she can love anyone. Not in the way you mean. Too much of what she is was forced on her. She's had to fight so hard for what little else remains that I don't know if she could ever give it away."

"Could... Cassa?"

He moved his fingers to the back of her neck. What was she being so careful of? Him?

"Yes, she could," he said as he rubbed points on her neck slowly. Different in feel than Alicia's, more like Cassa's had been, with some slight give to the skin. "She spent what was human of herself wildly as though in a panic that she couldn't." Except there was so little that had been human, ever. He laughed against the warm dusty curls of Eunni's hair, feeling his own breath in his face. "She could never bring herself to believe in any return from her coin."

The guard stumbled to his feet as Sorsi walked up. Wearing a Xintan tunic and pants now, with Bluestone Clan embroidery on the bands. She passed a water canteen to him. "I suggest you get some sleep while you can."

"Elder Mother?" Eunni asked. "Is there any chance of food?"

The priestess ignored her. "There will be two guards, one set back where you can't see him. If you try to escape you'll be killed, right then or executed immediately after. I can't see that I'd be loosing much if you die."

A sip of water first to cut through the dry of his throat. "You're the first out with the news of what happened at the Holding." He swirled the liquid in the canteen. Fresh and ice cold. It tasted of the earth, a running stream, he thought, not a spring. He passed it to Eunni then looked back at the priestess. "You have a chance to make this over again. As I said before: promises. You say that you know who I am, but your actions say something different. Your words say something different."

She barked a short laugh. "Both say I'm bloody tired. Of this, of you. You could be the Lady incarnate right now and I wouldn't give a damn. I'm going to bed, such as it is." Then to the guard: "Watch and listen. And don't forget the other guard. Do you understand?" She didn't wait for an answer before leaving again.

The man's eyes were searching everywhere except towards them. Looking for the other guard, Garm thought. Should keep him awake thinking about it.

Eunni sighed and stretched her legs out again. "Not a bad idea. Here..." She passed the canteen to him. "I can't tighten the stopper. We should save some for Alicia."

A metal screw top, the canteen was metal as well, fit inside a leather sleeve. "Are you in very much pain?"

"A hot bath would be nice. And some willow bark tea." Her hands had gotten tucked up under her arms again. Rocking slightly, her knees drawn up and over to one side.

"I can help. Would you mind?"

"Mind?"

"The touching. Different customs."

"You mean we might shock the guard?" She was laughing softly, all care gone with the pain. The laugh was very close to being tears.

He moved Alicia, laying her head on the ground where he had been sitting. She didn't stir. "Lie down," he said to Eunni and helped her. She blinked at the mix of sunlight across her face; the tree shadows had reached them. "I won't knock you out as I did for Alicia. I was in a hurry, it has certain risks and it's not meant for that." He found the first point he wanted and worked it.

"That's supposed to help?" she gasped, instinctively trying to move away from his hands. The guard was closer, his rifle ready but to one side.

The second point and the third. Her breathing was rough with an attempt at control but a few more pressure points and she let a slow breath out. The questioning in her eyes was as mixed as the broken light of the sun. Disbelief and hope. "How long..." she started, but he put his fingers over her lips.

"Long enough for now," he said gently, rearranging the woolen robe over her and tucking the edges in for warmth, then going to her other side. For his own comfort later, so he'd be lying on the side that hadn't taken on the rifle. Then moving his fingers to her temples and a different touching again. "This isn't for pain but will help you fall sleep. Concentrate on the feel."

"Did she like you doing this?" Her voice was a whisper. Her eyes had closed.

"Yes. She had trouble sleeping. It was this or listening to her and Bolda arguing over who was or wasn't cheating at rings and stones."

"Did she cheat?"

"Only with Bolda. So did he." Her breathing had slowed and he made his words very soft and followed her rhythm.

"You never answered me." Slower again and faint. "What do you see when you're with her?"

His hands moved on their own: circle and press, lighter and firmer, the placement here, then there. What did he see? His mind was as drifting as hers;

he had lost the slight pains in his fingers and joints that anchored him. Even his leg didn't ache; the gash lost in a memory somewhere. What did he see? Then or now?

"When the Zimmer ship passed over us, before we reached the mountains, do you remember?" She didn't answer. "I thought I could ride in the image reflected back from the belly tiles, it was almost familiar, it wasn't until later that I recalled from where." The freighters on Lillisim. Rarely more than ten times a year and always an event. Nothing else ever happened on Lillisim.

"Where I was born and grew up, the ships would come in off the ocean, always the same pathway. There must have been a beacon in orbit, or the ship's Net flagged the route on approach. I never thought to ask, no one asked, it was just what happened, like the sand, like the waves. Lillisim was part of a Temple contract run, only those ships ever came." He was sure she was asleep; the touching was for him now.

"There would be a whine, like from the Ladybug, then a flash of dark over the tunnel opening of any building underneath, and the shape of the opening would bring the sound down to the apartment levels. Where I lived was in the ship's path near where it usually was able to land, my people were merchants because of that, had been for as many generations back as our family history went. If you hurried as soon as you first heard the whine and were lucky, you got a glimpse of the ship as it passed overhead. It looked as though the ocean and dunes were floating in the sky, with a line of silver for the shore, all the images swirling around an oval point of darkness."

Too fast over to see properly, he remembered, but the image would last to be puzzled out later. Much later: a moment after the ship passed, the building would explode children like a bean plant does overripe beans.

"If they begrudged their coming to Lillisim, the traders didn't show it in their welcome." He leaned over her, a fingertip to her lips to feel her breath. "I suppose we wore ourselves plain for them to see and never expected other than what we got in return. There's nothing hidden about us. The breeding is too thin, too much all the same."

He stretched out beside her, her head nestled in the crook of his arm. On her other side, Alicia was asleep, dreaming, her eyes moving rapidly. She looked like a child again lying there. Like Li-Fu had at much the same age, he had scarcely noticed her changing into a woman. He hadn't let himself remember her for a long time. He would have liked to know her better as a woman; she'd come back to Palace, to her mother's death, a stranger. Or he had been one to her. Tass'alt to an Empress, not the father she remembered. Neither of them had tried to break down the barrier between them - and then she was gone. All he had were memories of her as a child, all he'd ever have now.

The guard had gone back past the line in the dirt, fighting his own battle with sleep by pacing. Smoke was like a fine mist in the trees beyond him, heavier in what could be seen of the mountain across the valley, a softening of the distance but bright where the sun touched it. The smell of wood smoke, a cooking fire, he thought, then remembered the heavy smoke earlier. No wind, it would have spread to fill the valley, catching the light air currents from the uneven warming of the land, and drift to be trapped in the branches and the long green needles.

They might have left the food behind, Garm thought, wrapping a curl of brown hair around one finger. And Sorsi's two might have brought it back here. And he hoped the others, whoever they were, had been able to run, and had run then, both fast and far.

Eunni sighed. Asleep, he decided, but not dreaming yet, she was very still. He smoothed the curl to join the others. Red from the sun in the brown hair, even coarsened with dust and sweat. Red as well in the freckles across her small nose and in her eyelashes. At midday, she promised the color of the sunrise. And her skin - he could see under the dirt and under her skin, she was transparent with the sunlight. With the back of one finger he brushed along the curve of her jaw. Barely seen hairs like the frayed edge of a silk scarf. She had the gift of scent that a wildflower does.

"I wear myself plain when Cassa is with me," he said, wondering if she heard, or would remember later, or understand. If he did. He was warm with the sun on him, even with the thin robe and the cold ground. Warm with the woman beside him.

He woke from a dream of Lillisim, but only stray images remained, and impressions of feelings, such as dreams splinter into. The sky had been an oval of cerulean far above him, a hole at the top of the shell of the building. The translucent walls glowed; the apartments with their balconies facing to the center were spiral ridges in the nautilus. The sand was down, he remembered, and he thought it really had been then, and the building bathed in sun. The merchant ship had come; the one that would take him to Rimnic, a start that years later would take him to Palace. But what he saw in the instant of waking was the light around him - it spoke to him in a whisper. The people crowding him were light-eaten shapes, speaking, touching him good-bye, but all of what he heard was the light and he took that with him out of the dream, the straining to hear, and the sense of loss when he couldn't.

Then he wasn't there - finding another image after all - but at the level between the dunes where the ship was, the shape of it almost not seen, the hull scales just another texture of amber sand and blue sky. There was no entrance, he remembered fearing that the ship was closed and would stay closed. The dunes pressed at his fear, the tips of buildings he should have been able to see

were gone; he was alone with the wind and the world-net. It whispered to him, it had been all along. He turned full circle one more time to see his home, he knew it was the last time in the way you know in dreams, and from the direction of the Temple and the path that led there, a young girl watched.

Alwin was standing over him, leather strips in his hands. "Don't bother tying them," Sorsi said flatly. One of her Xintan was beside her - returned after all - and the guard on her other side, but that one was backing up, looking to run. Garm could see their deaths in the priestess's face, a desire to finish here before taking her turn to run as well.

He got up on one elbow, holding Eunni against him with his other arm, shielding her with his body. She woke up with a start, then lay there very still, her eyes to the ground. As though he could protect her, or she could hide. Alicia was asleep and he didn't know if he should wake her up to die.

The light had faded, sunset already, and a storm coming. Red and black, the light was strange, and a taste of the breeze was bitter and sweet, cold metal on his tongue. Copper. And sugar. Then, as quickly returned: the resin of the pines and the scent of sun warmed earth. He got to his knees, still holding onto Eunni but for balance now, and looked up. Blue overhead, an oval of blue, too bright to see properly and with the sun a blazing point hardly past midday. He squeezed his eyes shut as he turned his face away, disorientated.

The guard did run, the scuffle making him look again. The Xintan Warrior aimed his rifle after the man, but Sorsi pushed the barrel down. "He can only go where we're going," she said, and to the man's puzzled look, shook her head. She pushed the dirt with the toe of one riding boot. A line had been there once, now a faint red edged shadow was before her, and a gray one behind. Two suns, Garm wondered?

The second Xintan Warrior appeared leading the bay mare, the horse laden with packs. A cloth was tied over her eyes. "I cut the other ones loose," he said, struggling to control the animal, all his weight on the lead rope to hold her down. "They're no use to us."

"Fewer people makes the promises easier," Garm said, getting to his feet. His thin underrobe caught a swell of cold air, the edges of the torn cloth brushing at his thighs. "Your time runs out, I think," he added softly looking to Sorsi with his words, and holding his robe down with one hand.

The length of a small room to be at the cliff's edge. He felt the promise of the rifle between his shoulders the entire way, waiting for the shot. He was still alive to look back. Nobody had moved but Eunni, sitting up now and looking around. Behind them, it was a short abrupt climb to the crest of the mountain and a broken ridge of trees and bare rock where the soil had eroded. Red flickered

between the rocks, in the cracks, and the trees drifted in his consciousness, there and gone and back again.

"What did you do to her?" he asked, then realized he had spoken to the air, looking out again from what had been a cliff. The mountain was sinking, being swallowed by a flat plain. The image lapped at the further line of mountains as an ocean would, in a vast, slow swelling. He could have stepped out, walked out. Solid ground, flat as a flood plain, the entire thing made up of plates of mud, dark spaces between them. Above was a red sky of billowing clouds edged in gray. The air was filled with the scent of something sweet.

His body didn't want to move, he stiff legged backwards a couple of steps before turning. "What did your people do to her?" he asked again, his voice breaking.

"A drug to keep her asleep. That's all I heard."

Red clay under his feet now, he hadn't seen the change come. He stepped towards the other people and the edge of the first plate crumbled when he put his weight on it. They would have to walk them center-to-center, he thought, as though they were small paving stones set in a lawn. The ridge behind the stand of people was gone. All he could see were plates of red clay to a close horizon of clouds, the same all around.

Eunni was still kneeling, holding fragments of red clay in her hands, the tip of her nose dusted with red. She was laughing silently. The man from the Holding backed from her, his attention on her, not the change around him. The two Warriors had taken guard positions relative to the priestess; he had seen it done so often at the Holding.

"This is Zimmer," Garm said, bending to take a fragment of the plate that had broken under his feet. "The world, I mean. She's created it here, probably taking the pattern from the energy fields the Zimmer are using at the Holding. She's not awake yet, still dreaming, I think." He smiled, he felt it as a weak smile, but suspected it looked wild. Red chalk stained his fingers, he thought the clay would have had the brittle hardness of shell but it crushed easily to a powder. The scent of roses was in the dust and when he touched a red smeared finger to his tongue the dust was sweet.

Sorsi took the rifle the darker Warrior held out to her, checked it quickly then put the strap over her shoulder. She motioned Alwin to the third point of the guard. The bald man hesitated, then ducked his head and moved. "How far out will it go?" she asked. His death wasn't in her face anymore, he saw, but hers hadn't replaced it. Not a trade; the woman looked as though she planned a walk on Zimmer every day after lunch.

"Does there have to be an end?" Garm asked.

The mare danced uneasily beside her, snorting and trying to shake off the cloth over her eyes. Sorsi ran a palm along the animal's neck then wrapped

fingers in the long mane. "It came over us like the tide coming in. There'll be a shore."

The mare had settled to a nervous blowing. "How did you get into this?" he asked. "I can't see you as a Blueknife fanatic."

She frowned at him, then left the mare to draw a line with the toe of her boot, unconcerned about the plates crushing underfoot, making a straight line a body's length. "That way," she said, pointing towards him, away from where the Holding would be. She shook her head. "I didn't like the cliff trail anyway. This will be faster."

"Did you think she was a fake?"

The taller Warrior looked to Sorsi as though all his answers had that source. She shrugged. "This is Otalli quil'Postassa," she said, gesturing to the blond with an indulgent look, and to the other, the darker man, heavier and with a similar build to hers, "Caull quis'Pall."

A brother or maternal cousin, Garm thought. Cross-Clan to Bissalta and Fontil. "Did you know Fontil?" he asked. "The one who died as Pantinn's..."

"I won't talk of my dead with you," she said as evenly as she had spoken all her words. And to Caull, "Put a long hobble on the horse - I don't want her running - then tie the girl on. Alwin, you can stay with us and pledge to take my orders or go your own way. We three are bound together by words of honor, but you're none of mine and I won't have you with us otherwise."

She waited. Caull had the mare as a shield but he was watching the dark man, one hand ready to his rifle. Brother, Garm thought.

Garm took a step forward. "If he wears a braid under one of those gloves then he's already broken one oath."

"I'm oathed to Blueknife," Alwin said in a rush, backing up as quickly then stopped, off balance on the broken ground. Sweat streaked the dome of his head, rivulets in the dusting of red chalk. "I've got the cuts. All of us broke..."

Sorsi scratched the back of one hand. "When?" she said. Otalli grinned, hardly waiting for her sign. The distance between the young Warrior and Alwin was three quick steps. Garm's head pounded but he didn't dare move, he almost didn't breathe. He had once asked Gennady how it felt to kill a man.

The man didn't struggle with two rifles pointed at him. The braiding was gone, both tan gloves off, and on one wrist showed a small tattoo. More than a servant then. And further up the same arm: three parallel lines cut deep, probably less than a week old.

She looked at him then back at Alwin. Otalli had let him go and the man was backing up again. "I have contacts, they won't know I was with Blueknife, you could..."

Garm was watching him, he missed what Sorsi must have done, or the look on her face perhaps, but Alwin suddenly bolted. Stepping stones, Garm thought.

Running from plate to plate. The distance was swallowing him faster than it should have, chalk rising behind a straight trail of shattered plates as his weight pounded them. Garm looked at Sorsi, the two Warriors were at guard position again, their rifles pointed at the running man, but restrained by one blue tattooed hand raised. Eunni watched as she held Alicia, the girl was awake now.

Alicia's scream was cut off by Eunni's hand at the instant Sorsi barked, "Stand down!" Her rifle was in position and as ready but none of the three fired.

Only clouds, Garm thought. Only a shape formed out of clouds with wings of gray dust and lightening bolts for talons. He didn't see the bird entire, the cloud followed it down with ripples of a red storm and a hot wind in the cold air. Alwin vanished in puff of crimson chalk and when it settled, he wasn't there.

"Anything you know about?" Sorsi asked him, letting her rifle swing back on its sling.

"No."

She looked at Eunni and Alicia but didn't wait for any answer. "We have to move, so we'll move slow to Alwin's fast. Take the hobble off the mare. If there is any sign of that thing, set her running. If we live, we'll move slower still." She looked at each of them in turn, stopping at Alicia. The girl had managed to get to her feet. "Are you awake enough to walk?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

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An hour of shouts - from the prisoner, from the Holding guard doing the questioning - alternating with soft tones from the guard more threatening than the knife the Warrior used to flick scratches on the prisoners arms and legs. An hour of listening to the same questions over and over, all of which they knew the answers to, and Rit was bored as much as appalled and disturbed that he could be bored watching a man scream obscenities, a man who could count the remainder of his life in hours, not days.

The prisoner was Bluestone Clan, although Olloss had been careful to say to both him and Captain Slicanin that they didn't know his name. And had lied - and had known Rit was aware he lied. Was the lie to stop the deaths from spreading out in a useless chain? Or to stop them from spreading up into the Blood in Xinta? The Temple Captain was becoming impatient. Too few prisoners, too few names, too few answers. Too many suicides among those under guard.

Olloss's face was impassive - Rit's model - and he hadn't moved since setting himself where the prisoner, when taking ease in how the ropes cut across his neck, would face him.

And Rit's reaction if the man had been one of the Patrol prisoners? Or City Guard from Endica or Intil, someone Rit might have known if only to pass by at the gates. Or one of those Rit had known better, ex-Patrol maybe, even from Endica Barracks? One who had taken a City Guard position when his term had run out because he had family here, had married in Endica or Intil, had children? Still had children in the city of white shell that Endica had become?

Rit walked to the other side of the room and leaned on the wall beside Olloss, feeling the smooth curve of the room against his bruised back like it was the inside of an egg. Cold, but not the cold of stone, this burned. And white, stark white except where they had darkened it with soot from the torches, smoke from the candles. These rooms weren't meant for fire, the spaces didn't draw. Smoke clung to the smooth walls until disturbed and then followed the movement.

A Clan Zimmer fortress. Ulanda's pattern pull hadn't faded.

The prisoner followed Rit's movement with his eyes then spat between broken teeth. "Strom abomination."

The guard slapped the man with the back of his hand. "Where was the second wave of troops stationed?" Again. The prisoner's head lolled to one side, blood dripped from his nose, joining a slowly growing puddle of blood on the floor under him. Only the ropes held him upright in the saddle stool. "The original attack was planned for dawn. What was the signal to change the time?"

No answer, only the dripping blood.

"You were in Endica for three days prior to the attack," Rit said. The man's head straightened until his eyes met Rit's. "On leave from the Command in Intil." He saw the other city in the man's mind, but it wasn't a true image so much as a sense of place stronger than if he had just passed through it. A Senior Warrior, a Lead Hand. Finding out who he was would be relatively easy if he had access to the Xintan military rolls - or if Intil and the people reappeared when the Zimmer pull ended. He didn't mention the prisoner's rank; everything said here was a matter of Net record.

"You were with the second wave of attackers," he continued. Images came to him then, but in a useless jumble. The attack on the Holding. He had the man's attention, something the other man hadn't managed with blows and shouts.

"The Strom are soulless filth. Monster! Abomination!" Broken teeth, split lip. He spat blood with the last word.

"Possibly," Rit said, then to the Marshall: "He won't talk, not yet."

Motioning the guard to step aside - the slightest hesitation and the man did - Olloss squatted so he was face to face with the prisoner, pulled his knife from his boot and held it near the man's face, turning the blade so the reflected torch light

flashed across the blood streaked face. "In the Lady's name," he whispered in time to the flashing light. A heartbeat. Slow and regular. Rit felt it stronger than the prisoners own. "I tell you, you have no mother, no sister. Only the Lady. And the Lady you have denied."

The prisoner twisted in the robes, fighting the flashing light in his eyes. "The true Lady has my heart, her sign is on my arm." Blueknife oath cuts. Three shallow cuts across the fleshy part of one forearm.

"There's only one Lady and she's here," Ollass said. "She dreams of a red world. I've seen her. I know the truth. You've seen her dream made clay and mist, you know the truth but you still deny her. In denying her, you deny your mother and your sisters." Olloss ran a finger through the blood on the man's chin and held it up before his eyes. "Human blood? You talk about abomination... can a thing without a mother be human?" Then with flat of the blade on the chin where his finger had been, he pressed into the blood and the man froze. And in a single one of those heartbeats, the knife twisted and followed the blood back, slitting the lower lip, then the nose, cartilage parting with a snap. The point of the knife stopped at the tear duct of the left eye. Another heartbeat of frozen time, then the man screamed.

Olloss straightened as the scream became a cough, blood splattering. "Get him out of here. An hour so he can think about it."

The guard signaled his men. Olloss waited until the prisoner had been dragged out, then took the towel passed him and wiped the blood from his knife then his face. "What else did you get from him that wasn't in words?"

"Only that he meant it when he said he'd kill me if he got loose. I'd like a name."

"You and others. A name that only leads back to Xinta won't find anyone what they need to know here. By the time you get to Wilni..." The tone said 'if' you get to Wilni. "... don't worry, there'll be blood across not a few of the seats in the Assembly of Elders, but the names will be the same."

"And the Temple ship Captain's concern about who planned this?"

"A matter of politics more than justice." Olloss dropped the towel in the pool of blood and with his foot, moved it back and forth as though intending to clean the floor. "I don't like cold killing or politics, both are usually for nothing in the end except to prove you have a strong stomach."

Rit opened his mouth to agree, finding that much common ground with the Marshall - and wanting words to disarm his growing desire to walk out of the Holding and across the dry red plain that his home had become and not stop.

An image came, not words. An explosion of water - not blood - against a parquet floor. And Garm. Rit tried to take the sudden image and change it to a sense of the old man and hopefully see where he was. And found himself looking up at a green sky. Ri.

Pasi had him by the arm, half supporting him. He was in the middle of the room. The Warrior - his personal guard - had been in the corridor, conceding that Rit might be safe in the company of three guards and the Marshall against a bound and bloodied prisoner. Olloss stood where he had been earlier, the same expression on his face as when he had watched the prisoner.

"Is this a Strom thing?" a woman's voice asked from the doorway behind him, sounding amused. "Or do you normally faint at the sight of blood?"

Rit shook his head to clear it and Pasi let him go. "Only at the sight of my own," he answered as he rubbed his face with his hands.

Ro'lin quis'Palltin. The Elder Bluestone priestess. She laughed at his weak joke. A snow hawk, Rit had thought on first seeing her and hadn't changed his mind. A short plump snow hawk. Dark brown eyes, slanted as to almost mirror the line of her hooked nose. Written into her leathery sun-darkened skin, the dense lines of blue were an older, more elaborate style of tattoos than Viy'lana's, more like what the priestess's draw on the faces of their dead who fall in battle.

Behind her and half into the room was Captain Slicanin, her snout wrinkled, her nose twitching. "If you have no more answers for me than before, I'll take the Strom before he faints again. We can walk where it isn't so messy. There's too much blood here; who's to say whom it belongs to. I don't want it to be mine."

Pasi looked towards the Marshall in the briefest of glances. And got a nod in return in just as brief a movement.

A long walk, Rit thought as he turned on his heel and left without another word. Rude? Deliberately so. He knew he shouldn't let himself out of the discussion between the two despite that he could pick it up from the Net - the very cooperative Net as far as he was concerned, even if he didn't advertise the fact. But he was tired to death of being guarded and always watched.

He checked for Net flags, feeling again the difference from the Net he had gotten used to. A feed from the Zimmer ship had quickened their own, but to grow into what, he wasn't sure. Bolda had a message for him that said Quin'tat was otherwise unoccupied and if he wanted to talk to him, now was as good as any time. "No, it's not," he replied, but the message sat there, and when he checked, Bolda was outside of the Placement limits which meant he was in the underground chamber where they had taken Ulanda.

"Is it a Strom thing?" Slicanin asked as she hurried beside him.

"What?"

"What you do. Xissi quis doesn't have answers..."

"Who?" Then realized she meant the Holding man doing the questioning. Xissitta quis'Ril.

"The one with the blood on his hands but no answers between his teeth. Even the Marshall has no answers, only you do, and you won't tell me whose blood should be on the floor there."

"Panntin is Strom too, ask him who you're supposed to arrest. Isn't that how it's done in Temple? The Priests make the judgments?"

"No. Yes." Her whiskers fanned out. "Yes."

Three layers of shielding yielded as he and Slicanin reached the balcony, the Command level Net making its own kind of allowances to him.

The area hadn't existed before. He walked in midair; he stood on white shell that wasn't there, his hand on a railing that might well be a cloud. And was followed into the fantasy. As soon as he and Slicanin had passed the secured area, Pasi was joined by two other guards, the men arriving on the run. Pasi had a look of solid determination on his face; the other two watched their feet more than him, their fear obvious. They didn't look at the red sky or the red clay plain or the white lines on the too-close horizon that was the old ruins come to life again as a Zimmer city. No ocean, no river, only the flat plain.

Cold air and freedom. Freedom fifty odd feet below him. Slicanin pulled at his sleeve and he followed her back through the warding. "Is it a Strom thing to think you can walk on a pattern pull that might not be there a moment later?" she asked when they were back in an area that had at least been something before. Her teeth chattered the words into bits even through the Net translation. "Or should I ask the Lord Priest that as well?"

"You might." Then he laughed suddenly. The Captain might not like walking through a fantasy, but she didn't seem to mind swimming through one. "I have to talk to Quin'tat, do you want to join me?"

"To swim?"

"You swim, I'll walk on nothing. It's a Strom thing."

She laughed as he had, mimicking the human action, but then licked her palms before smoothing her whiskers down, both sides at once.

Pasi cleared their route through the Security Net links and the other two guards left to continue whatever they had been doing before. The corridors that led to the underground chambers were secured by Zimmer, not Temple or Xintan guards, same as the Holding Center where the crystal arrays were. The Zimmer at the last door saluted him, then Slicanin. Rit nodded, not sure if it was the same woman as when he was here last. Placement didn't differentiate between the Clan Zimmer in each triad and he still had trouble telling them apart.

"Wait here for me," he said to Pasi, and only here was he obeyed.

Once down the first few steps, the walls changed from monotonous white to slightly concave plates of polished red clay set with a darker mortar, not the water smoothed stone it had been before. On the surface of the clay were widely spaced flecks of white that looked like mold. Moisture here. That was the same as the original.

"I don't think I'll ever bother to visit Zimmer," Slicanin said as she tapped the wall with her nails at each step, apparently aiming for the white from the way her

fingers darted. Small glow globes bounced in time until he sent them ahead. "I think I'll go home and have babies. What do you think?"

"Why not."

"No reason not to, I can."

"I'm sure."

"No, seriously. The males would come. Don't you think so?"

He stopped and looked at her. The long gray whiskers on either side of her snout flexed to almost meet in front, then each side wiggled counter to the other and she smoothed them back with her thick black tongue. "Vannsit?" he asked the Net as he continued down the steps, adding 'breeding and babies' when parameters were requested. The information was spat out in a confusion of images.

He changed from the Xintan they had been using, to a pull of plain-tongue. "If you went into season, a Zimmer triad of guards couldn't keep the males away." With the words, he signed a negative form of indulgence but used High formal, hoping the combination would constitute another joke if nothing else. Or he could always plead ignorance, her question and the language both. He didn't have the faintest idea of what she was getting at, but from even a few days experience, assumed it had little to do with what she was saying. "You could hide here, never go home, and still the males would find you. They would be so thick underfoot we would trip over them on the stairs and break our necks."

Teeth showed in what he had learned to recognize as a Vannsit laugh. "I think so." She tapped her nails as she started down again. "They would, we would."

The stairs opened to a large cavern. More red tiles on the ceiling, walls and floor. The bottom edges of the tiles dripped, the white foam had increased to form concentric rings on the darkened clay, and on the floor, the rings filled with a solid growth of white. If you broke a piece of foam off, it crumbled like a biscuit, completely dry to the touch, and with the smell of butter but not the feel. A single track of crumbs lead to where Medeen stood at the top of the final few steps down to the garden.

"Lord Strom," Medeen said, not changing his guard position. "Captain Slicanin." A Net linking globe hung from his empty ammunition belt, a white ceramic trade knife in a leather sheath was beside it, the only weapon allowed non-Zimmer in here and one the Zimmer considered basic to being dressed. The young Warrior wouldn't be able to hear the start of the Net echo but Rit could. He saluted the boy solemnly before starting down the stairs.

Scaled fingers with black tipped nails touched his sleeve to stop him again. "I can feel the bite of your teeth. This Net sets mine against each other so that I can scarcely hear what is being said."

"Perhaps if you just said it plainly it would be easier to hear."

Her whiskers fanned out and she blinked. "The Net from my ship would be easier, and the warding as well."

"Really?"

"I modified the systems myself with Vannsit cores, the original ones were stupid. Well, boring. They didn't like me." A fluid shrug. "What can the rebels do now that my people can't handle? What are the Zimmer doing except getting in the way? Besides, Vannsitini is a much prettier world than Zimmer."

Rit stepped past her, but stopped and turned just before starting down the steps. She was still standing next to Medeen. "Especially prettier with Vannsit males," he said.

"Is there another kind of Vannsitini? What would it be without males? Who would go there?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know." Sunlight reflecting off the pond inside the garden cast a net of dancing light around him. "It could prove to be awkward. What if the Lady woke up while you were... well, involved. Who would be there with you?"

"You seek to discourage me with possibilities like that?" She tilted her head with a look at Medeen, her pointed black nose twitched. The rims of Medeen's ears were red.

Rit laughed again and Medeen's high color spread to his cheeks.

Slicanin was frankly staring at the boy. "Does the color mean you would like to swim with me?" A more direct and personal question appeared as a Net query, the relay Medeen held mirrored the request.

"Will you join me, Captain?" Rit said, giving the Net link a nudge at the same time. It crumbled and she turned her stare towards him, whiskers eclipsed from their fanning. He shook his head as he took the last few steps down, then looked back to check that the entrance was still there. Slicanin's head poked through, her eyes blinking at the sunlight, then she moved in a rush to stop next to him, hands busy sleeking her pelt down and rearranging her uniform.

Bolda sat on a rock next to the pond, the second linking globe by his feet. Ulanda was in the wooden pavilion, brazier set close by and a screen for privacy. The grass would have been as soft and dry and the sun as warm. Their own need to give her shelter, he supposed. She had been curled up against the rock Bolda sat on now when this space had finished changing from a stone shelf over a black pool into a garden.

"You two again," Bolda said but his growl was as absent minded as his comment. Slicanin had come in the first time with Quin'tat, not him. The weaver was at his braiding loom, what looked to Rit like a four legged stool with a round hole cut in the center of the square seat. A red and white patterned cord hung from the hole, weighted half down its hanging length by a net of clear glass balls, the rest of the completed braid coiled on the grass. It was secondary cord; the balls of silk that Bolda was crossing over in a steady rhythm were thin strands of

round primary cord each wrapped around a glass cylinder with a barb that stopped the unrolling.

"You were expecting somebody else?" Slicanin said. She reached for a dangling blood red primary cord only to have her hand slapped away.

"I can always hope. By the way, you touch that Zimmer Net with anything of your own and I'll chop you into fish bait myself.

"It was only an idea." Slicanin leaned on another rock and started flicking the water with a finger.

Deciding to give them the waters edge, Rit sat on the mix of grass and yellowed needles in the shade of a pine tree where he had sat the day before. In a way, he felt he had claimed the spot, responding as much to memory as the need to be at least momentarily apart from the others. If he closed his eyes for the scent alone, he could have been twenty years younger and sitting in his great-uncle's private garden at Strom Charter House in Wilni. Was it still there, he wondered? The space would be, but probably not the way his great-uncle had kept it. A small walled garden without flowers except the few that seeded themselves. Leaves from the ragged shrubs went unraked, becoming brown skeletons by spring. A wooden bench had been set under the single pine tree leaning against the wall, in the summer the shade was deepest there and the air fragrant.

Rit had been pacing, not sitting. "Don't you like it, boy?" Tirreniti had laughed at his answer. "Yes, it is messy. I suppose you could give me the history of garden styles and map the drift of cultural influences." He could have and started to do so. His uncle smiled through a mouthful of his lunch and patted the bench beside him. "Stop wandering and sit down. Instead of styles, tell me when a space is a garden and when it isn't? When is there enough of a difference between the wild and the tamed?" He remembered he hadn't. Instead, he had argued semantics.

A heavy knit top landed in his lap. "Come in with me," Slicanin said as she tugged at one leg of her pants.

Strung iridescent beads, impossibly tiny, made up the stretchy cloth of her top. In them was something of what he felt when he touched the tiles of the flitter. Energy pathways... but they weren't all pre-set, he could have been touching the skin under soft fur. He tossed the top over to join Slicanin's boots and weapons. "Another time. I've used up all my Stromness for one day. Perhaps someone else...?"

Bolda looked up from repositioning the net of glass weights higher on the growing braid cord. Where he had just taken it off, the silk was crimped. "Not bloody likely. And both of you leave the kid alone."

With his words, the Net linking globe sprouted two flags. Rit scanned them and left them. Delayed transmissions, Bolda must have been using the link to its capacity.

Slicanin stretched, facing away, and her broad tail unwrapped from between her legs and started to wag. Scales, but not gray or black. A rainbow of set colors, or iridescent like the beads, Rit hadn't time to decide. She looked over her shoulder and winked at his looking, then splashed into the water and disappeared.

"She does that deliberately." Bolda was staring at his dripping silk. "Aims it. Talented woman."

"Should she be in there?"

Bolda set the braiding frame to one side and stretched his legs out, digging into the grass with his toes "Have you decided to include her in your worry list?"

Two more flags buzzed from the link, priority labeled and for him. "May I? The Net, I mean."

"It's all yours, I'm going to get something to eat. Are you interested?"

"Something to drink."

"You mean stronger than tea?"

Yes, he had meant stronger than tea, but he shook his head. "Better not, I have to be back for the rest of the interrogation in an hour. Make it tea, maybe a sandwich too. Where's Quin'tat?"

Bolda nodded towards the pavilion, then left.

Rit let Gennady's flag unfold first, then Kori's, hers unfolding entire at a single touch. The freeborn was still in the Holding Center, Allykh with her. Nisstin's input lay heavy over their security runs, she had left his comments in place, adding variations and new runs until the report was like a maze, the spin analysis a small prize in the center.

Rit let Gennady's bare-bone flag repeat. The sasi are falling to seed, the Zimmer lord had said, and when the sasi die, the world drowns. The flag tore like wet tissue to an image underneath. He had no perspective of size to what was happening and then all at once he did. A plate of red mud. A seed like a grain of dust, then another, another, a tide of them pelting down, each in a drop of water held by a thin membrane that burst on impact. Above him, the sky was clearing and something huge screamed with hunger.

"Wake her up," Gennady said.

Quin'tat was at the far end of the pavilion, overlooking another section of the garden. Raked sand, moss and rocks backed by a reed fence. Last night, Rit had gone through the half-moon gate intent on finding where and how the garden ended and followed a path of mossy wooden rounds set as steps up a gradual slope. Pine and cedar trees on either side of the pathway; he couldn't tell if there

was any difference to them from the several kinds he thought he knew and found he didn't when he tried to compare. He had put a cone heavy with seed in his pocket and later, left it in what was still his room. His books, Bolda's rug by his bed, the world-altar dish and the tapestry, all there.

He hadn't found any limits to the garden. From the other side of the crest: the same path down and the pavilion set in a garden of stone and sand, and on the far side of the wooden building, the lawn and the stone edged pond with the red bridge over it. A looped-pull, Niv had called it. The Select Ka'it'ka's garden from Palace.

One of the Zimmer triad guarding Ulanda was outside the screened area watching Quin'tat and Rit nodded to her before sitting down near the large man, but on the low wooden bench instead of the steps. Yellow wood with a brownish color, almost purple, to the grain. The pattern of shadows cast by the beams framing the open pavilion hadn't moved at all in more than a full day. The sun-warmed stripes felt good against his back.

Quin'tat didn't appear to notice his arrival. "I'm sorry," Rit said. "If there is anything I can do..."

"You've done it." As he spoke, Quin'tat continued to stare at a rock in the center of the garden, lines in the sand circling it.

He hadn't meant to beg the possibility that he could have prevented En'talac's death but that was what was in the man's voice and voice was all he was getting. Quin'tat was blocking him. Along with Pida and Jini, he had escaped from the Holding in the damaged Zimmer flutter. They had drifted west with the wind coming off the ocean and been picked up by Slicanin.

"I would have seen you sooner but I've been busy since before you arrived back here."

Quin'tat let go of the linking globe he held and watched as it rolled down the steps and made a short trail at right angles to the rake marks in the sand. That he had had one at all was an act of trust in the man that Rit had argued for. "Is it over then? Will you get your people back?"

"Not yet." Nowhere near finished. "We might get lucky with the search. After all, you were found. The pods are covering the periphery of the Zimmer pull and the few clear areas inside. They'll do more if the veil rises. Allykh says it's not possible to fly for any distance through the cloud without the kind of protection we don't have and they refuse to move the Ladybug from guarding here. Gennady says we have two days at most before the sasi die."

Endica would be the first to drown, not the Holding, a Clan fortress built on what passed for high ground on Zimmer. Endica had been transformed into a city of white shell, warded by the Zimmer against the mirsasitin and lesser predators, but not against the floods. The Zimmer ship didn't have the crystals to spare for that kind of sustained effort. Intil didn't exist, neither did the delta farms, but

Endica stretched huge. A city of ghosts for the most part, the ruins from over six hundred years ago as changed and solid and on dry land as the new town.

One of Quin'tat's thick fingers slowly traced the seam of the floorboard beside him. He didn't say anything. "Did you take Gennady's spin?" Rit asked sharply. "I passed it to you."

"She'll have to wakened eventually. If you can't, then there's nothing to be done."

"Will you help?"

The answer came slowly. "If you wish."

"I'd like you to talk to Captain Slicanin in the meantime," Rit continued, relieved that much had been settled. With Garm gone and En'talac dead, they badly needed this man's experience. "There'll be more prisoners taken as the questions about what happened here spreads into Xinta and the occupied areas. I'm asking that the Xintan be allowed to handle the situation. We have to live with the results of what happens, you don't. Let the Xintan Courts deal with them, at least for the preliminary judgments."

Quin'tat was back to staring at the rock. "Captain Slicanin doesn't have a choice."

"I think she's trying to impress Gennady, nothing more."

Quin'tat shrugged. "With or without Gennady, with or without the Lady Priest Ulanda waking up, eventually Slicanin will have to stop asking for names and insist the people be turned over to her."

"Anga saw choices and he and one or more of your crew had to be involved in the attack on the Holding. Or doesn't Empire Law apply to loom-masters?"

"What he thought and what others of my people may have thought - and done - is very different than an outside attack against Temple."

"Not to the people who died. If it would help, let the Xintan Courts deal with the rebels first, but put a reserve in for the Temple Justice Court's final decision. Log a formal submission in the Net, your name or Ulanda's, or both. Whatever would do it."

"And of course there's precedence?"

"I've flagged several."

"Really?" Quin'tat shook his head, then stepped down and picked up the Net linking globe. He could see the broad outline of the man's foot in the print left behind in the sand. The sun shone red tips into the black of Quin'tat's hair as he stood looking around the enclosed garden as though he hadn't been staring at it for hours. "What are you waiting for?"

"There's no need to move quickly and many reasons to move slowly. We need stability here..." Too late, Rit remembered En'talac's identical words, but Quin'tat didn't react, he must not have seen those records. "The stability has to evolve, it can't be forced by eliminating a few key people, not when it involves belief

systems. Revenge shouldn't be a priority, not unless you think there's a need to hide your tracks."

"I had nothing to do with this."

"Anga was your responsibility, you have to take some of the blame. Consider this as payment."

"A strong lesson needs to be made or this will just be the start. A Temple Justice Court would be looking at more than a few lives. Temple moves slowly in most matters, but not in this."

"One of those lives is my wife," Rit said, being deliberately cruel. His wife and Eunni. Even if they managed to get free of the Zimmer pull, he wasn't sure Eunni could survive the journey, that those who had taken her wouldn't think her valuable enough to keep safe. "Three rebel groups made it out before or shortly after the attack from the Endica based Xintan troops. We don't even know if all the captives are together or if they split up. Different ones may have Garm or the children. The Ladybug recorded several groups of riders heading north. And an Ocea ship was anchored off the point..."

"And now? An ocean? On Zimmer?"

There wasn't now... and in a few days, not an ocean, but a shallow sea that would last until the sasi sprouted. "There'll be something," he insisted. "If they were already past the range of the Zimmer pull, then we'll have to negotiate to get them back. The very act of having our people will consolidate the opposition; give them a focus. If Slicanin starts collecting trophies and creating martyrs, we might not get them back at all."

"There have already been deaths among your prisoners."

Where had he gotten that? Almost anywhere, Rit thought. There were too many groups vying for control and either passing on information or holding it back in their own interests. The South Marshall and the Princip at Endica. The representatives from the Assembly of Elders who had been here for the Blessing and who had survived either here or in Endica. The Zimmer - who were effectively in control but weren't interested in making a career of it. Captain Slicanin. Panntin's Household... Viy'lana really.

"Quin'tat, if we go the route you and Slicanin want, the next prisoners won't be ones taken in battle, but people with influence over others. Their deaths won't stop that influence."

Quin'tat was rolling the linking globe between his palms when he looked up, the ball almost lost in his big hands. "Lord Priest," he said, switching to High formal, and looking past Rit. "San Viy'lana."

Panntin smiled and answered in heavily accented Xintan rather than the Hegemony he could have used. "I would have to have my own Net link to understand what you said. A greeting, I suppose?" Braid ends trailed to the hem of his Xintan tunic and floated as he walked down the steps. Viy'lana didn't follow

him, but leaned against the post nearest Rit. He bowed but she was watching Panntin.

"I'm not sure I like this part of the garden," Panntin added. "Or, I could like it, but it would take some effort." Auburn hair shone in the sunlight, darker than Rit would have expected from first having seen it in a shorn Patrol cut. Curls left loose, too short to tie back yet, but the sum of the change wasn't to soften his features - the boy's face had become that of a man's in a few short months. Except he looked untouched by what had happened.

"I've come to collect you both at any rate," Panntin continued, but looking at the linking globe, not at either of them. "Bolda said lunch is ready. Lord Wilntinn and the Lady Ramsini will be there. Viy'lana, if you would..." He stayed as Viy'lana accompanied Quin'tat, the large man looking at a loss at how to protest an arm put through his and a determined pulling. The sun brought out the gold streaks in the brown of the priestess's braided and coiled hair. She walked with one arm resting on the round of her belly and took the stairs with exaggerated care, leaning into Quin'tat for support. Three rebels had fallen to her knife before Wandassa had arrived and they had time to set the Zimmer wards. She didn't have a scratch on her.

Panntin watched them leave, using both his hands to shape the sign requesting an indulgence of place. "Useful language. A little awkward with the cording but I can manage the basic signs so that I don't have to learn two different forms, and nobody else has to either." He sat where Quin'tat had been earlier. "Did I interrupt anything important?"

"No."

He smiled. "You still don't talk to me." He used Hegemony for the last words, and Rit heard again the young man's voice he remembered.

"I haven't been around very much."

"And busy otherwise when you were. Or do I make you uncomfortable?" Russet eyes and Rit saw his uncle in their quiet gaze.

Rit took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He didn't want to get into this now. "No, not really."

Panntin smiled again. "I'm not offended, I understand it isn't personal. I was in awe of you, you know. I didn't know you were Strom but I could feel the possibilities about you. Not any details, but the magnitude. I asked to be transferred to your Squadron. Lord Calmuit owed my grandfather certain favors and I extended that privilege just once more past my being in Endica at all. He didn't like you. Or me. He isn't a stupid man but there's nothing complex about him and he distrusted it in others, hated any kind of a mystery."

"I didn't think I had been one."

"Of course you were. For one, you weren't intimidated by him or by your superior officers. You may have intended indifference, but they took it as contempt."

"You knew all this from six months? And much of it spent on horseback away from here?"

"Of course I did." Panntin brought his legs up to sit cross-legged, then looked over at him again. "My abilities are hardly unique, don't tell me you didn't know how your superiors felt."

He had, and hadn't cared. "I had suspected you knew Lord Calmuit," he admitted. And remembered how he had planned on using it by involving the boy in the report on what had happened at the Spine. "Alicia mentioned that you had known her cousin."

Panntin smiled but this time it was a remote smile. "Yes. Gannet. I was hopelessly in love with her. She was quite impatient with me." He looked out towards the garden and there was a pulling down in the Priest, as though he were going into pattern but Rit couldn't see anything come of it, neither a sign of pattern or a sign that the memory had caused him pain. "I came to the Border because I couldn't see any future for myself, and I was used to seeing fragments of people's futures. I thought it meant I was going to die very young and before that happened, I wanted something different than to live hidden away on my grandfather's estate. All I found were more people, their lives and their deaths. Nothing changed."

"You weren't wrong about dying."

"No, I wasn't." Panntin draped his arms over his knees and sighed, as though relaxed by the warm sunlight, but the pulling of pattern in him was stronger, more obvious. A song this place knew, Rit suddenly realized. Alisim? On Palace?

"Viy'lana killed Vinn," Panntin continued tonelessly, watching the flexing of one finger on the cloth of his pants. "Did you know that?" Rit didn't answer as his thoughts scrambled back from where they had been. "The screams you heard while Garm painted Ulanda's face with his own blood. I saw it the first time I made love to her. I didn't understand, I thought it was the sickness. She had the knife under my skin."

"And Gannet?" he said coldly before he could stop himself. "Did you see her death? Did you feel her die?"

"Sometimes I think I killed her." Then, his voice even more distant, Panntin added, "The waves surround the stone. Can you see it?"

"I shouldn't have said that."

"How could you not say it?" Panntin closed his eyes and rubbed them with the heels of his palms before opening them. "The waves are still there. How quickly we adapt. We were bred for that characteristic as much as for being vicious, you

know. Expressed in varying degrees, of course... and you can change the word if you like. I won't."

"I didn't ask you to."

Panntin looked at him, his face expressionless. "What I didn't understand at the time was how you could be a Patrol Captain and be unaffected by the violence, how you could keep so removed from what almost all the men were. And even now, men will die but you won't have blood on your hands."

"I don't see it that way."

"You would watch them die, take their words from their minds, and all the time wait for the change in circumstance that meant they would be allowed to live."

"Working towards the change, you mean. Which is what you interrupted with Quin'tat. You were next, and on the same business."

"I can't help you. I see what is, you see what might be. You constantly evolve." Panntin shook his head. "Viy'lana and I, we're each already what we're supposed to be. She's quite perfect. I don't hate what she is or what she's done, or even fear it. I barely remember being able to. Another life, another person. Do you understand at all?"

He did, in part, and said, "Yes."

"I knew you did, but... I found I had to ask. Do you understand why?"

"Yes."

"Worse than needing to ask, I had trouble with why I should need your reassurance, why I felt I needed any justification for what I am." Panntin turned to look at the screen that made the corner of the pavilion a private room for Ulanda. "You didn't see any of this happening."

Dreams he couldn't remember, a feeling of dread. "No, not really."

"It unfolded like a flower. Also quite perfect."

Rit closed his eyes, breathing deeply to control the rise of bile in his throat. Then stood. "Is this what you came here to say?"

"Do you think I betrayed Ulanda?"

The truth? He didn't see it in the young man, not betrayal, nothing so conscious. Or anything as simple as intent. "No. No, I don't."

Panntin looked at him. "I can't see that your words are a lie but I don't see the same thing in myself. What will you see when you see everything?" Rit didn't answer and Panntin smiled again. "I suppose you are waiting for that as well. Who will you betray in this wait?"

Rit was half way across to the other side of the pavilion when Panntin's voice stopped him. "My people will continue with the questioning and they will deal with the Marshall and Captain Slicanin. They don't require an interpreter of reality. As you said to Quin'tat, we have to live with the results of the Blueknife attack."

And him? Rit turned. "And those results are?"

"They're not all one thing to have a simple answer. How could be they be?"

What Alicia had said to him. The evenness of Rit's voice broke into a snarl. "Try me." The Zimmer guard shifted position relative to him - guarding him? Or guarding against him? Rit smelled the change in the air. Sweet. Burning sugar.

Panntin glanced at the Zimmer woman then back. "One result is that Alisim Temple, not outsiders will make the real decisions here and will be seen to make them."

"Seen by whom? The Zimmer?"

"The Assembly of Elders and the Xintan military. Our relationship with the Zimmer is limited. I told you I see what is - here and now - I don't see the future except how it reflects dimly in the present, I don't think I ever really did."

"And Ulanda?"

"I didn't betray her." Softly spoken, barely heard in the distance between them. Another protest against what wasn't an accusation. Panntin stood and joined him. "I won't betray her... or any word you want. I don't mean her harm."

"And me?"

"Our interests aren't so close that I could harm you. I won't be your enemy."

A large Xintan rug had been spread near Bolda's cording loom, baskets of food beside it, a brazier a little over. Slicanin wasn't there yet, still swimming, Rit thought. Hann was near the loom and she looked up and smiled as he sat. Viy'lana had claimed one corner of the rug and Panntin joined her there.

Bolda was at the brazier, two teapots ready to one side, a third already wrapped with a warming cloth. He snorted when Rit sat down. "Thought I was going to have to go get you two."

"Me? For lunch?"

"I know it doesn't sound likely." He poured a bowl of tea but didn't offer it, shoving it under Hann's nose instead. "Here. Some people will do almost anything to get out of working."

Rit hadn't expected Hann to be out of her bed. She had taken two bullets to the shoulder and had a couple of broken ribs besides. The Captain's bead top was on her lap, and except for her smile to him, she kept her eyes lowered.

"Doing more than I was at least," Rit said. "How are you feeling?"

Viy'lana reached for a sandwich. "She's fine."

Hann's dark face reddened. "As you say, Elder Mother. Only a scratch."

Bolda poured himself tea then put the pot by the priestess. "Probably from playing with that damn cat. You should have let it outside the Nursery warding line." He sat down on the same rock as before, reaching distance to Hann, the braiding frame between them. The tea bowls were still by the brazier.

"I refuse to be blamed for that," Hann said, quite firmly, but the two weavers shared a look, hers with a strong measure of gratitude. "Kori went back for her, not me. She didn't say it, but I think she would have sooner left me behind."

Perhaps she thinks Tika wears lavender cords braided into a collar.” Bolda humphed loudly but his small black eyes twinkled.

Rit settled back on his heels. Kori had picked the cat up as the women retreated towards the warded area, the Xintan girl already badly wounded. With the Nursery secured, they had slipped back out through the shielding - Kori's doing again - and tried to reach where they had left Alicia, Eunni and Garm. He'd gotten the story from Nisstín's spin of the sequence of events during the attack. Viy'lana's version merely stated that the girl had left her post without authorization.

“I thought Wilntinn and Ramsini were coming,” he said.

“Ramsini is still dressing,” Viy'lana said. “I expect she hopes to impress you.”

“She impresses me all to hell,” Bolda said, an air of finality in his tone. Rit saw the finger wiggle of a negative he gave to Hann but from the angle, Viy'lana wouldn't have, couldn't have by the way her eyes narrowed.

Rit passed Viy'lana the two bowls that Bolda hadn't - the smaller inside the normal size one. “The tea must be ready by now.” She looked at him, then Bolda, but only briefly, her narrowed gaze settling on Hann.

Wilntinn and Ramsini arrived a few minutes later, giving Viy'lana a different target. Hann settled into talking quietly with Bolda.

Slicanin's return was announced by a splash and Rit moved his sandwich out of her line of fire. With a series of clicks, the hooked ends of the scales on her face snapped back into place, immediately followed by a flick that stripped the water from the thick pelt covering her head and neck. Then she shook. Her tail was tucked between her legs as she sat, the end splayed to make a fan against her belly.

Bolda brushed stray drops from his jacket. “I hope you left the bloody fish alone this time.” He spoke in Hegemony. Viy'lana was stubbornly pulling a Xintan translation through the linking globe although Rit knew she understood the language.

Slicanin coughed the water from her lungs, splattering Bolda more. “It was only a small fish.” She glanced at Panntin - Viy'lana sitting against him - waited a second then looked to Quin'tat. “Lots of fish in there and still no bottom. I went a long way down and as much side to side, much further than falling off a balcony.” She scratched her narrow torso, both hands, leaving tracks in the black fur. Her teeth chattered together, in pleasure, Rit thought and he got a very fast sideways wink. “What I thought from the echo the first time was the side of the cavern wasn't there when I reached it. I don't think there is a cavern at all only a few body lengths down, and the surface...”

Rit passed Slicanin her clothes before the bowl of tea that Ramsini had just poured. Using the service as an excuse, his stepmother had moved closer,

crowding him with her skirts. "How far down until we aren't there anymore?" he asked Slicanin. He had taken the Net spin of the Captain's first report earlier.

"I didn't look as I dived," Slicanin said, staring at the tea. Pants and top were in an unordered pile on her lap. Her whiskers flexed counter again and drooped. "If I'm that far in and she wakes up, I'm lost in there, I think." Her whiskers drooped all at once and she looked at Rit for a second. "I knew the way back, my body remembers that kind of thing. That's all. I think I'll go swimming in this tea. I'm cold. The next pond I swim in will be this big."

She took a sip, barred her teeth, and tipped the contents of the bowl into the pond. A yellow fish darted in at the splash, then flicked more rings into existence as it jumped before diving. Slicanin watched, the tea bowl forgotten as she leaned towards the water.

"Don't you even think it," Bolda growled, half up.

"Think what?" she asked and then shrugged. "You should have let me set the Net," she added only a moment later, frowning at Hann as though just then noticing her. "Don't you think so?"

Hann frowned back, her heavy brows meeting in the middle, then looked to Bolda.

"Hell, she didn't ask me." He picked up the bowl Slicanin had let roll.

"I don't recall asking you," Slicanin agreed, then turned her attention back to Hann. "What kind of pups do you think I could breed out of a mating in waters of the Wu'loss cass?"

"You're asking the wrong party," Bolda said when it became apparent Hann wasn't going to say anything. "Although it's a little damp in there for lighting a joss stick."

"You might try the sand garden," Rit said. "Quin'tat, did you know that by the time I left there, your footprints in the sand had vanished?"

"And mine?" Panntin asked.

He hadn't seen him make any; he hadn't been off the steps. "There are no footprints in the sand at all."

Ramsini got to her feet. "I haven't seen that part of the garden. Ritsiniti, would you show me?"

"I will," Slicanin said, breaking in before Rit had so much as opened his mouth to say no. "I have heard I am talented but I can't yet swim in sand. Or catch fish in stone. Perhaps it is a Strom thing. You can teach me."

Sunlight and anger combined to bring out Ramsini's freckles. Wilntinn bit his lip. Amused, Rit thought. Neither of them had been startled or even particularly interested in Slicanin's sudden arrival from the water. He caught his cousin's eye. "Why don't you go with them? I'd be interested in hearing what the both of you think."

Bolda raised his eyebrows, his small eyes rounded in their nest of loose skin. "If this isn't Alisim," Rit continued, "it's very close. This Ka'It'ka, was he human?"

Bolda shook his head. "Quin'tat?" He added a brief hand sign that Rit didn't recognize.

Quin'tat stiffened. "No," he said, his first word during the meal that hadn't been made as part of a formal greeting. "Not human, Wa'tic. Related to the Spann. And calling it a 'he' isn't really accurate, although it translates that way into your language from the neutral. The Wa'tic, like the ti'Linn and Spann, have only one sex but a joining of at least three individuals is required for any kind of result, although the offspring of so few would be sterile."

Bolda snorted as he got up, balanced his tea bowl on top of the braiding frame, stared at it as though daring it to tip over, then said, "I think I'll go too. We can take the path around the pavilion." He reached the red bridge before looking back. "Aren't you three coming?"

Wilntinn was back first. "You'll have lots of opportunities to study footprints." He folded his slight frame down to the grass then leaned on one elbow. "I'm not sure I liked it."

Panntin chuckled. "No."

Viy'lana turned her head to look at him. "I did. It's very peaceful."

Panntin put one hand on her shoulder, his braid ends trailed down in front of her. "Do you really think so?"

Her smile seemed to grow out of the blue lines tattooed on her face. "If you don't, then you were looking at yourself." Her tone was playful now. "It is peaceful, and that it can be more, doesn't take that away. I'll have one made and you can stare at it until it behaves." Viy'lana chuckled, nestled against Panntin, the Priest's arms around her. She held his hands in front, forming the shape they took with her own fingers. She wasn't wearing the birth silver of her other two children.

Rit squeezed his eyes shut against a feeling of disorientation, almost dismemberment, his limbs lost in the buzz in his head. For an instant he had seen what Sarkalt had, was seeing it somehow through the Overpriest: two points of light burning inside the woman.

Wilntinn was watching him, still blank faced. Ramsini and he would be the same age, he thought, startled again at how much they were alike, the difference in his being male hardly showing in his features. And Ramsini was still fertile; with his suddenly heightened awareness he knew it like the knowledge was a scent she had left behind her.

Rit picked the tea bowl up that he had knocked over and put it next to the pot before getting up. "I've got work... "

"I understood this was work," Wilntinn interrupted softly, his attention shifting to the priestess. "Aren't we expecting Olloss and Ro'lin?"

Rit didn't look at her, his mind still burned with what he had sensed before. How much was Wilntinn capable of picking up?

"They'll be here." Viy'lana leaned forward and filled her tea bowl. "And Lord Strom is mistaken, he doesn't have any work to do, or not the work he thinks. Alisim Temple does. And the work he *does* have to do, well, it's not only the Marshall who has an interest in what happens in the Heg Capital." She looked at Wilntinn through the steam.

His cousin laughed softly. "And an interest in Blueknife?"

Viy'lana smiled at Wilntinn but included Rit in her gaze. "The traitors are dead, or will be soon, regardless of what that water creature does about it." Her hands caressed Panntin's. "And for those who stayed just this side of belief, with the Zimmer pull, there'll be no questions left, and that means there'll be no questions left about who holds the balance of power in Xinta."

Panntin leaned forward to kiss Viy'lana's neck. "You said you didn't see any of this happening... if not you, then what do the prophecies have to say?"

Rit was sure the question was directed at him, but Wilntinn answered. "Which one? The words of all of them are obscure enough. Glimpses of the future. Or more than one future."

"What future would you see for yourself?" Rit asked.

Wilntinn's red-flecked eyes caught the sunlight as they widened in what Rit felt was amusement. "Are you offering me back the Strom Noble House? Is being king enough for you... or is that being offered as well?" At the sound of footsteps on the bridge, Wilntinn turned his head and nodded towards Slicanin and Ramsini. Bolda brought up the rear, a Zimmer guard watching from the pavilion. "When the Captain... she?" Rit nodded. "When she talked about breeding pups out of the dark ocean, I got the feeling she meant both figurative and literal pups. What the Strom Archives says about the future is like that." He raised his cup to Rit in a salute. "Regardless of what I see, I plan to die an old man in my own bed, and I don't much care if the bed is in the Palace in Wilni Capital with a crown over the headboard, or not. Where do you intend to die?"

He shook his head. "I've been told I'll be eaten alive at the Court in Wilni Capital."

Wilntinn laughed, but lowered his voice to whisper: "I've found with Ramsini, it's best to lie down before she trips you. Less collateral damage that way."

"I've no doubt. And I do have to go." He nodded to Viy'lana and Panntin. "I'll be in my office."

Viy'lana caught up to him at the cavern entrance and signed Meeden to stand by the stairs instead. "What did you see when you looked at me?"

He didn't see anything now but a young woman, her face scared with tattoos that couldn't disguise her beauty, or distract from the cold intelligence in her eyes. "I saw that you gambled and won."

"Yes, I did." A tight smile. "Panntin says you'll burn the world up before you're done."

"He phrased it differently when he said it to me, but I think he meant the same thing. I trust it's not a literal translation of what he saw."

"And Tirreniti? How did he phrase it? Was his literal? Or did he tell you?"

He tried to walk past her and found himself as helpless with her arm through his as Quin'tat had been. "He told me nothing. May I assume that was part of the arrangement with Bluestone?"

"And you never asked who your mother was? A servant, you were told, I suppose. Someone of no consequence, thus not worth the asking."

He didn't remember if he'd ever asked, or if the question had been answered the same way that any behavior of his was that might betray him as Strom. Or if it had seemed important to him - he'd lived in a household of men in a Charter House, there hadn't been any women around him.

In the face of his silence, she continued: "I understand you'd been told who your father was, so there were no questions from you about that either."

He didn't need the last legs of his world kicked out from under him, not now, damn it. Not by the truth from this woman. "Panntin said he wasn't my enemy. What about you?"

"I gambled with the boy, not the man. I don't fault you for what was my decision..."

"You never had that choice. Ever."

"No, I didn't need protecting. I don't need protecting." Another tight smile, but he could feel she was, incredibly enough, amused. "I didn't need the blood wind to see that you had been claimed by something more than a priestess. I only wondered that others couldn't. Panntin isn't from the right Strom blood lines, neither am I from the right Bluestone lines, not to the satisfaction of the Bluestone elders, but..." She shook her head but with the same smile as before. "The few who were of the right bloodlines who didn't die with the pattern sickness are in Blueknife and their fate is just as settled."

In Blueknife? Cold fingers ran up his back. He didn't like the information, the source, or the timing.

Viy'lana gave his arm a squeeze that threatened to become an intimate gesture. Still amused. "Some time ago, others gambled in the same way I did with Panntin, and lost their bets over and over again. Beautiful children, I'm told, but every one of them born dead. You were a very late and lumpy miracle that most disbelieved."

"Do you mean the source? And did they disbelieve my father or my mother?"

"Oh, father, of course. An impressive man by all accounts and one whose words found more paths to travel than just in the blood-wind. He fostered that disbelief as carefully as he fostered you. And was believed until the Lady's arrival

and all miracles came due." She laughed and let him go. "Panntin's and my children will live to be born and to grow up. That's a gift of blood / can give them."

"Who...?" His mother? He didn't know what he meant to ask. Could a name be the start to finding reasons he wasn't sure he wanted to know?

Viy'lana's gold-brown eyes crinkled at the corners. "Who?" She laughed out loud. "Oh, I think you're quite a separate creation." She took a couple of steps away before looking back. "Go, go. You said you have work to do, let us get on with ours. You have a wife to find."

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Nisstin was waiting for him in his office, sitting in one of the saddle stools at the desk. "More of your things came through than mine," the Warrior said, closing a leather bound journal as Rit entered. "Do you think that means anything?"

"Maybe she's partial to books." He picked the volume up from the table where Nisstin had pushed it towards him. Green leather from something with scales. He couldn't read the writing inside, if it was writing, and the Net couldn't either.

"Not one of yours?"

He shook his head. "How's your leg doing?"

"Just a scratch. Probably not as bad as your indigestion."

He laughed, suddenly, thankfully, feeling human. "Are they finished then? Is there a summary?"

"Bolda's keeping score, he promises a summary later." He smiled. "They're talking details, but Bolda says what's agreed on here will decide how the power base is divided up. What I've heard already might surprise the Assembly of Elders. I'm curious, why did you leave?"

Because nothing they're doing seems real to me. And more: why did no one seriously try to stop him? "Is Viy'lana always that bad?"

Nisstin crossed his arms. "You obviously haven't been reviewing enough security records."

"So I was told by my wife. Besides, I suppose it's not fair for me to be asking you about the priestess."

Nisstin stretched his injured leg out so his foot rested on the saddle stool opposite. "My oath is to Alisim Temple. Last I looked, the ranking Priest wasn't Panntin."

Nisstin had been a Lead Commander, the same rank as Fontil, and in charge of a Company of three hundred men under the North Marshall. He'd been reassigned

to the Holding and taken a good number of his top men with him. When Garm insisted that all senior personnel take at least general Temple oaths, he had stayed.

Rit sat down and leaned against the strip of leather at the back of the stool. "What brings you here? Or is it a social call?"

"Not quite. Simitta's pod has found the Ocea ship."

Good news or bad? Either way he would have appreciated a flagged notice of it. "Where?"

"Near the edge of the pull, they can see the ocean from where they are." Nisstin rubbed his thigh. "High and dry now. There's been a fire. We're not sure who's still alive, but someone is."

Rit took the Net the Warrior offered with his last words. There wasn't much solid information in it, but at the core of the lead was a spin analysis from Simitta. "Bitilan."

"It has to be from how they're using the Temple warding to guard against the pod. I'll be going out there on the flutter, and I assure you, you'll get a full report as soon as we return."

"Why wasn't I informed earlier?"

"You were expected to be busy for the next few hours, and besides, I wanted to tell you myself."

Rit hesitated a moment. "Well, you can tell me why on the way."

Nisstin shook his head. "You're not going. Not a chance."

The analysis from Simitta had listed options for Rit to choose from. Not Nisstin, not Viy'lana, and not Olloss. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I think you're the wrong person to tell me I can't go."

The Warrior scratched his nose. "Well, I suggested we tie you up somewhere until Ulanda wakes, but Viy'lana overruled me. There appears to be some confusion with the Zimmer about who has the authority to say what you can or can't do."

Another division of power, and not, he thought, one that was being decided in the meeting. "There's no confusion in my mind, nor apparently, in Simitta's."

The flutter joined with the pod, pausing against the side only long enough for the three of them to transfer over. There was a sharp whine as the shielding fields separated and the floor of the pod rocked for a moment as though the craft was sitting on water and not red clay.

Ship's Net hummed around Rit, familiar already and with the same hesitant feel as at the Holding. He resisted the urge to test it and then forgot about trying when he followed their escort into the next room. It was like walking into a bubble. The tiles showed only as a hint of texture his mind found easy to forget to see. In front of him was the wreckage of the Ocea ship - and only dry land, not

the ocean Rit knew should be visible. To one side the view was blocked, the surface tiles resembling the interior walls of the ship.

Simitta rose to greet him, bowing stiffly, then did the same to Nisstín. The Bluestone Senior priestess with them got only a nod.

"Ro'lin quis'Palltin," Rit said in Xintan, taking her arm to bring her forward. He left off the titles but signed honor. The Elder priestess had surprised him by being at the flitter, not the meeting, when he and Nisstín had arrived. "Our expert in theology and a jurist for the Assembly. She had been assisting with the arrangements for the Blessing."

Rit signed honor again, adding a request for indulgence that the priestess wouldn't know, but still got no response. "We'll see if we can talk those still alive into surrendering," he said to cover the insult.

Simitta's clan marks were silver on the white of his skin, as Gennady's had been when Rit first met him at the Spine. He had thought them faint scars until meeting him the second time. "As you say," Simitta replied at last.

Ro'lin tilted her head back to Simitta's height and crossed her arms, one hand playing with a single silver coin set on a leather cord. Wings of long white hair hung loose to float in a halo around her face. Rit felt her stretch outwards somehow, but he couldn't follow any more than he had been able with Panntin at the world-altar.

"It's not for either of us to understand," she said, her sympathy showing clearly in her voice. He didn't know what Simitta would make of it. From his response: nothing. But she didn't stop with sympathy. "We've lived past the last day for both our worlds, I think. That morning, I set the form for an offering fire. Summerwood, mountain blue pine and only half dry, deliberately so. I wanted more than the scent, I was far from the war, and I wanted the sound. A long time since I rode with the Warriors, but I could listen to the fire and see the smoke. There would be the dead in the smoke. The way of our people, yours as well, I think."

She waited, watching Simitta's unchanging face. The ice-green eyes didn't blink. "The fire died unlit," she continued and in her darker eyes, Rit saw for a brief moment that morning not so long ago at all. The elderly priestess glanced at him first then to Nisstín before her words continued again, softer. "The fire died unborn. There was no need for a fire, for falling all around me were white petals from a sky of blood. My only child died in the fall of petals, and her daughter with her. It's counted as honor among my people that they were taken by the Lady."

She walked past the silent Zimmer and stood looking at the Ocea ship. The gold metal disks embroidered in dangling rows in the seams of her dark tunic reflected the zigzag lines of lightening where the Zimmer warding still tried the Temple shields. The Ocea ship was fractured, looking like a ripe fruit smashed to the ground. Where the hull boards had sprung, curved ribs could be seen. Fire

had consumed much of the prow, leaving charred stubs of timbers. The burn marks ended abruptly in a straight line across the tilted deck.

"A world's passing is a hard thing to bear." She turned to look back at Simitta. "I used a lifetime of strength to survive the sickness, too stubborn to give in even as I wanted to go. Still, I knew the end of my days all the same and I welcome the coming darkness." The lightening shone in her dark eyes as well. "And you? Do you welcome your end?"

Simitta was ice to her heat, but the answer was in Xintan. "Yes."

"I'm told that my blood kin have become part of what this world is, the soul of it. And yours? Or has she only marked you?"

He didn't answer again but she responded as though he had. "Deeper than I have been, and longer ago, I think. We'll have to see what's left of either of us when the blood-wind is finished blowing here. I liked the Simic; I hope he's on this ship. He didn't need hope or a promise of life or even to know anything. He had become his duty. The rest of us have to work at it. When hope is gone, or our time is past, there is always duty left."

Simitta moved slowly to stand next to the priestess, looking out as she had been doing. "The pull is unstable this close to the edge. The plume of red growing out from here is the clay bleeding into the water." The white tiles to the side of them vanished. Waves washed close in towards the ruined ship, sand or clay underneath Rit couldn't see, a shore at any rate. And in the near distance: blue sky over blue water.

"Any change in the energy fields brings the ocean in." The sight of the water didn't appear to affect him. "It's not a problem for the pod, but if we want them alive then we can't push too hard, or wait too long."

"We'll need some kind of Net access," Nisstin said. He hadn't moved from the doorway.

The hum of the pod's Net changed into a song. "I will take point on the contact," Simitta said through the unfolding spin. "As the Mother says: duty."

"Our duty," Rit reminded him. "I didn't come here to just to watch."

Ro'lin stepped closer to the Zimmer. "Don't pay him any mind," she said as though to an old friend. "He doesn't yet know what duty means. You need two on this point I think. You and me. We'll see who they think to shoot at first."

Rit looked to Nisstin. The Warrior didn't try to hide that he didn't like it even as he nodded.

A triangular white flag shivered in the static where the two fields met. The shape and color was a Xintan sign requesting negotiations. Ro'lin handed Simitta the flag and he let the breeze spread the cloth full length before turning the part he still held over the edge of a clay plate and pushing the clay down to secure it. He knelt next to the flag and waited, Ro'lin standing at his shoulder.

"Is that your tame dog, Elder Mother?" The voice was scorched sounding. They couldn't see the person.

"I've come for your dead," Ro'lin shouted. "I would see to their comfort."

"We give our dead to the true Lady, not to the whore you shield." Moments later a head landed on the plates of red clay near Ro'lin. Rit had a glimpse of lines drawn over the features before it ended face down in a drift of ash. Braids of once-blond hair strung out from the head like pale tentacles.

"Not Bitilan," Rit said needlessly. The Temple man had black hair. Cut short, like Pida's and in much the same style. A Temple aide, open classification the Net file said, skilled at a number of duties but primarily security.

Whoever was in the ship was still yelling, a note of hysteria in the tone. "We're in the blood red sea, Elder Mother. What else could we want?"

Ro'lin held her arms out. "Should I go then?" A step back and she waited. Simitta didn't move. "If your dead need no comfort, what of your living?"

Rit touched his hand to the tiles in front of him, each one about a hands width and as long as his arm. Transparent like finely made glass but without the distortion that should have come from the irregular surface he could feel under his palm. He remembered the shimmering gold and bronze of the Temple ship tiles. He turned around to look at the white tiles making up the far end of the room. A Zimmer - he might have been the same one as met them - stood by the door, he wouldn't be able to see the ocean from that angle, just white wall.

Nisstin followed his gaze, leaning with his back against the clear tiles. "Why doesn't it bother Simitta?"

Rit shook his head as he turned his attention back to the Ocea ship. "The warding around the wreck hasn't varied since before we got here," he said. The spin had said that the pod's systems couldn't penetrate it. The fire had been out already on the Ocea ship when the Zimmer found it.

"Bitilan would have had to be alive when the fire was still burning, none of the rebels would have had the experience to manipulate the fields to smother the flames." Control of that much power at the Holding could have easily broken through their isolated shielding, but this was the first sign of warding being used at all.

After the fire was out, the warding had been changed again so that the entire ship was contained. Fire eaten timbers still smoldered, making a ceiling of gray and black above the ship where the ash met the shielding. Between the ship and the water were two skiffs, their planks splintered like kindling. There were no bodies and none of the tracks reached to the edge of the pull.

They still hadn't seen anyone on the ship, only the man's ranting told them there were survivors. Ro'lin had walked several feet to one side of Simitta, letting the shields send her white hair flying. Red light and blue made her round face

glow and sparked off the dangling gold coins. The energy in her plump frame was electric as her hair

"Would you stay here forever?" Her voice was a steel knife. "Can your mothers find you here? Can the children of your sisters find you here? Who will remember you here?"

Silence. Rit thought he could hear the ocean in the distance. Then ash was disturbed, drifting down from a cross-fallen timber towards the prow of the ship.

Bitilan this time, still dressed in his Temple robe. Two men were pushing him forward, a blue-steel knife pressed into the skin of his throat. Rit saw it from Simitta's view and theirs at the same time and from a distance that suddenly wasn't there anymore. He felt he could have stretched out his hand and touched the blood on the Temple man's neck. A sharp push and Bitilan raised his arms as though to break a fall that didn't come. A blood stained bandage capped Bitilan's right arm at the elbow.

Nisstin shook his shoulder. "What are you seeing?"

Bitilan was hanging from the cross timber of the wrecked ship as though he had been thrown from the deck. His throat was cut. Rit hadn't seen it happen and he stopped the pod's Net from showing him.

"The stables," Rit said. "Before they left the Holding. Bitilan was already a prisoner by then." The enclosed courtyard where the day before yesterday Garm had passed out some of the apples he had brought from Strom Charter House in Wilni. The cobblestones were splattered with blood. "Rossa and Tam were with them. Are with them."

"And Willi?"

Flashes of images: Tam with the awkwardness of a heavy child, fighting first his sister and then one of the Warriors from coming nearer to Rossa. The girl's small white face was smeared with red, those golden eyes closed.

The boy held in the grip of one of the other Xintan, the man both amused by and appreciating the boy's spirit. He laughed as Tam struggled and bit. The man's knife was already in his hand. Bitilan was fighting for Rossa's life as well, but with words, his Xintan rough and broken without the Net to translate.

Rit shook his head. "She went with the Patrol, they broke off from the Xintan." Tomsin - Squadron Second. Nan's man from Intil. Willi had called him by name. He had a family, Rit remembered, a wife and two children. No, two babies. A dirt floor swept smooth, a diapered boy sitting on the floor in a dust speckled beam of sunlight, playing with painted blocks, red and blue with numbers carved into them. A puffy faced blond woman, barely out of her teens, cradled a newborn in a fold of her shawl, bending to wipe the older one's running nose. Scolding as the boy turned his face every way against her trying, ending her words with a frown of concentration, a blunt tongue stuck out to moisten her lips. She looked like a cow, Rit thought, but was surprised at his feeling of disgust, not at her

appearance. He didn't know her, had never met her. Then a burst of gunfire and shouts made her look up, her mouth open and her face blank with listening. The Xintan attack on Intil.

"Rit?"

He shook his head to clear it. "Willi wanted to go with them, she knew them. Your people who were with Tennin never made it to Intil." That last image had come out of sequence from the others, as though his consciousness was a net and the pattern of the warding link he had set on Tennin a large fish. He saw three Xintan guards shot; he saw them die in an instant and all together.

There were more images, there were whole lives waiting. "I don't want this," he said thickly. His throat was raw, the cold air of the pod felt as though it was burning him. He forced his attention outwards, towards the Ocea wreck. Nisstin didn't say anything.

Ro'lin was talking again to the man who had held the knife to Bitilan's throat. A contemporary, Rit thought. There was white hair under the dirt and ash and something in how he and the priestess moved spoke of familiarity. Cords stood out from his neck as he yelled and gestured. Rit listened, watched their lips move, but the words wouldn't come together, they were just noise. He leaned forward, the tiles cold against his forehead. I'm leaning on air, he thought.

Nisstin pulled his hand down and pressed a cup into it. It took Rit a moment to realize the sides were hot. There was a tray on the floor with a pot of tea and a plate of glazed buns.

"I knew there was a reason I brought you," Nisstin said.

Rit knelt heavily, not feeling the blow to his knees. "Really? Is that how you remember it?" He stared into his tea. "Ulanda wanted me to come."

"Are we taking turns making up stories?"

"No. She's in all of this. I feel like I'm falling into her every direction I turn. What isn't her?"

Nisstin drank half his own tea at a swallow then gestured to the Ocea ship. "Their warding has started to shift, it must have needed Bitilan to control it. Simitta say's it's oscillating. Eventually the highs and lows will separate and when they do, the warding fails."

"You didn't answer me."

"Talk to Simitta about that, not me."

"She's beginning to wake up," Simitta said through the Net. "I can feel her turning in my arms." Water reached to wash around his knees, white fingers of a wave touching him. "The Wu'loss cass." The last was a whisper.

Air boiled into the thin layer of water as the cracks between the clay plates drank the alien sea. And were as suddenly dry, the water fading like a heat mirage over a road. The pod's Net said it didn't exist.

Ro'lin backed nimbly from the foam. "Gorrtil quis'Serinat," she shouted. "Your Mother reaches out her arms for you."

A days beard frosted the old man's soot blackened chin. He opened his arms, his hands stained with blood and ash. "I'm ready for her embrace." He stood on the edge as though he intended to fly, his blue eyes blazing.

"She'll talk them out," Nisstin said.

The ocean boiled against the edge of the pull. The Zimmer shielding had damped as far down as possible without dropping entirely; any push would bring the water in that much quicker. The Blueknife wasn't talking now but praying, a chant taken up by the other two.

Simitta rose to his feet with a slow struggling movement and stood, weaving in place. Rit felt as much as heard another prayer from him. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's been on the search runs most of the time, not with the Holding's security as I had expected him to be." Nisstin shook his head. "The few times I've seen him, it's like he's half asleep."

Nisstin looked as though he had more to say but Rit stopped him with a hand on his arm. The Zimmer watching them from the doorway had taken a step in. "This is over," he said in his own language, leaving Rit to pull a translation. "When the water comes, we go."

No command had come from Simitta, nothing had. "You can maintain position, water or not," he said, reaching into the pod's Net. Demitt, one of Simitta's people, not Gennady's.

Black ringed the Zimmer's eyes. "I command here. The a'Genn los is dead."

Dead? Lavender smoke was choking him. A joss stick on an altar. Rit looked to Nisstin but he was turned away, watching what was happening outside.

The ship was on fire again. Gray smoke swirled like fog around the standing figures, flames rose behind them. Ro'lin stood on the other side of the double shields, her face bathed in firelight.

Demitt had come closer with that soundless movement Rit remembered from Gennady in the anteroom. "The pod will stay until I order it gone," Rit said quietly, facing bared fangs. All his energy was reserved for the order he sent into the Command level Ship's Net, Ulanda's mark over his own. Without intending to, he wove Simitta's prayer into the words. Demitt dropped to his knees, head down and his face turned away.

Rit's fingers twitched, one hand over the colorless hair. He knew how to move his hand and the man would die. Tucking his hands under his crossed arms, he turned to see Nisstin watching him. "Can you swim?"

"Some." The pod shook, almost unbalancing them both but the Warrior's eyes never left his.

Rit checked his rifle one last time. “Do it,” he said through the Net to Demitt. The pod’s shielding died then reformed in back of him. He could feel the pounding of the ocean under his feet now but the wind came from inland, dry and sweet tasting.

“Warding separation in two minutes,” Demitt said over the Net, the spin that was more useful growing under his words. A moment later, a tongue of red light bloomed from the Zimmer ship and ran lightly over the failing shielding of the Ocea vessel. The lights would stay and set the pod’s Net system so that they wouldn’t be deaf when they went in. He looked back one more time: Ro’lan was a tiny figure in what looked like a window in the pod. He hadn’t known they were visible from the outside. He waved and she waved back.

“It’s raining,” Nisstin said, looking up at the sky, squinting against the quickening drops.

Simitta shook his head, as he signaled his team to circle around. “No, the sasi.” The clay plates were pockmarked; the smell was cloying. Then a wave of salt water washed in, bringing long trailers of drift-weed to catch between the plates.

Smoke shot up from the Ocea ship as their warding started to fail, followed by swiftly growing flames. The pod’s Net could reach inside the ship now, the broken timbers were a puzzle in crystal with five people in the heart. The rebels had retreated inwards taking the children with them, all five too close together to separate with the level of Net they could risk. They didn’t want to set any Temple weapons off by pressing too hard.

“Rossa! Tam!” Rit yelled as he started climbing the side of the ship. Neither answered but they were alive, he had to trust that. Delicate lines of shielding twisted in a dance around them, smothering the flames, pushing out and around without while avoiding the last known place of those hidden within.

Splinters and a skinned forehead rewarded his trying to watch the Net and climb at the same time. Nisstin had dropped out, Rit felt him like an irregular pulse as he checked placement. It was Simitta who spun them together into a unit, taking the analysis from the Net and offering what he thought they and the others needed.

Inside the ship now, he found himself in a stinking twilight of steam and smoke. He could hardly see. Crackle sounds surrounded them each time the shields passed closely, after it was quiet enough to hear the pick-pick of the sasi falling outside.

“I must learn how to do that,” Nisstin said, coughing. He had just backed out of a hole that proved too small, loosing the end of his braid to a smoldering log. The beads were stripping off.

Rit used his knife to start a cut in the tough cloth of his tunic, tore a wide strip off the edge, and tied it over his mouth. "What now?" he mumbled through the cloth. Two narrower strips cut and he wrapped his hands.

"Use the Net like that." Nisstin leaned on a broken doorframe, one hand over his thigh. His hand came away with wet blood against the smeared black of his palm. He frowned at it as though puzzled.

Rit pulled smoking wood to clear a path. "Do you still think you can swim?" When Nisstin didn't answer, he pulled placement. Simitta and the others were in place, but their advance had been agonizingly slow. They looked like bugs in a well-chewed house; the center fuzzy like it was filled with smoke. Just interference from the crystals Bitilan had used to protect the ship, he hoped, and not a fallback system. Without the pull threatening to dissolve around them with each expenditure of energy, the Zimmer systems might have been able to find a way in and disarm any other weapons.

The ship lurched and a hand grabbed him as he fell back. "Hang on," Nisstin yelled into his ear at the instant Simitta screamed it into the Net. The ship groaned, then he felt it turn, splintering wood first against clay, then sand. A surprisingly gentle kiss of water, a hesitant lick of water, and Rit closed his eyes tight, his cheek pressed against the splintered beam he clung to. There was a pause, as though the ocean held its breath, or drew it in away from them, then a roar that took his breath before the water did. Loose wood slammed against his body. The ship lifted, then dropped and lifted again.

"Shield against the water!" Rit yelled, choking as salt water flooded his mouth, but he kept the Net link. Too late to be careful about calling the water in, the shielding should have happened the moment they were out of the Zimmer pull, the sequences already set into the system, independent of the Zimmer crew starting it.

"What water?" Demitt replied, the man's hysteria clouding the Net like steam. From him, Rit saw a boat like a broken toy, and under and around was and wasn't water. The Net couldn't see the water enough to matter; to the shields it wasn't real. Red clay and the sasi were real. None of the Zimmer could swim.

They were floating, bumping ground every few moments. A tiny stringer of weed like a green ribbon hung on a nail next to his nose. He had lost his rifle.

An inhuman scream came from above and his wet hair tried to stand on end. He felt the jolt as the shielding pushed the mirsasitin back. Another cry, somehow he recognized it as a different one. Further away, he thought. Hoped. He had seen the Zimmer Net images of them.

"Rit? Over here."

Rit clawed wreckage out of the way. Nisstin was wedged in between two huge planks. "Net's gone," Nisstin said. "Can you get anything?"

He hadn't thought to check. The ship shifted again, the timbers groaning. "I can't reach Simitta or Demitt or any of the team backing us up. Nothing."

Nisstin pulled himself up, using the two planks as holds. "The last placement had us close. If anyone is still alive..." He gestured to an opening framed by splintered beams, then coughed, bending nearly double. "You go through first, take my knife as well, just in case..."

"Lie back down," Rit said and helped him. "Where are you hurt?"

"There's no..."

"Shut up. Apparently I outrank you. And I asked where."

He found it - by feel and Nisstin's gasp both. A break in the same leg where he'd been shot. The skin and muscle was torn.

"It would have been easier if you had just told me. I'll need your tunic for..." At a grinding noise, he stopped. Just wood against wood, he decided.

Nisstin was leaning back on his elbows; he had a piece of wood in his mouth ready to bite down on. The mirsasitin trilled, building to a call and Rit pulled at the same moment.

"I suppose you arranged that," Nisstin gasped.

"Part of the service." Rit wrapped the cloth strips tight. Blood mixed with charcoal to make a dark mud. "You'll never get all the junk out of this. You'll scar like a priestess."

"Wonderful," Nisstin said, trying to take his knife from the sheath, but fumbling, his hand trembling. "If you'll get moving, I just might live long enough..." The words stopped abruptly as the Warrior fainted.

"Wake up!" Rit hissed into his ear. Nisstin stirred, but it was only to a half conscious awareness.

"Cut the lines in my face before you leave." His eyes weren't tracking.

Rit wrapped the man's fingers around the hilt of his knife and squeezed them to hold it firm. "I'll bring the children back here." He didn't know if Nisstin heard.

Rit pulled himself up through the space Nisstin had cleared. He hadn't had time to feel his own cuts and bruises, numb in too many places, but everything was still working.

An inner room and not as badly burned. He stopped and tried to listen for a noise that wasn't the ship. Water. The drumming thunder of the sasi falling on wood, not shielding.

"Rossa!" he started to yell and had the breath knocked out of him. Thin arms hugged him tightly.

"Tam's this way," she said, starting to pull as hard as she'd been hugging. A large knife in a leather sheath was tied with a rope to her waist, and she kept her other hand on the hilt of the blade. A crash from above jarred the ship and he

buried her against him as debris and water rained down. The shields must have failed along with the Net. Or Demitt hadn't stayed.

One of the rebels was in a corner, dead, half his face was missing as though it had exploded. His throat was cut. Tam was out cold, a bump on the side of his head.

"I'm going to marry him," she said as Rit checked the boy over.

"Do you know where the other two rebels are?"

She shook her head. "They heard you coming on board and left. Earning their path to the Lady by your blood they said. One stayed." She smiled again through layers of dirt. "He knocked Tam out but he didn't know I'd gotten my hands loose. I only had one warding bead, not enough for setting a proper shield. I'd saved it."

"You did well to save it." He brushed a strand of hair away from where it had caught on her lip. If she had been frightened, she wasn't now. "I'm going to go get Nisstin. He's been hurt and this is a better place than where he is."

"I'll stand watch here." She had the big knife drawn.

Nisstin didn't look as though he was breathing. Rit reached to feel for a heartbeat, when the Warrior's arm suddenly moved. His knife brushed Rit's ear as it flew past. Rit drew his own knife and turned in time to see the old man working to free Nisstin's from the beam by his head. And then hesitate as though he had time to think about dying. A white ceramic blade was stuck deep through one eye.

Rit's knees gave out and he sat down. "I'm glad someone's got good aim." Nisstin chuckled weakly.

His back to them, Simitta pulled his knife out, using his foot against the Xintan's head. "The pod has left," he said in heavily accented Xintan as he turned. "Two made it out, two of a triad. The others are dead." His tunic was torn from the throat, loose ends tied at his waist, his other hand tucked inside. The cloth was soaked with blood. His chest looked as though an animal had clawed him.

Nisstin struggled to sit up, hanging one elbow over the plank beside him. "Will it come back?"

"No. When the pod left, I set all the independent wards I had brought just to make us float. They won't last, the power drain is too great and they don't see the water as well as they should." He slipped his bloody knife into the sheath attached to one boot and squatted, both hands between his knees. Only then did Rit see that his other hand was flayed to the bone, three fingers missing. "We've killed those we wished to. The girl, one..." Rit looked up from helping Nisstin stand. "... one the ocean took. And this one."

"Will Gennady send the pod back?" Rit asked.

Simitta shrugged.

When the pull finally died completely, and the warding soon after, there wasn't enough ship around them left to sink. The shell of warding acted like a transparent hull holding pieces of the broken ship above it. As the power drained, Simitta had gathered the glowing balls in closer, shaving bits of ship away at a time. Every swell brought water in and took more of the ship out.

"Throw the rope over the top," he said to Rossa. She was shivering as she tied the strands tighter then threw the end back to him. They had a raft of sorts and now, a lean-to tent against the night.

He checked all the knots carefully while she scowled at his scrutiny of her work. "I can see skin," he said, peering closer. "And here I didn't think you'd ever come clean. If this wasn't the black ocean before, it is now."

She scowled harder as she ducked under the edge of the canvas and knelt next to Tam, pulling her wet tunic over her head. Rit tossed her a blanket. Everything was at least damp but the wool held the body's warmth even wet.

"He's getting better," Rossa said, a stubborn note in her voice as she arranged the blanket to cover Tam as well.

"His pulse is stronger," Nisstine agreed, gasping with the effort of speaking. Rit had thought the Warrior had been asleep. Rossa gave him a grateful smile as she reached to feel Tam's heartbeat. Nisstine looked at Rit and winked.

"I'll take first watch," Rit said, putting another blanket over Rossa. "I can tell when I'm not appreciated. Both of you try to get some sleep."

All that remained of the sunset was a thin line of yellow separating the doubled dark blue of sky and sea. The water was calm. Simitta was where he had been since the warding failed: kneeling at the edge of the makeshift raft, staring outwards. He had shown no interest in building the raft or the shelter. Rit sat next to him.

"Do the bandages need changing?"

Simitta turned his head towards him, his hair reaching up to a crest then smoothing. He went back to staring outwards. The yellow glow didn't warm the green ice in his eyes at all.

"Is there anything I can do?" Rit persisted.

"Watch the ocean with me."

He could, there wasn't anything else to watch. "Why did Demitt say you were dead?" Cold white fingers touched his face gently, tracing the line of his jaw, the stubble catching like sandpaper. Rit didn't move away but it took all his will not to.

The Zimmer blinked and withdrew his hand. "I wondered if the sasi would bloom here but the salt will kill the seeds." He was silent a long time. "I won't see them bloom again."

Not unless they bloom tonight, Rit thought. There had been the remains of another bandage under the white tunic, and from a much different cloth than would have been found on the Ocea ship. "I'll watch with you," Rit said, putting his hand over the Zimmer's. "En'talac once said to me that... when coming back from a long ways away, that having someone there can help. Perhaps going, it can help as well."

Simitta's hand turned so that he was holding Rit's instead. "You smell like she did." He raised Rit's hand to his mouth. Air hissed over exposed teeth.

Past tense. "Cassa?"

His hand was lowered but not let go. "She would have been able to sit here, knowing she was dying, and her living through it would have been as real to her. Both things at the same time. The Spann build the Wu'loss outside of themselves, in spinning the tops, they can touch the ocean. Just to feel that it's there. Her touching of it was inside herself, most of her mind was as hidden to her as the depths we look at. She could never be sure if what she reached was a phantom of thought and desire, or the Wu'loss. It's a part of your people, I think."

Living and dying. Both did exist at the same time, Rit thought. "And your people?"

"Our instincts and our thoughts are the same thing." The words were slower, fainter, but Simitta's eyes didn't leave the water. "Being with her is like playing with an animal."

His hand was being cut; the Zimmer's nails, Rit thought, then remembered the spurs on Gennady's middle finger. "And yet, you'd go to her." To Ulanda, he thought, but when he spoke the words, he had meant Cassa. "And you're here now."

Simitta's fingers relaxed under his. "It should never have happened, I never meant it to." The moon was rising behind them, near full. They had shadows on the ocean's surface. The Zimmer's breathing was shallow and labored and Rit caught him as he slumped. He put Simitta's head on his lap so that he faced to the water.

"Can you see the ocean?" Simitta whispered.

He remembered the feel of Gennady's face from touching him that once at the Spine, thinking he was unconscious. Simitta's was the same. Smooth, almost without texture. "I only see what's in front of me." Ulanda would have woken up in a cavern, water smoothed stone and a dark pool. Would she remember the garden? He had lost all sense of her when the pull died.

"Let my body go into the ocean."

"I will."

A barely felt nod against his thigh and the words came out between the short, rapid breaths. "Demitt was correct in what he said. The Simitta los'Genn was dead already. Gen killed all that he possessed of him. What remained wasn't a'Genn. I walked away from my honor to serve something else."

"How could you not?" Rit whispered, smoothing colorless hair away from the unblinking eyes. The ocean had risen in a wall around them.

"Do I know you?" The words came out from the light. He had first thought the light was from her, but it wasn't. A partly woven girdle was held loosely in her hands. Dry grass and flowers, white flowers. They were blinding.

"No, I don't think so." He didn't know where Simitta had gone. He stood alone, still wearing the rags of trousers and the piece of blanket he was using as a tunic. Late afternoon. It was hot. Water nearby, he could hear it. He knew it wasn't Alisim. And he knew it was as real as where he had just come from.

Her fingers were weaving a long strand of yellow grass into the girdle. The black silk cording on her arms, with only a few loops across the back of her hands to the palms. He had thought she would look like Ulanda, but she didn't.

A'Genn Clan marks on her cheekbones in red and blue tattoos. Had Garm mentioned Clan marks in any of his stories? "I should go back," he said.

She looked up, squinting and turning her head as though she had trouble seeing him. Or hearing him. The changes passed like cloud shapes over her features; he had seen mad beggars in the market with faces like hers.

He was forgotten as she turned back to her weaving. "I was with Simitta," he said in a raw whisper of panic that he could be trapped here forever. "I must go back."

With a loop of grass, she had attached a dark green seed to the girdle. But it was a flower that opened against her fingers as she looked up at Simitta's name. "So go."

Rit's mind was silent of prayers or even thought as he pushed Simitta's body into the ocean. The Zimmer didn't float. Hours later he couldn't keep the thoughts at bay any more but he was still watching the ocean when the Temple Scout ship's flitter came.

They had followed the rising clouds, climbing the spine of a mountain, the path coming out of the forest to a clear view before winding down to disappear into pine and white poplar. Another mountain, a twin to this one, was across the narrow valley, but growing where the two met was a stepped tower of rock and

ice. Garm stared at it, rooted. It dominated the sky in a way Palace never had. The wind picked at his hair, he could smell the ice in the flow of air, ice and sun.

Granite, bare to the same wind, it would sing through the rock. He listened but only heard his own breath, ragged in his throat, and shivered even with the warmth of the climb still in his blood. The peak of the mountain was the shape of the stone he had brought from Cassa's study and worn as a pendent. The bird growing at the world-altar would cry from a beak shaped like that. He wished the clouds would reform, or had never left, that he could have gone from here and never seen this.

Buttercup butted his shoulder. Eunni had the lead rein and she stopped beside him. "A mountain," he said, feeling the need to say something to her. They were last, as usual, following the tracks left by the others. Where else could they go?

Eunni laughed as she held the mare's head. She looked different, he thought, and not just that she was leaner and tanned, her fair skin roughened by the weather. "The ice reflects in your eyes. Perhaps you shouldn't look."

Ice. A river of ice - gray crusted and boulder strewn - wrapped the mountain like a scarf. A leading face of ice, green deep in the fractures and creases, and a tiny milky lake that gave nothing back to the eyes.

He looked back at her but she had stepped away, closer to the edge of the ridge, hands on her hips, her face to the wind. He might tell her she was beautiful later, he thought. Sometimes he thought they were alone, in the entire world, just them, and that the moment of the day could last forever. He came to stand next to her, to see what it was she was looking at. Wind blew courses in the long yellow grass that grew deep into the valley but there were other lines, straight ones, and fences nearer where the trees gave out.

A green-painted shutter banged in the wind. Garm found himself irritated by the sound even as he felt himself growing heavy with the waiting. How could the others stand it?

Caull crossed from his tree to where Sorsi watched. "The place must be deserted. No one could stand that for long." She smiled, dimpling the lines of tattoos that started at her mouth.

"Check it out," she said, gesturing to Otalli. The young Warrior glanced to where Alicia was then slipped soundlessly from the priestess's side. Garm saw him only in the moving, he blended in at each place he stopped. Sorsi kept her rifle pointed at the small house.

The cabin was built on the slope, wooden stilts set in rounded fieldstone held the low side even. A single room, Garm thought. Two windows visible, one beside the closed door. The banging shutter was on a side window; the glass in the lower pane was broken. The wind had sucked a length of curtain out, faded yellow fabric with green vines on it, the end of the panel torn. No tracks in the

dirt yard and fallen leaves had piled up against the fence on the far side. Where the sun hadn't reached, frost remained, tracing the veins of the leaves and giving a burnish of silver to the pale bark of the branches and saplings that were woven to make the fence. Garm could hear water over the sound of the wind; the stream must be close.

"There's no glass under the window," he said.

Caull had brought his rifle around to cover his advance. "Go back to where you're supposed to be."

He went far enough to satisfy him. Eunni and Alicia watched from where they had been told to stay, with the mare.

Otalli had reached the broken window, the sun reflecting from his blond hair as he folded his gangly form low enough not to cast a shadow into the cabin. Then moving in the dark of the overhanging roofline to the door, standing to one side as it swung open. Garm's palms sweated as he waited for the boy to go in.

Caull went around, following the path the younger Warrior had taken, and gave some kind of signal that Otalli nodded to as he went through with his back to the wood. Two fast rifle shots. Garm crouched lower, flinching as the echoes bounced between the steep valley sides. The two Xintan didn't move.

"It's safe," Otalli shouted, then stuck his head out the doorway. His ears were red. Caull brushed in past him, his lower face pressed into the crook of his arm.

Sorsi lowered her rifle as the solid older Warrior dragged a blanket wrapped body out. Otalli followed with a brown stained mattress. Both of them panting from holding their breaths.

"Bring the women down," she said to him, again without turning. She went a different way than the men had. Garm couldn't see or hear her before she could have gone two body lengths from him.

The smell of wood smoke woke him early. The sky was brightening with the dawn, but they wouldn't have sunlight here for hours yet. Or at all, clouds were coming in, thin bands of white low in the sky. The frost was hard on the ground; it was a cold world this morning, with the silver of each breath hanging in the air until he stepped through.

Caull didn't challenge him, only watched as he walked down from the porch into the yard. The Warrior was standing guard, pacing the higher ground with a view both of the cabin and the trail in from the near mountain. But Buttercup welcomed him, a whinny coming from the pen. And a bleating. Two small goats, black with long white faces and flopping ears, were keeping to the far side of the pen, their huge dark eyes never leaving him, stepping over each other to get away if he moved too quickly. Both females, one still had milk. They hadn't been there last night. He gathered a handful of grass for the mare and rubbed the soft

skin of her nose as she played at eating the frozen stems. Her breath puffed warm sweet smelling steam against his face.

He left the animals and followed the path that led to the creek. Smoke lingered between the bare branches of the small stand of poplar that bordered the water on this side. He walked on a bed of crisp gray and yellow leaves. The clouds had spread to cover half the sky; he could smell the moisture in the air.

"I wouldn't have thought you up this early," Sorsi said. She was kneeling at a small fire in a cleared space near the water, a bundle of twigs in her lap. It was the first time he had seen her make the offering.

Cold water, moving too fast to freeze yet, it tasted sweet cupped in his palm. "Five people are about three too many for the size of that cabin." He splashed water over his face and hair, enjoying the shock. One room with a tiny sleeping loft. "I think Otalli would agree for all he was trying to pretend he was sleeping when I woke him up to untie me." Five people and the lingering memory of one more. He would have preferred to have made a bed on the porch but hadn't been given the option.

"You'll both appreciate it soon enough." She watched him as he stripped to the waist for washing. "We've been lucky." Faint red sparks and ash joined the smoke in a thin stream as she absently pushed a twig of pine into the flames. Her eyes never left him. "There should have been snow already this high up."

A few seconds of icy water and Garm was glad to put his robe back over his shoulders. His hair dripped as he wrung it out and left it loose down his back. He knelt down close beside her, folding his robe double under his knees.

Not an offering fire after all, he noticed. There weren't the lines drawn into the soil there should have been and the branches weren't arranged properly. She must have originally thought to make one, though. There wasn't another reason to have built a fire here. He hadn't seen the priestess since she had left them the day before and he hadn't cared to ask the two men where she had gone or why. Neither would have told him. He had to assume she had been on guard, the other Xintan had bedded down after tying them for the night.

"Lack of snow's not just from luck," he said, though of course, it was that too. "The forming of the world-altar, the storms, it's upset the weather pattern over the entire continent. I wouldn't think the Zimmer pattern pull would have helped things."

"No, I suppose not." She smiled at him easily as he did to her; she seemed relaxed and not tired at all. Round faced still, several weeks of skimpy eating hadn't thinned her out. Her face glowed in the dawn and the firelight, tattoos jumping from the movement of the flames. "I thought you might offer me some grass too."

So she had been watching him. "About all I could offer of food." Rabbit stew again last night and not much of it. A doughy biscuit each made from the store of

flour found in the cabin. He'd spent hours sucking on his share of the bones. He could have eaten the flour raw. "Where did you find the goats?" She smelled of goats and grass.

"That's what this place is. Summer pasturage for goats. There's more of them around loose, more than I think would have wandered off. They should have been long gone to market. The herders must have died or gotten caught up in the war." Another twig went into the fire, but she didn't speak the words of prayer. "The North Command Line road passes near here, about two days away on foot."

He hadn't known, had lost track of distance and direction in the weeks since they had left the area of the Zimmer pull. They had gone slowly, spending days at a time in well-hidden camps, the priestess sending either Otalli or Caull ahead to scout. He hadn't been sure they had had a direction.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"We were supposed to meet others here. If the attack wasn't successful."

One man had been in the cabin, but at least a week dead. He'd died of gunshot wounds, probably soon after getting here, his struggle to get in was still plain in the record of dust under the window and the smears of blood on the wood planks of the flooring. The glass had been pushed into one corner of the room. Garm hadn't seen if he had the Blueknife marks on his arm, he'd been buried wrapped in the blanket he'd died on. "What now?" he asked.

"We wait. More might show."

She didn't look overly concerned. "And if they don't?"

"Then that's another kind of answer."

"And us?"

She stretched her hands over the fire and yawned. "We'll stay here until spring."

"Without knowing anything?"

"I'll send Otalli to the nearest town for information. We've got contacts there, or at least we did. Bonpana, it's a staging area for the harvest pack trains coming over the mountains. The North Marshall has a full Company stationed there."

"Do you think you can drag him away from Alicia?"

She laughed. "Maybe I'll get her to ask him to go. Think she would?"

Probably. The girl seemed at a loss of what else to do with Otalli mooning around her. "Ask him to bring back food as well as news." he took one of the twigs from Sorsi's lap and holding it to his nose. "We'll starve here otherwise, Alicia included. How could he refuse?"

"I wouldn't be seventeen again for anything." She shook her head but with a smile around her lips. "Although I don't recall ever being that bad."

"Or that fickle?"

"You didn't know me." A more sober look. "You still don't."

"What's to know?" He reached to touch her face. "When you sleep, when you dream, you look as though you find peace there. But you don't sleep more than you must. And you smell of pine."

The leaves on the path rustled and he looked up. Sorsi hadn't moved, she probably had been waiting for him to hear the footsteps.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Eunni asked. Caull had followed her, but kept back.

"No," Garm said, drawing back from the priestess. She didn't look particularly pleased but still had a trace of the amused smile that had grown under his fingers, as though she was trying to decide if the irritation of the moment was worth losing it for.

And apparently decided it wasn't. She barked a laugh. "Not at all. We were discussing breakfast. Caull, how does goat meat sound to you?"

"Better than rabbit," he said evenly but his eyes had gone to his sister, to Garm and back several times.

"Goat milk and butter," Garm said quickly in protest. "We can have proper griddle cakes with the flour. Cheese later on." She would have known Caull was there when she let him touch her.

Sorsi looked at Eunni, her eyebrows raised. "Do you know how to milk a goat? I know Caull doesn't."

Eunni glanced back at Caull and then shook her head. "I'm a city girl."

"I'll milk her," Garm said, getting up, brushing his knees off. "I'm very good at milking." Sorsi started laughing again, Eunni biting at her lips to keep from joining in.

"I wouldn't be surprised." Sorsi got to her feet. "Get Otalli to help, he can watch you and take lessons. I'm going to go get some sleep." Flames died as she kicked dirt over the small fire. A calmer look to him, then to Eunni. An appraising look, the moment waited for her words but she walked past the older woman without speaking. She put a hand on her brother's shoulder and they walked with their heads together but Garm couldn't hear what they were saying.

Eunni didn't move until they were out of sight. "Caull would kill you if you so much as touched her." She wore the striped Ril'mil tunic over leather pants that had molded themselves to her legs. Her claim on the clothing from the packs Buttercup had carried. "You shouldn't tease her."

"I wasn't aware of any teasing," he said, looking in the ashes for embers. Not an offering fire but he wouldn't mind staying here for a while yet. He looked up at Eunni, puzzled.

"Do you think that will keep us alive? If she falls in love with you?"

He had the ashes spread and still no fire. "Is that likely?"

"Let me do that," she said irritably as she knelt. She held a twist of grass to her breath and an ember burned it into flames. Carefully adding the twigs that

Sorsi had left, Eunni sat back on her heels. "When you were looking at the mountain..."

"What mountain?" He hadn't since that once.

"Don't act the fool with me," she snapped, looking at him. "She's a priestess, a real one, I mean. She feels whatever it is you do when you're with Cassa and she can't escape from it like we did the Zimmer pull. Caull feels it too, at least enough for a focus in hating you."

He didn't think it was hate, but hate was probably the closest word that Eunni could find to describe how the Warrior felt towards him. She was full of quick moods, anger as easily as laughter, and with the need to label what was a thing of the moment. "Why would he hate me?"

"Because it means they were wrong. That maybe Fontil died for something real. That Ulanda really is the Xintan Lady." She sighed, holding her hands over the fire, rubbing them together in the smoke. "Hell, they have to know it, after the red desert and all that, but you shove it down their throats every day."

"What I am, what I represent, has eaten their hope."

She drew a breath, as though to protest the form his words had taken and then let it out in a sigh. "Yes."

He put one of his hands on hers. Amber tanned to deep gold, the skin smooth and firm; his hands were younger than hers. Had he really been that old man? A very long way from Palace, he thought, lifting her fingers to his face, breathing in her scent. Pine smoke, resin from the needles, her own oils and sweat. He kissed the palm - salt and wood smoke - and then ran his tongue to the line of scars the tying had left. He could feel the heat where the skin was stretched over the inflamed joints. She never complained but he had learned to recognize the longing for the relief that he could give her.

"What do you think about what I am?"

Her breath had quickened. "I don't know what you are," she said, the lie in her voice. Her cheeks were spotted with red. "I think you miss her."

He chuckled, lowering both their hands to his thigh. "Is it that obvious?"

He had crossed the line she had drawn weeks ago. "Garm, stop it." She pulled away angrily, wincing when he didn't release her. "Let me go." She tried to pry his fingers loose with her other hand.

"I do miss her," he said, taking that wrist as well. "She was better trained than to struggle. Even the first time I held her like this, she yielded to my touch. I could have taken her right then and she would have responded in any way I wished."

Her breath steamed in the air but she had stopped fighting to stare at him, her eyes narrowed.

"Can you image why?" he said and let her go.

She rubbed her fingers. "Trained?"

"What Fontil died for is real."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

She didn't answer.

"How can you? Eunni, Cassa was at Palace as Empress only a few years, then thirty-five more gone into stone. Granite like that mountain, but she was still Empress and I was still the San of her House, with full rank and any privileges I cared for. There wasn't any question of my right to these things." He stood up, he wanted to leave, right then.

"I didn't struggle either," he said, watching the breeze move the flames of the small fire at his feet. "I went to her when I was told to. I gave up my wife, a profession I enjoyed. Eunni, this hasn't anything to do with believing in her. There weren't any 'maybes' to what she was and I had no questions for her, ever. My entire role was to be her companion, a link to keep her tied to her human body. She wanted me, she got me, even untrained and unskilled."

And he had flown from Palace with her that first evening and never returned. The Rin'cass wu, rider of the phoenix. He hadn't known for years what it was Cassa had made of him, hadn't believed it until Ulanda. He still didn't believe it most of the time, wandering bewildered as all around him people's lives shattered.

He looked up. The mountain grew out of the grass and the ice. He could feel the wind under his wings. Eunni's words didn't reach him. "And Ulanda?" she said again, her hand on his arm.

He blinked until he saw her. Brown eyes looking up at him, just brown, he didn't see himself there. He couldn't think why he thought he might have been able to.

"Sarkalt had Ulanda made for the sole purpose of replacing Cassa as Empress. The only control he would have was in what wasn't Cassa in her. What was the world-pattern, the part of her that was part of the Unity. And so she was trained. Trained to become an Altasimic Priest, to give herself to something that could very well kill her, trained to allow the control over her life that would help her survive."

"What part do you have in this?"

"I think Cassa shaped me out of what I was before. An entire reality budded off just for that one purpose. I destroyed Ulanda's chance to live; I led her to this thing with less care for her than I felt for that goat. If you think it's monstrous, that's because it is. I just have the practice of it, you don't." He bent and picked up a branch of pine from the smoldering fire, the end glowing red from the movement then fading under its burden of ash. "And after all that, I still wanted her to love me. I couldn't even see her, just Cassa. I hurt her over and over."

She took the branch from him and let it drop to the fire. "I might think it monstrous if I believed a word of it." She pulled him away to walk with her. "About your not caring, I mean. The rest? I don't know."

"I couldn't even give her simple comfort when she needed it." Ice had fallen around him so often, blurring his sight. He didn't know himself then, he was someone out a story.

Eunni didn't answer, her own comfort to him was offered in her silence, and a hand on his arm. They followed the path of the smoke, the breeze pushing them.

"All I intended towards Sorsi was to offer her the comfort of words," he said, watching the ground, the grass, his feet. "Nothing more."

"And if she took more, would it matter what you had intended?"

"It would only be in payment for what I've taken from her."

"Are you forgetting who the prisoners are here?" she asked but started laughing suddenly, a strong wild laugh. The sound obviously frightened her; the laugh wasn't a thing of the moment but had eternity in the sound. Her hand on his arm was trembling, but she didn't stop or turn away.

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The long grass made a bed; they turned to flatten it around them like animals settling to sleep. Eunni tried to pull him down to her but he took her hands again, but gently to hold them as he sat next to her instead. He looked at her and she turned her eyes away, suddenly shy of him and not at all sure she should be doing this. Above her, the sky was white, banded with ripples of pale gray. For a moment she felt as though she were moving and not the clouds, a disjointed feeling, the same as when the echo of her laughter had threatened to bury her. His hands moving on her skin were a surprise and she had to force herself not to cringe anticipating him.

The frost had melted damp around them, an earth and straw scent in the crushed stems and seed heads. "Look at me," she whispered hoarsely. Bits of yellow grass were caught in his hair; she picked some out, running her fingers through to separate the tangles of silver. Still wet, he hadn't seemed to care, not feeling the cold.

His eyes were hooded and half closed as his fingers stroked her breasts. "Look at me," she insisted, holding his hand quiet, pressing it against her skin. She felt raw where he had touched. "I want to see your eyes." Snow was falling around him, large wet flakes the color of his hair.

"It's snowing," he said, blinking up at her, looking confused.

Plain green, Eunni thought, relieved. "It does that in the winter." She heard the relief in her voice as well. And felt like laughing again. Nothing plain about him and he scared her half to death. Wild, alien, no one would think him human. Sorsi certainly didn't. Or Caull.

"Who did you think you were making love to?" He sat up, shaking his long hair free.

She hadn't been sure. "Was that what I was doing?" What he had been doing.

He looked pleased with himself. "I might have been mistaken. We might do it again, just to be sure of what it was."

Pleased and plain green, but there wasn't anything gentle in his eyes. The strong angles of his face were carved out of gold metal. She looked away quickly, searching for her clothes. Full of grass and damp, the cold leather of her pants stiff and unyielding. She pulled the tunic over her head, not even shaking it out first, afraid that she wouldn't have the strength left to put it on afterwards. One hand was caught in a twist of the loose fabric and she felt a flutter of panic rising to stop in her throat as she struggled with the sleeve, making it worse. When he touched her she almost screamed, then froze, blood pounding in her ears.

He helped her without saying a word, holding her to sit leaning against him after she was dressed until she had her breath back. She thought she still might faint even as the stupidity of the fear confounded her.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"What?"

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, no of course not." Very stupid fear. Stupid, stupid, she repeated as she got up, holding onto his shoulder a moment for balance. "I'm going back..."

"I'll come with you."

"No," she said quickly, then slower, but backing away from him already: "I want to get cleaned up."

She followed the path they had made in the grass. It had stopped snowing already. The wet had come in too warm to be the first real storm, she thought, unless a cold front was coming up behind.

Someone was chopping wood back near the cabin. From the power behind the strokes and the timing, it would be Caull, she thought, and followed the noise to find him. He was working in the stand of poplars upslope from the cabin, the small building just visible through the ranks of thin trunks. The area had been cleared; trees she could have fit her hands around had been cut out ground level and stacked to one side. He had a small pile of wood already cut out of a larger tree and was working on another, the end supported off the ground by crossed lengths. Dead wood, the bark was dried and the wood cut cleanly. He worked methodically, each length had been sorted by size, branches in a separate pile,

wood chips in another. His rifle hung on a snag by his shoulder, just clear of the swing of his axe. There were hoof prints and drag marks through the layer of leaves. He must have used Buttercup to haul the dead tree here. The mare was gone, maybe Otalli was helping him. From further up the slope came more chopping sounds, faint and irregular. Trimming branches.

She leaned heavily against a tree. "I don't know if it will do any good."

He didn't stop beyond a pause to glance at her. "Just keep him busy and away from her." His words were as measured as the swing of the axe.

So don't say thanks, she thought, suddenly angry. Then as suddenly, just incredibly tired again. Would she have done differently if he hadn't asked? She wasn't blind to what could have happened. And what did it matter now? She closed her eyes, pressing her hands over her face, dizzy with the smells around her, the cold moist air choking her with scents. Leaves, the cut wood, sharp and bitter, wood smoke and pine on her hands, the ashes worked into the tunic. When she opened her eyes, Caull was watching her.

"You sick?"

She shook her head and he shrugged, the axe already swinging down to hit the log. And again, building into exactly the same rhythm as before.

She felt each stroke through the ground between them. The blows settled in her belly. A couple of days early, but the cramps had started, that happened sometimes. Or she was just hungry. She crossed her arms and hugged tight. Wood chips flew under the steel blade of the axe, the smells had faded as quickly as they had come but the sound was giving her a headache. Her period, it had to be. Not that she would have to worry about getting pregnant, she thought, fighting a hiccup.

The hiccup turned into a yawn. She felt like she had been born tired and never grown up. "I'm going to go back to the cabin and see what needs doing," she said, trying to stretch some of the aches out, knowing that never worked.

He didn't look up. "You can help Otalli butcher one of the goats."

It must be Sorsi up slope with Buttercup then. And probably Alicia, the priestess never left her alone with the boy. "I thought Sorsi was at the cabin." Waiting for Garm, she had thought.

The axe bit into the log and stayed. Despite the cold air, the heavy Warrior was sweating into his tunic. Blueknife mark, the three lines, showed on one arm where he had rolled the sleeve up. Same layer of fat under the skin as his sister had, he looked soft, but he had the same heavy muscle too.

"Does it matter what you think?"

"He wouldn't force her," she said, and instantly regretted showing her anger.

The Warrior just stared at her. "He wouldn't have to, now would he?" Eunni shook her head, not sure what else she had heard in his tone.

"She's never had luck with the men she's chosen." He wiped his forehead with bottom of his tunic. "Never been one of them worth a damn. Fontil included."

What now, she wondered. She hadn't thought to earn his confidences. "Did she ride with him?" she asked when he didn't say anything else.

His eyes narrowed, giving him the piggy look of his sister, then he laughed shortly. "Yeah, she did. Then the Mound happened." He had used the most formal Xintan word. "Days of waiting for some meaning to come out of it that made any sense. Had a worse time stopping the rioting in Ojin than we did anything to do with real fighting. We practically walked in without firing a shot. Then - nothing but rumors. There were six priestesses among the troops in that Command, two died right off. Sorsi was as sick, I thought she'd die but she came out of her tent, middle of the night, looking like a ghost and said Fontil was dead. She's never said his name since."

He had a talking look; she knew that in a man. Would he regret it later, she wondered, and take it out on her. Then decided: no. He was honest; there wasn't anything sneaky about either him or his sister. "And Otalli?"

"Otalli was Fontil's Squire, he earned his Warrior rank in the taking of Ojin. Most of the Fontil's Command was Bluestone, but Otalli was... Postassa is a Silverfox name. The Senior warriors, especially Command level, take Squires from the other Clans in honor trades, and especially with the war coming up, it marks any agreements. Fontil had left him behind to look after Sorsi. She'd been called to the Mound as well, but was too sick to go. It's not unusual for..." He shrugged. "Some priestess's will take a Squire to their bed, no harm to it if the boy keeps his wits about him. Sorsi never did. She used to joke that it was the only reason they fell in love with her. No risk."

He stopped, lost somewhere in memory, Eunni thought. Or a future that wouldn't happen. "None of us have Mother names now, regardless of what happens from here." He pushed through the cut to break the piece off and moved what remained further up on the crossed support logs. "Otalli or me, we could disappear easy enough, leave the Homelands for good, go somewhere..." He hesitated and Eunni didn't think he could imagine anyplace else. His free hand pushed on tiny branch until it snapped half off. He stared at the stub then swung the axe hard into the dry wood. "But what's she supposed to do?"

"The Innit Unity would be safe. Or the..." She almost said Tikkanami and then she remembered the embassy that had arrived in time for the Blessing. And the Innit Unity, how long would they hold out if the Xintan had Empire behind them. But Caull hadn't said where, he'd said what. "Did Sorsi get you into Blueknife? Her idea, I mean?"

"Idea?" The cold had crept back into his voice.

"Vision then. How would I know? I'd seen the odd priestess in the Treaty Enclaves but they sure as hell didn't come into my tavern or pass the time of day with me."

He looked up the way the drag marks led then started chopping again. "Well, it doesn't matter any more."

Alicia was leading Buttercup, the mare making slow nervous work of three trees lashed together into a crude sled, branches tied in a bundle on top. Pine this time but just as dead looking. Another rope was tied to the logs, the end wrapped around one of Sorsi's arms and held taunt with both hands. Eunni kept her eyes on her feet.

Sorsi began to untie the ropes. "We need to rig some kind of frame so the logs don't slide forward."

Caull rubbed at his forehead with the back of his hand. "Should be able to fix up something." He watched as Alicia started to lead Buttercup around to head up the slope, but then took the mare's reins from her. "You can help Eunni at the cabin."

Alicia had backed up, glancing at her, then Sorsi. Her hands were covered with pitch and she had smears of dirt on her face that couldn't hide the dark circles under her eyes.

Sorsi's face had clouded. "More matchmaking?"

"He's got to stand his turn properly," Caull said evenly. "Besides, she's not suited for this work. Not the heavy things, not without better food than she's been getting."

Alicia looked as though she might protest. "Come on," Eunni said, taking her hand and turning it palm up. Roughened from weeks of travel, with small cuts and lots of ground in dirt. And blisters across the palm, some burst and bleeding already. There wasn't any flesh to it, or strength either. "Do you really want to chop trees?"

"No, not really," the girl sighed.

Sorsi let them get as far as the start of clearing. "Eunni?"

She turned.

"Is he human?"

Eunni heard the same tone in the priestess's voice as she had in Caull's earlier. "No."

Sorsi laughed.

The goat was already dead - hanging from the porch roof by its hind legs - and skinned, the hide stretched flat on the porch, fur side down. It didn't seem possible to Eunni that a whole goat could have fit inside that small amount of skin. Garm didn't look up; he was busy cutting into the head, Otalli watching him work, his rifle next to the skin, forgotten. He started when he saw them, looking

around frantically, then stepped back to retrieve his weapon and tripped over the bowl of blood in his hurry.

Garm straightened, the brains of the animal in one hand, a large knife in the other, looking confused at Otalli's stumbling. Then he looked to Eunni, adding a frown. "I thought I was."

She heard Alicia chuckle as she walked into the cabin. The tips of Otalli's ears were bright red; he probably thought the girl was laughing at him. He had his rifle cradled in his arms as he stared at the spilled blood.

"You're human enough I suppose. No blue scales and you didn't want to dance with me."

"Didn't I?"

She chuckled then remembered Sarkalt, more than she had let herself at first, she could almost feel what she had felt then. "No, not that I mind."

Alicia had reappeared, a wooden bucket in each hand. "We'll need more water." Her face and hands had been washed. "Otalli, can I go on my own?"

"Why don't you go with her?" Eunni said before the boy could answer. "We're being watched enough and she shouldn't be lifting those heavy pails."

He gave a quick look towards where Caull was back chopping wood, then nodded and shyly took the buckets from Alicia. Eunni watched them leave, Otalli cutting his long legged stride in half to match Alicia's quite deliberate saunter. She wasn't innocent, Eunni thought, or a child despite her size, but she still had trouble imagining Rit married to her.

Garm had the knife inside the goat to gut it, every movement sure. "Where did you learn to do that?" she asked as she bent for the bowl then kicked dirt over the blood. Too cold for flies, it was just as well.

"On Lillisim," he said without turning. "The old animals would be killed, most of the meat and parts were dried and powdered to be used as seasoning. The hides were made into whatever was needed locally, only the fleece was sent off world in trade." He had the bits and pieces out and was separating them on the porch. Intestines, she recognized those.

"What are you keeping that stuff for?" she asked as he trimmed fat, putting that in yet another pile.

He sighed. "On Lillisim, we had food everywhere, everything was food or a tool. I have trouble imagining that we could starve here. This world barely knows you, or you this world."

"In general or me in particular?"

He ignored her words, starting to slice thin strips of meat off the bones. "We all gathered food as children and learned some part of cutting fleece, or sorting it. Or to herd or butcher goats, to tan the skins. All these things were a part of our lives."

"The hide is ruined, but there's still meat left," Garm said, as he kicked at a frozen haunch. Well chewed, the thigh bone splintered by powerful teeth. They weren't the only hunters of the goats.

Snow again last night but light, not much more than a dusting of fine crystals. The storm had been mostly wind, scouring the grass bare to build high rolling drifts. They were in a blue shadowed corridor of snow, the tops of the walls blindingly white against the sky. The world had changed shape overnight.

Sorsi was following the wolf tracks where they started clear of the trampled area, squinting at the glitter as the marks crossed a wide band of sunlight, her rifle held ready. Long shadows, it would be dark in a couple of hours, Garm thought. They should have been heading back already.

"Four of them. In the mountains by now," she said when she came back. The frown she had been wearing since morning had made it into her voice and she looked puzzled as she stared at the remains of the goat he was helping Alicia load into the sack, putting the meat on top of the grass they had already cut.

"A wolf fur coat sounds like a good idea," Alicia said, her words puffing white into the air. "Anything that doesn't smell like goat. No wonder we worry about wolves attacking." Eunni had sewn goatskin robes for them, strange lumpy things with the fur inside. And mittens, lined with scraps of wool.

Sorsi laughed with Alicia's obvious attempt at humoring her. "Wolf fur and wolf meat will both sound good before the winter is over." She slid her hands back into her mittens, but frowned again as she studied the tracks more. "They were scared by something." The words were muffled from using her teeth to pull her trigger hand free of the leather mitt.

She went off without another word. Garm could hear the direction, a crunching sound as the crust of the snow drifts broke under the priestess's weight. A wide circle.

"Maybe Otalli's come back," Alicia whispered as she tied the top of the sack closed.

"Maybe." He whispered as well. The day asked for whispers, he thought. Or shouts.

He hadn't thought Sorsi would have been the one to come out hunting today. He had woken several times during the night from Eunni trying to get comfortable against him, a trade off of warmth and how much she hurt from being in one position for too long. Each time, the priestess had been up, staring out the window by the door, snow as hard as sand driving against the glass. A red glow from the banked fire, but the snow would have been brighter. Standing watch, even with the three of them secured in the sleeping loft, a grate attached to block

the ladder. Either her or Caull, one always dressed with a rifle ready to hand and the few bullets left to them, loaded. Dozing through their share of the long night, but up.

Otalli had been gone almost three weeks, leaving before the first heavy snow fall. Garm had said good-bye to Buttercup hoping neither the mare nor the boy would return.

"If I sit on the sack will you pull me?" Alicia asked, all seriousness and then giggled as she did just that. "With some practice, you could take Eunni out for a ride. She must be bored silly by now."

Eunni was bored. With him, the cabin, the endless games of squares with Caull, but bumping over snow on a sack wouldn't help her. "Do I look like a horse?" He pulled Alicia's scarf better around her face and tied it tight. Red spots on her cheeks, almost purple. Her lips were chapped.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Her laughter was in voice and eyes both, the delicate shades of brown in each iris appearing lit from behind. Then her hazel eyes sobered. "Do you think he's come back? Sorsi's been edgy all day. She's expecting something."

"Something," he agreed. He still couldn't hear Sorsi.

"She's as bad as Ulanda sometimes. Well, not really, but she looks at things that aren't there, hears things. What's the same is that she always looks like the next step she takes, she's afraid she won't land."

He tried pulling the sack. Frozen to the ground. "Are we talking about the same person?"

"Garm, I'm serious..."

"You can't be," he said, quite serious himself. "About Sorsi, that is. Or you're wrong." He disagreed with Eunni about it before and disagreed now. He thought the priestess looked more as though she had never taken a step, or contemplated taking one in the near future. Caull as well. Rooted in whatever they were doing or thinking.

Alicia got up and pulled the sack loose before answering. Bits of coarse fibers stuck to the snow, and the surface showed the pattern of the weave. "She told Otalli to not come back."

"Who told you that?"

"He did." After looking around carefully, she turned back to him. Just snow, it was absolutely quiet. "He said that she told him that all she sees is his death if he comes back. That's why she waited so long to send him, hoping it would change or someone else would arrive."

"So he just told you this?"

"He promised me that he would come back, to bring supplies. He didn't want me to think he wasn't going to." She picked at the tie rope, then started winding

it around her mitts. "He said we wouldn't last the winter without supplies. I can't seem to get anything straight. About people, that is."

"Do you want to?"

"No, not really." Her eyes had brightened again. Her smiles always took advantage of any moment they could. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Must be."

She laughed. "Nisstin does Bolda much better."

"Sorry."

"It's just that I've never had anyone fall in love with me before. I used to watch them fall in love with Gannit. Always at least two or three at a time, like it was a disease they caught off each other. Some even tried to bribe me to help them. Dumb stuff like telling them when she'd be a certain place."

"And you just laughed at them, no doubt."

"Do you think I'd do something that mean..."

She was laughing now. "The both of you together," he insisted and saw the sheepish look on her face he had expected.

"At night after we went to bed. They acted so stupid. Even Panntin did. He was one of the worst."

"And you? Are you in love with Otalli?"

She shook her head slowly, some of the laughter gone. "No. I wish I were though. Maybe whatever it was that En'talac did to me, she left something out. I mean, there he was telling me that he was willing to die for me and all I could do was give him a stupid smile and say that Sorsi must not have meant it, that she was trying to..."

"Let him go? She probably was. She draws very definite lines about things like responsibility and he was only in this because of how he felt about her."

"Maybe." Alicia sighed but he could see that she didn't agree with the first part at least. "I know this is only because we're stuck so close together, like you and Eunni, or even Sorsi. I tried to leave it open, not really encouraging him, but not pushing him away either. Right now, we're all we have. The line between his keeping me safe as a prisoner and being my protector..." She hunched inside the shapeless robe. "I did it deliberately. I would have even if Eunni hadn't helped."

"Well, you've been through this before."

The laugh came back but all of the sadness didn't leave. And guilt. He didn't know where that had come from. "Yes, only Rit didn't fall in love, not with me anyway. Maybe I haven't got it all straight. I guess he was a prisoner as well. Which makes you..." The laugh had taken on a sparkle that wasn't entirely forced. "Not straight at all. I didn't fall in love with you or you with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Which one?" she said, pulling the sack through the deepening shadows. Still no Sorsi.

It moved easily without her weight on it. Not much meat. He didn't want to think about eating their two milk goats or the mare if Otalli brought her back.

"I think it must be that I'm in love with you," he said. "If you're not in love with me, there's only that choice left. My fate, obviously."

"You're just greedy."

"I admit it."

"I don't know why Eunni puts up..." She stopped, a mitten on his arm. "Look, the wind must have blown them here last night."

Or uncovered them. They had been walking in the tracks they had made earlier; the snow glittered around them in the setting sun like diamonds pressed into blue ice. But there was a long patch of crystalline red high up and partly under the cupped edge of a drift, a deep hollow of red, with purple depths in the blood color. The sasi blooms hadn't been there an hour ago, they wouldn't have seen the burrowing shoots, wouldn't have seen them ever if they had touched ground before maturing. Probably a larger area had been seeded, only those sprouting out of the sunlight and away from the alien soil would have survived this long. If you shouted, they died, withered without flying.

Palm sized already, the flowers were still unfolding as they watched. Just the moving tips were visible, the plants had eaten the snow around them as moisture and the whole area was sunken. By the time they flew, only the blooms would be left, the rest of the plant absorbed.

Alicia left the sack, walking slowly to the blooms. He followed, the scent of roses growing stronger in his mouth. Almost ready to fly.

Like red velvet against the snow. They were exquisite, he thought. Zimmer primary. The sasi rose. They had watched the storm of sasi falling on the red plain, the fitful wind sending drifts of seed to where they were standing outside the tide of the pattern pull. Blue sky behind them, pine trees, long grass and water. They were still covered with red chalk when all that was left to see were pine trees and low rolling mountains. The small birds he had first seen at the Spine were chirping in the trees as though the pull had never existed.

One mitt hanging from her teeth to free a hand, Alicia gently touched the edge of one petal. It blackened immediately, curling in as though her finger was acid. Each time she had touched one and each time, had the same disappointed look on her face.

Garm fit the mitt back over her hand. "Just as well they die." Too loud and several near the border of the patch did just that.

"I keep thinking I could pick some to show Eunni." She sighed as she bent to pick up the rope from the sack. "She'll probably never see them. I don't think she really believes me when I tell her they look like roses." She rubbed her nose with the back of her mitt and sniffed. "We should be going." But stopped a little on, turning to see if the sasi had flown yet.

He listened for the buzz that would start just before, like bees but more complex, a song of buzzes. Nothing. "Too soon," he said, bending to speak into her ear. "Let's go. There might be more closer to the cabin, we'll see those."

She started pulling the sack, a scraping sound of rough cloth on crystal. But under that noise was a buzz after all and he stopped again to see behind them. Not a buzz, a whine and a pitting sound. It was getting louder. Alicia hadn't heard yet and he grabbed her to stop, holding her absolutely still in his arms as he listened.

A moment more and he didn't have to listen. Lines of shining blue grew out of the snow, they were in a straight hallway of blue warding, sizzling and spitting as steam boiled and the snow vanished in twin rows beside them. Then crossed. They were in a cage of blue warding, reaching upwards until the color vanished into the steam-ridden dark blue of the sky. Where the sasi had been was a stain of black on the snow.

The flitter settled next to the small lake of green ice. Rit left the tiles clear all around him, some part of himself enjoying the slanting sunlight and the feeling of warmth while looking out at winter. Ro'lin was looking up at the mountain, the sun glaring off the fresh snow. She liked the tiles clear as well.

Wiccin bobbed his head up from the data point he was monitoring. "Lord Strom, the Net won't take properly with the warding set like that," he said apologetically. The pod was moving in from over top of them and the freeborn Zimmer kept having to remember not to look, tucking his chin down when he saw Rit watching with him.

"Just do what you can with it. The warding is more important." They didn't know what capabilities these people had been given and couldn't expect the restraint that Bitilan had shown.

He tried to reach Garm, then Alicia. Still nothing. They wouldn't drop all the warding until the two Bluestone were captured. The man was trapped outside the small cabin. Eunni must be inside if she was still alive. Their information was sketchy.

"Both are taken," Gennady said on the linking Net, the distortion dying as he spoke, along with the blue lights. "No Temple devices on them, nothing. They'll wake up in an hour or so."

Rifles and knives, not quite nothing, Rit thought as he told Ro'lin what Gennady has said, then instructed Wiccin to take the flitter in closer to Garm and Alicia.

The second try through the Net reached Garm. "Pretty, but did you have to scare us half to death?" Rit heard the murmur that would be him telling Alicia. He still couldn't talk to her directly, the Net too different from what she had learned.

The flitter landed, it had taken seconds to cross the distance. They both waited for him, standing together in the snow. He took Alicia's hands, she was smiling up at him but that was all. He could feel her uncertainty. "There were devices on Sarkalt's ship that could be used as weapons," he said to Garm, with Alicia's hands still in his. Wet leather mitts. "Used by someone who knew how, just one could have reduced this mountain to dust and then swept the dust away. Even a passive sweep with Net could have set something off. We didn't know what had been given or who had learned to use what. Bitilan was in charge of Sarkalt's security and he was the one that Anga had helping Blueknife."

"Oh."

Neither had moved. "It's warmer inside," he said, making it an offer. "And Garm, you know Ro'lin, she's in the flitter as well."

"Eunni's back at the cabin," Alicia said. "Caull is with her."

"He's been taken. We waited until he was outside and the warding lines could be set around him without hurting her."

"And Sorsi?"

He nodded.

"Alive?"

Her face felt frozen. "There was no need to kill them." He let his hand drop. And through the Net that Alicia couldn't handle, told Gennady to have the pair taken directly to Vancallin, not to the Holding as originally planned. Then to Alicia: "Should we go get Eunni then? Tam is talking to her, she knows we're here now."

Alicia nodded.

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Smoke had backed into the cabin as the warding had pushed it down then smothered the fire. Passing over top it in the flitter, the small building below looked as though it had breathed in a mouthful of smoke and forgotten how to exhale. The warding was one final check that anything lethal hadn't been set in the cabin.

Two of the Zimmer crew was walking through the white barked poplar trees nearby. Like ghosts, Rit thought, watching them for a moment before leaving the flitter. To human eyes, they seemed to belong to this frozen land. He took the feed from the sensory wards they carried, ship's Net buzzing at him, almost eager to be in his mind, the hesitant feel had vanished after the rescue at the Ocea ship.

Do you want to come with me, he almost asked Alicia and Garm, but stopped in the face of the quiet around him. Garm hadn't taken the Net feed, hadn't attempted it beyond that first time. Both he and Alicia were sitting together, looking out through the band of transparent tiles. She had tried to talk to him earlier, but had run out of words very fast. After a murmured greeting, they had both ignored Ro'lin and the Senior priestess hadn't forced herself on them, becoming part of the silence. She had said this was a possibility, he just hadn't believed it.

He turned away, pulled his cloak higher under his chin then stepped out of the flitter. Eunni was on the cabin porch, sitting on a split log bench and wrapped tight in a blanket, Tam standing next to her leaning on one of the posts that held up the porch roof. Smoke leaked out the partially closed door behind them. She looked like they thought she would: dazed.

She didn't see him; she was watching the pod leave. A ripple against the blue snow and the darkening sky, its undulating shadow on the snow had more substance. One more task: Tennin and the others were a couple of hours away by horseback, moments by pod. That close, he could sense the direction as a vague pulling. The watchlink was working and had led them here out of many possibilities.

The trampled snow around the cabin crunched under his boots but she still didn't turn to look. "Sorry about all this," he said, stopping next to her. Tam hadn't seen him either, but straightened quickly and gave a short bow.

Eunni turned her head, startled, then laughed. "You would be. Can I go home now?"

Using the post, he pulled himself up onto the porch. "Would a hot bath and food that isn't goat meat do for a start?" He offered her his hand.

"Today isn't one of my better days," she said in the same light tone. "You'd better give me both hands."

She doesn't weigh near enough, he thought, as he helped her to stand, lifting under her elbows. And she hadn't gone two steps before he realized each step was an agony for her.

"Are you hurt?"

"Winter always does this." She leaned against the post. "Is it very far?"

"Not so far that I can't carry you."

"I'll manage, you'd put your back out."

"I'll take her," Garm said. He had two small black goats on leashes, the animals almost strangling themselves in their efforts to escape.

"Both of you, don't bother," Eunni said, sounding annoyed.

Alicia was behind him. "I've got some things to get from inside." She looked down as she passed him.

Ro'lin had followed, white hair streaming behind her in the dry air. "Would you show me around the cabin," she said softly, stopping Alicia with a hand to her arm.

Alicia looked to Garm but he was busy tying the goats to the post. "I know Sorsi," Ro'lin said as she pushed the door open and waited for Alicia to go in first. "There will be a game of squares set by the fire, Caull will have carved the pieces using the Clan emblems. She'll want them when she awakens."

Alicia stared at the old woman uncertainly, biting her lip. "At the Holding?"

Ro'lin nodded. "For a while at least. For questioning. You can see..."

"No," Rit said. "Vancallin."

Tennin woke up remembering the line of blue light coming out of nowhere at him. Otalli had said they would make the cabin by noon and then changed it to nightfall after they hit too many drifts the horses couldn't climb through.

Warm at least and he had the taste of wood smoke in the back of his mouth as though he'd been snoring. And was tied, hands and feet.

"Don't struggle," Rit said. "You'll make the ropes tighter."

He managed to sit up. The scar across his face hurt like hell from the change, cold to warm. "You," he grunted, feeling the pain flare through his skull, settling to the slow thumping that was all his heart seemed to manage lately. "It's you."

"In the flesh."

Fire in a stone fireplace but it didn't throw much light. "Where am I?" He blinked the fire from his vision but a halo of light stayed on top of the pulsing dark of the pain. That light never blinked away no matter how hard he tried.

"The cabin Otalli was bringing you to."

He looked around. A single room but he'd already known that. He was sitting on a mattress. There were blankets around him, clean ones, and soft enough that his weather roughened fingers couldn't really feel them properly. "Where's Willi?"

"With Tam. Back at the Holding by now."

Safe. He hadn't dared hope for the boy to be safe. All he had known was what Willi had told him. Now she was safe too. "She won't thank you for it." She wouldn't. Stubborn as a cat.

Rit chuckled at his sour tone. "I'm getting used to that." He moved closer. "Hold still, I'll get those off."

Tennin rubbed at his wrists as he watched the ropes burn yellow. "Why?" he asked. Rit shrugged, he was watching the flames too. His hair was longer than he'd kept it in the Patrol, much longer, with red beads strung on one side. More white at the temples than he remembered. Dressed like a Xintan, but that didn't look strange anymore on anyone. Seven months since his last good look. Just before he left for Intil with the book and letter. Tennin couldn't recall seeing him

at the Holding even though he knew he had. A memory of a memory. Seeing Eunni was clearer in his mind. And that Xintan woman who had collapsed.

"Tam is doing fine," Rit said after a while where neither of them had said anything. "There are others his age at the Holding, they get along."

"Fine doing what?"

"He's not thanking me either. He's going to school."

"At that place?"

"He's made friends there, that's what he needs now. The situation was too politically unstable to have him stay with Eunni's sister."

It could have been worse, Tennin thought. He'd lived with thinking it had been worse but he'd be damned if he was going to thank him either. "I thought you'd be in Wilni by now."

"Blueknife changed the timing. The transfer of power will be sometime in the spring."

"Heard that." He found his feet under the blankets and started untying them, waiting for Rit to stop him. He didn't. Then waited for the dizziness to pass.

"Heard lots of things," he continued slowly. "Trouble has been what to believe." That rope went in the fire too. A waste, but it wasn't his rope to worry about.

"You can about take your pick of what you want to believe." Rit leaned back, his face out of the light but the waiting look was too familiar to mistake for something else.

Tennin sighed. "Hell of a turn. Do you ever wake up wishing we'd gotten an earlier start that day? We could have made Intil before the first attack, maybe even Endica."

"Maybe we did."

The words had been whispered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry." Rit got up and stretched. "Are you hungry?" He was already rummaging around in a basket he'd pulled over in front of the fireplace.

Two baked chickens in a covered dish, fresh bread and a sack of yellow apples. Tennin ate most of a chicken before stopping for breath then slowed down, dipping bread into the fat and juices collected in the bowl, giving himself a chance to taste the food.

Grease dripped on the wool blanket and he pushed it away. No sense messing it up when he was warm already. "What did you do with the others who were with me? Besides Willi."

"They're in custody. The brother and sister are in Vancallin by now. I guess the boy is in Endica. Sorsi quis'Pall, the Bluestone woman who was here, well, she'll get a second chance if she wants it. The same one Panntin took."

"Shit."

"There's been a couple who've tried, they're both dead." He shrugged. "Her choice."

He didn't sound exactly happy about it. "What about me? Why aren't I with them?"

"Because I said so."

"Just like that?"

Rit's eyes never blinked. "Yes."

Okay. Tennin shrugged and tossed a bone in the fire. Rit was toying with a chicken leg; he'd hardly eaten anything. He hadn't lost weight, Tennin decided, maybe added some; he looked like a fat house cat until you saw his eyes.

"I didn't betray Heg," Rit said, looking up. "I wasn't part of the Strom or Xintan plan."

"You are now." Tennin grunted as he leaned forward to get some more of the bread, pulling the basket between his feet. All he needed was food. He'd be fine. He didn't want to see Rit's eyes. "Didn't put up much of a fight either from what I've heard."

"No, I didn't." Rit tossed the leg bone into the fire and wiped his fingers on a cloth from the basket.

Taking his time. Getting his anger sorted out, Tennin thought, he never just came out with it. "Well? How do you like your new bosses?"

Rit's eyes hardened at the tone. "Is there such a difference? I've seen what the Royal Guard left when they were finished with a Strom Estate."

He should have left it alone, Tennin thought as he grabbed at his own anger for strength against those memories. "We almost took you people out. Maybe we will next time." His fists were clenched and he was panting.

"We? You and the remnants of the Guard?" His usual dry tone was back tight, under that damn control again. "There's nothing left of Blueknife, you know that, you're just too stubborn to give up anything. What did you plan on doing? Spend the rest of your life on the run? Taking pot shots at people who are just trying to get on with their lives? There are no winners here, the Strom and Xintan included. These changes have thrown them as hard, maybe harder. Empire will make this world over into what it wants, regardless." He shook his head. "Let it go, Tennin."

"For what? Maybe you figure you can pension me off? For old times sake? I can look after horses, eh? Like Cillamet?" Rit's face had closed at the man's name, just shut up tight. "What about Cillamet? Is he dead too?"

Rit fit another log onto the fire and fiddled with it. "I don't know," he finally answered, watching the shower of red sparks. "When Ulanda... the Xintan Lady..." He hesitated, the wooden poker in one hand, smoke coming off the charred end.

"I know who she is."

"And the Zimmer pull?"

"Whatever it was." His head still pounded but he'd lost the anger already, couldn't hold it worth a damn anymore. He'd started losing it somewhere between the plates of red clay. It had taken that much for the strangeness to get to him. He had thought he'd been hallucinating at first.

"You were in it?"

"Yeah." After killing his escort, the rebels left him in old Endica along with the baggage and a few women in a makeshift camp. Then Tomsin had come back with just Patrol and Guard. And Willi. They'd been right at the start of the change, watched it pass them, building a city of shining white around them, moving slowly it seemed until they tried outrunning it. They'd ridden through that and then right into the center of the waste without knowing what direction they were going.

"Ended up at the Teat," he added, talking slowly again, getting his breath back. "Only thing that wasn't changed. At least there was water." And what he had seen there had finished the job on his anger. They'd gotten water from the spring, had planned on resting, he wasn't the only one hurt or sick. Or scared shitless. Half an hour the others had stayed, tops, and had kept their heads down most of it. There were still Bluestone sign on the flattop cairn at the steps leading up. Mother names, left like the people had just stepped out. Only the rounded tops of the pebbles showed above the sand. Sand in drifts down the steps too and the trees near the spring were flattened by the stuff, broken like twigs. Red clay was over everything like colored sugar over a bakery cake.

"A reshaping of reality," Rit said. "But it didn't affect what was happening at the World-altar. The rest of the pull was based on..."

"Don't bother. I rode through enough of the fucking thing, I don't want to jaw it to death." He'd been too sick to go on or so he'd told them. He probably had been. Tomsin had given him contact names and places in case he made it out later. Willi had stayed with him; the two of them huddled in a tiny cave where the water had worn the rock back. He never heard what happened to the ones who left. On the last day there he went up the steps a second time despite what the first time had done to his eyes. He couldn't image spending real time living with that, what it would do to a person. Kind of thing he'd never would have thought of trying to image.

Rit looked at him, his eyes gone quiet, then nodded as though satisfied. "During the pull, Intil and the Stud weren't there. The Ocea farms in the delta weren't either. And when the pull died, they still weren't there. Virgin land, like nothing had ever been there."

He hadn't outrun those stories, just hadn't believed them. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." He sounded bothered, more than he usually got. Or allowed to show. "No sign that man had even existed there, ever. There's been people at the mouth of the Endicastrom since the ice receded, probably almost as long as there have been people."

The apples were sweet if a little soft and warm from sitting next to the chicken for too long. "Well, I wouldn't know about that." He took another bite. Five bites to the apple. He'd better slow down. "Where the hell's Cillamet?"

"I have no idea. Ulanda doesn't remember much about what happened from the time she was drugged until she woke up. A few dreams, nightmares of seeing people die. I don't think she dreams about those places disappearing."

Had he asked about dreams? "So get someone to ask her."

Rit's eyes were back on the fire. He didn't answer.

Tennin rolled his sweater off over his head. He couldn't remember being this warm, not even drunk with the mulled beer in Bonpana. He stretched, content to wait. Quiet was fine if you were full and warm. They'd been quiet together lots; he'd forgotten that for too long.

"I was on the Ocea ship when the Zimmer pull died," Rit finally said. "The one the rebels had. There'd been some trouble we hadn't expected. We ended up needing rescuing ourselves."

"What about Tam?" He hadn't known which group had Tam until meeting up with Otalli. He'd been almost relieved to give up hope of his surviving.

"He slept through it, a concussion. The Zimmer who was with me, he died during the night before the Temple craft came and got us. He was... he had known Ulanda's mother before she became Empress."

"What are you going on about...?"

"When he died, I went with him. She was there."

Tennin rubbed his face, feeling the ridge of the scar. He'd almost died from that. Almost died too many times. "You got anything to drink here?" he said when it was obvious Rit had stalled again.

"Sorry, I forgot..."

"You would."

Rit pulled the basket back over. "... to get it out." A flask from the bottom and two tiny pottery cups. Mead.

"To long life," Tennin said, raising the cup in a toast. Rit matched him, adding a smile, but his eyes hadn't changed.

Tennin took a sip. It nibbled all the way down. "She the one they burn the incense to when they're not burning them to the Lady."

"Yes."

Tennin let his breath out slowly. "What'd she say?"

Nothing really. All the things I could have said, or asked, and I didn't. Any of them. All I kept saying was that I had to go back, and then I was back."

"So?"

"It was as real as this."

"Like I said: so?"

"She was crazy."

Tennin chuckled over another swallow, choked and then coughed until his throat felt ripped in two. "Kind of have to be, wouldn't she?" He coughed through the words, the black creeping into the halo of light around his vision. Least if he passed out, he was going to land soft. "Look what she's god of," he continued after a moment. "Or supposed to be. All you can do is the best you can." He and Willi, they'd solved all the world's problems in those few days stuck at the Teat. He took another swallow. The water had tasted like this.

Rit had the look about him of a recruit who's just survived his first skirmish. Was that all he wanted? "So, do I get pensioned off?" He topped his drink up. "What's this all about?"

"You get left here with enough supplies to last until spring."

"Just like that?"

"It's the best I can do for now."

"Okay." His original plan. He wouldn't have minded Willi, but he wasn't sorry to be rid of the others. "Got anymore of this?" He held the flask up. Rit nodded. Tennin took the next cupful in a single swallow. "You see stuff? Like a Strom?"

"Yes."

"About me?"

"Possibilities. Anything too clear is usually too late to do any good."

"But I'm safe here until spring and then I just take off?"

He nodded.

"What about Tam and Willi?"

"They make their own lives."

Tennin shrugged. "Like us."

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"I combined wool from first year Veslin sheep grazed on the Dassli Plain with...." Hann hesitated again as Ladyspot crowded the other horse, forcing the weaver's gelding further away.

"Settle!" Ulanda hissed in High formal. One ear twisted back to listen to her then the mare shook her head violently, her long mane flying. One of the horses had picked up a stone, necessitating this stop, and Ladyspot wasn't happy with the wait.

On foot and leading her own horse, Alicia walked up on her other side. Ladyspot nipped at the sleeve of Alicia's riding tunic and the girl pushed the mare's head away. "The animal's hoof is bruised, they'll have to bring a remount from the Holding."

"Tell Masti that's not acceptable." Then speaking in Xintan, she prompted Hann to continue: "Mixed with what?"

Hann looked past her to Alicia as though appealing for help, then at once looked away again. Had something passed between the two? Ulanda looked at Alicia, and saw only the surface. The young woman was pale, but that might be the light and the contrast of dark hair and clothes. Her only colour was the red along the outer edges of her ears, from the wind and cold of the ride. Alicia returned her look; she was on the receiving end of an indulgent smile - a familiar smile. A moment and Alicia left to return to where Masti, the Lead Hand for her Daywatch, was standing. The two guards with sound horses were on point watch, well out from their position.

She turned back to Hann, and the beads on the ends of her fine hair braids clicked together. "Mixed with what?" she asked again, far more irritated with the weaver than with the restless mare under her or with her over-cautious guard.

"Dassli Plain, Lady. That's Rilmilli territory now..." Hann continued and again, stalled. In the gray daylight, even colored by the reflection from the golden grass, the red in the girl's cheeks had a violet hue. As indirect as her halting words were her eyes, constantly darting to the horizon line, the sky above, then down to her hands, to her fingers twisting the leather of the bridle lead.

"I'm aware of the political boundaries and the geography." The words came out sharper than she intended and she softened her tone. She had woken this morning craving the sense of living that lately, she had only been able to find on horseback and at full gallop, not sitting, waiting, and having to draw out, word by word, what anyone else would simply say. "The choice of wool, the blend... is that such a difficult question to ask the person who did the blending?"

And she intended to ask Bolda why he had left it to Hann. As she spoke, she turned more towards the weaver, and Ladyspot took that as permission to dance sideways again. And to consider the crowding she caused as an affront against her. One hind leg kicked out, narrowly missing the roan. Hann pulled her horse's head around and forced the stolid creature in a tight circle.

Ulanda had taken an instant dislike to the shawl. Boiled wool, deep blue with a needle woven border in the same colour. The original weave would have been like gauze and as easily torn, only the felting kept the weave intact.

Winter and blue skies and ice-edged dawns, white noons with the wind in the frozen grass and drifts of snow.

She had woken from her drugged sleep to the start of winter, could scarcely remember the time before, from the Opening to sitting with Sarkalt and Niv and Garm at the cliffs edge overlooking the water. The winter just passed might have been all of her life.

Even with the warming weather, Niv complained constantly of the cold and spent most of each day in a heated bath, each night with her. Last night, she had

woken perhaps an hour or so after making love with him, and spooned together, shape to shape, his arms around her waist, his hands clasped. She envied his sleep, the slow rhythm of his breathing. The mindlessness of his sleep. Long before the dawn had robbed the blue shadows in her room of all colour but gray, and the offering fire in the courtyard outside had been lit, she had been half through the t'sin kalinsa, the fifty-first movement of the t'sin, the third level in the practice cycle. Niv had slept until Alicia arrived with their morning tea.

"Mixed with what?" she asked Hann again.

Lives and the shape of lives and a loom of stone and ice.

Or just prayers that she couldn't answer.

Except that at long last, Hann was answering her, something about wool washed in a solution of dissolved silver. She didn't hear more than the first dozen words.

Shifting her weight again, Ulanda pressed with her knees. The mare responded instantly and broke into a trot. She rode bareback, staying on more by balance, by anticipating every action, then by the grip of her thighs. Another change, and the trot smoothed into a gallop the mare could maintain for hours.

Seemingly all around her like the air was, the Holding Net offered her Placement on the growing distance between her and the straggling guards, Alicia's signature on the lead. She was with Masti and the groom, the three of them with two sound animals. She pulled back, away from the neural system. And lost it. And knew it had lost her.

The mare's pace quickened.

Leaning forward, one cheek against the animal's neck, she matched breath for breath, hard and deep, pushing breaths that chilled her throat and lungs. The fine braids of her hair whipped behind, mixing with the gray and black mane, both flicking foamy sweat from their lengths.

She was nothing. No weight, no substance.

Faster.

She willed it, feeling as though she willed it of herself and felt the body beneath her respond. Muscles coiled and exploded. The rhythm changed again. All the sound in the world was hoof beats and wind. Grass and mud and hard packed soil. The crack of hooves on stone as they reached wind bared granite outcroppings. Then over into the shadow of the stone and the grass that grew where the wind had dropped its load of soil.

Ladyspot pulled up at the cairn along the cliff edge nearest the Uppost, and stood, ribs heaving, head down. Ulanda remained on the mare. She knew her own legs couldn't hold her.

Above her - rising far above the black standard moving slowly in the constant wind - were the blue columns of warding light. The mounting mass of clouds over

the river gave them definition. Directly below was Endica. The smell, a mix of wood smoke and coal. And the marsh. Last year's grass rotting in the relative warmth.

Masti arrived first, followed by his men and Hann, then the groom and Alicia bringing up the rear, the two doubled up on Alicia's gelding. Without a word to her, Masti ordered the men into a mounted three point guard position well out from her.

Alicia left her gelding to the groom and walked over. "We'll have to rest the horses."

She slipped off Ladyspot. "We can walk them back to the Holding, that's rest enough." And to Hann: "My cloak first." After the weaver loosened the ties, Ulanda shrugged the fur off. The cold tore at her sweat soaked tunic and pants. Even with the short wait and the mare hot under her, her muscles were stiffening. The cold would quicken the process. Moving carefully, she began a warm-up series of stretches. With her left leg straight behind her, she leaned forward and bent her right knee. The muscles in the back of her calf pulled. She straightened then changed legs.

Alicia helped Hann tie the cloak onto her gelding and then turned to her. "What's that supposed to do?"

"Riding tightens the wrong muscles."

"Not wrong if you use them for riding."

"I'll tell that to Niv. Or you could put it to the test yourself."

Alicia giggled. "You might shield the Net when you say things like that."

"Say it when?"

Hann echoed: "And what?"

Alicia winked at the weaver, then to her: "And besides, Niv wouldn't."

Another stretch, this one just past where the muscles in her legs wanted to. "Wouldn't?"

"Wouldn't?" Niv asked through the Net.

And he was there. Masti looked that way once, then returned to watching their perimeter. The other guards would have taken their direction from him. All of them were experienced enough with the Net systems that they were as capable of seeing Niv as Alicia or Hann. And Niv hadn't set a privacy screen.

He looked around slowly, blinking at the diffused light. "Wouldn't?" he repeated, settling on Alicia to ask.

"Not even if you really thought she was serious," Alicia said. "And if I was. I think you're too afraid of Rit."

"I wouldn't provoke him on a whim."

"Do you find your husband so frightening?" Ulanda asked.

"Of course not, not frightening. Well, sometimes I find him very Strom." She glanced away, and then dropped her eyes to her boots. "Did you hear about Ramsini?"

Which version of the story, she wondered. "I heard from Viy'lana that Ramsini is carrying Rit's child."

Alicia looked up. "Is she?"

"She's not here to ask. He's not here to ask."

"He'll be back from Wilni tomorrow night."

"Then you can ask him tomorrow. Or ask Viy'lana if it was Panntin who told her."

A look to see if Hann was listening, then Alicia shook her head. "I can hardly ask Viy'lana. And Rit won't tell me the truth."

Without answering, Ulanda started along the edge of the cliff towards the Uppost. Perimeter patrols had worn a path wide enough for three horses abreast, and the dry cold weather made what would be treacherous mud in the rain, easier going than the long winter-tangled grasses. Seen from the air, the flat plain was crossed by paths, some from single riders and a single ride to flatten the grass out of line with the wind. Other paths were worn enough that a generation wouldn't see the earth healed.

From close behind her: "Would you tell me?" Alicia asked.

I don't care, she wanted to say, frustrated that she was being asked to.

Niv joined her, less 'here' than he had been. He was a ghost, a shadow in a day that didn't have shadows. Alicia walked on her other side. "He might not know," the tass'alt said softly. "The child could as likely be Olloss's." Even in the Net when he could have any language or accent he wished, he hissed the last word between his teeth.

Ulanda looked back to where Hann followed. She hadn't given her horse to the groom, and was walking alongside the roan gelding, one hand on the halter lead. "What have you heard?" she asked her.

"Lady, that's about it." The answer sounded reluctant.

"He'll know," Alicia said, looking sideways at her. "You know."

"I don't choose to," Ulanda said. "Ask Panntin. Or ask Hann to ask Panntin."

"Hann?" Alicia asked.

"Not on your life."

Alicia sighed and then looked up, her eyes to the sky. "I hate this weather. I wish it would rain or..." She didn't finish, and without a look back, turned and walked towards the cliff edge.

Ulanda stopped. She was a whisper of air against Alicia's ear. Going just that little bit into pattern, she lost Niv entirely. "Do you love him enough to care?"

Alicia didn't respond.

"Will he care if it is his child?" she persisted. Still, Alicia didn't turn to look back. As though seeing from the girl's eyes, Ulanda selected the same vision. Endica. As always from this vantage point, she followed the curve of the city wall to the harbor and river, then with a nearer focus, the streets - the shapes the streets made - then the houses and yards. She had never been down the path to the town.

And knew that Alicia saw what was before her with different eyes. Tentatively, she followed Alicia's vision further. Streets and shop fronts. Walls. Shadows that tall windows make. The feel of fabric against her face. The sound of bells. A shop door opening. Voices. Then gunshots, screams and a child's shrieking cut off. And silence that was worse.

The past was so close. And what she saw of the girl, too immediately tied in with experiences. It always ended like this.

"Do you love him even though he can't give you that child?" Ulanda heard. "Can you?"

Instead of answering what must have been her own mind, she stroked a hand against Alicia's cheek. Cool skin, but prickly against her fingers and the silk of her braids, feeling not just flesh, but something like what she had felt from the shawl this morning. And kissed her on the lips. And was less than a whisper of air and never noticed.

"Both of you have taken oaths to me," she said with her own voice from where she stood.

Alicia crossed her arms, and for several minutes, Ulanda felt her resistance to any kind of answer. Then she sighed again, and turned to walk back.

"Does it really matter where we actually are? We'll be in Wilni in a month. Both Rit and me. For the coronation at least."

It was her turn not to answer.

"We will."

"So you keep saying."

"Can't I even talk about it with you?"

"You want me to care whether he's sleeping with his step-mother, or with Eunni... if he is, what do you want me to do about it? I'll talk, but not about things that don't matter."

"Is he? Sleeping with Eunni, I mean?"

"Ask her."

"Doesn't it matter that it matters to me?" Ulanda didn't answer. Appearing close to tears, Alicia bit her lip. "What matters then?"

"He constantly defies me. He..." Sets his limits outside hers. *Ranking Priest* was more than a title; it was the shape of reality. An expression of power. If she couldn't handle those oathed to her, what could she handle?

Worst was that Altasimic was still alien to her. Power from overpattern, yes, but the shape of this world - of the Unity - slipped constantly from her hands. As with the Blueknife attack, she could loose everything so easily. *And when the Empire ships come?* From Slicanin, they knew that the Altasimic Sector was under the control of the Office of the Third Concord and the Imperial House. Allies to Riggant and a loom-master whose memories would include those of an immediate predecessor who may well have died in the middle of dreaming about her.

Niv, back again, - or she was - finished the sentence she had begun: "He sees independence as a virtue." In High formal, his fingers shaped a different word: *challenge*.

The word didn't make allowance for Rit only being a Salin, not a Priest. And his life was her responsibility. "There won't be a challenge," she replied in the same language, but the verbal form.

Alicia had pulled a translation of both. "He wouldn't. Believe me, he wouldn't... it's just that..." She shook her head. "Just that you can't expect either of us to be mindless in our obedience."

"Obedience?" Niv asked. Speaking and signing the first word in the more complex language, he switched to the Heg that Alicia had used. "Will he come directly back from Wilni, do you think?"

Alicia hesitated a moment. "He has to stop at the cabin. He has to pick up Willi."

"And see Tennin," Ulanda said. "This is what I'm talking about."

"What's wrong with him seeing Tennin? I don't understand what the problem is." Her voice had risen until she was almost shouting.

"You don't have to see it," Niv said.

Alicia looked past her to Niv, but he was gone, and the girl's attempt to reach him in the Net was blocked at his end.

Five minutes walk had brought them to the Highpost, the gate leading to Endica was to her right. Cut by hooves, the ground had been muddy once, now dried and rough. Fresh horse dung steamed in the cold air. Mansi had ridden ahead and was standing talking to Pida. The tass'altin turned to her, his hands making the same shape Niv's had. *Obedience*.

"You too?" Alicia stared at Pida as though daring him to say anything and then turned and walked back towards Hann and the horses.

When Pida signed a query, Ulanda motioned him to stay. "You can make up with her later. Let it sink in that I'm not playing word games with her and Rit."

"Would she stay at the Holding and not go to Wilni if you asked?"

"If I ordered it."

"Ordered? Your people are amazing."

"So bad as that?" She smiled, but felt like laughing. "Or do you mean the species?"

"I'm not sure that I didn't mean the species."

"Obviously, I don't give you enough to do."

"I wouldn't provoke Niv on a whim either. Or your San."

Or defy either. His being here could only be on Niv's orders. "Am I a whim?"

"You could be generous."

"Perhaps I will be after you tell me why Niv and you deliberately provoked her outburst."

"Was I so clumsy as to let you see our complicity?" He stopped and looked back and Ulanda turned as well. "You might ask Hann if I'm so clumsy." Hann looked up, a darker red flooding her cheeks.

Hann and Pida? She gestured for the tass'altin to walk with her. "Obviously you don't mind provoking Bolda. You might be careful, he wouldn't take it lightly if you hurt her."

"I'm not..." He smiled. "... not unaware of possible complications from the affair, not the least of which is hurting her. That the Empress' House weaver, a man whose other titles were a matter of popular speculation on the Overpriest's ship, especially with loom-master Anga's refusal to hear his name spoken, this *weaver* has taken a local girl of little training and unknown aptitude and made her his apprentice. Is it any wonder that your tass'alt has noticed?"

Apprentice? "The Piltsimic are known for the informality of their arrangements, but not so informal that I wouldn't have known about it."

Pida's hands held a complex sign usually used as an Opening. "What is 'formal' here, even as little as a Piltsimic would think formal enough?"

She felt trapped in his fingers. "Intent."

He nodded and the shape dissolved as he rubbed his hands together as though simply cold. "Exactly."

She really did give him too little to do, she thought. Or allowed Niv to give him nothing to do. Each time she spoke with him - usually conversations of no consequence - she was able to slip into what amounted to another language, one made native by shared experiences and attitude. There had been nothing deeper.

Through the Net, she told the groom to bring Ladyspot to her, and with a foot up, mounted. "What's this about then?" she asked Pida.

A stroke of the mare's neck and then behind the ear, and Ladyspot shivered. He dropped his hand to his side. "Lady Priest, it's not necessary to point out how vulnerable your House is."

"And yet you just have."

"And I appreciate your indulgence in being able to do so. From what I understand, all the Holding's defense plans appear based on the likelihood that the next ship will be from the Alput Warding Station, and as little prepared to counter you as Captain Slicanin was." He gaze took in the horizon then returned to her. "Such a ship is overdue."

Their security analysis said the same thing. Niv had conspicuously absented himself from the weekly meetings, and Pida, less conspicuously so only in that it was easy not to notice the man at all. As far as she knew, neither of them had reviewed the Net records. She checked. They hadn't. "And what is Niv's concern that he couldn't bring to me himself?"

A simple motion requested continuing indulgence. "I don't know that he would call it a 'concern'."

"But you would?"

"In about as much as I would call him your tass'alt."

That ended any allowance she felt like giving. A click of her tongue and Ladyspot started forward. She hadn't gone twenty feet before looking back. Pida was where she had left him. She circled back. "And where he isn't my tass'alt?"

"As much as I would have thought it unlikely, I would say his feelings are that of a friend."

She didn't know if she felt insulted or amused, hadn't sorted either emotion out of what had prompted her to return. "He's a fiction, a creation of Cassa's. He's..."

"Probably the only person who sees you as a woman with needs and wants and failings..."

"You forget yourself."

"... that are quite independent of whatever else you are. And that's where he is unlike any tass'alt I've known."

In Niv's eyes, would she always be the child he had first seen? *A patio and snow and Sarkalt and Niv watching her dance.*

"And this concern of my tass'alt's?" she asked.

Pida looked back to where Hann and Alicia stood, still talking. Their horses provided a barrier to direct sight, if not to the Net. "The Xintan have no tradition of prayer, not in the way Empire thinks of it, of deliberately shaping the will of a Priest who in turn is capable of subtly molding the Unity, the moving framework of the present. But what appears to be a fundamental difference isn't so obvious from the result..."

"The intent."

He bowed. "Exactly. Prayers through words, through actions, through..." He made an expansive gesture. "... through living, large deeds, small..."

"And this concern of my tass'alt's?" she repeated.

"He asks who you pray to."

"Don't be ridiculous."

He didn't answer except with his hands: a sign that once again requested indulgence, but on a personal level. A sign a reluctant messenger might make.

They landed by standby warding-light; the sliver of moon hadn't risen yet. Rit opened the flitter as soon as they touched ground in the courtyard of the Holding. Much warmer here than in the mountains, the air was mild in comparison. Horses stirred in the stables nearby but they were used to the flitter. A double Guard had appeared instantly at the near gate leading to the Holding, standing formal honor for him. Medeen passed the pair at a walk, stopped half way to the flitter and bowed deeply. Rit caught Pasi checking the Duty sheet through the Net - Medeen was assigned as Lead Hand for the watch.

He put the last of the papers he'd been working on during the journey back into the pouch and handed it to Pasi. The Warrior nodded his salute and left, his dog following closely. He was off duty after his report went to Nisstin.

And to Willi, "You can probably get something to eat in the nursery. And make an early night of it."

Willi hung at the doorway, she had a flitter tile tucked under one arm and was picking at a broken and flaking edge, bits of greenish clay littering the front of her jacket. "I promised Catlin I'd go see her as soon as I got home. We've got a history test at school tomorrow and I said we'd study together. I can eat there."

"It's late. They'll have finished dinner an hour ago."

"It's not my fault we're late."

Catlin was Eunni's sister's eldest daughter and as different from Willi as could be, more like what he thought Eunni must have been like as a girl, even to the same reddish-brown curls and the dimples when she smiled. Willi was surly, and not shy of telling anyone what she thought regardless of the consequences. She hadn't redefined her loyalties in the last couple of months so much as just expanded them to include a very few extra people. He didn't think he was one of them.

Rit took the tile from her and handed it to Wiccin. One of those Kori had made as a prototype, using clay imported from the Innit Unity - one of the failures from the looks of it. All the mud you could want not more than a couple of miles away, and the Zimmer woman had insisted she needed that particular clay. Wiccin had been teaching Willi how to modify the energy pathways Kori had set in the tile, giving the girl more of his attention during the flight there and back than Rit really thought wise.

Wiccin held the tile in both hands like he was afraid he would break it. "Lord Strom, your young one may keep it to practice with. She shows promise."

He made a motion of allowance and the tile passed hands again. "I'll have a horse saddled for you then," he said to Willi. Willi looked smug at the double

victory, and he couldn't resist adding: "Did you have a preference as to who your escort is?"

She blushed and he fought a smile as he pushed a change of assignment into the Net at a level she wasn't allowed. She had a crush on Meeden, something painfully obvious to everyone. Meeden bowed in his direction at the new orders and then ran to catch up. A few words between them that Rit couldn't make out and the boy reached for her carry bag then dropped it before he got a good grip. Surprisingly heavy Rit knew from lifting it into the flitter on the way back. Full of school books, not clothes. From the ride in the closed flitter, he didn't think she'd changed her clothes in the week with Tennin.

Not just books had spilled out, but more tiles, several of the thin plates broken on the cobblestones. Not the greenish Innit prototypes, these were paler and, as well as he could see without going over and embarrassing Meeden more than Willi was already doing, they lacked the Alisim Temple impression on the surfaces.

"Dinner plates?" he asked Wiccin, meaning it as a joke.

"She has been using clay from the glacier lake in an attempt to match the settings Kori made in the Innit tile. Lord Strom, did I do wrong to give it to her?"

"No, of course not." He turned to pick up his own carry bag before Wiccin could pass it to one of the servants who had followed the guard out by only moments. Most of it was that Willi made him feel old, he remembered her as a baby. Not as a woman who might take a lover - if she managed to improve her hygiene - and not as someone near old enough to learn how to fly anything.

Then, as an apology of sorts, asked: "Do you want clearance to take the flitter to visit Kori in Endica? I'm sure she's still up. She's logging much later hours than this."

Wiccin glanced at the shape of the Zimmer pod blocking stars on the far side of the stable walls then shook his head. Too great a risk of running into a Clan Zimmer at the works-yard where Kori spent most of her time, Rit thought, and let the man escape to his own quarters in the Holding.

Lights were on in his bedroom, the door wide open to their small courtyard. Alicia was in bed, propped up on her elbows, reading, glow globe positioned just over her head. The pieces from a game of rings and stones were gathered together on the floor next to the rug, the leather and cloth bags left empty as though the game had been interrupted. The room was scented with almond oil and slightly steamy. Part of a different game, he wondered? And with whom?

"I didn't think you'd be in bed already." He tossed the leather pouch onto the chest then let his heavy cloak fall to the floor over the carry bag.

"I was up early this morning, it was a busy day." She didn't look up from her book as he toed one game piece. Then tried to hide a smile as she turned the page. "Pida, just Pida. I was winning too."

"Just Pida? What was it you were winning at?"

Then with a wider smile that wasn't hidden at all. "Why don't you ask me what we were playing for?"

"Because I'm not sure I want to know."

Another small globe came out of a corner somewhere and floated to the ceiling. "If you're going to work for awhile, I could probably stay awake long enough to join you for some tea before you get started."

"Where you are right now, will do me fine."

"It's barely after six by Wilni time."

"Busy day too," he said as he walked into the bathroom. And a busy night. Reviewing reports until three in the morning, then worse: five hours of listening to speeches over a lunch meeting today where he didn't dare close his eyes and insult the Innit Ambassador.

"How's Tennin?" she yelled over the sound of him splashing water.

The water was still barely warm but looked clean. Alicia must have put a filter field through it. It would do, he decided as he pulled out a couple of towels and a dressing robe from the cupboard. "He's getting stronger," he answered from the bathroom. "And he seems happy enough."

"Seems?"

She was at the doorway, a thin sleeping wrap loosely tied at the waist, the bright yellow silk transparent with the light behind. He hadn't thought it was that warm. Yellow and white beads in the long tie of her hair, she was toying with them; the shorter curls around her face were defined, un-brushed since being washed. The look was deliberate, he thought, the placement of the lights as well.

Just a few years older than Willi. The thought disturbed him. "Happy isn't a word I would usually use in connection to Tennin, but..." Rit pulled his long jacket off, crumpling it as though it were his thoughts instead. "... he likes being alone. He likes Willi's visits, they get along, but I don't think he minds at all when we leave. Did you know that Willi has decided she wants to be a pilot?"

Alicia smiled. "What does Tennin have to say about that?"

He had wondered briefly what Tennin had thought of Willi making clay plates and then staring at them for what had probably been hours at a time. Then thought, and wondered that he hadn't earlier, that there must have been a crystal in that carry bag of Willi's. She would have needed one for setting the energy lines, even using Kori's tile as a map. She wasn't shy about using her relationship to him to get what she wanted out of the Zimmer, Wiccin and Kori, and he suspected, Gennady. He might do better to feel sorry for Meeden.

He shook his head. "I don't know if he knows. A week isn't long enough but it's not fair to Willi to have her out there for more than that at a stretch. He'd have a better chance to help raise the two if he was in Endica."

"Ulanda doesn't even like the idea that you see him."

"There's no sense to that."

She picked up his jacket from where he had let it drop. "So you keep saying."

There wasn't, except it was part of a fear that she hadn't let go of even once since Sarkalt had died. He had to be in Wilni on a regular basis - part of the compromise at his staying here at all - but each of the times when Ulanda knew he'd used the opportunity to visit Tennin, she would act as though he had been contaminated by him.

"You might as well leave that," he said as Alicia shook the jacket out. "It needs washing."

"I can tell." She wrinkled her nose, but folded the jacket anyway. Tan and dark blue, Strom House colours, not Ulanda's. And in the closely tailored Hegemony Court style which he found uncomfortable after having gotten used to the looser Xintan tunic. "Why are you so late?"

The spin summaries on his trip were already in the Net but she hadn't looked at them. The next trip he made would be as king and the idea sat in his mind, feeling strange. Besides the full workload in the recorded plans for this trip, he had spent near as much time in the Charter House where he had grown up. The Greens Brother had taken up the conversation from when Tirreniti had died. The apple trees, sheltered against the brick wall, had been in bloom. And Bolda's apple seeds had sprouted.

"The Innit Unity has reopened their Embassy in Wilni Capital. There was a banquet lunch with the usual speeches that went on forever. I was late picking up Willi."

"I thought Tam would have gone this time. It was only for a week."

"There's nothing for him to do there."

"It wouldn't hurt him to go."

"I don't think forcing him is the answer. Besides, Tennin isn't easy around him either." The eleven year old was too loud without meaning to be, exploding with energy and clumsy at the same time. And angry in his embarrassment when Tennin called him on it. "He's just a boy," he added lamely.

Alicia was picking at the embroidery on the hem of the jacket. "Is Willi yours?"

"No, she isn't. What brought that on?"

"Something Tennin said when he was here."

"That's very old news."

She looked up, her hazel eyes steady.

"Tam isn't either," he added. "Just in case he was next on your list."

Pink lips had tightened to a white line. "Rossa had a letter from her mother. Ramsini's pregnant. Olloss sent her to his family in Vancallin when they knew for sure. Apparently he didn't think northern Wilni was safe for her. Rossa's been talking about nothing else for days. Of course, she thinks the baby is Olloss's."

And where had Alicia heard differently? "Why shouldn't she think that?"

"Damn it Rit..."

He sat on the tiles at the edge of the pool, the steam rising from the water warm against his back. "Alicia, I don't know. It could as easily be Wilntinn's as mine. Or Olloss's." Was this old news as well? "Would it be so bad if the baby was mine?"

"I haven't decided yet. I think I wanted you to say it couldn't possibly be."

"Wanted or expected? You'd already made up your mind." She had, he could see it in her, the looking for truth so automatic now that he didn't have to try at all. And saw more: that she did know, or thought she did. "Who did you ask?"

She shrugged, looking very tired all of a sudden. "Sometimes I wish you'd never found us."

It had been a longer way back than either of them had expected. "Alicia," he started then hesitated, not sure of what to say. There was an uncertain look showing through the tired, it never really left. But no tears. "Ramsini was there when I needed someone very badly."

"And she was certainly willing." A wry tone, but the core of her voice was hollow.

"She also wasn't the wisest choice. I'm sorry this happened." He pulled his boots off, then his socks as she watched him.

Watched and waited for the more he wasn't sure he had to give. "That's it?" she said. "That's all you have to say?"

"What do you want to hear?" Even if Alicia had been there, he didn't know if he could have taken that kind of need to her. He hadn't told anyone except Tennin about Cassa but he wasn't sure Ramsini hadn't known anyway. Not the exact thing, but something close. And the others... Nisstinn perhaps, out of all of them he thought the Warrior might have understood and kept quiet, but Nisstinn's recovery from his injuries had been slow. Even with Jini looking after him, he'd gotten much worse before starting slowly to mend. And he couldn't have talked to Bolda, it said too much Rit didn't want said. Ulanda? God, no. He shivered, fighting the cold that threatened to invade him. Had it been Ulanda who had told Alicia the child was his? Or Panntin? And what else had been said?

"You have to understand that kind of need," he said, looking away as he spoke. He had wanted Eunni, not Ramsini, not Alicia. "You see it every day in Ulanda."

"At least she shows some discretion."

"Would you have preferred I'd gone with one of the Holding servants?"

"Or Pida," she said overly sweetly and with acid in the words. "At least he wouldn't have gotten pregnant."

Was she only joking? Yes, he decided, and only to be cruel. Her cheeks were flushed with anger. And if Pida had been doing more than playing rings and stones with her? "Perhaps you should have had him stay tonight."

"Why?" The words weren't sweet anymore. "So you could have found us together? You wouldn't have cared."

Would he have? "There was nothing done that I should care about." He spoke softly, meaning to apologize... and caught her hand before it connected with his face. She twisted out of his grip.

"So maybe I'll go ask him now."

"Have you talked to Ulanda about this? Was it her you asked?" He took his pants off and threw them into a corner. "Maybe you should go talk to her now. You could use the change in perspective."

The door slammed behind her, the Net gave their bedroom as an egg of silence. Her moving in with him had been at the end of a hard won struggle that had kept him here when he had wanted the both of them in Wilni and away from this mess. Too many changes, she couldn't have handled Wilni, and she had needed Ulanda. And Garm and Eunni, needing those two as a pair - which they still were to his surprise. Stability in the people around her, not in the place.

The bath water had cooled but he took his time washing, letting his own anger work its way out. He wasn't sure sometimes, just what it was that struggle to keep their marriage together had won.

The door wasn't sealed. Alicia was back in bed, reading again, but with a tea tray on the rug next to the pallet and Tika curled up by her knees.

He went over to his carry bag to get the small package then sat next to her on the edge of the pallet. "I brought you something." She had been crying, her eyes were swollen and red. And the tip of her small nose. "From the High Market in Wilni Capital..." Grease spots showed on the outer wrapping paper, he'd forgotten the pastry. "... and from the banquet, I forgot I put that in there."

"If you'd remembered, you'd have eaten it." She sniffed as she picked at the flattened roll. The ground almond filling had squished out at either end. Lemon and honey with the almond. He'd eaten three of them while listening to the Innit ambassador's speech. "You should have given it to Tennin," she added between licks of the sugar from her fingers.

"He doesn't much like sweets." He put Tika to the end of the bed along with a portion of the pastry. The soft gray and cream fur on the cat's shoulder and neck was still wet from Alicia's tears.

The paper crinkled as Alicia reached for the shallow wooden box inside. She ran her fingers over the carved surface before opening it. "They're beautiful," she whispered, lifting the rope of pearls from the velvet nest and wrapping the strand around one hand. Sliding them against her skin.

The old clasp had been gold with the Royal mark as part of the design. He had debated leaving it, worn as it was, or having a new one made in the same pattern. Wilntinn had been with him, quietly amused at the intensity in which he

handled the pearls. And had suggested a new clasp: six petals in silver, not the Xintan pattern but the actual shape of the flowers. The merchant had politely pretended not to know who they were - in the face of their respective guards - and he, as politely, didn't ask how the man had come to possess a necklace that technically belonged to the Crown. They cost most of what his father had left him, the money surviving fifteen plus years and a war to fall to a string of beads.

There was a blue undertone to the white, a cold color in the pearls, they didn't warm against her skin, but added their frost to her instead. "They've been in your family for generations," he said as he tried to fasten the clasp, his fingers clumsy. "All those Royal House women, mother to daughter, to cousin or sister." He had it done up at last and leaned back to look at her. "You'll be a beautiful Queen."

"Somehow that's still not real."

The women weren't real to her either, he saw, but the pearls were, and were enough. "You can wear it for the Coronation." He reached for the last of the almond roll.

Alicia slapped his hand away. "That's mine." She lay back against her pillow, looking up at him as she chewed, her fingers back to feeling the pearls, leaving sticky prints on the luster.

He picked a crumb from the corner of her mouth. "I'm sorry about what happened. I suppose everybody is just as decided that I'm the father."

"Rossa hasn't said a word to me all day about Ramsini."

"Everybody then." She nodded. Then it must have been Panntin who had told her. That Ramsini had gone back to northern Wilni with Olloss, to the base camp near the Aklif mountains, he had known, but not that she'd stayed with him. He didn't know how he missed so much gossip. "Did they marry?"

"I don't know. I asked Hann but she didn't seem to think it was important."

"No, it wouldn't be to the Xintan, not for two people who had been married before." And Ramsini was Strom. The Xintan might consider that much the same as Bluestone and their women seldom gave the formal honor of their names to other Clans. He had been thinking of what Ramsini might want.

Alicia rolled over onto her belly again, closed the book and pushed it to slide off the pillow, sending game pieces skittering across the floor. And looked at him sideways, a wicked glint in her eyes. "If Olass doesn't mind, I guess I won't."

He pushed the long braid at the back of her head to one side. The clasp had caught a strand. He tried to hold onto what he felt from her. Not a blending of emotions but a complex harmony. "Do you forgive me?"

"Not yet," she replied archly, some of the effect lost as the words sank into the pillow. "Olliss's not minding will include that his wife's child will be mostly Strom and the son of the Hegemony king."

"Half Strom anyway."

"He thinks it's yours and not his *and* he doesn't mind. I think my not minding should be as rewarded. What else did the jeweler have available?"

"Almond rolls. In the whole market, just almond rolls and one necklace." He had the necklace off again.

She put the pearls back into the carved box, turning it to the light several ways before closing the lid. A pale wood he didn't recognize, almost white in color with green depths. More of the six-petal flowers were cut into the polished surface. It wasn't the original box any more than the clasp was the original fastener.

The box was to her nose. "Gennady's here."

"I saw the pod on the way in."

"Ulanda had asked to see him. I think he wants to talk to you."

No flags had been waiting in the Net when he arrived. He checked again in case he had inadvertently walled them out. Still nothing. "What did he want to talk about?"

"Simitta. He asked if you had told me anything about Simitta's death. Only, not quite in those words."

"Was he being diplomatic?"

"Very."

Placement didn't have him, but showed four areas blanked out at the domestic level he had used. The Guest rooms or Ulanda's chambers, he wouldn't be at the Nursery or the Holding Center.

"He was with Ulanda but she's retired for the evening." Alicia sat up on one elbow. "He said he'd see you whenever you got back, it didn't matter how late."

"I'm sure it can wait until morning. I'm too tired to deal with him if he's in a diplomatic mood."

"Then tell me. What about Simitta's death?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"There must be more than is in the report." She put the box with the pearls next to the tea tray on the rug. The sides of the box reflected red from a wool and silk rose. Pastry crumbs on the top. Inquisitiveness had replaced most everything in Alicia's mind.

Rit unwrapped the warming cloth and checked the pot. Lemon tea. "Do you want more tea?" She shook her head and he poured fresh into the second bowl for himself. "He talked about the sasi blooming. He wanted to be left there, in the ocean; he had been watching it as he died. I pushed him off the raft when I was sure he was dead."

"That's all?"

"Perhaps Demitt's version didn't agree with what Gennady has heard since." The report Alicia would have seen had been an edited version of the truth and which didn't mention Cassa. He took a sip of the tea then stretched his legs out

and scratched the curly hair on one thigh, noticing some of the scars from that battle. Not as bad as Nisstin's, especially with the man's fair coloring. "I don't know. He might have just been making conversation."

One glow globe dimmed, then the other. He lost the feel of her at the same time, a dimming of her curiosity, or he was too tired to maintain that level. Alicia shifted over, giving him some of the warmed bed and a fist full of covers pulled his way. Shadows grew around them as his eyes adjusted. One of the shadows moved. Tika. The cat was on the warming cloth he hadn't put back on the pot, purring loudly as she kneaded the fabric.

He took his dressing robe off and let it drop to the floor next to the cat before slipping under the sheet, still holding the tea bowl.

The taste of lemon rind was in his mouth as he swallowed the last of the tea. He stretched, feeling the sheets against his skin, cool cotton that was rapidly warming. And warmer still next to Alicia. "Why don't we both get some sleep?"

She laughed as she gave him more space. "Have I forgiven you?"

The mattress felt like it was absorbing his bones. "You shouldn't," he yawned. "Could become a habit."

She leaned over him, a hand playing in the mat of hair on his chest. Almonds, but not the oil from the bath. Almonds and butter from the pastry. He put his much larger hand over hers. "Why don't we worry about that in the morning too."

"So who's worried?"

"I am."

"So, maybe I should go find Pida."

"You do that." He yawned again.

She giggled then whispered into his hand. "I'll forget you said that if you tell me what happened when Simitta died."

"Do I have to make love to you to shut you up?"

"You say just enough to make it plausible. But you ended up with Ramsini right afterwards."

"I told you..." The rest went unsaid. He didn't want to start it all over again.

She curled up against him. "Rit... I do understand when I'm not angry. It's just that when I think of her being pregnant with your baby, I want my own children so much. Will you make him your heir?"

It would solve one problem and he didn't much care if the child was his. Rit turned to hold her. "I don't know what I'll do. I do know I should have told you, baby or no baby."

"You should have," she whispered as he felt himself start to drift, his own exhaustion mixing with her feeling of release. The harmony was quieting to a hum. "I shouldn't have had to hear it from someone else. When I found out, and you hadn't said anything, I thought it might have been more, that Olass had taken her to Wilni on your orders."

"Who?" he mouthed, the taste of her hair against his lips. She didn't answer and he fell asleep holding his arms around her, her hands entwined in his.

He woke towards morning, the faint whine of the flitter growing into his dreams as sounds do. Images mixed with the insect buzz, and for a brief moment of consciousness, he was flying, the plain between the Holding and the ocean coming up fast to meet him. Then fell back into the dream for as brief a moment: mountains and ice. And an image: Tennin and Willi at the mountain lake, the breath of the glacier a thin ice mist about them, the sky the same colorless gray. Currents of clay in an ocean of rounded stone. Arms crossed, Tennin watched as Willi used a knife to pry minute frozen clumps of clay away from the shore. The two faded in and out of his awareness... the mist or he was waking up, leaving the dream behind.

Beside him, Alicia stirred and sighed, bringing him further out of sleep. The room was still dark.

Rit tucked the blanket around her shoulders; she smiled and murmured something, but didn't open her eyes.

The flitter was landing, not leaving. The sound got louder, then suddenly cut off. In the silence, Command Level Placement touched the barriers about his and Alicia's room and faded. Nisstin.

No flags waited for him in the Net, but Rit felt the Warrior's focus on him. As he slipped his dressing robe on and crossed the room to the door leading to the terrace, he felt he was walking part through another time, another place, at some level expecting to see En'talac's body on the stone flagging.

Nisstin was in the courtyard off the Assembly Hall, standing by one of the pillars supporting the awning, leaning on it to ease his bad leg. Waiting for him. He was dressed for winter. And armed. The Nightwatch remained at rest; they didn't salute him. Rit saw himself through their Placement scans and felt the limits that Nisstin had established.

Rit's feet were cold on the damp stone, the waking dream hadn't included putting shoes on. "What's the problem?"

"Tennin's dead."

A mountain and ice. He saw a stone cairn by the lake. And Nisstin leading Heni along side a stream. Willi was beside him. A fall day, it would snow soon. Warding beams shone blue against the white sky. An Empire ship. It wasn't the Ladybug or Slicannin's.

Through the suddenly silver and violet night, Rit looked for blood on the Warrior's hands. And the scent of blood. And found that much before the alien senses faded.

"I can see you back there to bury him so apparently there's a future with you in it. You'll survive tonight. Tell me, did you kill him on Ulanda's orders."

"His life was a favor from her to you and hers to take back. You could have left him to the Courts."

Or left him in Wilni, or rather, not asked Garm to start the process that eventually found him in the loyalist camp. He would have died of his injuries or of a fever or have been executed. "Did you kill him on her orders?" he asked again.

"I was there to make sure he was dead."

Who else could Ulanda ask to kill someone? And who couldn't she trust not to interpret the orders to his own advantage? Gennady. And the Zimmer had wanted to see him.

He turned to leave and was stopped by Nisstn's hand on his arm. The scent of blood again, and Rit forced down the alien senses. "She won't see you. And Gennady is on his way back to the Ladybug. If you need to settle anything right now, you're stuck with me."

"Apparently, I'm not going to kill you, so I'm going back to bed."

Nisstn pushed him. Hard. "React, damn it."

He couldn't. He didn't know where his feelings were, he felt numb, he felt as though he still walked in the dream and hadn't woken at all. Mountains and ice and a world where Tennin was alive and watching Willi pick out clay with the tip of her white knife, the red markings along the blade flickering in and out of his vision as his perspective changed with the mist swirling around the two. The part of him that could feel rage or pain belonged to another state.

White knife? Willi still had the Patrol issue blade she had with her when they picked her up near the cabin with Tennin and Ottali, not a Zimmer knife. Especially not an honor knife with the sasi rose markings along the center of the blade. Had it been white in the original dream?

"Do something!" Nisstn yelled and pushed hard again across Rit's chest.

Rit grabbed at him as he fell and they both went down, Nisstn lying across him. The Warrior's rifle skittered across the cobblestones. The nearest Nightwatch guard started towards it, then stopped as Nisstn waved him back just as he tried to get up. The movement threw off his balance and he fell into a roll, holding his bad leg.

"Goddamn bloody..." Nisstn sat up, hands around his thigh, breathing heavily.

The tie of the robe had come undone; Rit was sitting with the bare skin of his buttocks against wet cold rock and more exposed to the cold air. He got to his feet, tied the robe again, and offered his hand to Nisstn. "Any damage?"

With his help, Nisstn managed to stand. The Warrior's braid was loosened, the shorter hair falling loose around his face, and he pushed it behind his ears. "It'll hurt like hell for a couple of hours, but I'll live." He tested his weight on the leg and Rit braced to catch him again, but the Warrior managed to hobble a few steps without help. "My office? Before we disgrace ourselves completely?" Rit didn't answer, but Nisstn took a grip on his arm as though for support, and limping

heavily, walked him towards the north guard station. And when they were away from the guard: "I'd feel better if you had tried to kill me."

"You'll have to work out your guilt on someone else, I'm not interested."

"I can see that." Nisstín stopped at the door to his office, put his rifle just inside then braced himself against the frame while he took his long coat off. "You created the situation, don't pass it off on me."

Rit shied away from looking for the truth in the man's words. He *wanted* to be angry, he *wanted* some kind of reaction in himself and if it took lying, then fine.

"If I'm guilty, then you aren't? Is that the way it works in your mind?"

"Tennin could have disappeared without a trace, especially the second time. He could have been dropped off anywhere an hour after you found him - you had a flitter and you had a freeborn Zimmer pilot who would have flown him to the sun if you'd asked."

Rit walked past him without answering. Warm air, the office had a fireplace, the hearth still radiating the heat stored in the stone. It would have been hot in here, very hot for anyone sitting on the saddle stool that had been pulled close to the grate. Last evening. Waiting for the order to come from Ulanda, or for Gennady to be ready. The fire had been allowed to die on its own, the ashes showed the elongated shape of the wood, large crossed logs, the ends fallen away and only partly burned. Where the ashes were thickest, they were still warm and glowed faintly silver. Listening to Nisstín, Rit's mind had started shutting down again, leaving Zimmer to fill what was missing of the human in him.

"Are you hearing any of this?"

Finding the language was a struggle. "I'm listening."

Nisstín threw the coat at the stool and missed, the draft sending ashes blowing upwards. "You could have just had him disappear, but no, you had to make it official, you had to make a point of using your position to protect him. And then you threw him in Ulanda's face every opportunity you got or could make."

Kneeling on the warm stone, Rit pulled the coat away the grate, then used the prod to push the half-burned ends of the logs to the center and added coals from the firebox. There was ritual in how he moved, a part of his mind very aware of what he was doing and very interested in watching it, but he didn't know what ritual, or the meaning.

He knew when Nisstín limped from the door to the desk in the corner, and when the Xintan came up behind him. A forearm resting on his shoulder. The scent of lavender. A joss stick over the coals.

As it had been with setting the watchlink on Tennin, distance and then time split and split again, each portion distinct and separate, each leading from the other. He had all the time in the world to turn and pull the Zimmer blade from Nisstín's boot, to notice how the plain white trade knife flickered red from the sasi rose it couldn't have. And how a single touch from him - made in that very slow

turn - had Nisstin on his back, one arm twisted under his body, the other arm paralyzed from a nerve blow. And how a kick had the man motionless, but conscious. He'd survive the exactly and so-deliberately placed kick, but perhaps not the knife held to his throat, the point just under the skin, the trickle of blood that grew with each heartbeat and breath and which would take so little for it to be a torrent.

Rage at last. Rage at chance. At luck. At a god who killed what you loved in order to possess you more completely. He'd asked Bolda if Alicia differentiated between Ulanda and Cassa - he should have asked it of himself.

Nisstin choked against the increasing pressure of the knife tip. "You said you saw me alive..." The words were slurred.

"So I did." The rage drained and Rit stepped back in what felt like a smooth continuation of the attack. "So I did," he repeated more slowly then sat on the saddle stool near the hearth. The knife dropped to the floor from his hand. He didn't have the strength to hold it.

Movement came back in jerks of Nisstin's arm and leg muscles. Rit didn't offer to help as the Warrior pulled himself up to a sitting position, couldn't have helped if he had been asked.

"That's the second time in just a few hours I've seen someone move like that," Nisstin said then wiped his throat with his hand, looked at the blood, and only then winced. "Why Zimmer?"

Rit shook his head. Cassa. He could see the tattoos on her face, the a'Genn markings that he was almost sure Garm had never mentioned. "I don't know," he lied. With a bare foot, he pushed the knife towards Nisstin. "I think a part of me got trapped by the Opening, like the pattern deaths, except..." He was loosing the words, loosing his sense of the other man. Just tired, he said to himself. Emotional shock.

"Except you didn't die?"

The fire had caught; Rit felt the warmth at his back and on the back of his legs through the dressing robe. And the leather of the seat he was on, the arms of the saddle stool and the strap across the back. And the air: cedar from the wood, fresh scent added to the older, lingering smell. Lavender from the joss stick. Warm leather and wool from the coat too near the flames and metal from the Xintan rifle Nisstin had propped against the wall.

When he didn't answer, Nisstin changed the question. "Did you die?"

Rit stirred himself from something like a deep sleep to answer. "I don't know what lived and what died." And what was born. He had tried to tell himself that being with Simitta when he died had led him to Cassa, and Cassa to the alien senses, but he remembered earlier incidences, even the way the Zimmer Net had acted towards him from the start, how the Zimmer had acted towards him.

He heaved himself to his feet and stood, then needed one hand on the mantle to keep from falling. His head felt like it was floating, a band of pain squeezing across his temples. "I'd better see Willi and Tam, I don't want them to hear this first as a rumor. Do you have an explanation for them that makes more sense than what you've told me?"

"He knew."

Human anger at last, now when he didn't have the strength to take a step. "Nisstn..."

"He was out of the cabin by the time we landed, and waiting by the goat pens. It was dark, no moonlight, the clouds were too thick, but he *knew*."

He shook his head where he would rather have had some of that Zimmer exactness back. He could only vaguely remember what he had done previously, where he had kicked him or how hard. "Of course he was out there, he probably thought it was me coming back for something. You could have landed in daylight to the same end, he was half blind as it was."

"I'm telling you, he *knew*. He faced down Gennady and that's no mean feat. He told him to go ahead. Said it was near enough to being springtime."

Safe at the cabin until spring. All that he had seen of the future and all that he had promised Tennin.

He spoke quietly. "I suppose it is near enough to spring." At least in the warmer south, in Wilni Capital. The apple trees in bud, the crocuses growing wild in the grass, a mass of purple and yellow blooms. The anger hadn't left, but it had changed direction, directed inwards to gnaw at his stomach.

Despite the divisions of power in the Holding, despite his not being in strong with any of the groups brokering that power, both Kori and the Net would take his orders as a priority. The flitter, mid-day. Wilni Capital. Kori as the pilot, not Wiccin.

Nisstn had managed to get up far enough to half sit against his desk. "Planning on running away?"

"I'm taking my family, such as it is, and going home."

"Are you including Willi and Tam in that family?"

He had meant them - and Eunni, which was an indication of how well his mind was working. Willi wouldn't go with him to Wilni Capital, or, if he forced her, she'd run away at the first opportunity. She would be a flitter pilot if it killed her and she wouldn't care who she had to deal with if they could get her what she wanted. She had as one-track a mind as Tennin ever did. Tam? Easier, but he wouldn't be doing him any favors sticking the awkward boy in the middle of a volatile Court.

Nisstn twisted around and pulled a folder out of the stack on his desk and tossed it to land on the floor between them. "I've reviewed the security arrangements at the palace in Wilni Capital. You haven't faced a serious

assassination attempt yet... you might survive the first few as they figure out what it takes to kill you, but I wouldn't take as high as even odds on the tenth attempt. And I wouldn't give any odds if the target were someone close to you instead. Being close to you doesn't keep people from getting killed."

"I get the point."

"And for you and Alicia?"

Was it Nisstn's business once they left the confines of the Holding? "The situation is no different than we would have faced two months ago if the Blueknife attack had never happened." He couldn't disagree with Nisstn's assessment of his chances, except that he didn't *feel* like he or Alicia were at any particular risk, and hoped it wasn't the kind of head-in-the-sand wishful thinking that had blinded him so often just before disaster struck.

Moving stiffly, Rit picked up the folder from the floor and sat on the stool. A stack of loose sheets and a narrow recording crystal in a padded sleeve, the kind of crystal that had the analysis capacity built-in so you didn't have to use the Net. There were only a handful that he knew about at the Holding, and he had two of them in his office.

He let the analysis filter through his mind as he thumbed through the sheets. Names stood out in several annotated lists: the new Blood Guard. The Queen's Guard. A few others separate from the two, with Pasi's name at the top of that list. Servants and close staff for the Royal apartments. Physical description, age, and family. If they were Heg or Xintan. Ranking and security risk. There was even more in the crystal. He had met some of the people on his stays in Wilni. Seven names had been crossed off in red pencil; more had a question mark next to them, and in the crystal, under a lock that opened at his touch, reasons why they were considered a risk.

"The crossed off ones, I wouldn't be alone in a room with." Nisstn passed the pencil to him. "Any you want to add?"

All the questioned men in the Queen's Guard he crossed off, and five in the Blood Guard list, one of them the Commander of the Daywatch, and four more in the staff list, a man and three women. "And Pasi?" he asked. There hadn't been a mark next to the man's name. "I take it he's not a problem."

"Other than you might trip over him or the dogs, no. He doesn't have the imagination to get himself into that kind of trouble. My sister's son, youngest of three. I think the brains got used up by the first two. I would have thought you knew."

That he wasn't a risk or that he was Nisstn's nephew? Had he suspected? He knew Pasi reported to Nisstn, but didn't think he'd given it much thought beyond that. "No, I didn't," he admitted.

"I married into the Sallin name, I wasn't born with it." Nisstn shook his head again, a wry set to his mouth. "I was very ambitious in my youth."

And his wife, that daughter of the powerful Greywolf Sallin family, what did she think of Nisstin's relationship with Ulanda? "Any family?"

Nisstin hesitated, a puzzled look on his face, then said, "A boy and girl, both I'm reasonably sure are mine. They're as ambitious as I was..." He smiled with the same wry look. "... or as ambitious as their mother has become. My son's married into Redleaf, and my daughter's husband is Redleaf."

With the distinction, Rit realized his mistake. He'd already been told the man's family: his sister's children. Nisstin had made the mental switch from the matrilineal Xintan culture to Heg faster than he had the reverse.

Greywolf and Redleaf, the two weren't traditional allies, making the marriages both risky and potentially very useful for Greywolf Clan... and which explained Nisstin's relationship with the Marshall. And Pasi's. "I take it your son at least, is in Wilni."

"With the Occupation troops in north Wilni, waiting for the mountain passes into Surri Province to open up." Nisstin bent to rub his bad leg. "Stay here until after Garm and Gennady go through the portal. Until after the other Empire ships arrive."

Did Ulanda think he'd make a difference she wanted? He would have thought the opposite. Or this was Nisstin's idea, that she needed him here. "I'm leaving today," he said, needing to hear the words again and again. "If I have to ride Heni the whole way, I'm leaving."

Nisstin appeared to be concentrating on his leg. "And Alicia?"

"If she wants this marriage, she'll be with me. Don't bother telling me Ulanda didn't know the consequences of her decision."

"I think other consequences then you going or staying were what pushed her." Nisstin looked up. "She did what she felt she had to."

Rit stood, put the papers on the desk, and then held up the recording crystal. "May I?" Nisstin nodded and he put it in the dressing robe pocket. "Has anyone looked at the political consequences?"

"I'm looking at you."

"And I'm the only one?"

"If you don't make a point of this, then yes, you are. If anyone thinks of him at all, it's that he probably died in the fighting or is hiding out under an assumed name. A few people here know differently, and only you, Tam and Willi are likely to miss him."

Had Tennin's life been so invisible? And what would his own would have been if the war and Ulanda had never happened? No wife, no children. Nothing to mark that he had ever existed. Very human now... suddenly, he needed to be certain Ramsini's child was his, needed her here so he could look for the truth in her. Or at the Court in Wilni. Who had she told? Had she made the claim that he was the unborn child's father? If so, then he had the right....

And remembered where he had felt this before. Remembered what he had felt when Kori had told Gennady that Clan a'Genn didn't exist in this reality, and later, what Gennady had felt, his spurs cutting tracks through the skin of Kori's cheek. One chance. The kinds of odds Cassa liked. Breeding dominant. A part of him, caught in all the other parts, was amused. The Choosing and Simitta's laughter: *Cassa having fun. She'd like that.* The twins.

Nisstin was watching him, his face impassive.

"You'll excuse me, I've got packing to do." And two children to talk to. "I'll transfer the information to one of my crystals, then send yours back. Thank you for this much anyway. And for telling me yourself." The Warrior bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement, and Rit turned to leave.

Ulanda was at the door, Niv at her shoulder. How long had she been there? He couldn't feel her or Niv, body heat, scent, the sound of their breath, nothing. He was tempted to wave his hand through her to see if she wasn't a Net image.

Or a pattern pull.

"I understood you have questions about my decision."

Pale in the uncertain light of the fire and he was relieved that much of the 'here' had found her. She might be real. He tried Placement, but suddenly, the usually cooperative Net found him as unreal as he did her. "I was told you wouldn't see me."

"I'm seeing you now. I'm curious... others appear willing to accept my decisions. They even do me the honor of thinking these decisions significant past something approaching a whim. Some apparently, by their actions at least, even think that what I decide has ramifications and scope beyond what they are capable of understanding, and thus grant me their loyalty without needing explanations."

Thin white fingers wove other words into her anger. A shell of anger, he thought, and for that, didn't require an explanation. "I won't be what you want."

Over his words Niv whispered in her ears with a sound like water over smooth stones, that faint and silken. "You don't know what I want," she said.

"You or Cassa?" Whatever she had done to his sensing her earlier, he could feel her now, feel the truth. And knew how delicate the line was that they walked together. "Shall we put our respective tempers to the test?" he added coldly. And turned his head to Nisstin, the man a threat at his back now, where he hadn't been when only his own life had been in danger. "Don't."

"There is no need," Niv hissed in Xintan, and Nisstin sat back against the desk again, his eyes closed a moment as though he needed the time to center himself.

The windows were open to the morning, the mild breeze moved in the layers of gauze Ulanda wore, the cloth as iridescent as dragonfly's wing. She took a sip of tea, careful of the long floating sleeves. From Tikkanami, a gift from their new Oligarch. During the winter in the high plains of the land-locked country, the sasi had bloomed about the time the story of the Zimmer pull reached them. Her braids matched, Hann's work. The weaver was improving. And as much from Pida's tutelage as Bolda's, she thought.

Niv fussed with his dressing, crest rising at each change, then flattening as his doubts started. "The blue tunic," she suggested. Lighter than his normal color and pale against the passion he was capable of. "I like it on you."

"Why then, when I wear it, do you have it so quickly off me?"

She laughed. The day had started like a promise and she felt it growing around her, a globe of possibilities. In the Net this morning, a flag: Viy'lana had given birth, a boy and a girl. While the dawn prayer fires burned, she had been in the last stages of labour, and an hour later, when Ulanda woke, it was over.

Outside her suite, her Guard saluted, rifle's slapping the floor. More possibilities. "May I come in?" Gennady asked softly, already allowed. She had left instructions to admit him.

Niv dropped the lid of the chest he had open, and turned to Gennady but the man only saw her. His eyes were blue ice edged with black. A flame robe to match the flickering of his skin. "You are in," she said in Zimmer, an allowing in that as well, and motioned to his formal clothes. "For the Naming?"

He hissed a tight laugh. "Yes. I've been told it's a significant event. And, as I was here..."

"Would you be my guest?"

He bowed. "Clan a'Genn is honored in this and that you've allowed service to your House."

She bowed. "I trust it is a service that will be better rewarded than that you gave the loom-master."

He laughed again, but the black about his eyes deepened.

The Empire ships could only be days away and the portal still hadn't opened. "The Spann can stay here until the other Temple ships come," she continued. "Or with Slicanin, if it prefers her company to mine. They can talk." Gennady didn't answer. Olumka was in the Ladybug's flitter that had landed during the night, the request for refuge - carefully worded in Trade-basic - logged in the Net while the craft was still airborne. "Did Poss a'Itic let Olumka go or did your crew?" A sweet smell came from Gennady, and even though the news wasn't a surprise to him,

his eyes had gone to full black. "I wonder what reality you think to have her create. Garm said that we're a bridge. Simic to Altasimic."

Gennady bowed. "The Lady Priest is mistaken."

She laughed. "Undoubtedly in something, not being the god you worship. But at what point this time? Or is it only in the connections..." She saluted him with her tea bowl. "... that I am in error?"

"You forget I know you."

"If you knew me, you'd be on Zimmer now."

"As you say."

So polite. She made a motion of apology.

Ulanda let the Naming ceremony for Viy'lana's twins flow around her, not pulling the Net to see what the meaning was of each of the steps as it happened, instead, let herself drift lightly in pattern. Not quite bored, but not at all interested... the feeling of expectation she had woken with had been replaced by the too familiar restlessness.

Wandassa knelt before her, holding two small packages, blood red, one in each hand. Ulanda bowed in return, keeping time with the ci-ci drums sounding from the Assembly Hall.

The offering was to Panntin next, then to the fire. The smoke caught in her throat, suddenly choking her. She was blinded by tears and a feeling of displacement.

I'm still here, she thought, looking around when her vision cleared. More *here* than she had felt earlier. Her anteroom off the Assembly Hall, the doors between the rooms left open, a number of people gathered in the larger room. The wide doors of the far end of the Hall were open as well, the breeze moving in the draped curtains of silk, in the canopy of banners hung from the ceiling, in the colorful ribbons of silk entwining the pillars, counter to the direction of the carved wood. She could feel the breeze reaching out for her, icy fingers touching her skin. She felt alone even with Niv warm against her. Pattern moved like a stream around her body, she couldn't reach it. Too much *here*. Nobody seemed to notice, not even Panntin.

No, Quin'tat did. He was at the Holding for the ceremony. Watching her. Sitting quietly - a very still mountain - but she kept the focus of his attention even as he chatted with Jini.

I don't know where they are. Her failure. A created reality that denied his creation of reality. Wife. Children. Especially children, especially now.

Then she saw the smoke again and was lost in a misty gray. Another offering fire, the scent of burning pine in the smoke but with the overly sweet smell of the lemon flowers lingering in the back of her throat. Small trees in a row of planters, white painted wood, moss like green shadows in the joins. A brick wall was

behind them and stone paving under. They were in an open building, or a covered part of a patio, yellow brick set around with sheets of heavy cloth like red and white sails. Viy'lana and her, alone, but with the sounds of chanting and the ci-ci drums in the distance and sounding like they were part of the rain, a drumming on cloth and stone. Much warmer but a morning darkened by cloud into twilight, the blossoms on the trees floating like white moths against the shine of the green leaves and the rough textured fruit. Given the time difference and the distance between the Holding and Vancallin, it wasn't *now*, but the actual time the children had been born.

The offering fire was sheltered under an awning, the smoke rising to be collected in the center, escaping on either side in twin streams. Then, not alone, two bundled shapes were in Viy'lana's arms. She carried them to the offering fire, and stood beside the flames, her bare feet forming more lines to join those already drawn into the sand. A thin crying, two voices...

The world altar and the portal. With the same lack of volition as had her in Vancallin, she was at the world-altar and a different scent and a different taste of sand on her tongue, between her teeth. Around her, the plume grew like a whirlwind, and for a moment she was the portal... it was daytime in the diamond.

Camerat. Caml't Temple. *Freedom?* Reflectively, she jerked her awareness back and her anteroom in the Temple Holding solidified.

The image was gone but the scent remained. Pemka algae.

The Naming Ceremony was over, most of the people were gone and the doors closed. In the center of the decorative spiral were the remains of a small banquet. A brazier offered a pine scent to compete with the lemon. Lemon tea, the pot was next to her and there were slices of lemon in many of the tea bowls.

And a lavender scent, joss sticks were burning. A forest of sticks had been laid over the coals on the altar, all of them were gray with ash.

She was kneeling. Niv was beside her. Garm had left already, Eunni as well. And Quin'tat. Had she only been sleeping and dreamed this?

No. "I've lost any sense of the portal," she said as she got her feet. Niv remained sitting, a bowl of tea in one hand, and only watched as she walked to the altar and leaned against the lip of the large shallow bowl. "Nisstin?"

"Security links from the world-altar don't give any change." A pause. "I've checked with Quin'tat, he had just gotten back to Endica, and he agrees. It's not ready to open, not by anything we know."

Would the man lie? "And Gennady?"

"He left when the Naming ceremony ended."

The door to the corridor opened and Hann stuck her head in, caught Bolda's eye, then Pida's and smiled with relief as she came all the way in.

"Viy'lana's sent me with some of the mother-cake." Hann put the covered plate next to Bolda.

Bolda passed the girl a bowl of tea, and over her protest that she should go back, grunted, "Sit."

Hann did, looking more relieved still. "The courtyard... Viy'lana said it was her home. That she made her first offering fire as a priestess in the courtyard there. It was raining then too. Her other two children were born in that house, live there still with their grandmother." Hann's dark eyes looked around, then she continued in a low voice that wouldn't carry to the guards. "She cried. She didn't giving birth, but after the Lady's gift to her..."

Bolda tugged one ear. "Did I miss something?"

Hann answered him. "I missed it too. And I've always wanted to see Vancallin, it's supposed to be beautiful. Rossa said she could smell the lemon trees, but I don't think so. At least, when Willi told Rossa she was crazy, she didn't get too angry."

Pida went over to the weaver and after an exchange of whispers, took a piece of the cake and brought it to her. Ulanda signed 'no' with enough movement to make her wrists hurt. A delicacy she'd first tasted when Bissalta had her baby. Sugar syrup mixed with dried fruits, a shallow pan of the mixture baked until it was half burned and then coated with layer after layer of colored fondants. Niv ate it greedily; it made her feel ill to watch.

Hann laughed as she passed the plate to Nisstin. "Of course I'll tell Viy'lana that the Lady ate most of it."

"Ulanda?" Bolda asked. "Was any of that you or was it Panntin?"

She heard the flow of words and their abrupt ending as she stepped into the center of the marble spiral. She pushed a platter of sliced meat out of the way with her foot, confused for a moment at seeing it there. The wreckage of the banquet was all around her.

"Gennady's trying the same coordinates as from Palace. He's jumping from orbit right into the portal. He's using overpattern, not Zimmer pattern.

Their Net was floundering as the silver bird at the world-altar screamed in her head. In the panic, she had lost the self-control that separated her from the system. Too soon. Days too soon. Time threatened to crack wide open, spilling eternity into the Unity, a rift in the fabric of reality. Then the wings unfolded all at once as they had at Palace on Ri, a snap of movement she hadn't been able to see then but could now. Life and death filled the veins of the expanding wings; they engorged on chance.

The bird turned, green eyes burning into hers. Then she blinked and it was Rit looking at her, the same wings rising around him.

Dusk. Wilni Capital. It had been raining and would rain again soon.

"I should have killed you then," she whispered, seeing that last trap of Anga's and her choice.

"Freedom," he said back to her and it wasn't a whisper, it rose with the scream of pain coming from the bird. Then, from the man: "Did Tennin pay for my life?" And all sense of him was gone.

The Hand of Guard had moved towards the doors, their weapons ready. Hann was on her feet, knife in one hand.

Niv held her; she leaned back into him. Gentle fingers touched her face, feeling the energy points. A motion from him and Pida left to find Jini.

"Freedom," she said against his hand on her face. Against the scent that even now caught at her throat and deepened her breath. And laughed softly.

And pulled in, hard, focusing her mind to a single point and tried to wrap it tight in the strings of a counted mantra. Too human, how could she be human at all?

Their Net regrouped, reformed and sparked in a mental avalanche that threatened her concentration. Two of the Guard collapsed - they had stayed in, trying to hold onto the security links, that system not as affected as the other - one started convulsing, the other appeared unconscious.

And then the Net worked, both systems. The Level one security alert hummed in the air as seemingly passive links came to life. Command Level Placement. *Two out*, the system whispered in her mind. Garm and Eunni. And an escort, but the three men - or two and a boy - hadn't existed in the first flag. Kori's flag, first and second. And then she lost any feel of the woman.

"Pull them in, now," she said, the order going into the security linking-sphere the point guard had. And felt the link falter.

"Keep out of the fucking system!" Bolda shouted at her. His mental block had been as subtle. Then to Nisstin: "Secure the flitter Olumka came on and..."

"Gennady took it along with the pod."

Bolda swore as he picked up the Net leads. "So he did. Pin Wiccin down at least and make sure no one can get to Slicannin's flitter, not Wiccin, not Olumka.... are any of Gennady's crew still here?"

"Placement says no, but I don't know how much of this made the Net before it went down and every one of those here was an expert in Net technology." Nisstin motioned to a guard and the man left at a run.

"Secure Quin'tat," Ulanda said.

Bolda gave her a sharp look then nodded. "I've cut off the Endica leads entirely, we can pick them up later." She could feel him starting the process of pulling their Net in, leaving the security leads as the only fully functioning system. Then to Nisstin: "Get me Viy'lana... hell, Wandassa and Bissalta, then, in person, either here or I'll go to them and I don't give a damn if they're in the Nursery."

"With Gennady gone, will Captain Slicannin attack?" Nisstin asked Bolda but the question had been asked and asked. Their analysis said she wouldn't be able

to get through their defenses with the systems she had on the Scout ship. And that she didn't have the will to do more than mount a display to impress the Temple people she would have to answer to eventually. What seemed appropriate in the face of Zimmer warship, might not when that ship was gone.

Bolda shook his head. "I'm more worried about what it was that pushed Gennady to use the portal before it opened." He looked at her. "Was it open? He was pushed, wasn't he?"

"No. Yes." And closed her mind against remembering what the Zimmer had almost caused to happen. She wondered if Slicannin wasn't having a different kind of problem right now than an attack of conscience and said so to him. "The Ladybug was *her* ship. Gennady gambled she wouldn't let it be destroyed."

"Hell," Bolda said with a sigh.

"Are there Empire ships?"

"We have to assume there are," Nisstinn said. "What made it through of Quin'tat's protest before the Net was totally secured, said he thought so too."

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Garm hadn't heard the horses where he should have easily, but only her voice, breaking into the sound of the waves and the wind.

"I thought I would find you here," Eunni said.

Garm looked behind him. Eunni's face glowed white in the moonlight, floating. She had stopped a body's length short of being beside him. "You and those others?" Three guards that he could see, or almost see, they - and their horses - were dark forms against a faintly silvered background of grass. "Did you all think it at the same time?"

She came down the last steps of the narrow path, feeling her way slowly, then stood beside where he sat on a ledge of stone, facing the ocean, a restless surface of black and silver. Waves, hollow with the direction as much as distance, crashed against stone far below them. From her expression, he thought her worried despite finding him so easily. Did they think he would try to fly from here? At least they hadn't used warding restraints on him.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked, pulling the hood of her riding cloak over her head. A halo of curls sprang from under the heavy cloth. Leather mitts, not gloves brushed the hair from her eyes, soft suede, as brown as her hair, and with the dense fur on the inside to cushion her fingers.

He had thought the evening warm. He took her hand in his. A different kind of restraint, he thought, and no less effective. Standing on the cliff's edge, he had

felt the portal open and then close. Just that. "You shouldn't have ridden all that way to fetch me. Did she really think I wouldn't come back?"

Seven days until it can be opened again. If the same rules held here. If it could be opened at all, ever. If Gennady hadn't sealed it behind him. "Seven days," he whispered, but thinking of what could be happening with the stretching of time inside the diamond. And Gennady wouldn't be walking the distances.

She stepped back, drawing him to his feet. "Then there's no reason to be sitting out here now." He saw the sympathy in her eyes, and in her voice.

The burial cairns were very close to where he had stood waiting for Cassa on the night Sarkalt died. Two mounds of weathered stone, each rock fitted tightly against the next. The ocean would take Sarkalt and En'talac's bodies eventually, he thought, the water's force wearing at the cliff face, erosion from winter freezing and the storms. It was Rit who had them buried here and in this fashion. Not a Hegemony or Xintan custom and not Ri or Bothi'net either, at least not anything Garm had found in the Net to do with Bothi'net.

When Garm came here to watch the ocean, often tufts of grass had been pulled and scattered, Heni's doing. Rit had never mentioned his rides, in person or as a record in the Net, and the Guard had never known to follow as they so easily did for him. Did Rit miss his visits to En'talac's grave? Sometimes he thought he might go to Wilni to ask him and then would wonder why.

It had been dusk when he had first gotten here and he'd spent some time by the graves, watching Buttercup graze in the long grass, a mix of winter gold and the new, shorter blades. There were wild flowers growing in the narrow crevasses between the gray stones - both cairns, not just En'talac's - a few of the plants were in bud already, taking the extra warmth from the stone, but only one had an open blossom. A delicate flower held deep into the rosette of gray leaves. In the darkening light, it had the blue of the morning sky. He didn't think Quin'tat had ever visited his wife's grave; he didn't talk about her either and answered personal questions, or those threatening to become personal, by turning away. Rit must have planted the flowers, or gathered seed at least, and packed the spaces between the stones with soil.

"Rit used to come here, didn't he?" Eunni asked, as though she had been reading his mind. One of the mitts touched a stone. "He said Tennin will be buried like this beside the lake. Nisstsin said..."

A granite spike against the sky and a small milky green lake. "That mountain," he said, compelled to say something if only the obvious. Time would carry on here after he left. Seven days.

Her brown eyes looked into his, searching memory perhaps for when he had said something similar, but she only sighed and shook her head. "Rit wasn't angry talking about it, I wish he had been."

"A Temple will be built near there some day. Perhaps even where the cabin is. The Zimmer data shows a narrowing focus of pattern lines centered on the peak. Not strong enough to form the world-altar like on Ri, but very close. It wasn't coincidence that we ended up at the cabin. Or that Tennin died there."

"Murdered, you mean."

"As you wish." He put his arm around her shoulder as they started walking towards the horses.

One of the Holding Guard, or more likely a groom, a local boy from the way he was dressed - and this close, Garm could make out the clothes in the brilliant moonlight - was between Buttercup and Eunni's gelding, holding the reins. The other two were by the stone marker, the Temple emblem moving slowly above their heads.

"I remember what Rit was like before," Eunni said. "I don't know what's going to be left of him when he's finished. Who's going to be left."

"What about you?" he asked. "What do you want to be left of him?"

She laughed, had he imagined the worry in her voice? "Don't know that I have the right to want too much. Are you jealous?"

He smoothed the smile with his hand. Her skin was cold. It might be cold after all, he thought. "Might I be? Did I tell you I love you?"

She looked away. "Garm, don't say it."

He missed her when she was gone. He liked to watch her, the way she smiled, and the way the creases at the sides of her mouth fell into the twin dimples under her cheeks. He loved her scent, the moist fragrance of the warm nights they had spent lying together in a cocoon of blankets.

What else could it be except love? The other answer came: a few months of peace, a healing time, someone to share the loneliness with. "I do love you," he insisted to her as he had to himself. The dark was scant privacy, but he took it regardless and kissed her.

Or tried as she turned her head away. "A part of yourself? Like Rit?"

"Yes." He didn't have to try hard to know he only had a part of himself to offer.

Her eyes met his again. "Do we ever give more? Anyone? Can we?"

He had, and so had Rit, he thought. "No," he said, changing his mind. "You're right." It hadn't been given. He wasn't entirely sure if what he felt towards Eunni was freely given either. Her laughter drew him, and what made it. She laughed like Cassa had. A part of her was free of what he or anyone could offer or take away. Ulanda wasn't free like that, or Rit. Even Alicia, she stole her laughter like a thief. And himself?

In the spiral in Cam'lt Temple, he had held Cassa in his arms as she died and she had laughed like that, the sound in his mind, his soul. And the other Cassa he had held? The one who had really died? Who had she been? He only knew her

struggling against the drugs as the Temple aides held her, then the snap as she woke up all at once and faced the Camerat vass'lt and the knife.

He took Buttercup's reins from the groom then waited while the boy gave Eunni a foot up onto her horse. "Sir?" he asked when Garm didn't mount Buttercup.

"I'll walk for a while," he said and signed dismissal in a large enough form to be seen in the moonlight. But which, from the expression on the boy's face, wasn't understood except to mean he was an old man who waggled his fingers when he talked. Eunni laughed and started the gelding at a very slow walk he wouldn't have trouble matching on foot.

He welcomed the time it would take to walk back to the Holding and would have made it stretch longer if possible. The world was limited to rolling grass and sky and stars, from one trough of a wave of land, to the next, and, for now, it was all he wanted. The land and the woman he *could* possess, did possess, and who asked nothing of him.

Then the last wave of land before the Holding. On the crest, the lead Warrior stopped, his horse backing up. Suddenly, blinding red light bloomed over the Holding forming pillars of warding energy, followed by a loud splinter of sound.

The rear point guard was already moving. At a full gallop, he jumped from his horse and rolled to his feet, visibly fighting the heavy blanket of air pushing down at them. Not wind, not in this narrow space, but the point man would be riding into a storm from the massive change of the warding levels. The crackle of a linking sphere pressed to its limits cut through noise.

"Go!" the guard shouted at Eunni, then to him, yelling: "Go, go!" He bodily picked Garm up and pushed him into Buttercup's saddle. Then a slap on Buttercup's rear and he ran for his own horse.

Garm caught up with Eunni at the crest then turned in his saddle to look behind. From there, the view was to the cliffs, the ocean and the river delta. Shapes against shapes, dark masses and liquid sparks of moon and starlight, sky and water, and becoming more defined as he regained some little of the night vision the red warding had stolen. Nothing wrong. Or nothing yet. The Holding Net, which he should have been able to reach from here, wasn't there at all. Not shielded, not locked, but the nodes pulled in. The groom, forgotten by the guards, was close behind, and Buttercup fought Garm's hold on the reins to follow the other horse as it passed them.

Red light, red columns of energy. Alien - his body knew. A matter of degree, all their warding systems, their Net system, was Zimmer based, but it was easier to accept the difference when it was limited to something like an accent in the Net. He hadn't had to deal with the security systems. A part of him expected the land to change around him, from grass to plates of clay, the sky to the unyielding black of the veil at night.

Another flare of red, but not from something added. In a heartbeat, a flitter passed between the warding columns, drawing the energy barrier across the space where normally it remained as potential, leaving expanding rings on the translucent red surface like a stone dropped into bloody water.

Buttercup balked then sidestepped, almost throwing him. The rear guard grabbed his reins, the man's body kept him from falling even as his roan mare crushed Garm's leg against Buttercup's side.

They galloped towards a clear space between the columns that at the first touch became a shimmering wall of pale red light. More rings in a blood surface, but feeling like light rain on his skin. Then they moved through the rings like jumping hoops, the barrier had formed in back, pulling them in.

"They're in," Niv said at her back. "Will you give your decision now?"

"Decision?" Ulanda replied as an echo, allowing her frustration to match his. "Kori will go straight to Rit. He should be here."

An avalanche of events... and their response so far was only one of many possibilities discussed over the past months. And yet, there had been no hesitation on her part or Nisstin's, any questions or suggestions. Just this: full warding and an attempt to secure a means of escape.

Buttercup came into the stables at a gallop, sparks flying from the cobblestones. Garm slid from the saddle as a Senior Warrior took the mare's bridle, then Eunni's animal a close second to Buttercup. No message from either of them, the Net didn't work, even here inside the warding limits, only security links were active - a parallel system in the Zimmer fashion - and those brushed her off when she touched them, although they wouldn't have held out with a direct request. The Holding had pulled very far in.

"Now," she said, and walked with Niv back to the Holding Center. By the first Center guard station, Garm and Eunni had caught up. Nisstin joined them from the direction of the tunnels.

"The flitter was Wiccin, I assume," Garm asked. The Net leads, available here where they hadn't been outside, hadn't been released to him. Her orders.

"It was Kori." Nisstin shook his head as he moved out of the way of people coming and going. Packages and bundles. "We lost her instantly on the outside security links, she's stripped herself out of the system. We're waiting for notice of visual contact to come in from any of the posts, but if she doesn't want to be seen, I doubt she..." His words trailed off, his attention to what he was hearing in the Net.

"Not authorized?" Garm insisted.

Bolda jogged in, Wandassa on his heels. "Bad news," Bolda said. "It's three pods coming in slow from over the world-altar, and if we can trust the markings,

two are from the same Cruiser, one isn't. That makes two ships in orbit at least. If the pods keep the speed they're at now, they'll be here in twenty minutes. They aren't responding to our messages."

"They know what Slicannin knows," Ulanda said, "so they're aware we have reason to fear attack. This has to be an indication of their intentions."

"And it's more aggressive than we had hoped," Wandassa said. "The Dog mountain sensor was noticed, it's dead." An aide whispered something to her, and she excused herself, going out into the corridor to talk, her tone urgent, but Ulanda couldn't make out the words as they got further away.

Bolda snorted. "It still could be worse. They want to talk or we'd all be dead."

Ulanda shook her head. "More than Anga's life was lost with Sarkalt's ship. The remaining triggering sequences that might have constrained my response to force died at the same time. They've reason for caution."

Wandassa joined them. "There's an alternative to Slicannin's flitter. Wiccin says he might be able to construct a craft from the tiles at the works yard if we can get them away before the pods get there."

"I've got people in the tunnels already..." Nisstin's voice trailed off, his fuller attention once more in the Net. Very narrow links came alive with leads like threads strung between them. And faded moments later. The orders had gone out and the Net pulled back in again. "We'll have what's there," he continued. "Whether their movements can be tracked back into the tunnels is another matter."

"What about Quin'tat?" Garm asked.

"If he's aware of Slicannin's flitter leaving," Ulanda said, "then he's apt to assume we're on it. And if he doesn't know now that Slicannin's flitter is gone, he will after speaking to the Empire ships and pass that assumption onto them. It will turn the focus away both from here and from Endica." She felt the truth of the words the moment she spoke them.

"And pass the focus onto Rit?" Eunni asked quietly.

Ulanda made a motion of Closure without meaning to. "He should be here." The bubble of fear in her throat hadn't been there before Eunni had mentioned Rit. "We've worked though our best response to a hostile contact over and over, and he willfully ignored every opportunity to be involved. I don't intend to be trapped or even killed because of his blindness."

Another aide whispered into Wandassa's ear. She motioned the woman away. "That was word from the Nursery." She hesitated. "From Rossa. Willi is missing, she thinks she was with Kori."

"How certain is that?" Eunni asked.

"Certain that she's not in the secured Holding area," Wandassa said. "I'm sorry."

The string of caverns had been joined to the Holding Center, the rubble filled passages cleared. And, using warding energy to map the underground world, they had found additional passages to the cliff's edge, and narrow shafts looped with rusting metal cable, that sank to river level and Endica. Concrete, not stone, or not primarily. Some of it, even the deepest and presumably done as repair, was Ocea work, and in the same stone as the Holding's foundations. The Ocea wouldn't use pre-Millennium materials, a sentiment she understood.

"This isn't the time or place to discuss it," she said to Garm.

"There's only one place I can leave this world by. If the Temple pods have been to the world-altar, the people heard what Quin'tat has to say, his version of events..."

"Worry about it later," Bolda said to him before she could. Then to Eunni, the Weaver added: "You know the way."

"I'll see to it he doesn't wander off."

"Oh shit." Bolda's face had a far away look.

"What?" Garm said.

"Eunni, please," Ulanda said softly, and to Garm, signed a formal request for indulgence coupled with the shading that turned it into a direct order. He returned his answer as formally, his eyes cold green. She waited until they had both left towards the tunnels before echoing Garm's question to Bolda.

"The Intil sensors just got a good look at the off-pod's markings. Banti Temple affiliation, that's Rigyant based. And one of the Council Offices, it's Imperial. Neither of those ships would have come from the Warding Station."

What dreams had there been to augment Quin'tat's message and Slicannin's report? "I asked Gennady what reality he would have Poss a'ltic create. I wonder what prayers he's taken with him into the diamond."

Bolda snorted. "Just try thinking of a reality that don't mean your death."

Or should she create one to her liking in the diamond? That was one course of action she had skirted around with the same tenacity Rit had showed in ignoring anything that would further connect him to her. Leaving here. Admitting her failure.

The Net - the two systems where they came together in the Holding Center - strained to find her through the locks placed on them. Ulanda signed Closure with her hands, an unthinking response that Niv immediately untangled by forcing her fingers apart with an urgency that didn't take into account his strength compared to hers.

"More bad news," Nisstinn said quietly, his attention in the Net. "The pods are sweeping their path with an energy field that kills our links on contact. Ten minutes until they're here." He was at one of the bundles. Zimmer rifles, he threw the first to Bolda.

Most of those ten minutes were spent getting to the lower cavern. Torches not glow globes, and nothing at all of either Net system. Wet stone, the smell of water that had never seen the sun. Iron dust and lime, a concrete smell she hated, the dust from the tunnel. The sound of feet and their own breaths, of distant water - louder than the near silent flow in the cavern - and a hollow blowing sound from the tunnel's mouth. The cavern where she stood and the tunnel she would leave by didn't exist as far as Net Placement for the Holding was concerned, and there were no references that might lead to tell-tail dead ends. And of the mapped tunnels, there were several to Endica and the ocean cliffs, which didn't exist in the same way.

From here, speed wouldn't be as much a factor, not for her. Others would have the tiles for the jury-rigged flitter out of the works yard and into the secured tunnels - or not - and there wasn't anything she could do using pattern without alerting the pods. The Zimmer rifles and warding beads they carried were a calculated risk: the slight chance the pods could detect the crystals they carried, against their need for defense, as well as power for the flitter if crystals from the work yard weren't forthcoming.

Nisstin came in with Wandassa, the both of them with rifles in their hands, Xintan stock. He threw his onto a ledge and took the Zimmer weapon Bolda passed him.

"I wish..." she said to him and held out her hands, wanting his touch. His own scent and the steel and oil from the rifle. His world that he had always spared her.

"No wishes," Niv hissed in her ear as he took her hands.

"Two of the pods have speeded up to circle around," Nisstin said, speaking to Bolda, not her. "They're using the same damping field, links and wards are failing on all sides. From what we've picked up with long-cast sensors, they're communicating with ships inside low orbit range."

"More pods most likely," Bolda said. "Classic battle formation. I'd say we're dealing with our worse case scenario. How long until they're here?"

"They're slowing..." His words died as a groaning sound moved through the rock above them. "They're here," he said, then motioned to his men. "You know what to do."

Wandassa knelt at her feet. "Lady." Her voice failed. Then from a pocket, she took two silver coins strung on a fine chain and offered it up with both hands. "Viy'lana wishes you to have this as a pledge. Panntin says... he says to tell Rit, the time for waiting is over."

The clouds had broken to the east and the sunset, the rain reduced to the occasional drop. From the roof of the Palace where Rit stood, Wilni Capital stretched out before him in straight lines, a gold grid work of streets, the wet cobbles reflecting the colour of the east sky. Gaslights were coming on, houses and the main streets. Bluish yellow along with the gold reflections and both against the uniform black stone of the buildings and the pale gray roof tiles. High Market was the only spot of bright color with its awnings and flags catching the last of the light. High walls and a bow of the Wilniström River separated the Capital from Wilni, in the larger city only the major streets - those going from the East Gate - were visible. In the distance, fields melted into a horizon of clouds.

A warm early summer evening. The light breeze smelled of wood smoke and the acrid mix from burnt silks and cotton. Another arson, a shop near the palace, and of no military significance or special relationship to the Ström except it was near the palace and much of its business had come from the palace. Which wouldn't burn as easily.

Wilni palace had started as a Noble House estate, the original buildings added to over centuries, but the basic form remained - the central structure was a fortress. Built on a hill, four stories high, flat roofed and with enclosed courtyards like the one in the Manor House in Endica. And with its own water supply and fire breaks between the main sections and no wood used in any of the construction. Stone, concrete, tile and for the doors, steel, in one of the few applications besides guns, for the salvaged metal.

The arson wasn't his concern. In the Hegemony High State Council meeting he had just left - and which had promised to last well into the night if he hadn't adjourned it - the Princip for Wilni Capital had mentioned it as a single item in a list of such problems that were being dealt with as a civil matter in the Heg Courts. And dealt with poorly to the Princip's mind - his concern and one shared by a surprising number of the Heg nobles who wanted any trouble taken care of quickly. A balancing act between a military response effective in the short term and civil one effective in the long term, Rit had suggested, then argued.

He couldn't see the burned shop from here; his view of the city was narrow, with only a head's width of space between the outermost of the stone shields. A triple row of them ran along the perimeter of the Palace roof, the spaces between staggered.

Olloss stood to the side. He had been at the meeting and had suggested a drink before retiring. Rit had countered with a suggestion they get some air first, then get seriously drunk.

Taking off his close fitting jacket, Rit considered letting it drop to the wet flagging, but smoothed it over one arm instead. The warm air felt suddenly cool, he'd sweated through the linen shirt underneath. "How about another turn around?" he asked, enjoying the sense of freedom the change brought. A chance to move. A sense of place. Fresh air that hadn't been thoroughly breathed by others. He needed all of those things. *None of us are required to like our duty.* En'talac's words.

"I'd like to survive long enough to get that drink you promised me. I've felt safer on a battlefield."

Rit leaned his free hand against the stone shield. Granite from the Aklif Mountains, green flecks in a predominantly black ground. Except for notches spaced for climbing, it was plain on this side, but carved and the shape painted on the outer facing side. The Royal Emblem, the same symbol repeated over and over. On the flag staffs growing out of the base of each shield, hung the Strom Noble House flag.

He turned to the Warrior. "We were talking about my mortality, weren't we?" He motioned the three men by the guard station steps to follow them as they resumed walking. They had joined the others there as though by providing so obvious a direction, they could get him off the roof. The new Blood Guard and as much Xintan as Heg.

"One in, two spread out?" Olloss suggested - a classic Xintan positioning that would give them some privacy - and Rit nodded to the Nightwatch sergeant - a very bastard Blood Guard, the terms as mixed as the people. "And the middle go-by?" Olloss added.

He nodded again and followed the Marshall. The discussion was inevitable, and one of the disadvantages of being Strom was that he knew it. The Warrior waited until the men were in position before speaking. "By Hegemony law there has to be a clear succession."

"Worry about it when I'm dead."

"The Hegemony Noble Houses won't accept that, and this peace depends on using the kind of stability only they can provide. You heard them tonight."

An internal coup like the one that had put the Olum on the throne two hundred years ago, could have been tolerated - it would have involved many of the other Houses as conspirators. Promises and rewards. But not a new dynasty through an outside agency. Especially when the agency was Xinta and especially when the new dynasty was Strom. "Nothing will make them like me on the throne, a son of mine no more so."

"A son through a woman of the Olum Dynasty would. I think they'd accept the promise of half-Olum son on the throne and start plotting who he should marry before he's cut his first tooth. And don't expect any support from the Assembly of Elders if you try to pass the succession off. Their investment's by the other hand,

too much blood has been shed for them to tolerate any suggestion they might have been wrong in putting you on the throne instead of the more normal direct rule from Xinta. They won't agree to someone other than a child of yours. If this falls apart, expect another invasion within a month."

He ignored the last, constant threat. "Who won't tolerate it? The Assembly of Elders or the South Marshall? If Ramsini has a girl, the Noble Houses won't accept that succession either."

"She says the child is a boy."

As she insisted the child was his. "She's probably right," he said, meaning both things.

The old man smiled, deepening the lines on his leathery face. "I certainly didn't argue with her about it. You'd think she had been bred and raised on the mother-plain herself." His look became more serious. "The Noble Houses won't accept a child of hers either, and neither will the Assembly of Elders if for other reasons. Get your wife pregnant or get another wife, preferably of the same Olum bloodlines. Even the right woman as an acknowledged mistress would help... and there's several at Court, two among the Queen's attendants. Your fertility isn't in question."

Neither was Alicia's. Suddenly he was surrounded by stone, the sky above a darkening gray that might well be as solid. A box of stone. A blue flame. And a young girl dancing in the snow on a world very far from here.

"Rit?" The Warrior had his arm.

He shook the hand off. "That Alicia is my wife and will remain so, isn't in question either. And I don't intend to cold bloodedly take a woman to my bed to satisfy the Heg High State Council or the Xintan Assembly. Bluestone wanted that particular marriage for the very reason that Alicia is infertile."

The stone box still surrounded him even as he was aware of the rooftop, the shields, the Blood Guard. And Olloss, the man discounting Bluestone plots, past and present. *Blood across not a few of the seats in the Assembly, but the names will be the same.* In the months after the Blueknife attack, there had been a great deal of blood, but the names were indeed the same. And his mother? Her family? Bluestone? The prisoners he had seen questioned, some executed. The bodies of those who had killed themselves. The brother and sister who had kept Alicia, Eunni and Garm captive. He didn't know, he only had Viy'lana's words and no way to know if she knew or had been acting out some plan of her own. The matter was entirely too close to him to know anything with any surety.

As Rit half listened to Olloss, the words started to fade. The old man didn't lie, what he said could be said to a Strom who would hear lies and hear more than words. And it was said plainly and bluntly in common Xintan, but the words drifted in and out of Rit's awareness. The place and the people remained real but

barely so and he felt he could lose sight of them like he had the pillars of the Audience Hall while standing in the snow at Ri-altar.

Was what he did or decided now so fundamental that it took him back to the beginning? Re-invented. Re-created.

The world-altar. The sky was clear over the wasteland, only the ridge of Dog Mountain held the light, rose and green, the sky stroking the mountain, a milk blue that rapidly deepened to indigo.

How real was it? Had it been clear that night or was he in the present time? The difference in the position of the sun from here was about right to make it now.

And another change and this one definitely in the past: he stood with Gennady, the broken post road at their feet, his men in the crevasse behind him. *If he had to kill them, the night would help.* What must be Gennady's thoughts, and definitely his vision. Day-soft asphalt glowed silver in the growing dark, a fractured line curving around the Mound of the Lady. Yuin sight.

The curved road straightened. Or he had changed his perspective besides changing bodies. He was turning; he had been looking at something.

The Palace rooftop in Wilni Capital. One of the outer shields, his feet near the edge and touching splattered paint, a mark where a workman had put his brush down. He was standing on top of a shield. The glowing lines were the streets of Wilni Capital on either side of him. Cobblestones, wet from the light drizzle. All he was seeing was a reflection of the gas lamps the Capital boasted. He was on the opposite side from where he had stopped earlier; the sunset was across the body of the Palace, the clouds opening like a yellow mouth to swallow it. Olloss stood in the shadow of an inner shield, looking up at him. The Blood Guard was on point, Xintan fashion, more men near the stairs and the guard station at that end.

Trying to get down, he half fell off the shield, and landed heavily on one knee on the stone of the go-by, the leg twisted. Only the stone shield at his back held him up. Olloss didn't move towards him. The Blood guard didn't move towards him.

Birds? The sound of birds? Seagulls? Rit turned his head towards the noise but it was Pasi, the sound was his running footsteps. Too loud, the sound pounded into the stone of the rooftop. No boots. Pants on, Pasi had his tunic clutched in one hand. No boots, stocking feet, but a hollow thumping sound at each step regardless. "Don't..." Rit started to say. *Don't come near me.* His back to the stone, he straightened the twisted leg, and slid down until he was sitting. Wet stone. And cold, colder than he would have thought likely from the mild night. The jacket he had taken off earlier was on the flagging; he must have dropped it before climbing onto the shield. He pulled it onto his lap - brocade and silk velvet, light brown and blue, the Strom colours - and hugged it against his chest. He was shivering.

"Keep back!" Olloss ordered. Pasi stopped ten feet away, his chest heaving. Keeping his face towards Rit, the Marshall edged towards the guard.

The old man's hand. A trick of the uncertain light? Blackened. Blood dripping on the stones. "What...?" Rit closed his eyes against a wave of dizziness.

The walk from the last crossover to the Mound, Gennady at his side, Garm trailing, sliding in the loose dirt where the Zimmer moved without a sound. Rit had Heni back from the Zimmer, he led her in. As he set the guard at the Post road, he knew he had seen them for the last time. And Cillamet. And Panntin. And himself.

"I should have killed you."

The Mound. Moonlight. The white flowers were in bloom, touched with frost, but blooming with the stink of death in mid-summer heat. The scent of the enitree bush. And pine where there weren't any pine trees. He listened for the sound of a sage hopper but the night was quiet. Another time... was it real? What he had just seen was a mixture of real and created.

Re-invented.

The future and the past. He had seen Nisstin in the mountain valley, there to bury Tennin, Willi by his side. *You get left here with enough supplies to last until spring.* And Tennin: *I'm safe here until spring and then I just take off?* He stood with Tennin overlooking the dry streambed on the way to Intil where he and Tennin would part company and the book and letter start the first leg of their journey to Wilni Capital. Tennin: *Don't get yourself killed over this.* And he'd said it was worth their deaths. The smell of the white flowers was in his mouth, a carrion stink. The flowers were seeds still, broken from a girdle fashioned of twisted grass.

Re-created. Worth their deaths.

Letting go of the jacket, Rit pushed against the stone he sat on, trying to get to his feet. His palms flattened then slipped on ice rimmed granite and he opened his eyes to a violet world where the only silver colored heat came from Olloss and Pasi. The two had backed almost to stairs, the younger man batting at the air, his eyes wild. A trail of silver drops led to them. The Blood Guard weren't in sight, but he knew where they were by the heat trails in the air and their scent like spoiled milk. Moving into assault position. In the hand Olloss could still use, he had Pasi's Zimmer rifle, runs of color moving on the surface of the barrel, matching the energy traces that Rit could feel against his skin. Had shot, would shoot.

I should have killed you.

"Didn't you know what you were getting?" he said, repeating the words he had used to Quin'tat in the Audience tent at the Mound. Except he spoke in Zimmer-native, a language he didn't know at all, but which was suddenly as familiar as

the ability to taste air and see the now dark roof-top quite plainly in the silver and violet of yuin sight.

He struggled to his feet - he could wish for the same grace as the Zimmer had, and which he had shown against Nisstin that once, but this time, he stayed human. "I think I've had enough air," he said in Xintan, and had to concentrate to understand the words he was speaking.

Olloss stared a moment, then nodded, relief showing on his face - an emotion Rit had to interpret from a distance. He lowered the rifle.

Rit walked towards the stairs, moving slowly but not from caution at the Marshall's rifle or the Blood Guard he could sense were still moving into position from other points on the roof-top, from other stairs and guard stations. The world he saw was and wasn't the one his other senses insisted was around him. The same stone, the same walls, but the seeing was too different.

A whimper come from the Guard station and Gana, the bridle bitch, crouched towards him. He squatted and let her lick his face, then used her solid frame for support as he straightened again. And kept one hand on her shoulder, her warmth an anchor. His worlds were slowly becoming one.

"Pasi, have the men stand down. It's over."

"Sir?" Pasi looked to Olloss. Still no curiosity, a patent feature of the man. But fear.

He was tired of having his orders second-guessed and he didn't care whose nephew Pasi was. "Do you have a problem with my order?" The bitch echoed his words with a soft growl and a tensing of muscles he could feel through his hand. A line broken. She'd kill her handler if Rit asked.

"He doesn't," Olloss said and with the flat of the rifle, shoved the man into moving towards the guard station. Then waved the rifle in the all-clear signal. But asked, his eyes on the dog, "Is it over?"

"Seems to be," Rit said. Stone... he could be in that small stone place too easily. And wanted to be, a part of him very much wanted to be there and not leave, ever. Olloss was asking questions, the tone, but not the words reaching him. "You'd better get that hand looked at," he added, hoping those words at least were being said.

They must have been because Olloss replied: "Don't worry about it, I've burned myself worse over a campfire."

The Queen's Guard had been doubled, the metal pocket doors to her retiring room, normally open, were shut. Unwilling to wait, Rit went the longer way around, through his own rooms, the doors open, the metal contained within the stone walls. The dog padded beside him, bumping his leg with her head or shoulder every few steps as though needing the contact.

Alicia sat on upholstered stool by the fire, sewing at a large embroidery frame, only an area the size of her palm completed. Three of her ladies were with her, daughters of Hegemony Noble Houses, all close to her age. Meant to be friends, meant to be companions. At a price. Even at the best of times - and not at all now - he had trouble remembering their names. They seemed interchangeable.

As he might a human, Rit motioned to the dog to sit by the door - and was relieved when he was obeyed - then stood beside the animal, suddenly not knowing why he was there or what he could say.

Alicia looked up when he came in, then to the girl perched on the edge of the chair the stool belonged to. "Milla, some sherry please. No, from the cabinet, don't ask service for it."

The other two kept their eyes down and needles moving.

Strom abomination.

Alicia reached and patted the seat of the chair Milla had just vacated. "Rit, come over to the fire and sit down, that shirt is soaking wet." Then past him, and with a sign for favor formed by her fingers: "Olloss, please, it's best I handle this."

When he turned to look, the Marshall wasn't there. No guards. He hadn't been aware of anyone following him, but, thinking, at last thinking, realized there must have been. He let himself fall into the chair; his knees weren't working any better than his mind.

The girl's sewing was still on the wide arm of the chair. A small hoop, not a frame. A Noble House emblem. Trihawk. Not Wilni then, but Denman, or one of the central provinces. How closely was she related to Panntin? Milla... something. He'd forgotten the House pledge name. Her father was spending his future wildly here, and he couldn't remember exactly who he was among the others gambling on peace.

Alicia took both glasses from the girl and passed one to him, then took the embroidery hoop from his hand and let it drop to the rug. "That animal isn't sleeping on the bed."

He shook his head, fighting off a desire to start laughing. A very bad reaction. As bad as the one which he had fought against every step of the way here. The one which would have left him on the rooftop still and damned to anyone who tried to approach him. "Her name is Gana," he said as evenly as he could manage. "I wouldn't think Tika would appreciate the company. Have you been briefed?"

A sip of the sherry and Alicia made a face. She didn't like the taste but insisted on drinking when he did. "I know you scared the Nightwatch half to death and tried to kill Ollass."

"He's fine. Or will be. You saw him...?"

"And he tried to kill you."

"I'm fine too."

"Or will be?"

He drained the glass at a swallow. "I don't know."

"Did he try to kill you?"

"He saw something he tried to kill, I don't think it was me. He certainly hasn't been arrested for trying to assassinate the king."

Her hand on his, but to pry the fingers open and take the empty glass to replace with hers. "What happened?"

There was no proper Net he could ask for a record. Without experienced people able to use the Net, and even fewer crystals, Wilni only had security leads in place - suitable for codes and simple commands, and a very little more actually inside the Palace. One source of information was available to him: pattern, Altasimic world-pattern and overpattern, the last obvious now where he'd only had hints before. Ice on the stone. This time it hadn't been Ulanda's power bleeding in.

And a second source that understandably wasn't his first choice: from what was left of his wits, images that might mean anything.

A little late, he took Alicia's free hand in his... and knew late was better than she had feared. "I don't know what it was. Perhaps it was Garm... it might have been the portal."

Putting the other glass down first, she took the untouched drink from him before it spilled - his hand was shaking.

"Ulanda... there's danger of some sort, I just don't know what."

A brief moment when her expression didn't change, then another that his mind shied away from and she slammed the delicate crystal against the fire grate, the alcohol in the sherry flaring blue.

A blue flame...

Two guard were in the room before the flare died, rifles in hand. The brindle bitch waited for instructions, her eyes on the men.

The Queen's Guard - not the Blood Guard that should have been at the door leading into his rooms. And their intent? A sense of self-preservation pushed the other image from his mind.

Alicia squeezed his hand. "As of now, the Queen's Guard has exclusive duty in the Royal apartments, not the Blood Guard Nightwatch, and not the Daywatch when they come on duty." She turned to the two men. "Inform the Command of the change and get any of those men left inside the Royal Apartments cleared out now. And, I want someone to talk to them, to stop the rumors. Also, I want his Dresser and two of my guard in here, and no one else without express permission from me." She looked at one of the men in particular, but Rit didn't know him. "Sergeant, do you understand?"

"No one to enter, yes Majesty." He looked at the three ladies, only Milla on her feet, the other two hadn't moved from their sewing.

"Good." Her eyes went to the girls as well. "Milla?"

"I'll stay if you wish."

She nodded. "Trisi and Iona, you'll be escorted to your rooms." And back to the sergeant: "The two guard in here, find me men who can stand their ground no matter what happens. And have that dog taken to the kennels." Then to him: "Rit, if you can manage it..."

He echoed what she had said into the security links and set his Seal on the order to the Command, expecting and finding one of the half dozen people on the other end who were capable of using the links at all.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he said in Xintan. "The loyalty of the Queen's Guard doesn't extend to me."

"But it does in a very clear line to me," she whispered in the same language. Fingers on the buttons of his shirt. A palm smoothed along his chest and slipped the cloth from his shoulders. "I don't scare them on dark rooftops and they don't think I ever would. You shouldn't have accepted the guard given to you. You shouldn't have accepted most of the people pressing you all the time."

And her ladies? The two she had so abruptly dismissed under guard. "Am I being eaten alive?"

"Nibbled like Gennady would have Slicannin's ship." She sounded more amused than the joke warranted and he wondered why. He managed to capture one of her hands again... then forgot why he would want to, forgot the sense of what he had been saying, or had meant to say. Had there been alternatives to accepting the people around him, alternatives she hadn't seen for herself even as she had seen the lack in him? *Create others - less pressing, less scared - create them out of the air?* Did these hypothetical others exist as possibilities he had some control over? A stone room...

Alicia slapped him across the face. Twice.

"What are you doing!" Another form... a person? A high-pitched voice, thin body? Familiar? At the edge of knowing and he lost that awareness as well except in how it threatened the woman with him. The room had narrowed to the two of them.

Ice and the crackle of pattern. He didn't need conscious awareness to keep that focus clear, to keep it like the life-line a part of him knew it was. If he lost it... if he lost her...

Again. Another slap, then Alicia half fallen against him in the chair. Panting from the exertion.

She was speaking to someone else, the words not directed to him and he had to concentrate to hear them. "Don't come near us," she said. "He's not really aware of any of you."

He took her hand then pressed the burning palm to his lips. All her strength, and he'd barely felt the blows. She was near tears. "I'm sorry," he whispered against the heat of her skin.

"It's Nanisini," she said. "Your physician. Do you see him?"

Words, insistent words. "Who?"

"Get him out of here," she said. "Sergeant, I said no one in here without my permission. Is there a problem with your hearing?" A wait - had she an answer? Then: "Milla, on the table by my bed is a leather pouch, bring it here, quickly."

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"Rit, wake up." A distant noise he might listen to some time when he wasn't asleep. He rolled over. Then, apparently not to him: "Get him on his feet, get him walking."

Alicia's hands.

"A sedative and a neural inhibitor..." She was explaining to someone who apparently needed the words said to them slowly. In Hegemony. "Damn it, you don't know, I do."

A blocker patch at the back of his neck. How long ago? Bolda had given Alicia a book of the Temple drugs - the rare few ones left. Native equivalents were already being made against how long it might take for the Temple ships to arrive and how easy - or not - relations with them might be, but the local drugs weren't as pure, or as fast to be absorbed through a skin patch. Most had to be taken orally. There were too many gaps in matching the pharmacological knowledge of this world with known Empire equivalents. And a lack of people able to use the Net who could be spared and who had the years of experience as medics. Jini had taken over En'talac's work with the Xintan healers.

He hadn't known the weaver had given the patches to her until Milla brought them from her bedside.

"Let her through! Let them both through."

Alicia's voice.

Rit willed the room to take shape around him, willed his mind to connect with the body. He was walking, if only in a stumbling shuffle. His bedroom. He didn't remember leaving the retiring room.

He moved his hand on Alicia's shoulder, a very little more than a dead weight now, and he sensed her relief before he was able to see it on her face. "Let him down, slowly. On the bed."

Of the world of people, her face was all there was, she knelt in front of him, her hands on his wrists, rubbing them. "Rit, Kori's here. Willi's with her." A motion that had her turn away only an instant. "I said, let them through." Soft, and with threat in the voice. And then, just softly: "Kori? Come over here."

His world grew.

"Lord Strom." The Zimmer woman knelt beside Alicia, her face averted in a classic submission pose.

"Willi?" he said. "The flitter..."

"Is on the roof," Alicia said. "Warded so it can't be easily detected and under guard. The Queen's Guard. Damn yours."

Anger was being born in her. A woman's anger, not a child's.

There were other voices trying for his attention, there had been earlier, the same as there had been other bodies supporting him, but he'd only felt, only heard, Alicia. Then Kori. And by the door, Willi slumped in a chair. Dark clothes, a Xintan tunic and pants. And standing near her, Milla.

"What time is it?"

"A couple of hours before dawn. Can you take Kori's spin?"

The security links were being augmented by the flitter's Net, both under shielding that hadn't existed earlier. Kori's doing? The sense of the Holding that grew around him was uncomfortably close to what he was, all too recently, capable of seeing through pattern. He limited the spin to points.

Point. Gennady forcing the portal. What he had felt last night.

Point. Why Gennady would take the risk - the reason growing out of the analysis made by a former member of his crew. Hostile Empire ships, not one ship. One ship, she said Gennady would have risked that he could defeat, if only for the crystals to refresh Ladybug's depleted stock. And that he'd be gone well away from any possible pursuit.

Dressed? Boots off, stocking feet, the linen shirt off. Stiff narrow-leg pants, the same brocade as the jacket he'd abandoned on the rooftop, they hid the dirt better than the white cloth of the shirt had, but he had dirt on the sheets and the heavy coverlet.

"Rit, don't you dare!"

"Fall asleep?" He had been, his mind wandering as his hand experienced the varying textures of the cloths. He took a deep breath and thought he might be sick instead. There was something, some reason, still escaping him. "Willi?" he said. "I think you can walk over here easier than I can there."

Alicia took a step back like an invitation and Willi pulled herself to her feet, a sullen look on her face.

"Just what is it you think you're doing here?"

The girl shrugged.

"My fault," Kori whispered.

"I doubt that very much." And to Willi: "Where's Tam?"

She shrugged, but had a wary look in her eyes. "How the hell should I know?"

Rit felt a familiar anger. How much was bravado on her part... and to cover what? "You'll keep a civil tongue in your mouth."

She crossed her arms, her eyes to the floor. "Yes, sir." Even that much was grudgingly given.

"She's been up all night," Alicia said. "Neither of you are in any condition to argue about why she's here and not in Endica."

"My Lady...?" A soft voice. Milla. A Wilni accent, not Denman, despite the Trihawk name. "I can find her a place to sleep."

Alicia turned from him, a part of him resented the division of her attention.

"Please. You'd better rest too." A pause, then: "Thank you for staying tonight."

"I want to know what she's doing here?" Willi? Milla? For a moment, he didn't know which he meant.

"You can talk about it later," Alicia said. And to Milla: "Put her in my bed. Please, stay with her."

The Trihawk girl didn't wait for Willi to follow her, but took her by the arm and pulled her out of the room. "What am I going to do with Willi in the middle of this?" he asked.

"You don't need to do anything right now." And to Kori: "Can you lock the flitter against anyone but you taking it?"

Kori waited for his nod and did so through her Net link. Why hadn't he thought of it? It was apparent Kori wasn't able, for whatever reason, to say no to Willi.

"I'm still missing a part of what I need," he said, his eyes to Kori.

"Lord?"

"The ship's probable actions against Ulanda and Alisim Temple. I need a current analysis based on what you know now." He was a month out of date; he hadn't had new information, no more than he could get via a message pouch from the newly reinstated Messengers. "Kori, what will the ships do?"

"Lord, they will attack you."

"Me personally?"

"They will see you as being as much or even more of a threat than the Lady Priest Ulanda. She wants what they want as long as it includes her."

Truth and not-truth. Or the possibilities all came down to one thing in Kori's mind. He was in a fight with people who wanted power, influence and control over Alisim. The weapons used were what you made of them. Words, guns, ships, blood.

With his fingertips, he touched the skin of her cheek. Burning hot. Or he was that cold. A scent of roses came from her and other senses threatened his human ones. "Kori, who do you burn sticks to? Who do you pray to? Not Ulanda, I take it."

The slightest movement of her head. "The Empress."

Cassa. And Bolda's words: *my oaths are to Cassa, not Ulanda*. And Bolda had given Alicia neural blockers.

Woven lives. "All our lives are woven..." he said softly, as though to himself. The image was from the spiral that had to be on Lillisim, the one he had seen when Simitta had died, where Cassa had been weaving the girdle, using the long grasses that grew on the sides of the stream. The words were in Zimmer, but different again than what he had spoken on the rooftop. The prayer form.

"There will be another Emperor or Empress here," Alicia said in the Xintan she knew Kori spoke well. She didn't mention his change in language although she had pulled a translation from the link with the flitter's Net and would know that he hadn't needed to. "A different god... or expression of god."

"Only one," Kori hissed urgently. "Only one ever, anywhere. The Wu'loss cass has a form now. Cassa. Only Cassa. The Spann Olumka is at the Holding, not with Gennady. That one says Gennady has abandoned his faith."

"Lady?" a deep voice asked.

Rit's world expanded once again. The sergeant of the Queen's Guard Alicia had been talking to earlier. A tall man, dark hair and olive skin. Hegemony by his blunt features and size.

"Lady, Lord Wilntinn is at main gate."

"Rit?" Alicia asked.

"Have him escorted here. Is the Marshall alive?"

"Rit, of course he is. His hand wasn't even badly burned."

She said it lightly as though it had been a minor accident. A campfire? Had Olloss said that?

"Creation through interpretation? Did you create his love too?"

He had puzzled her. "Olloss? Don't be silly."

He'd meant the sergeant and said so in Xintan and in a whisper the man wouldn't hear. Alicia blushed. "Don't go Strom on me. Do you want Olloss here or not?"

"Yes, I'll see him with Wilntinn. I'd better call the Council as well, and as soon as possible. This is going to affect them, they'll have to know what's going on." He gave the necessary orders into the Command link. Alicia nodded to the sergeant. Many of the lords would be in the palace already, there were apartments set aside for when the meetings ran late. Others would have left for their manors in Wilni Capital, but none were more than a messenger away.

"Kori," he said. "Do you have any knowledge of what tactics they might take?"

She stood in a whip-like motion, startling the guards at the door. "I took Empire standard certification, not just local."

Where *local* was, he had no idea. "And the level?"

Before Kori could answer his question, Alicia added, "Certification in what?"

The Zimmer glanced to Alicia and hesitated before answering, “Master in Security. Before Clan a’Genn claimed me.”

“Will the Empire people think there is an immediate danger?” Alicia asked.

“Yes.”

Just one word again. He supposed it said everything for a Zimmer. “What do you base that on?”

“Lord Strom, there are at least two Justice Cruisers here, and these have sent three pods to the surface and six more in half orbit for backup. Three times three, this is an actively hostile move - they mean for it to be seen as hostile, regardless of what else they do. If they wish simply to kill, they will be able to escalate their aggression in increments that allow them to judge any response. If they wish to negotiate instead, they will be able to do so from a position of power.”

“And their next step after this display of force?”

“They need to locate those who pose the greatest danger. If the Lady and her people escape their notice in their flight from the Holding, the others might assume they were on the ship I took.”

“There was another flitter?”

“No, but there are tiles at the work yard and Spann-based crystals they can use. And I left Wiccin there. The Temple flitter I used can be followed, less easily with... with what I know, but there is no way to hide from the kind of looking they will be doing. Why I took the risk is because regardless of what path they follow, the Temple ships will come here.”

“To attack us? Why?” Alicia asked.

“That Lord Strom was part of the Opening, that he...” She turned her eyes to him. Pale blue, she was upset, frightened even. Of him? Of being alone here, surrounded by aliens? Her narrow purple tongue touched her lips. “That you are ris’lim...” She used the Zimmer word and hesitated as though searching her mind for the Xintan equivalent when he nodded for her to continue. *Fated*. “... that went out with the Captain Slicannin’s first message along with your breeding. Lord, I know what the message said and it shouldn’t have brought this response without collaborating evidence — deaths like what happened at Palace in this reality.”

She took a breath. “What has happened here since the Opening, Slicannin will tell them, as well as any Xintan or Zimmer analysis she had access to after the Blueknife attack and while she was guarding the Holding. And Quin’tat has the experience, at the Holding and in Endica, of living on this world and will be able to weigh what is important in what they hear and what is not. They have gone first to the Holding for the more certain danger, but they will come here as soon as they learn that you have left Endica. Lord Strom... the loom-master’s plan wasn’t only the Lady Priest Ulanda’s death during the Opening, but the destruction of the bloodlines that allow any contact with the Wu’los cass.”

The few who had survived the Opening. Then thought: children. His son. Another generation, one born to a new order where learning to touch pattern would be as natural as breathing. And, if he was any indication, didn't require Temple training to learn. "What are your recommendations?"

Kori's eyes slid to the others in the room. Alicia's sergeant. The two guard at the door. "Yours, Lord?" In Zimmer-native, both words carrying more weight than what the ready translation by Alicia's link did.

His answer was in the same language and as weighted. "No."

"But they are mine," Alicia said. Rit heard the anger in her tone - against him - and riding it, her uncertainty about what she claimed.

A world-view defined by the people in it. A need to belong, to believe that belonging was possible. He wanted to reassure her, to tell her that she could depend on them with her life. He wanted qualified truths not to be lies by definition.

With Alicia's words - or tone - the marks on Kori's cheeks bleached to white, and she turned her eyes away, but not before Rit saw that their colour wasn't much darker, only a haunting of the pale blue remaining.

The Zimmer, the Clan at least, had multiple command lines within what appeared to Rit to be single group, and others, he suspected from the odd thing Gennady had let drop, that were based on gender. Xinta had something he thought might be close: the respective responsibilities and powers of the warrior and the priestess, a balance apparent at all levels from the Assembly of Elders to a Company of troops.

From Kori's reaction to Alicia, they were touching something basic. And in her reaction to Willi.

He looked at Kori quietly until she met his eyes "Will you take Alicia's orders?"

A moment, then: "I don't know her status. I don't know how anything works here."

"You've been at the Holding almost from the beginning," Alicia said. "You lived there for months. How can't you know?"

"Because it's not a matter of just changing the rules," Rit said slowly. A memory: Simitta on the raft, the Zimmer los dying. *Our instincts and our minds are the same thing.*

"You belong to me," he said to Kori.

A relieved, "Yes."

"Why?"

"Lord Gennady gave me to you. He spoke to you as an equal."

"How would you have acted towards his wife?" *First sister-wife*, Gennady had said. "His senior, his first wife. Would you have taken her orders over other people's?"

"Over his."

He hadn't expected that answer. "Zimmer society is a matriarchy?"
"Lord?"

The translation had broken apart into possibilities, none of them close to what he felt in Kori's need for clear rules, and less to what he had meant by the word. "Kori, Alicia is my senior wife, my first and only wife. Ever. If that's different, then you'll have to work around it. Even if I... even if I had a mistress and had children, Alicia would make the decision as to how they were raised, by whom and where."

Alicia slipped her hand around his and gave a squeeze. A vote of confidence in his intentions, he thought, not in the literal sense of what he had said.

"And Willi?" Kori asked.

Kori would be aware that he and Tennin had been close friends, that he had felt responsible for him. From that, did she think of Willi as his daughter? Or had the story that she was reached her ears? "What about Willi?"

"She is your... mistress." She used the Xintan word that simply meant lover.

Alicia drew in a sharp breath. "That little bitch."

"She's not," he said quickly to Alicia.

Sounding tired, not angry now, she said, "Don't be a fool, I know that." Then sat beside him, her hand still in his. "What are we going to do?"

"I had thought...." He shook his head. "I had hoped that being away from her, from Ulanda, the rest of it would stop. I was wrong."

"And Kori's right? You'll be a target?"

"From what I understand, my not being a Priest makes me more of a danger, not less, not if I can somehow connect with the kind of power Ulanda does. From last night, I have to think I can. And I have no idea of how to either start or stop doing what I did."

"We can't fight them....?" Her eyes went to Kori.

"Not directly."

"Can Ulanda?" The Zimmer shook her head.

Neither Alicia or Kori mentioned the 'we', he had used. He wondered if they had noticed his preemption of their future. Did they think he had a right to drag others into what was his fight for survival?

"Do I have the right to survive?" he asked so softly, the words were almost to himself. He could have asked them of Ulanda, might have if she had been with him. And his blood? Strom and Bluestone? If he didn't, they did. His blood. His responsibility.

"Don't ever say that," Alicia said harshly. After getting up, she went through the connecting door to her own rooms and returned a moment later, an elongated greenish-white box in her hands. The pearl necklace he had given her the night Tennin was killed. The silver clasp in the shape of a lady bellflower. She held it against his skin. "Do you feel any difference? You never said, but Ulanda could, as

soon as I came near her when I wore it. Apparently, silver modifies pattern energy. I've watched both Hann and Bolda weave Ulanda's wrist braids using extruded silver wire finer than baby hair. En'talac said the medical scans weren't reliable when the underbraids had silver in them."

Something that he hadn't felt all the times he'd handled the clasp before, a strong tingle like sustained static electricity. Hegemony used the gold standard for money, not silver. Xinta used both. Valcalinn would have stockpiles of silver, but even in Wilni, there might be enough to hide him from the ship's scanning.

"Where would they go?" he asked Kori? "If Ulanda had made it out of the Holding, where would she go. Here?"

The Zimmer woman shook her head. "Surri Province. Erisin."

"Why not Vancallin?" he asked. She looked puzzled. "The silver reserves there."

"That much of the pure metal will be suspect. There are other ways of finding people than scanning for them. Natural silver ore in sufficient quantities, however, especially when mixed with small amounts of other metals will confuse the results of the scanning... and the area would be so large that it wouldn't be searched easily by other means. And the searchers won't be thinking mines. Such things aren't common in Empire."

"Mines?" Of course, a silver mine. And in disputed land, the last place anyone would expect to look. Rit bowed his head over the tiny silver flower. A flowing river of pearls against the skin of his hands. Ice and satin. The pearls had the colour of snow at dusk, the shadows blue and rose and tasting, smelling...

A crease in the land, the mountain formed out of folds of rock. Hemlock forests, shadowed, the silent, constant fall of the tiny needles. Sword ferns, the brown feathered curl of the new leaves barely showing in the crowns. On the cool breeze, in the taste of the water in the streams: melting snow. And higher, on a bare stretch of the slope, on the patchy snow, clay plates, broken. Footsteps from more than one person but shapeless with the melt, led into the forest.

"Rit?" Alicia was shaking him.

Had the flitter crashed already? He had no sense of 'when', and even the images were fading. "I ask again, what are your recommendations?"

"The main thing now is to gain time. I don't think they will attempt a direct attack, it's too dangerous. Part of the reason for their coming here is to contain you, and thereby better control how this develops. You need to take that initiative away from them."

"And accomplish what?" He couldn't see what he could do past trying to stay alive by whatever means he had available - or the power that took him over did - and considering the destruction possible, somehow it didn't seem enough of a plan.

"You have the power to create the future."

"We all do."

She didn't answer. "Did you give the same advice to Ulanda?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the possible end results?"

"Only one is acceptable. Freedom."

The room blurred. Something of what he had felt last night stirred, his perception of it blunted by the drug Alicia had given him. *Freedom*. And Kori's definition of the word? *Gennady has abandoned his faith*. "Surri, then."

"Yes."

He didn't have a better idea. Or her desire to get out of here was infectious. "If we're to follow, what needs to be done?"

"It's been started. I've made modifications to the flitter crystals, using Spann based coding. As I said, what is there is too easy for the ships to detect, and besides, will respond to Temple overrides, leaving us helpless."

"Wiccin would have taken the flitter and not have known the danger," Alicia said. "He wouldn't have known any alternatives, would he?"

Kori shook her head. She had mentioned something of that before, Rit realized; he just hadn't picked up on it.

"I've started the Spann sequences, but couldn't initiate the cascades while in flight." Her eyes had a distant look. "At least three more hours for them to finish. I don't know if it will be finished before the Empire ships arrive."

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There was room at the Council table for fifty, standing room for many more: servants, aides, secretaries, footmen. Dark polished wood reflected the candlelight of the chandeliers. Sideboards of the same wood sat against the two long walls, meals could be served from there. A steel door at either end of the room, one to the Great Hall, the other to rooms leading to the Royal apartments. Queen's Guard were at each door, four men total, likely more in the Hall. The whispered report Rit had gotten earlier said the Princip's men, not Blood Guard, were supplementing the Queen's Guard. He wondered what Olloss thought of that, but didn't ask. Olloss was as silent on the subject.

The Chamber didn't have windows, no natural light at all - and all too often, too little air, except that now, above the Council table was blue sky and all around, walls gave way to a sunlit tapestry of Wilni Capital that was false only by his knowing the layers of stone and steel between this room and the outside. Rit

willed his eyes to see the smoke darkened frescos of plaster and paint that the others here would be seeing.

Princip Gilna quill'Astall stood up as the door to the Council Chamber slid open. Voices, excited talk. The High Council members in the Hall. They were having tea and pastries served them. Breakfast for men roused early out of their beds.

A Lead Commander unfamiliar to Rit squeezed through the narrowly opened door, walked over and handed a message folder to the Princip. Both men's heads were crowned by a rising flock of gulls, white in the morning sun. The birds' cries rang in Rit's mind, louder than the sounds coming from the Hall.

The Warrior left, guards closed the door after him. The sound of steel sliding against steel. The smell of the metal that since last night had been a constant irritant.

"Reports from the Lead Hands in the field," the Princip said slowly, still reading the sheets handed him. His voice was thick from lack of sleep. "The reinstatement of Martial Law for the city plus announcement of the imminent arrival of ships has been made at each marketplace. There have been injuries..."

"And deaths?" Wilntinn asked.

The Princip's already slanted eyes narrowed further as he took his seat. Then, with a sigh, passed the sheets of paper to Wilntinn. "And deaths on both sides. Unavoidably so. My men have no interest in starting riots, only in stopping them. From the lack of any discernable pattern, I think the trouble is spontaneous."

Olloss shook his head. "If we're dealing with one or more of the organized resistance movements, they'll use these market squabbles as a blind to their activities. I expect the fighting will get worse, and eventually, for some kind of direction to show."

"I have to agree with the Marshall," Wilntinn passed the papers along to Rit. The desired details were written in Xintan Military notation. He wasn't familiar with the symbols. The last page was a street map, red dots clustered about the market areas in the Commons, thickest in the High market in Wilni Capital.

"I don't see anything here." Or feel anything as being significant.

"And you don't give a damn," Wilntinn said.

A challenge? Yes, to wake him up. "Not as much as I should," he admitted. "I won't be here. The War Council will have to handle it so you might as well start now."

Less than a year for people to get used to the idea of Empire and contact with a way of life alien to them, the first months of which were still during the worst of the fighting. The coming and going of the flitter had been accepted - not welcomed, especially by the Xintan, but accepted as possible. Their history allowed for the existence of aircraft. Despite the scale of the Xintan conquests in the last thirty years, there would be areas of this world that hadn't yet heard of

the conflict, or where it was rumor from a distant place, of limited interest to people with crops to sow or to harvest.

And here? If the Xintan had trouble with the introduction of technology, what Hegemony sensibilities didn't allow for was his existence, much less his holding the highest place of power. Word of the Black Phoenix's aborted flight had spread throughout the city during the early morning markets. A spark to the dry wood of ignorance and fear. *Strom abomination*. And Bluestone, at least in the latest rumors dutifully listed in the security briefs. His own stupidity for insisting on answers from Bolda when the Councilor for Endica had been within earshot. He wondered if the sabotage had been deliberate on his part, if he had, in some way, wanted the truth to be known. Had he attempted to define himself by what others knew? When so much of his life had been a lie?

Rit wondered how much of what was being recounted had been seen in dream-invaded sleep and how much was from the Blood Guard and those few, who, by chance or some sensitivity, had happened to be looking towards the palace at the right moment. Sunset on a wet, early summer evening. Time for dozing by the fire. How long would it take for his physical flight - escape, literal flight - to be confused with the Phoenix's?

He had no memory of what had been real enough - and alien enough - for Olloss to shoot at him. Twisted grass and seedpods. A crystal girdle. Legends shouldn't have sleep-gritted eyes and stubble. He hadn't taken the time to shave and now, seemed to be doing nothing but wasting time.

Olloss got up and poured himself a glass of wine from the sideboard, favoring his bandaged hand. Kamill, Rit's secretary, got up from his seat at Rit's side to help but was waved away by the Marshall. The servants had been dismissed.

"In a long life," Olloss said, "I never once thought I would see the blood wind that Bluestone and the Strom speak of. Except, at the Choosing at the Mound of the Lady, with eyes filled with that blood, I saw the fall of snow where snow couldn't have been." He looked over at Rit and drank most of the cup before continuing. "And last night, I saw what raises the blood wind under its wing. I felt all of creation die. I don't wonder your mind is on things other than market riots."

Wilntinn looked up from the map. He'd taken it back and had been drawing spiral doodles along one edge. "Can we all get our minds back to the subject at hand and, with apologies to Roisin..." A half bow to the Bluestone priestess. Roisin quil'Susin, a senior member of the Assembly and Olloss's counterpart - or compliment - here in Wilni. "... might we leave religion to discuss another time?"

Rit agreed. If he was killed or for whatever reason was unable to perform his duties, the function of the War Council was to act on his behalf, even to settling the rights of succession. He motioned to his secretary. "Kamill, what's the progress on the two we need?" Apparently none at hand and none through the simple Net lead, and he signed him to go and see.

The man returned a moment later, papers in hand. "Sire, there's still no word from four of the messengers sent out before dawn or the guards following an hour later. Of the six additional instances where the messengers couldn't find their man, in three cases, the nobles have since been found and brought in."

"Leaving seven still unaccounted for." Wilntinn tossed his pen on the table. "And this regardless that the nobles looked for were in Council here last night, two had taken rooms in the palace and none of them had Royal leave to vacate Wilni."

Kamill managed to look as though he thought Wilntinn blamed him for the missing people. "Sire, I left word that any of the nobles on the short list for serving on the War Council be brought in immediately they arrive. Is that..."

Rit nodded. "Fine."

He looked emboldened by the approval. "Also, apparently three of our intelligence operatives haven't reported."

"It may only be that reporting in would put them unnecessarily at risk," the Princip said. From the look on his face, he'd rather he had been one of those missing, whatever the reason.

"We have other sources than reports," Roisin said. "Apply simple logic to who is here and who is..." The door slid open again and she stopped, the look of annoyance deepening on her face.

A footman escorted Lord Hanes into the Council Chambers, the Heg noble still in riding boots, dust on his long coat and a glimpse of hunting clothes, not court garments underneath.

One of those missing. Rit was relieved to see him here under his own power and not under guard. The elderly noble had paid solemn court to Alicia, not him, the situation amusing her as much as she had surprised Rit with how she had, as solemnly, encouraged him.

Hanes brought the smell of horses into the room. Once through the door, he immediately moved away from the footman, his eyes searching. He started towards Wilntinn, then apparently thought better of it, and stopped halfway from the door to the Council table.

He bowed stiffly. A bad back, he mentioned the fact each time his courtesies failed the measure he thought appropriate. "Majesty, lords, lady, my apologies for appearing in this state. My delay was inadvertent, I was out hunting."

"Hunting what?" Wilntinn asked. "And with whom?"

The elderly lord was telling the truth, Rit saw... and knew Wilntinn must have as well, his temper a matter of habit and lack of sleep. And that his cousin didn't care for mornings at the best of times.

"Redbeak grouse." A patient tone, a hint of indulgence, of amusement. "The birds are best taken at first light." And to him: "Sire, do you hunt?"

He was a breath of air in the room. "Not since I've returned to Wilni. Endica, yes."

"The Royal messenger was dispatched over two hours ago," Wilntinn said.

"Then troops an hour after that. And none found you?"

"The messenger called at my apartments and was told I'd gone directly to my manor following the meeting last night, so he followed. And from there... into the fields and hedgerows, guided by my head grounds man."

"You're here now," Olloss said in passable Heg, waving Hanes to a seat with his good hand, "This is a War Council; it's not birds we're hunting."

"How is it I'm part of a War Council?" Hanes asked with a carefully polite smile that only slipped a little when Olloss took the chair next to his.

"A process of elimination," Wilntinn said. "The Peace Accord says the two top ranking Nobles of the Council... other than Strom, and two members of the Xintan Assembly. And a Strom, in this case, myself. The first names on the list from the High Council are even later than you in arriving. In their cases, I don't think grouse are the reason."

Birds again. More gulls. Silver and gray. They flew through rising smoke. A district in the Commons, near the harbor. Over the cries of the disturbed gulls, Rit could hear the breathy roar of the fire.

Black stone and gray roof tiles, even in the Common, wood buildings were rare. Not much to burn. The docks - the few that weren't stone. The pilings.

Ships were being cut loose, sails raised, the predominantly white canvas reflecting the flames. Water. A dance of red and blue, gray and silver. Acrid smoke from the tar on the pilings, he tasted it in the back of his throat.

Rit forced his mind back to the Council Chambers and the handful of people at the long table. "Wilntinn's right, we have to get started here. Any opinions on who's suitable of those in the Hall already?"

"Before we decide on a replacement," Wilntinn said, "we should talk about who is absent." He motioned to his own Secretary and had a blue and tan folder placed before him. Strom House colours, now the Royal Colours. He took several sheets from inside and pushed them across the distance between the two of them.

"Something the War Council can handle..."

"It concerns Lord Aspeir," Wilntinn said.

The list was of family, close and distant. Holdings. Economic relationships. Debts, financial and personal. Head of Mellon Noble House and connected to the Ollum Dynasty through various marriages over the two hundred years of its rule. The House's primary holdings were in Surri Province.

"I read the summary at the last Security briefing," Rit said. "He would need a popular uprising, he doesn't have the support among the Noble Houses to carry

this on his own. I can't see the Empire ships as providing enough of a disruption, not at the street level. The people are sick of war."

"I disagree about his support. I think he'll get what he needs as soon as you're unaccounted for." Wilintinn took the pages back. "And as for the Commons being sick of war, they are, but you're a very clear focus for their hate, and those who support you, only marginally less so. The streets are already on fire with rumors."

Rumors would do. As far as he could tell the wharf fire was out. "So they are," he said tiredly. Last night. Couldn't he keep one thought in his head long enough to carry it to its end? "Princip quil'Astall, can I assume you know what's in these pages?" The man nodded. "What are the chances he'll get away?"

"That my men haven't found him, says he might already be outside greater Wilni. If so, I'd have to say it's possible, even likely he can move fast enough to outrun word of what has happened here." He rubbed his chin. "Olloss?"

The old man was looking at Rit. "Is the city burning?"

Damn him. "A wharf fire. They've cut some of the ships free. I don't think it's spread."

Olloss took the rest of his drink at a swallow. "Last night, we were discussing the succession. With the arrival of the Empire ships, I understand it's a question that needs settling and soon."

Wilintinn chuckled. "Instead of troops, shall we march the ladies in, then?" And to Olloss, added: "Sorry, I presume that was told me in confidence."

The Marshall shook his head and in that moment, reminded Rit very strongly of his granddaughter. "I only tell 'confidences' to a cat."

"The two are part of the same thing," Roisin said.

Was the Bluestone priestess another who Olloss had spoken to in 'confidence', Rit wondered? He had to expect that he didn't have a private life.

"In what way?" Lord Hanes asked.

"If I die without an acceptable heir - by whoever's hand - in six months, there won't be a Hegemony." He nodded to Olloss. "Am I wrong?"

Olloss shrugged, a sour look on his lined face, but the dance of light in his eyes didn't dim. "Who am I to tell a Strom that they're wrong?"

"Or Bluestone?" Roisin asked, a rare smile dimpling the tattoo marks on her face.

"The Compact between the Strom and Xinta stands regardless of who is king," Wilintinn said softly. "And regardless of who holds power elsewhere, on this world or not. Olloss, Roisin, you both might remind the rest of the Assembly of that."

Was there a mention of his death in one of those books that Garm couldn't find in the Archives? He had read them, but at the time there hadn't been anything in his life to connect the events to himself. And he had tried later... in memory, Terreniti's words ringing in his mind. *You'll see the end, I see you there, looking back at me.* And Panntin's in the garden: *Who will you betray in this wait?*

The end of their world? Or just the end of his? What would he find in Surri? Connections that he still couldn't make? He very much wanted to believe Viy'lana about Terreniti - and didn't trust his senses because of that. How much of him was tied into what Cassa was? By his going to Surri, was he making it worse? Should he try to stay free so that he could deal with the Empire people separately from Ulanda? Except he knew he might be doing that anyway. Ulanda's priorities were different from his. Her survival as an Empire Priest would be foremost in what she did. The rest could go to hell.

"If I had died nine months ago," he said into the silence, "who would have been king? Wilntinn? You?"

"I wasn't second choice," Wilntinn said. He had the same look on his face as he'd had earlier when talking about confidences. "Or third."

Rit was rapidly losing his patience here. "Who were the first choices?"

"Their names mean nothing, no more than yours does. As Bluestone predicted, it all came down to a matter of breeding, although not in the way the visions had been interpreted."

Pattern deaths? "The names, real or not, are a start."

Wilntinn shook his head. "A start to what?"

Angry, he slammed his fist on the table, but the sound was lost in the din as the door to the Great Hall opened again. Two Xintan Warriors, a young man held between them, his hands bound, his feet dragging. Blood dripped from his nose and down a ripped shirt. The two Queen's Guard inside the Chambers moved out into the room, their rifles up, two more Guard followed the Warriors in. Shouts in Xintan sounded from the Hall, and further, in the corridors.

Six months? Six minutes could see the war started again more certainly than from any Noble House plot. The rifles weren't being pointed at the prisoner.

A fraction of a moment to get to his feet, his action mirrored by the others at the table. A fraction of a moment to put his orders into the limited Net to his Command... and a question as to why he hadn't been warned. Both replies were by images more than words, he felt words were failing him even as he heard himself roar: "Sit down! Now. Everyone." And to Olloss, the old man still standing, his knife in hand: "Or shall I move this to the rooftops?"

Kori was at his side... and in the flitter. Was her presence here a Net image created by a system incapable of forming one? Or a creation of his need for the Zimmer woman's abilities? He waited for the world to become violet and silver, for the scent of sugar. For the perfume of a single rose.

Alicia was with Kori, he felt her there... and here, her presence in the feel of her small warm hand in his. He stayed human.

More of the Queen's Guard blocked the doorway. Rifles were aimed at the three Xintan sitting at the table, at the two Warriors still holding the boy.

Rit walked between the two groups. "Put the rifles down," he said to the Guard. And turned his back on them without waiting to see if they would obey, trying to act and sound as though his life wasn't hanging by the loyalty of these men to Alicia and their interpretation of how best to serve her.

"Release him," he said to the Warriors holding the boy. His order was echoed by the Princip. With a grip on the boy's torn shirt, Rit pulled him away from the door and pushed him towards where Hanes and Olloss sat.

Through the Net, he got the all clear from the Command Node operator. Tisin quil'Walters, Xintan and nominally Blood Guard, but in the administration end of things. Some of the bureaucracy of the Heg military system remained even with the Xintan changes. Rit hoped that the sense of relief he felt meant that what he heard was the truth. Still at his side, but in his eyes only, was Kori. And Alicia? He had lost all feeling of her.

The door to the Royal apartments opened a body's width. Alicia's Sergeant walked in, two additional Queen's Guard with him. "Sam, Rin, return to barracks," the Sergeant shouted as he strode towards his men. "The rest of you, back to your posts."

By what looked like force of will, he backed the others out towards the Hall, then bracing both palms flat against the steel door, slid it shut, barely missing limbs as the last two men scrambled backwards. A second booming shiver of sound and the lock slid into place from the Chambers side.

Amel cal'Estan, one of the replacements on the list Nisstin had given him. Rit took the name from his Net link and wondered that he hadn't before. "The situation?" he asked him.

A third quiet order and his men took position at either side of the locked door. "Majesty, the only access to the Royal apartments is through these doors, the others and the window coverings have been sealed." He glanced at the two Warriors, where earlier, other than moving around them, he had ignored them in his effort to get his own people under control. And relaxed that slight amount that told Rit he'd made up his mind the two weren't trouble. Wilni occupation troops, not Blood Guard.

It wasn't what he had meant with the question, but he wasn't ungrateful for the singleness of the man's focus. Kori had disappeared from his side. Had his need vanished at the same time? He could take that much - and this man's loyalty to Alicia - as being the truth.

"I'd feel better if you were with her," Rit told him.

"Sire, my Lady is worried about your safety."

"And I about hers. I appreciate the help here, but I want you with her to handle your people if there's trouble. I'm entrusting her safety to you personally."

Conflicting orders apparently. Estin looked uncertain, but then bowed and left quickly the way he had come.

Rit walked to the head of the Council table and leaned his elbows along the high back of his chair, putting his weight on his arms. As always, the battle felt incomplete, he felt the need to be doing something, anything. And his anger at Wilntinn's stalling wasn't helping. A stroll on the rooftop? As he had last night, when the constraints of this one room, the actual space, but also what it meant, had become too much for him.

He shook his head. "What is this all about?"

One of the Warriors who had brought the boy in answered. "He claims to be Lord Aspeir's heir. The Steward in the Hall said to bring him in." A look to the Queen's Guard at the door.

Kamill's instructions, interpreted liberally by someone afraid to take any responsibility in the matter. "The order was for Lord Aspeir. Why did you bring his heir instead?"

"He was the only one there. The manor and the outbuildings were deserted."

"He's who he says he is," Wilntinn said. "He hasn't been formally introduced at Court, but I know him to see him. Roland cal'Vebben, Aspeir's eldest surviving son. The older brother died fighting in the Royal Guard."

The last part was in the intelligence report. From the boy's looks, Rit wouldn't have suspected the relationship. Aspeir was a large man, clean-shaven as was the style, but with thick black hair showing at his neck and from under his sleeves. He wore the fur robes of his rank like a pelt. The boy was slender, with ash brown hair. If he had to shave yet, it was little more than peach fuzz. Only his eyes perhaps, showed the relationship. The same black colour and the same almond shape.

"I was expecting your father," Rit said.

Roland wiped his bloody nose with the back of his hand. "Majesty, I don't know where he is. I told the Warriors but they didn't believe me either."

"I didn't say I don't believe you." Rit straightened, then walked around the chair and sat, putting him at eye level with the boy. He realized who he reminded him of: Willi. The same stubbornness. Was it matched with the girl's ruthlessness? "Why did you remain behind? Was it your father's decision or yours?"

"I think he's gone hunting. His dogs are gone, he must have gone hunting."

"With his entire household?" Wilntinn said dryly. "Including the scullery maids?"

The Bluestone priestess leaned over to whisper something to the Princip then opened her hands in the way of a Xintan orator before giving a speech. "Roland of Aspeir. It's long been thought that your father's service to this Court is conditional on the number of Xintan troops in the streets." Her Hegemony was heavily accented but understandable. "To some, he is a patriot, only waiting for

the opportunity to free his people of the Xintan and Strom oppressors. To others, any cooperation, especially from which he benefits, makes him a traitor."

She stood and opened her hands wider as though about to address the painted sky above them. The sun - the sun that didn't exist in this room - glinted off the mirrors sewn into her tunic. Reflection of the candles, Rit told himself. And still saw sunlight on the woman's raised face. If the port still burned, this slice of reality didn't allow him to see the smoke.

"Roland cal'Vebben." She lowered her gaze to include him. "Tell me, which do you consider yourself? Patriot or traitor?"

The boy pressed the back of his hand to his mouth again then rubbed under his nose. Fresh blood showed at his nostrils and he sniffed. A bruise was darkening under his left eye, his cheek swollen. The lasting pain would only now be starting to make itself felt, Rit knew. Muscle pulls, and depending on how rough the Warriors had been in subduing him, deep tissue bruises. Stretched and torn ligaments. The knuckles of the hand Rit could see were skinned. He had been allowed to put up a fight or had taken someone by surprise.

After staring at the priestess a few minutes, finally, Roland shook his head.

Denied her answer, Rosien sat down, but her eyes never left the boy. "Do you know why we are here, meeting before the assembly of the High Council is called?"

Roland shook his head more slowly, more warily this time. "My father?"

"No." Lord Hanes put one thin hand on the boy's shoulder. "Your father is a damn fool and a danger, but he's not reason enough."

"Then why...?"

"My boy, sit and listen. The aim of everyone here is to prevent this from escalating into a war that will see the total destruction of the Hegemony."

"Wilntinn?" Rit asked. "What's the law here? If Aspier is declared a traitor, does his heir inherit? And when?"

"You're not serious."

"Which part?"

"You are serious." Wilntinn leaned back in his chair.

With effort, he kept his voice under control. "The law?"

Wilntinn threw his hands up with a laugh. "Does it matter? I like it."

Olloss said, "Let the jurists... or whoever does that here, argue about it when it's too late. Roisin?" A nod from the priestess. "Gilna?"

Rit hadn't thought the Princip had followed the events, but he nodded readily. "Sir, I agree it's a feasible course of action, but I'm not a member of this Council."

"A wise Council takes advice where they find it valuable." Roisin leaned forward and patted his hand, then to Rit's Secretary. "Record these here as constituting the War Council."

Lord Hanes?" Rit asked. "Your call on this?"

"Thank you, Sire." Without rising, the older man bowed. "I was among those who agreed on the terms of the Peace Accord. I remember that a search for balance consumed us. We were giving up a country, there was a great possibility that any say in our own affairs would be reduced to a whisper, and many believed, eliminated entirely."

A cautious look to the priestess and he continued. "Those in Xinta who started this war said they had what they sought from it: the rise of their natural allies, the Strom, power in the Assembly of Elders, rights to lands and trade. The ones who started this war assured us that there was nothing more to be gained and much to be lost by allowing the infrastructure of the Hegemony to be destroyed. Especially for the Strom. The agreement of the rights of the Council... of which any War Council is a part, was the key to our signing." He reached over and put a hand on the young lord's shoulder. "There are experienced men, and despite Xintan prejudice, rational and reasoning men, just outside this door. Sire, why this boy? I know nothing against him other than youth, but with the charge of treason, you give his father no avenue of retreat on his actions. You may very well make a bad problem worse."

Rit's reason was the same as Ulanda had given about Eunni. Roland was here and the way of his being here, the timing, screamed significance. And except for a man he had met only a few times and not at all in private, everyone else had gone along with his decision. Without question. Even his cousin. When had the serious evaluation of his skills, even trust in his abilities, turned to belief?

"What do you know of the crisis?" Rit asked him.

Hanes thought a moment. "I'd say that the ones who fly the air ships, that the additional ships we've been promised will come, have indeed arrived. From rumors whose source was given as Denman Province, I understand there threatens to be either political or philosophical differences, or both, between those in support of the Xintan's Lady and these new ones. That you..." Hanes bowed again. "... Sire, that you out of all the Strom rule, is by Xintan will..." Another hesitation. "... and for reasons as much or more religious than political. And, I understand, that since the failure of Blueknife, Xintan will is ruled by the Lady cult."

Rit nodded. "Let's just say that the most immediate of these philosophical differences will likely involve me personally, not the country and not the Council. I refuse to drag our politics into the mix more than I have to. There's enough time barely to call the War Council together, then I have to leave."

"You haven't answered my question. Why the boy?"

"Because time is slipping away." The probabilities generated by the arriving ships moved like the shadow lines on a sundial. Lines? Two suns? Where had that come from? He stood up and didn't know where he could go. Forty-five minutes.

"Because Roland's presence on the War Council is an antidote to his father's absence. Because, against all probability, he's here dripping blood on the Council Chamber floor and I have to think that means something."

That last was just more superstition, the old man's face said before he looked to Wilntinn, as though expecting more sense.

Wilntinn shook his head. "Because time *is* slipping away. And when it's gone, this world dies in flames."

"A Strom prophesy?" Hanes ran a shaking hand across his face.

"And Bluestone," Roisin said, watching Rit closely. "One of the oldest."

Rit shook his head. Damn Wilntinn. "A turning point in the fate of this world. Don't take it literally."

"I hadn't thought to," Hanes said. "Should I have?"

"Of course you should," Wilntinn said. From a pocket inside his jacket he took a smooth red stone, darkened by handling. He held it out in the palm of his hand. "If mountains and forest can become a red desert, then the world can quite literally burn. I saw the desert; too many people saw the Zimmer transformation to allow it to be a lie. As you said yourself, why the king is who he is, went beyond politics a long time ago."

Rit had known others had brought stones, fragments of clay out with them as he had the pinecone from the garden. Icons, treasures worn on chains, powdery clay in tiny glass vials. He had given the seeds to the Greens Brother at Strom Charter House. A match to the apples seeds Bolda had given him.

And if the next pattern pull was based on what he had experienced on the roof, not on well crafted warding crystals? He could fear the same thing the Empire people did, regardless that he was part of it. What had Wilntinn seen last night? Had he been one of those who were looking towards the palace - had known to be looking there - at the right moment? He hadn't thought to ask earlier when told his cousin was at the gates, didn't want to ask now, but he did.

At the question, Wilntinn looked at him calmly for a moment. Russet eyes. Pantinn's eyes. "I saw why we're sitting here waiting on the decisions of a man who patently doesn't want to be a king and who wishes he hadn't stopped that flight from the rooftop. Or, I suspect, the one that happened during the Opening."

A stone room, not wings. "I asked what you saw."

Wilntinn turned his hand down and slammed the stone onto the table. Roisin was the only one who didn't jump. The Princip motioned the guards to stand down. The two men had stepped forward, their rifles in their hands.

"I asked what you saw." This time, he didn't keep his growing anger from his voice.

Wilntinn sat back in his chair, rubbing his hand with the other. Amused. "A sage-hopper." He caught Hanes' eye. "A small bird that lives in the dry lands along the Endicastrom River."

Hanes nodded. "I've heard the story of the sage-hopper and the Autumn Blessing at the Holding in Endica. What does it have to do with last night? What happened here last night?"

"What happened?" Wilntinn spun the stone across the shiny surface of the table towards the old lord. A multiplicity of stones, flickering, twisting, red in the yellow reflections from the small candles above. And to Rit, for a heart stopping second, reflections of blood and sky-swallowing flames.

The stone came to rest within Hane's reach but he left it where it was. "What happened?" Wilntinn repeated. "A great many things, not all of which may have actually happened, but some did, I have that from people who don't have my abilities and are even less likely than I am to buy into the Xintan religion. What I saw was a gateway to eternity, clothed in the body of bird. Yes, a sage-hopper. It was also the bird above the world-altar, that thing of shifting sand and light. It was a Zimmer mirsasitin..."

"I saw one during the Zimmer pull," Olloss interrupted. "A creature of the red sky, claws as long as this table. And saw one last night, much, much closer."

With the words, Rit heard the bird's cry in his mind and willed it not to become something others might hear. *Did he want to live?* The question he hadn't asked En'talac after the Opening when he'd woken on Sarkalt's ship, her lying beside him. And then too quickly and all too clearly: her death during the Blueknife attack. An outstretched hand, a dragonfly in stone. Sunshine and the smell of gunpowder strong in the air. Where he had run to Ulanda's side, not Alicia's.

"He means that I became those things," Rit said.

"Did you?" A small voice from the old man.

"Yes."

"Can I assume the War Council has been decided?" Olloss said, one eyebrow raised to Hanes. The old Lord sighed and nodded and the Marshall waved to Rit's secretary. "Record it as so. Get the signature copies made up immediately."

Rit gave the go-ahead. Apparently, no one was going to ask Roland if he agreed.

"One thing remains undecided," Roisin said. "The succession."

"Then decide it now," Rit said, "or don't decide it at all. We're wasting time. The next years will bring more changes and problems than one name given here can solve."

"Sire," Hanes said. "One of those with the strongest claim to the throne is on your War Council."

The old lord's gesture made it unmistakable who he meant, even if the lack of options hadn't. Hanes had helped Roland take the ropes from around his wrists. A handkerchief, Hanes' House crest embroidered in one corner, had cleaned the blood off his face.

"Sire," Roland said. "I wish to assure you I don't..."

The boy looked... frightened? No. Rit wanted him to look stunned, confused, even frightened by what he had heard, by where he was. Wanted him to show some evidence that everything happening here was a step beyond the possible. Instead, he looked like he was gambling with something, for something.

"If you don't, what about the rest of your family?" Rit asked, interrupting him. "Your father needs no explanation, but what about the others? Brothers? Sisters? Mother?"

A sitting bow. "Just my mother. She's visiting my aunt on the coast, she does every year at this time."

"The details are in the analysis," Wilntinn said. "I thought you had read it."

He thought he had too. "So tell me."

"She's Aspier's second wife, stepmother to his dead heir. She's the reason the elder son was expendable where the younger wasn't."

Except for the bruises and red marks, the boy had turned a paler shade of gray. A claim to the throne? The reaction of the guards said yes. The Queen's Guard. "She's Olum, then."

Wilntinn nodded. "First cousin to the King. She met Aspier through his sister, she's the aunt. They were at court together as ladies in waiting to the Queen. Of those who didn't leave with old Court to the Innit Unity, the boy here is next in line to the Olum throne."

Rit saw questions in Roland's eyes, and now that the direction of the questions was apparent, at last: fear. And yet he had deserted his father when it appeared likely the man would throw the country into war for the purpose of destroying the Xinta supported Strom rule, and in the process - knowing his father - likely put him on the throne.

"Wilntinn," he asked, "was this in the analysis I may or may not have read?"

"No."

He turned to Roland. Patterns within patterns. He rubbed at his forehead, trying to push an incipient headache away. "What do you want?"

"For what share of the peace I can offer?"

"Yes."

The boy licked his lips, at last nervous even as his fear had disappeared. "There's a lady I wish to wed. And soon."

"A lady of the Court, then?"

"Yes Sire."

The flitter Net, Kori, and through her, Alicia. *Who?* he asked.

"Against your fathers wishes?" Wilntinn asked.

"Yes to both. Very much against my fathers wishes and her father's wishes."

"Do we hold up the government for the whims of two children?" Roisin asked.

She didn't see the patterns of lives like ice tracings. Crystals of fate. Rit's mind crashed down. A cascade of events. He'd slipped and fallen, hit bottom. He heard the door behind him slide open, felt the change in the air, the slight breeze.

"Majesty?" Milla was at the doorway, Alicia beside her. The Trihawk girl curtsied deeply and stayed down, her eyes on the rug. Roland sat where he was, his expression a mask. Twenty minutes from prisoner to War Council, to husband. And six months yet to being a father. The girl was pregnant and he hadn't noticed before. Interchangeable... he hadn't really seen any of Alicia's ladies-in-waiting.

"Wilntinn?" Rit asked, poorly understanding what he wanted from him now. Moments of certainty, more of disorientation. Had Wilntinn known?

Yes.

But for an answer, his cousin shook his head. "Shall we have the Council in, then?"

Shadows on the horizon. The Empire craft would be here in minutes. "Do it," he said.

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Fifty steps to roof level, then twenty more up the narrower spiral to the Signal post above the Assembly Hall. Viy'iana took the momentary privacy of the turn to rub her back. *An easy time of it.* Vayni's opinion. Her midwife. From her first two, she knew it only seemed easy well after the event. The twins were asleep in the Nursery... which was where the look of the guard on duty at the outer door said he'd prefer her to be. Sideways glances, the man didn't want to be seen looking at her. Tradition had the mother and newborn in the Nursery for the first ten days, a sanctuary away from a world that included men.

An older man, in his fifties, she thought. Steady, or he wouldn't have been given this post. Nassrin el'Wiscam. Redleaf blood. Someone who knew someone who knew someone who probably knew her. She should have placed him earlier - the Net had done that, made her lazy in remembering things like faces and names when she could pull the information she needed.

Moving so that he'd have to be rude in avoiding her, she placed her right index finger across the back of her other hand. A single flower. A sign used in battle when a Warrior offers their life without limits. She wasn't bound by tradition, by the needs of her body, the aching breasts, the cramps that climbing the stairs had started. Duty alone drove her.

The guard bowed. Only the satisfaction in getting the result she wanted kept her temper in check. Damn idiot. From where he had been standing, he'd been

avoiding the sight of the Empire pods as diligently as he had her. "Come with me," she said. "Have a look at the enemy."

The three pods hadn't landed, but were keeping well back of the warding lines, arranged so as to make a triangle with the Holding in the center. *Well back* put one over the cliffs, another overtop the river, the third half way to the start of the mountains. From there, Viy'lana saw them as shapes defined by the pearl glow of the morning's light, not as distinct objects. Their tiles had been set to reflect what was around them, short of the near invisibility they could achieve.

"More machines," the guard said, and spat.

"Useful machines."

She was on the end of another carefully sideways glance. The Net, even the warding, had been readily accepted, but not the flitter and even less, the Zimmer's larger pod. Sometimes, she felt that to most of her people, the parts of the Empire technology that had no apparent physical source was nothing more than an extension of Bluestone abilities... abilities now as unaccountably shared as unaccountably held back for hundreds of years.

Crossing her arms, she waited. Finally, he sighed. "As you say Elder Mother. Useful machines."

Not San. Elder Mother. She'd seen his look and heard his tone many times while riding into battle. "The Lady will see us through to victory." She patted him on the shoulder. "We're dropping the shielding. Send a message only if the pods do something more than this."

In the middle of his acknowledgement, the Zimmer warding columns folded, the energy lines flowing back to the crystals in the Holding Center. Like a flash of lightening more easily comprehended in the afterimage, she could see the tracings in the stone under her feet. His last words were lost to the noise of the sudden wind as air moved into the void that was left.

It was quieter in the Assembly Hall, the wind was dying back already, barely moving the flags and not at all, the heavier tapestries. She hated the wait before going into battle, and hated worse, waiting for the battle to come to her. She had felt the same during the last month before giving birth, had faced that inevitable end with the same lack of patience.

No one else was moving, everyone was in place. Waiting. She felt exposed without weapons - except for the Zimmer blade in her boot - and lacked even the warding beads that had saved them during the Blueknife attack.

A double Hand of guard against the walls stood honor duty, another Hand inside the anteroom, and within their ranks, only the Lead Hand for the Daywatch had the ability to access the remaining security links. Which they weren't using. And which they hoped would go undetected. Gennady in the Ladybug hadn't thought to withstand two Temple Justice Cruisers, and they couldn't leave here en mass like the Zimmer had. And wouldn't leave at all. Panntin was by the altar

dish, pacing back and forth, his eyes to the spiral under his feet. If she touched him, he'd barely notice, not while he was like that.

A battle of wits and nerve. Ulanda would be in Endica by now. And still free, or taken prisoner, or killed. There wasn't any way she could know. She had stopped defining distance by how far a horse could take a rider in one day, or how far a man could walk in an hour. Distance had become a matter of what Net links were set where and how good you were at handling the systems. Endica was a thought away, not half an hour away by horseback - or a life away through enemy lines.

Wandassa came from the inner door, a leather sac in one hand. "Don't hold it by the sides. It's getting hotter very quickly, the leather's starting to burn."

A difference in the smell even in the few steps to the altar dish, and after pouring the contents overtop the stones from the world-altar, she used the tip of her knife to pull the smoking sac up and away. Fine sand, sparkling red and yellow in the reflected glow of the torches lighting the room. The sand was all that remained of the main crystal array.

The Holding's warding had withheld three assaults, they had decided not to wait for a fourth that if successful, would have left their systems wide open to a forced Net dump. Each of the three attacks had ended just short of success... and needn't have ended at all. Testing them? Making a point, she thought. And, despite Bolda's reassurances that the pods' actions so far had been restrained - and despite her assurances to the guard - for the first time she felt that they might actually survive intact.

Elsewhere, the points made were brutally clear. The reestablished Endica link had died immediately after the ships had arrived and news had come of two flitters landing outside the Manor. Either Quin'tat had managed to get a message to the orbiting ships or Slicannin had told them where they would likely find the man. The Holding had had no contact outside their immediate warding perimeter since then and they didn't dare use any of the remaining security linking that involved the tunnels, even those openly mapped, and there had been no manual signal from the Manor that the Downpost could detect.

She ran the tip of one finger through the fine grains to form a spiral, exposing stones and ash, and ignoring the growing heat that was burning her skin. She'd welcome a scar from this battle, which if things went to plan, would be cerebral, not physical. Posturing, threats, allowances.

"A waste," Wandassa said, her lips pulled tight.

"Battles are inherently wasteful."

The crystal's destruction had been on her orders, the 'how' built into the crystals themselves. The Zimmer knew how to gamble and they understood extreme gestures. No Net records of the Opening would exist. Memory pulls? Pattern recreations? They would have to have a Priest with them to do either, and

even then would have Panntin and his connection to the native Altasimic pattern to contend with.

She motioned to Wandassa. "A stick, please." The other woman brought the offering tray from a chest against the carved wall. Black joss sticks, several different scents, each wrapped in distinctive paper. Cedar, she decided, and laid it across the sand of the crystals. It began to smoke immediately; she wouldn't need a coal from the firebox.

"As you wish," she added with a wave, giving permission for the others of the Household here to add their prayers, then turned to face the door and tossed her braids into place. "Come stand with me," she said to Panntin, and offered the Priest her hand, the one where the heat of the destroyed crystals was raising a blister. Pain and consequence. Both as inherent to battles as waste. She had judged the moment correctly, Panntin noticed and took her hand in his.

As they all were, he wore for the first time the formal dress decided for Alisim Temple: black tunic and pants, the cloth without the more usual embroidery. The colour in the clothes and the oath bands each of them wore on their wrist was out of deference to the Lady. The only Altasimic opal was in the tiny mother-of-pearl beads on the stiff high collar, tunic hem, and on the edges of the deep sleeves.

The Lead Hand bowed from the doorway. "The Signal post reports a flitter approaching."

"One of those that landed in Endica?"

"No San, it's coming in from over the water. The markings give it as from the Banti Temple ship."

"Notify the main posts, then freeze positions. Take no move against the flitter unless you hear differently from me." There weren't any questions; she was stating what had already been decided in the event of a seemingly peaceful approach. She only intended the reassurance to the men that direct and simple orders always were.

The Lead Hand nodded and returned to the Assembly Hall. "That it's visible might mean they intend to talk," she said to Wandassa.

"After talking with Quin'tat."

"San?" The guard by the inner door, and a moment later, Pida bowed from the entrance. He was wearing what he had at the Harvest Blessing, a stiff robe banded in green. "Would it be presumptuous for me to ask to join you? I can advise about intent, a form of translation the Zimmer translation globes might miss. I've extensive experience dealing with the people in Temple where the simplest misunderstanding could lead not only to my death, but the death of the Priest I served."

"Let him through," she said with a nod to the guard. "And your intentions beyond advice?"

He held one hand up to show the same black oath band as they wore.

"Then go change so the rest of you will match."

"With respect, San Viy'lana, this is very formal dress, and as a tass'altin, I wouldn't be expected to wear House clothes, no more than a Weaver is. Even without Quin'tat telling them, they will be aware of what I am."

"The flitter's landed," Wandassa said. She had received the relayed signal from the guard at the doors, and immediately following, another. "Two people out. No visible weapons."

"Shall we go then?" Viy'lana said, but for form, she drew the household into her path by sheer will.

"With respect again, San Viy'lana... " Pida waited for her attention. "Also expected to be in attendance at a formal greeting would be the Priest's Weaver."

"And who you have waiting in the corridor, no doubt. As a translation of intent."

Another bow. "And who has been given Empire ranking as a Weaver of the Second Thread by Master Weaver Asam e'Bolda, as is his right."

The classification meant nothing to her, but the maneuver did. And the timing. Extreme gestures. "Very well."

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The balcony of the Great Hall overlooked the palace courtyard. A lower line of sight than from the roof, and standing at the door, Rit couldn't see more of the city than a few manor fronts. The wrought iron gates that separated the palace from Wini Capital were shut, and mounted troops were in the streets, the Princip's men by the flags they carried and which Rit could see in glimpses of colour from between the bars.

On either side of him, steel panels could slide to seal the balcony off from the Hall and about a foot of the metal showed. He'd had the doors opened to reveal a short passage way formed by the depth of the exterior wall. A couple of steps into the space bordered by stone, and he felt a hush that was more than a lowering of the noise reaching him from the Hall. Another few steps and he reached the twin doors flush with the exterior: glass set in frames of metal, the same design as he could see in the gates. Decorative, not meant for defense. These doors, he opened, swinging them outwards.

Sunshine, it was morning still. The breeze was in his face with a trace of oily smoke from the docks, the acrid scent of gunpowder, but more: the river and wet stone, the smell of people's lives, of the city, and the scent of the farmlands beyond that. He faced where, a continent away, the world-altar was.

He was well outside where the Queen's Guard would like him to be. A lucky shot from the street could kill him. If any enemy made it inside the palace gates, then the wide staircases invited them into the Hall, the area difficult to defend if not impossible. The Hall was never meant as a line of defense if it ever got to that - the Council Chamber, the Royal apartments, those were behind more doors, narrow egresses easily held by a limited number of people. He had no place to go from here but to jump.

And if the enemy wasn't restricted to rifles or forcing doors? Assassination - poison, a knife - had always been more of a danger than an overt attack. Until now. And this enemy wasn't restricted to rifles, and no physical barrier his forces could mount would stop the Empire weapons.

A small hand took his. "Are you feeling immortal?" Alicia asked him. "Should I tell Olloss he needn't worry about the succession?"

From his and the Marshall's conversation on the roof top last night. Her briefing must have been very thorough. Dark shadows ringed her eyes, she looked ill. She tired easily, something she would never admit to, spending her energy in bursts that fooled most people. She must be near the end of her strength after last night and this morning.

"I'm not sure what I feel," he said, wanting to take her in his arms, for the two of them to sit right down in the sunshine of the balcony, mindlessly so. "I feel like I'm stuck here waiting again. Waiting for Kori to give word that the flitter is ready. For the Empire pods to move in closer, to land." What he wanted was for them to take the bait they were offering through the leads set in the Wilni Capital walls: a formal contact meeting with him and the Council. Using the flitter, they would move out right under the Empire ships. Skimming the roads, mirroring back to the ships what they expected to see.

He shook his head. There had been no response at all to the request. "What I don't feel is that..." What? That he was about to die? Out of all he wanted to do, all he did was move so he was between her and the open.

Alicia turned with him like they were dancing, leaving her further outside than he had been originally. Hazel eyes in the sunshine, her brown hair catching highlights of flame from the heavy burgundy curtains framing the outer doorway. Delicate skin, translucent in the light. She glowed with life.

"Shall we dance, then?" he asked, taken by the fact he could loose the truth of her so quickly and easily.

Laughing - keeping the illusion in the sound - she led him by the hand she still held to the balcony railing. Her full skirt swirled about her legs, brushing his. Lace and silk. Court dress, suitable for meeting with the Empire ambassador... which is what the Court believed was going to happen. Pale yellow silk for the dress, a lace bodice. Beads in spirals embroidered along those formed in the weaving. One of Bolda's Alisim Temple patterns. He still wore the pants he'd woken up in, with

a fresh shirt and jacket overtop. With urging, he had allowed himself to be shaved and the single tail of his hair freshly braided.

Was the dance his desire or hers? Even at the railing, he thought she might continue, but instead, she stopped, her eyes towards the city, and began talking in a soft clear voice. "My uncle spent a year in Wilni during his military service, before he was married. He used to tell us stories about his adventures at Court."

"I didn't know he had been at Court."

She turned to him briefly, and he saw that all the youth remaining to her was an illusion. "From what he said, I thought he had lived here, but... he couldn't have. His rank wouldn't have bought him a suite in the palace, not when the only land he would inherit was in far off Endica." Her face away from him again, her eyes outwards, the sun in them. "One of our favorite stories was about the King's birthday ball, and how the people, even in the Commons, were in the streets to celebrate. The King ordered the palace gates opened and a great crowd, as many as possible, gathered in the courtyard here and danced to the music. Gannet and I would pretend we were there, not in the courtyard, but in the Great Hall. We'd dress up in my aunt's old ball dresses, in my mothers, the ones that had been put away when she died, but which were too old to cut down for someone else. We'd practice curtsying..."

"And practice breaking hearts?"

He saw a gentle smile on her lips, a wistful smile. "Always. Anything was possible, even the throne wasn't out of our reach - after all, we were noble born and love was possible."

Like Milla and Roland. Had she known the girl was pregnant? The court was a small town in many ways. There weren't any secrets for long. He put a hand over hers on the railing. "Don't ever doubt me."

She straightened and met his eyes. "Those kinds of dreams were dead before I met you." She shook her head. "I promised to bring you inside, except I'm not sure it's safer than standing here waiting for a bullet. The lords were... they were almost used to you. I think that in the context of the war and all, your becoming king was something at least as possible as my coming to Court and the king falling in love with me."

And her becoming Queen, more so. He had watched her make mistakes, and not make the same ones again, and always, always, consider the consequences of what she said and did.

He took both her hands and held them as though he would formally request a dance of her after all. "I said to you once that we could make this a marriage to suit the both of us, and then, every time I fought with Ulanda, I proceeded to give you ultimatums about what we would or wouldn't do. Does this suit you? To be Queen? To stay here as Queen regardless of what else happens?"

"I suppose you know that they've settled on a marriage between Milla and Roland's daughter and Ramsini's son?"

"Daughter?"

She rolled her eyes as she shook her head. "Ask Wilntinn. Then ask why he and the War Council have felt it necessary to make a decision that marries off two people who aren't even born."

"The Strom are used to thinking in generations. And Bluestone. You haven't answered my question. Do you want to stay here?"

"Rit, that's not the whole point. I know it won't happen. It doesn't matter what I want. The only celebration that would take to the streets in Wilni is if you died. It doesn't matter that you're a good king; that you work hard to keep the peace here and to make their lives better. Nothing matters except that you are also what they saw last night. I never thought I'd see Olass afraid to tell you to your face that you're acting like an idiot. He came to me and asked if I could get you inside. And Wilntinn..."

"He's not afraid of me."

"Whatever part of themselves they show you, the both of them look at me like they're drowning and I'm a rope they might use to save themselves. I've looked at you the same way and don't like it in myself any more than I do in them. They've done the same thing with this plan of succession."

A matter of relative power. What he had said to Alicia at the world-altar: being male and twice her age hadn't given him more choices than she had. Wanting to survive, to salvage some freedom, had dictated his actions. And then: knowing that he could make a difference. And anger, too often his anger at Ulanda.

A cough from behind them. "Sire," Kamill murmured as he handed him a slip of paper. Written in Heg script, he recognized Willi's handwriting. Another hour; a problem with the cascade in several of the main crystals. He handed it to Alicia.

After reading it, she crumpled the paper in one hand. Illusions. The sun in his eyes, he could barely see her at all now. "Rit? Any idea how this changes things?"

"The Empire ships are waiting for something."

"Can you see any of them?"

"There...." He pointed perhaps five degrees off a straight line to the gates. Shimmers of almost-sky, almost-air, but more a sense of 'knowing' than being able to see. The craft was as near invisible as he found his wife. A glitter of sun in his eyes. "One is directly between us and the world-altar."

"That's where Kori said it was, but I still can't make it out. Does it mean something that it's there?"

"I think it means more that it hasn't moved in over twenty minutes. I'd prefer we were gone already, Spann settings to the crystals or not. Just moving. I want the focus away from here." He could see the other ships as well, through stone,

through solid steel. Three pods at the edge of the city, equidistance from each other and the palace.

A smile. For his impatience? "Can it see us?" she asked.

"I don't know." He hadn't felt any scans, but could suppose he might not recognize one if it was different than those he'd been exposed to. Or, the pod might simply be able to magnify the view to the point that he and Alicia could be seen plainly. "If I go in, will you?"

He motioned to the Guard to close the door.

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Yes, he would like tea. Silista? Hardly. Was the offer a Poultat joke, Quin'tat wondered as he waved the Steward permission to leave him.

"Inform the Sanli's staff that I wish to speak with her at her earliest convenience," he said to the man's back, not caring to put his request into the Net, restricted as he was to the minor domestic levels. Tea and servants and no access to anyone in authority. His report had been swallowed whole by the Net and he'd been escorted here by Banti Temple security and left.

An image, he could manage. As though he was looking out a window, Alisim appeared. Apparently real time, apparently real distance.

Using Net references, he forced the scale of what he saw on his mind; there was no natural perspective, no horizon, no height, no depth. They must be floating right over top of Endica. The delta was a palm's width, the harbor a fingernail. The Watcher Islands, the mountains, the Endicastro River, the puzzle of the waste, the world-altar at its heart... he could hold them all in his lap.

He turned his attention to the harbor city and increased the magnification until sufficient detail appeared that he could place himself in the scene. Deep green for wetlands bordering the river, green-black threaded with channels, piers, shacks on stilts. He had never been there, but the stench of the salt marsh at low tide had been a predictable and too frequent part of his last months on Alisim. On the far side of the image, the delta farmlands were lighter green. Fields had been plowed and planted, houses built, families were on land that had never, by any evidence, known a human footstep. All in the single season since the Zimmer pull.

And on the other side of the city: the city wall, the towers, the line of cliffs. The high flat plain where the Holding sat. And En'talac's grave overlooking the ocean. What had they been to each other in this reality? What would they be to each other in anything the Zimmer managed to create in the diamond?

And what dreams were Rigyant and the Imperial House in this reality taking into account in how they dealt with Ulanda?

"We're not over Endica any longer."

The words were in plain-tongue. A young Piltsimic woman stood in the doorway. The spin of the Net link still said: now, here. Endica. "Where are we, then?" His hands were more politic; his fingers shaped a formal Opening.

With a snap, the view changed and expanded. He stood on air, the ground very far below him, the curve of the world at either hand. He was out of practice - turning to look in the direction they were going made him feel dizzy.

"Wilni Province." The Piltsimic girl walked further into the room, stopped in front of him, then knelt and put one palm flat on what would be the floor - and which persisted in not being there at all by what he could feel of the Net. The image pulled in and down, taking his stomach with it. In hopes that a lower center of gravity would be kinder to his stomach, he knelt, feeling for the floor, for the cushions he knew were there.

They flew overtop a river, tongues of silver meeting in a broad flow of water and ending at the ocean and the horizon. "The Wilnistrom River. My pilot insists on following rivers and valleys where possible." Her eyes narrowed as though bothered by the reflection of the sun on the water, but then she looked to the horizon with the same narrowed look.

Her pilot? What was before him was a very young woman by Piltsimic standards, her skin still unevenly pigmented. A loom-master, then. Or an apprentice weaver butting in just for the fun of how much trouble she could cause before someone noticed. "You know who I am and what I was in the reality I came..."

Small dark eyes finally looked towards him. "Your report was clear on both." She sighed and pushed herself upright. For an instant, the ship felt like it was about to tip over, and then, in that same instant, the Net was released to the lower levels of the Command structure. He had spatial references along with any visual ones he wanted. He had layers of information telling him where he was, where they were going, the speed, the altitude.

A loom-master. Still on his knees, he bowed deeply. "Lady, I had wondered if any of what I said had been believed. Please forgive any roughness in my manners earlier."

"Drop the lady crap. And I knew who and what I was dealing with before I left Rigyant." Her eyes looked to the horizon again. "This place gives me the creeps."

He had no idea what she was seeing. To the Net, even the Command Levels he could now reach, she wasn't in this room with him. "The world-pattern?"

A twist of her lips into a not-quite smile. "Hell, you're sensitive to pattern, you tell me."

"I don't have a Priest here to see Altasimic pattern through. And, although I greatly appreciate the Net access I now have, it isn't what you'd be seeing." Nowhere near the kind of access a loom-master would have or the talent to use it if he did have.

"No, it isn't the same access." Another almost-smile. "For the first part, I think I can correct the situation pretty damn soon. A flitter left the Holding before the Cruiser pods reached Endica; the vessel was from the Vansitt Captain's ship. Want to offer me odds on where it went?"

"To where we're going, Wilni Capital."

"Right you are. Two rogue Priests, both with a direct link to focused overpattern. You guys really screwed up."

Two? Was she including Rit? Had it gone beyond what they were still finding out about Strom and Bluestone abilities? He didn't ask for clarification, he didn't want to know what En'talac with her more trained abilities must have known and not told him. When had he really lost her?

The Piltsimic girl wandered over to the wall - there and not there - and stood quietly, staring into the distance. The gauze of a cloud surrounded them. White, then a heart of gray smoke-like mist. The air seemed to cool, become moister, he felt soft drops of water on his face, and then, his mind taking the reality of speed and temperature from the Net, the mist became stinging sleet, the ice crystals barbed. He pulled back from that part of the Net lead. No water. No ice.

"Where I came from..." He got to his feet then joined her at the wall when she didn't turn to listen. "... the Weavers' Council at Palace broke with Rigyant. The Overpriest of Forms..."

She reached out as though she could part the cloud they traveled through. "Sarkalt."

"Yes, Sarkalt. In our reality, just before we left Palace, he opened a general allowance to the Weavers' Council. That we were dealing with a Priest able to..."

"The Overpriest Sarkalt died more than two hundred years ago."

An Empire with a difference shape than his... and with no need for that particular Overpriest to dance with the Change Phoenix. "Our ship jumped through the diamond to orbit Lillisim with the cooperation of the..." His words caught in his throat. Small knowing eyes stared up at him. "How many deaths?" he finally asked.

She shrugged. "On Rigyant? One. Me, or the former me."

And she didn't mind heights. Not Anga, then. Or did the body make that much of a difference? "Then the effect of the agreement carried over into this reality?"

Suddenly, they were through the cloud into blinding sunshine. He shaded his eyes with one arm then pulled even further away from the image. The room took shape around him, still filmy, but more comforting than relying solely on spatial references.

She didn't appear to notice the change in view from the heart of a cloud to a horizon that curved into a broad ocean. Minutes until they reached Wilni Capital. His words only earned him another shrug. "From what your report had to say about your Rigyant's response, I'd have to say yes. The same people would have died in yours as in this one, so something else made the difference that has me here and not someone from the e'Anga line that held power where you come from." A moment, then her fist slammed into the wall tile. "Don't take that as meaning any cock-assed agreement still stands."

"We didn't know what the faction was, only that we had their cooperation and they had the ability to offer it."

"Offer it long enough to help shape what happened, anyway." She shook her head. "Playing rings and stones with chaos. Blind stupidity."

"I'd like to say that of all the reservations the loom-master Anga had about the Altasimic people, I shared his concern for the... well, wild lines. The ones able to connect directly with overpattern."

"Concern?"

"From your tone, I take it you think the word is inadequate. Feel free to instruct me on the word you like—my report is as clear on gravity of the situation as it is on my rank. Is one as out of date as the other?"

"Not by a long shot."

"And the situation on the other Altasimic worlds?"

She didn't answer for a moment, then: "On too many of them, lunatics with claims to occult powers hardly get noticed in the general insanity. Hell, that's what it was like even before the machines stopped working. And now, they're too busy killing each other off to care much."

"Anga talked of starting over completely."

A heavy eyebrow rose. "And your take on exterminating billions of people over a couple of thousand cubic light-years?"

"I've tried not to think about how it might be necessary, but then, I've never had the emotional stake in the outcome that Rigyant does."

He got a silent stare, then she chuckled, and the chuckle rapidly grew into a belly laugh. "While you force yourself to think about it, you can be of some use in the contact team here."

"What use?"

"Regardless of what is happening elsewhere, we got two people here who are an immediate danger to the Unity and not just to good taste. And both of them know you and haven't bothered killing you yet, so probably aren't predisposed to do so in the future. We can't afford to push them or we'll cause the very thing we don't want to happen."

"Overpattern in the world-patterns."

"That for one. Another thing your report was clear on. It was a major focus once, so it must still be a risk."

"Do I get to hear what you have planned?"

"I don't have anything planned. I just want to talk."

"Why is it I think my ignorance is only one of many weapons in your arsenal?"

"You talk too much."

"The Altasimic find it disarming." The belly roll threatened again and he took advantage of her apparent good humor. "What should I call you?"

"Well, just so you don't get me confused with my father who hasn't had the decency to stay dead, call me Vivan."

"Bolda?"

"The same person. Obviously not the same experiences."

"Or access to the loom-master memory weaves?"

A raised eyebrow told him he was pushing her good will. Then she shrugged. "How the hell should I know?"

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Another ship. Rit didn't see it, couldn't see it through the walls of the Great Hall, but its presence loomed in his mind. As large as the city? Or larger... then much, much smaller, pressed to the size of a child's toy. It was what the pods were waiting for.

His hand still in Alicia's, Rit gathered Wilntinn in his wake, then Roisin. "Bring whoever it is to the Council Chambers, but have them brought through the Hall first, let everyone see them. And leave the doors open. Believe as hard as you can that I'm waiting in the Chambers to greet them. See me there."

In the time it took him to walk the hundred feet, he could hear the ship, a hum that would be a roar in the streets. And then he could see it as he had the city earlier in the smoke darkened ceiling of the Council Chamber. Not city-sized, and not something he could fit in the palm of his hand. About the size of the Ladybug, but with silver and gold bands rippling across the hull. The web eye looked like the eclipse of small moon by a large planet.

The aurora flashed blue as the ship crossed over into Wilni Capital and stopped over top the High Market. Awnings snapped like sails in a stiff wind. From a perspective he couldn't have, everything, the cloth, the dark stone, the cobbles and the slate roofs, everything was rimmed in blue light.

Warded? Did they think he could mount a defense?

From the rooftops?

A moment, then a flitter separated from the main craft. It looked as though it had passed right through the hull. And stripped out of the warding as it did.

A sign that they meant to talk? Or a kind of trap to let him think so?

The Net crackled as another, many times too complex system attempted an interface. Through the noise, Rit pushed an image of the small craft landing in the plaza, a double row of Honor Guard, passage through the Great Hall and a meeting with him. And with the image, a sense that the men and women in the Great Hall described the reality here as much as the hovering pods and the threat of Empire power.

Creating belief, Net and will. *I'm here waiting.*

Roisin joined Olloss at the table, but Wilntinn followed him and Alicia as far as the guarded inner door to the Royal Apartments.

"Just a moment with him," Wilntinn said to Alicia. Without looking at him, she nodded and left.

"What is it now? Something else that wasn't in the reports?"

"Milla and Roland are going with you."

"No, they're not."

"Drop them in Riwan, they can make their way from there."

"Their way where? Istarom? There's the possibility his father is heading to Surri Province. Roland being there puts him in greater danger than he is here."

"Aspier knows how far negotiations in Surri have gone, and that the fighting will be over before he could get there. We think his goal will be an uprising first in Wilni, and then Surri Province. And, as much as we don't need the boy actively on the Council, we need the alliances he can bring, both here and in Surri. And to keep Surri out of any trouble that Aspier manages, we need Roland settled in as the new Head of Mellon House."

Over Wilntinn's left shoulder, Rit could see through the narrow passage to the Chambers, the length of the table framed by the doorway. At the far end of the room a Piltsimic girl approached the table, then stopped, her hands flat on the surface. The members of the War Council were seated on either side of her, minus Roland, but including the man standing next to him now.

Standing, she was only as tall as Wilntinn was sitting. And barefoot, and wearing unadorned black pants - too tight on her round form - and a short black vest that barely covered her small breasts. Hands still flat on the table, she leaned forward, the vest flapping open in front, exposing her to the sight of the people seated on either side of the table. She had more body hair than most grown men and what skin could be seen was heavily freckled.

She was staring at him.

Rit spread his hands in a motion of greeting, Temple style, and the vision faded. Had it been from pattern or something created from the ship's Net? He couldn't tell and that worried him.

Wilntinn turned to look back. "Something I should know about?"

There was no sense of danger, rather a hollow anticipation such as he had felt at the Mound before the Opening. Was what happened next as fated as that had been? Or again, was he being invited to think so? The sense of power the girl had projected made its own frame of reference... and frame of truth.

"I'm not sure."

Alicia came back at a run, Pasi and the dog at her heels. "Rit. Now."

Wilntinn motioned to Alicia for another moment. And to him: "What did you see?"

"First, you can tell me something."

"Do we have time for playing games?"

"I'm looking for an end to games. Who was my father?"

It was a question that said he didn't think he was coming back. He saw the same knowledge in Wilntinn's eyes. "Viy'iana told you the truth."

"And my mother?"

"The last of that bloodline is in Vancallin waiting to be born."

The realization he should have come to months ago finally crystallized. They hadn't needed him any more than they needed Roland on the Council, just his blood and the alliances he could bring. A tool. A pawn who could be told just enough to move him in the desired direction, but not so much as to make him part of the process.

And the second part of the realization and the reason for the first: as his... father had said, he was the eyes looking back through the flames at the end of the world. He could quite literally destroy this world.

A stone room and Ulanda dressed in white.

Alicia pushed herself between them. "Rit, whatever this is, there's no time now."

The translucent outer tiles of the flitter shifted position constantly, reshaping the craft in flight, responding to energy fields that Rit sensed only when they were past them. They were crawling at no more than a walking pace while keeping the same relative height above the streets as when they had left the Palace roof. Kori was by the crystal array she had set up just past the eye of the flitter, out of the way of the others. Willi was with her.

Next to him, Alicia and Milla were folding clothes that had been hastily thrown into a pile, the two girls head to head. Arranged along the sides were chests, mostly tooled leather with Xintan patterns on the sides. His back was against one. At the far end of the flitter, Pasi was showing Roland how to operate a Zimmer rifle. Alicia's sergeant sat on the floor near them, his eyes squeezed shut. The dog was curled up on a blanket in the rear tip of the craft, snoring softly.

Trying to ignore the shifting tiles, Rit got to his knees. And had to grab the supporting arch for balance. Wood the same pale colour as the floor, but carved. Frozen in their form, fish boiled to the surface: fins and scales and stubby legs. Vannsit.

"You can help if you like," Alicia said with a glance at him.

As though his own need for some kind of physical support decided what he felt, all he got from her were tactile impressions: a fur collar smoothed flat, then the contrast of the wool fabric. And bumps from the zigzag embroidery along the front and the hem as she crossed the sleeves to the back then accordion folded the body of the heavy coat. And passed it to Milla to put into the open chest next to the girl. And then the next garment picked from the pile.

Each colour she touched had a sound, as though she played on an instrument, fingers strumming cords of dark reds and blues and browns. Then under her fingers, cedar from the chests the clothes would have been stored in, but more, scents that didn't have a match in the same way that music made up of colours didn't.

Another glance up and Alicia looked past him. "Willi?" She waited until the girl had come out. "Help Milla finish this. Sort them properly and smooth the creases. There's a couple of empty chests and room in others, but don't bury things we'll need to use right off. And make an inventory, we'll need to know what to pick up in Riwan."

For a wonder, Willi didn't argue, but squeezed past him without a word. Alicia got up to let the girl kneel where she had been and then took his hand. For a sick instant, he had thought his changed senses might be applied to the feel of his own skin, but nothing happened. He let her lead him the few steps to the other side.

"I thought you said you'd be happier just moving."

The focus that had lead to his finally asking Wilntinn for the truth, hadn't left him. The same thoughts circled his mind over and over. "I'll feel better when we're moving faster."

"Kori said that as soon as we're clear of Wilni, we could pick up speed." Alicia sat with her back against the opposite end of the same carved arch he had grabbed for support, but didn't let go of his hand. "She's having to compensate for the crystals that didn't reconfigure properly."

He settled beside her and slipped his arm around her waist. She was still wearing the silk gown and the sudden heat of her skin through the cloth and then the texture of the beads as he moved his hand higher was a welcome distraction from his thoughts. And the colour, just a colour now, yellow to the blue and green world the ever changing patterns the sunlight made of the flutter's interior. "I thought I was just talking to him."

Resting her head on his shoulder, she wiggled closer against his side. "Mmm?"

"Wilntinn."

She raised her head enough to meet his eyes. "Maybe you were. Does it bother you? What he said?"

"It bothers me that I've been lied to from the start." Starting with his father.

She opened her mouth to answer, then frowned. "What are you looking at?"

"Sunlight on your face."

"Is that bad?"

From sunlight to shadow to light again. Her pupils didn't react but the changing light brought out the exhaustion she had so effectively masked earlier. "Not bad at all." He kissed her forehead. "Get some sleep, I'll wake you when we reach Riwan."

"If you'll stay sitting here with me."

"I think I'll get some sleep too."

"You do that," she whispered, her eyes already closing, and from a small smile, gradually her face relaxed. He felt the comfort she took at being close and with his arm around her, and held that feeling like one of Ulanda's mantras until her breathing deepened and he knew she was asleep.

Opening his mind with a feeling that he was holding his breath in order to hear better, he tried to get a better sense of the energy fields that were making what he saw different from Alicia's vision. And felt *something* retreat. A breath of air or a slight change in the temperature. Moisture condensing to almost fall as rain, but not quite. And then nothing again. He opened further like he was leaving his body. Listening very hard.

Blue tinged mist obscured his patchy vision of the city and the large ship over the High Market. Then a fine rain fell like the sky was melting. When the air had cleared, all he could see was the dimly lit Assembly Hall and the Piltsimic girl at the end of the long table. As though he was actually seated at the head, Wilntinn and Roisen were to his right, Olloss and Hanes to his left. He knew they were there, but saw only blurry forms he couldn't blink into focus. And under that vision, Alicia, her face inches from his own, but just as blurry. Only the Piltsimic was solid.

The alien's lop-sided smile grew. "Do you want to try that again?"

Had the blue colour of the mist and rain meant it constituted a form of warding? The effect was as though a part of his brain had simply stopped working. He was losing the expectation of being able to see clearly, eyes or... whatever carried this conversation. "I meant no discourtesy."

"And I meant it as a non-aggressive response to what anywhere else in the Empire would be considered an attack."

"And your ships out there? Are they a non-aggressive response as well?" With effort, he kept himself from projecting what he knew was around him: one of the

Pods rapidly growing larger as they approached the perimeter of the triangle the Empire craft defined.

And wondered if he had been successful when the girl's smile broadened even further. "Compared to the alternatives? Damn right, they are."

"And the ships I can assume are at Endica?"

"The very same."

"Why?"

"Get yourself back here and we'll talk about it."

Something else happened and the blurry forms to either side of the girl became Olloss and Wilntinn.

The Marshall was speaking. "... you take for granted our alliance to an Office that..." The only person at the far end of the table was Quin'tat.

The image snapped. The pod was behind them; they'd almost brushed the ship's tiles with their own. And were falling straight down, loose tiles skimming away as their flat surfaces caught the air, then flying back, only to come loose again.

They had a floor and chests that seemed content to stay on the floor. And hull tiles around them like a jigsaw puzzle half built against a blue board. Something caught them no more than a dozen feet from the cobblestones, and instantly, the flitter was moving forward at the same speed with which it had been falling. If he'd been drinking a glass of water, it wouldn't have spilled, but his stomach wasn't as convinced.

Beside him, Alicia had slept through it. On his other side - and as asleep - the dog, her head on his thigh, a line of drool wetting his pants leg.

He was walking in the snow and making heavy going of it, falling into each step. Around him, as far as he could see, were birch trees, their branches a fine lace bare of leaves. White and white and gray lace, the light was flat, there were no shadows or colours.

Another step and his stumble into the snow didn't stop. He woke up trying to hang onto the wood floor with his fingernails. Alicia was tucking a blanket around him. A muted twilight showed through the open side of the craft. Deep shade, but hemlock trees, not birch. There was the sound of running water.

"Good, you're awake."

He rolled to sit up and wished he hadn't. His head pounded. "Where are we?"

She pulled a chest over and opened it. "Where we were the last time you woke up and asked. Just inside Surri Province."

He looked around. Except for the chests and the two of them, the flitter was empty. He heard a frantic meowing, but faint as though muffled by blankets. Chests, the two of them and Tika, somewhere. "Why are we whispering?"

She smiled without stopping what she was doing. "I don't know. We're hiding, it just seems natural to whisper."

The air was cool and smelled like morning, not evening. The last thing he remembered was watching Alicia sleep. She'd changed from the beaded dress to riding clothes, but still in the Hegemony style with a long split skirt. "I don't remember waking up before. What happened to our going to Riwan?"

A leather hunting jacket landed in his lap, then she closed the lid of the chest and got to her feet. "We're being followed by an Empire pod. Kori says they can't see us, only map the general direction we take. Riwan is an obvious destination within... the *allowance* of error for our actually being here instead." She used the Empire plain-tongue word. "We've made camp, Kori set the crystals to cascade again, and this time with changes that should make all of them convert to the Spann coding. She's sleeping now, she was dead on her feet."

She helped him up, then into the jacket. The high collar rubbed at an itchy spot at the back of neck. White powder dusted his shoulders and caught at the back of his throat as he brushed it off. A neural blocker.

"I *slept* the night?" His voice came out harsher than he intended.

"You slept most of yesterday and the night through and we didn't have to worry about you providing more of a target to the pod than an errant crystal."

He caught her hand as she fastened the first button on his jacket. "I'm not going back to Wilni."

"I know."

"Wilntinn told you?"

"The look on your face told me. Same as it tells me you don't like this treatment any better than what you think you got from your family."

"I don't."

"And I can't help that." She snatched her hand away from his. "Put your boots on, the ground's muddy. When you feel like company, come join us."

Eventually, the meowing stopped, the cat apparently deciding no one was there. There weren't any shadows to tell him how long he sat there, his boots in his lap, looking out onto the closed face of the forest. He didn't check what Net system existed without the main crystal array to power it. He'd taken the warning: if he did anything stupid, the Empire pod might be able to find them that much easier. Or more immediately, he might disturb the cascading.

He'd spoken to Alicia with anger he hadn't consciously intended, his 'now' telescoped back to within minutes of his aborted confrontation with Wilntinn. The blank hours in-between weren't blank enough as jumbled impressions forced themselves on his mind. Tactile again, he was being touched. And the sounds - people whispering over and around him, the feel of the Net, and just barely, the world-pattern - sounds that in this strange replay, brushed his skin, stroked, and pinched. And finally, a dream that was likely the effect of the drug.

No, he didn't like the treatment. Handled like Ulanda was. And she'd let it happen, the same as the first time he'd seen it at the Mound before the dance of the Opening. And he remembered the wariness and even the fear betrayed by Bolda and En'talac in their every movement, even when all they were doing was heating water or sitting next to her, talking.

Well, from what he understood, she'd been raised to it, had wanted the power that was the reason for the care and the fear both. He hadn't and he didn't. An Empire Priest... it wasn't an option, by will or circumstance. As Kori had said, he'd be killed more surely than Ulanda would. And as it had on the smooth surface of the Zimmer pebble Wilntinn had spun across the table to Hanes, the image of flames and blood flashed before him.

Did he have the right to survive?

Except it wasn't just his survival that was in doubt, but that of his blood. Wilntinn, Ramsini, his unborn son. And people on worlds he didn't know, anyone capable of seeing the bloodwind. Kori's Wu'loss cass.

And he was being pushed again.

He had to jump from the open part of the flitter. And, as Alicia had said, into mud. The flitter had plowed through widely scattered ferns and skunk cabbage to end nose first into a small waterfall, much of the body lying in what had recently been part of the stream. The interlocked tiles of the flitter - he remembered how easily they unlocked - were wicking the water back along the body of the ship about half way before being completely spent on the downward joins. From the extent of the mud, they must have been here for hours.

He walked to the rear of the flitter. Along the path of the landing, hundred-foot tall hemlock trees grew to within inches of the necessary clearance. Snapped branches and litter showed the sharp angle of descent. Overhead, his sight narrowed along the lines of the massive tree trunks, never to reach open sky.

He had slept through the landing? Walking back, he ran a hand along the dark tiles, feeling where the joins overlapped and where other edges vanished into the next tile, felt the texture, felt the faintest sense of the energy pathways contained within the clay. The ship seemed intact. Despite appearances, the landing must have been under some degree of control.

Footprints in the soft ground, the mark of Alicia's small boot top most, led to a small rise above the stream, the land dipping again to his left and straight on, then rising sharply to be lost in the maze of tree trunks. He saw Pasi through the trees, the Xintan Warrior standing on top a rocky outcropping, the dog beside him. He had a Zimmer rifle in one hand, a Xintan issue slung across his back. Using hand signals, the Warrior asked for instructions, and Rit waved that he should keep his post.

Roland had an area of ground brushed flat and an oiled paper map unrolled, the corners held down by small rocks. Several inches from one long edge was a

pebble. Milla and Estan were standing over him, their heads down. Alicia wasn't there. Neither was Willi or Kori.

"Looks like you have some idea of where we are," Rit said.

Milla stepped back, a startled look on her face. Estan quickly bowed.

"Your Majesty..." Roland started to his feet, then stopped half up and followed Estan's lead. He moved stiffly and favored his right leg.

"Call me Rit. All of you. And drop the other formalities." And before a response could test his instructions, asked: "I take it we're the small pebble."

Kneeling again, Roland pointed to a line drawn in blue that ran under the pebble to a thicker line. "If you follow the stream down a couple of hundred yards from here, it falls over a rock face into a small river valley. That's this, the Nesrinistrom."

"How sure are you?"

"The... woman, Kori, she said that there's a map in the ship's... memory." He glanced to where it was hidden by the slope. "And as soon as it was light, Pasi and I followed the stream down. From the edge of the cliff you can see over to the next mountain. There's a ridge with a rock slide here..." With his forefinger, he drew a circle that made up part of the outward curve of the river. "... and a taller mountain back of that which has to be Mount Nesrin." The Xintan notation within the narrowing circles gave only a reference number. A military map. "I've never seen it from this angle, but the shape of the peak is unmistakable."

Rit squatted close. "And the road..." A line in blue appeared close to the pebble, but he didn't have any sense of the scale involved. And again, the notations were in Xintan military script he couldn't read.

Roland's finger traced the same path Rit's eyes had. "The south pass road follows the river for a couple of miles before going up and over on the far side of Mount Nesrin." He twisted around and pointed. "If we need to get to the road, we should be able to go overland from here, but the terrain can get pretty rough. The river would be the surest route."

"Any towns?"

"Anquin at the start of the pass..." He motioned off the edge of the map. "And Nes, here..." He hesitated, then pointed several finger lengths along the blue line, a thumbnails width past the flag mark that Rit thought must mean a township.

"They've got it wrong on the map."

"How often have you been through here?"

"Except for this year, every summer since I was small. My father and the two of us... my brother... we'd go to Surri while my mother stayed with my aunt on the coast. We always stopped at Nes; there isn't anything else except for the mountain shelters. The road is good enough to travel on after dark so we'd keep going until we reached there, even if we'd gotten a late start from Anquin. From Nes, we'd take the road to Istarom." His finger traced a dotted blue line that

broke off from the solid. “Another day, maybe five, six hours actual riding. The Rom mines are there.”

“Any fortifications?”

“There's room for two hundred guard to be billeted in the keep alone...”

“You keep that many guard?”

“Usually only thirty or so, all of them local. Besides, the town is right there, there are always more men available if there's trouble. Now with the war... I don't know.”

“Lord Strom wants you secured there as the acknowledged Head of Mellon House. Can you do it?”

“I told him I could.”

Rit smiled at the answer. “And the location, could you hold off an attack?

“Unless you're a goat, the road is the only way in. Half a hundred men could hold off any army.” And in a quieter tone: “Pasi said he hadn't heard how far into Surri the Xintan forces have reached.” The boy looked up. Purple bruises showed along his left cheekbone, but he had escaped a black eye.

Rit motioned off one edge of the map, then took the stone that was holding the corner down and scratched a rough outline in the dirt. “The primary attack went in from Catalli, not the occupied Heg lands.” Freed, the map began to curl. Estan pinned with his foot.

The broad sweep of the stone through hemlock needles showed the attack route. “A mounted force along the main pass roads to...” A mountain range in miniature made of the same needles. “... Vaslir here, then...”

“The castle at the junction of the Vaslirstrom and...”

“And Surulistrom rivers. They'd be joined there by the Riwan based troops, not from the south pass here, but through the Akliff trade roads. Once Vaslir was taken...”

“The war would be over.”

“Yes.” Dizzy from bending, Rit straightened and to wait a moment until the pounding in his head subsided. Erisin, where Ulanda was headed, was between Istarom and the Innit border. Outside of the planned invasion route, but not by much, not when taking into account the fluid style typical of Xintan warfare. If it had been Heg troops driving this, he wouldn't have worried. “The arrangements with both the Innit Unity and the Catalli Regent was to...” He left the details unsaid. Trade agreements and concessions from another life. His faced him here. He started again: “The natives of Surri have more in common with the Aklif mountain tribes, not the Heg lowland people. Historically, they're more loyal to their Clan leaders than to the central government. By keeping the war restricted to the main trade towns ...”

“I've got relatives I know would thank you for it.”

Overstated, but he nodded. "The idea was to leave the native population out of the war as much as possible. And to concede on issues which have always caused problems in the area."

"The metals tax."

"Among other things, yes. And the compulsory military service."

"The war wasn't going to touch my father's lands, was it?"

"Your lands now. We had to offer the local leaders reasons to support the peace, the ones in Wilni Capital, at Court, and those our agents could reach. The more potential they were for trouble, the more we had to offer them."

"He bought that ability to cause trouble by sacrificing my brother in the Royal Guard."

In small measure perhaps, but the young man in front of him must have been Aspier's hope for real power where he wanted it. In Wilni Capital. "Will your people here accept you as Lord Aspier with your father still alive? And I don't want the simple yes you gave Wilintinn."

"If I can reach them first. My father's not popular with much of the family. He wasn't as ambitious in his first marriage. She was a cousin, my grandmother's youngest sister's daughter. He married too soon again after she died." The boy rubbed under his nose. "It was especially bad that he married who he did."

A close relation of the king, thereby endangering his eldest son's position with any younger children outranking him. And how would the same relatives consider that offspring, especially with a Trihawk bride in tow? The Denman Trihawk had always been on the opposite side of the political divides in Hegemony, and very concrete proof of Milla's father's willingness to cooperate with the new order of things was standing not twenty feet away.

When the discussion had turned to military talk, Milla had followed his own footprints to the start of the trail down to the flitter. Her back was half turned. If there had been a door, she would have closed it between them.

Roland had noticed him watching her. "Sire, if I may speak..."

"Rit."

Roland nodded. "Rit, then. In private, please." Without a word, Estan moved away. "A permanent record of the marriage was made, the same as a Charter House Recorder would do... Lord Hanes saw to it. Your Secretary made up the document."

"He still holds his Charter House rank. And the record was in the stack of papers I signed."

"So your man assured me, but events were rushed towards the end. Milla will be relieved."

"And you? Your father would have made you king. Is this particular child and wife worth what you gave up?"

Roland laughed at that. "Speaking of my father, he's much better at provoking me. Are you testing my temper?"

He shrugged. "Like you said, events were rushed there at the end."

"My father said that the best battles are ones you never have to fight, but win regardless. He said you were a military genius."

"Did he just?" Rit shook his head at any answer. "I'm going to have a look around and stretch my legs."

Opposite where Milla still waited, the ground rose sharply in a tumble of massive rocks and rotted logs and fell away again to one side. A landslide, and from the size of the trees, it had happened maybe a hundred years ago. Grown between and around the rocks, exposed roots provided easy handholds against the slippery moss, but he wondered how the dog had managed. From the top, he caught glimpse of a flash of light between the trees. He waited a moment but it wasn't repeated. Alicia? Or just Pasi and the dog? He started that way.

Roland's voice came from behind him. He was being followed. "Do you know what my father's main failing is?"

He stopped. Roland passed him as though he had someplace to go.

His turn to call from behind. "Why don't you tell me?"

The boy climbed to the top of a man-sized boulder before turning back. His movements were expansive until caught by strained muscles. "He's never understood that other people aren't an extension of himself."

"I've heard that's a common failing."

"Oh, he takes it to new extremes, especially with his sons." Another boulder as carelessly climbed, then two more.

The boy's restlessness was probably nothing more significant than having energy to burn after being cooped up inside the flitter all those hours. In that, Rit envied him his youth. Considerably more carefully, he hoisted himself up the first rock then took off the jacket that was restricting his arm movements and tossed that up before starting the next climb. Reaching the level Roland was on, he found himself on a small uneven plateau of rock perhaps five feet across. From there, he could see out across the steepest section of the old rock fall. Above them, the vertical lines of the trunks narrowed all the way to the tips. Sparkles of sky showed through the branches, the points of light too small for colour or to cast shade. He couldn't see the level area where presumably Milla and Estan waited. Or any place that Alicia and the others might be.

"Aren't you worried about being up here alone with me?"

Rit glanced over his shoulder then returned to looking at the sparkles of light set in the black-green of the hemlock. An unlucky fall could kill him, but so could a slip in the bath. From here, he'd land against a tree or between two boulders before falling far. "Were you thinking of pushing me? Or do you have something more lethal at hand? Or are you testing my temper?"

"I could join up with my father when he gets here."

"Wilntinn says that he'll stay in Wilni."

"Lord Strom told me different. Besides, my father will want a base in Surri. He always establishes a fallback position and Hanes was right, Surri is about all you've left him. He'll come in from Anquin. You said there wouldn't be Xintan troops coming in that direction... he knows that doesn't he?"

"I'd think his intelligence reports were as good as what I got."

"And he's probably spreading the story that your Xintan Bloodguard were sent to kidnap both him and me, but he managed to escape only to try to win my freedom."

"Well, you know him best."

"I wouldn't do it."

In the words, he heard a vulnerability he hadn't seen in the Council Chambers. "Wouldn't what, kill me?" Rit turned to face him and, as though he had moved too quickly, his head began to spin. With a hand out to test the distance, he found the back of the next boulder and sat. When he closed his eyes to rub them, the sparkles of light were behind his lids as well. He felt like he might throw up.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting in brilliant light. Roland's light brown hair sparked gold and red against a strange sky. Teal blue with narrow bands of cloud, opal against the darker colour. No trees, no mountainside, no rocks. No sun either, just the steady light, and despite the clouds, shadowless. He blinked and was in the green twilight of the forest, the only brightness was the wind tossed points above him like stars in a night of trees. "You might not have chosen the winning side here."

"I didn't mean it that way." Roland looked around as though to be sure they were alone. "The Queen was asking whether Istarom could be easily defended. From the context, I understood that she didn't mean from my father."

Rit rubbed his forehead. How far back was he going to have to go? "Do you know why I had to leave Wilni?"

"The Queen explained that the war wasn't a concern for either side, other than for your immediate safety." A wry smile. "She said that she refused to sit on a mountain side in a tent while waiting to deal with the Empire people."

"Istarom?"

"You'd be welcome."

"Even with the trouble I'd bring?"

Roland's dark eyes dropped a moment, then: "For making my case as the new Lord Aspeir, trouble isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"It could get highly dangerous. Besides the Xintan-Heg war."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing either." Roland laughed. "Besides, you don't know the half. You haven't met my grandmother."

By touch - never taking his eyes off the boy - Rit pulled the heavy gold signet ring from his finger and held it out. "This might help. Give it to your grandson."

Roland took it and held it in his palm. Red gold, quite possibly from his family's mines. He looked up. "Your grandson too."

And he had said that the Strom think in generations? "I suppose so."

"Roland?" Alicia's voice echoed off the mountain in back of them. From a whisper to him in the flutter to shouting for Roland where the sound could bounce from mountain to mountain along the river valley.

"You'd better go see what she wants. Tell her I'll be there in a few minutes."

"I'll help you down. You don't look too steady on your feet."

"That's why I'm sitting. Now, go." Roland hesitated then started down with the same lack of care he'd shown climbing up.

The forest closed in again. Rit leaned his head back against the rock and took slow deliberate breaths. With Roland gone, a lassitude had crept over him, stealing the last of his energy. A reaction to the drug? He'd certainly gotten more than enough sleep. He rubbed his eyes again and opened them, expecting some other change to his world, but only saw the forest, the high branches swaying in the wind. In constant motion: dark and light, the green deepened to black, the light, opal. As his vision blurred from staring, the sparkles became lines and the lines twisted to become spirals. Then flipped, light to dark. For a gut-wrenching moment, he saw a face looking down at him, a Xintan priestess, the tattoos as restless as the wind above the trees, the lines moving like a striking snake, like water.

Bluestone blood. How much of him was his mother? What had she felt in giving him up? Had she lived to know the fulfillment of the prophecies? *The last of that blood is in Vancallin waiting to be born.* Words that were both the truth and a lie. As good as dead? A condemned Blueknife rebel? Or alive in the way the world-pattern was alive?

Getting to his feet wasn't the effort he thought it might be. Apparently the spell had passed. Other than he felt he could drink the stream dry, he felt better than he had in days. From the base of the rock fall, he heard Alicia talking, her high light voice carrying. Planning the rest of the future. *Moving* him in the desired direction. Providing the answers he didn't have.

He found that he didn't want to find her after all. Which left up.

The mood stayed through most of the climb, worn down but not vanquished by the scramble that scraped his fingers raw. He felt drawn upwards, he felt like fire-warmed air.

Between rock crevasses lined by moss, he stepped through standing water, tiny transient ponds, their history recorded in algae, in black rings and green. Logs a hundred years rotted disintegrated under his feet. Black beetles fled the

light. He unearthed grubs in their thousands arranged along the grain of wood that had the resistance of damp paper. And an abandoned mouse nest, an exploding puff of feathery-dry fur and needles and moss in the general wet.

Around the rotted logs grew the roots of the newer trees like giant fingers, the trunks like arms, and he used the roots to pull himself up. Small stones had been caught in the bark and the branches of the trees and carried skyward. And always under his hands and feet: ferns and grasses, fragile in the late mountain springtime. Hemlock needles were in drifts against the boulders and in any fractures, yellow and gold and brown. And the air: it held secrets of scent. Animals he couldn't see. Rabbits. Squirrels. Bear. And birds, silent in the face of his invasion. He felt he'd never breathed until now.

The trees stopped abruptly at a cliff edge, the way clear to the river valley and the tall mountain opposite. The slope he was on curved outwards and he could just see the new washout Roland had mentioned.

And he could see the sky and feel how his body answered the opal lines and spirals painted across the blue. The world-pattern. Visible as it hadn't been since before Ulanda had danced the Opening.

He caught the scent of her first. Alien.

Kori's head dipped. "My lord."

His. "Does it bother you being owned? Like you were one of Pasi's dogs?"

Moving slowly, Kori crept to within five feet of where he sat. Shaped by her hands was a word he would have recognized yesterday but not today. She didn't make eye contact, but kept her head turned to one side and both her hands flat on the ground where he could see them. "Do his dogs mind being owned?" she answered in a soft voice. Xintan to his Hegemony.

"You're not a dog."

"Lord, I am also not human. What I am, what I feel, is natural to me."

His leg muscles protested his getting up. Sun warmed air washed in from the river valley, but the ground was damp and his trousers and shirt were still wet from his climb.

Kori didn't move when he squatted in front of her. "No, you don't smell human." As he might a dog, he stoked the crest of slightly coarser hair that ran the length of her skull and under her tunic at the back. Hot to the touch and resistant. Pink tinted. When he kept his palm still, the hairs moved against his skin like the grubs in the log had. "And you don't feel human."

You can touch, if you're curious. Horses... do you breed your own stock, or only catch wild ones.

And which was he? How did he feel about being owned?

He pushed her to the ground and knelt with one knee against her waist, pinning her. Still she didn't resist. Or meet his eyes. Silver hair spread in an aura

about her face and took gold from the carpet of needles. Her skin was a smooth white; there was no texture under his fingers. And no colour where before he had been able to see the stripes and the subtle shadings.

He bent closer to whisper in her ear. "But I am human."

And with his tongue, he pushed between her lips, probing. And met teeth. Taking her face in one hand, he pressed thumb and forefinger into the skin of her cheeks, forcing her to open her mouth, and then, his fingers pinching skin between her back teeth, to keep it open.

Without letting go, he kissed her again, longer, exploring, tasting, pushing, stroking her tongue with his and sucking on it. She groaned deep in her throat and a hand that smelled of roses and hemlock touched his face then fell back. Both her legs drew up, knees bent, and with the weight of him still on her, she tried to turn towards him.

Sometimes I think I killed her.

Panntin's words. Gannit's death. *His people.*

The anger drained first. He stumbled away, and stopped, a hand on a tree trunk for support. And looked back. Kori knelt where he'd left her.

"Lord, if I've offended you... " She spoke with her eyes to the ground. "... it was only through ignorance. If you could tell me what you want me to do."

"I shouldn't have done that."

She looked up for a brief moment then dropped her eyes again. "Nothing you do could be wrong."

Who do you burn the sticks to? Cassa. He had taken for granted the instant obedience of both Wiccin and Kori... and as long as what he asked was what he could normally ask anyone who worked for him, then it hadn't mattered what prompted the obedience. And when he had *been* Zimmer? *Who do you belong to?* He'd used those words and meant them and understood the answer as Kori had. "It would still be wrong."

"Then I have offended you."

He walked over, his knees almost buckling at each step, offered her his hand, and quite unnecessarily, helped her up. "No, you haven't offended me." He dropped her hand and backed up a couple of feet, needing the distance. "You can serve me best by using your skills as a Master of Security. I'm going to use Istarom as a base of operations. I have no more intention of sitting on a mountain side than Alicia does." And from Istarom to find Ulanda? Or to wait, and expect that she'd find him? Or nothing he thought might happen would.

A glance at the sky that was as brief and tentative as Kori's had been toward him. The lines were there, he hadn't needed to see to know that, but had needed to look all the same. "There's a Piltsimic loom-master with the Empire ships..." He explained what he knew, what he had seen in the Council Chamber and not told

Wilntinn. And about the world-pattern lines reappearing. And about how their effect on him had changed.

And finished with his hands spread, meaning his world, himself: "Do you have any idea about what is happening?"

As he spoke, Kori had looked to the sky, her eyes a paler shade of that blue, and now with a narrow black line circling the iris. "They seek to trap then disempower you. To kill you."

"Through the world-pattern? I feel..." More connected than he ever had? Or could he pass his recent actions off on a change in what he felt? "Would it be that hard to kill me otherwise?"

"Yes."

Another of her one-word answers. "Don't assume I know anything. Explain it, please. Why would it be so hard to kill me?"

Her look to him showed none of the submission from moments earlier. "In the seemingly simple act of breaking a few woven reeds, Cassa changed the balance... the relationship, between the greater universe and the Unity in such a way that the Unity would have been destroyed. This loom-master can't predict what other seemingly simple act might start it happening again."

"But I don't know..."

"You don't have to know and that only increases the danger."

"And the world-patterns themselves, how can they be changed?"

"If you think of the world-pattern as a kind of Net system..." She squatted, then picking up a short length of branch, sketched radiating lines in the dirt. And from each of the ends, more lines. "The Net is a finite dynamic process... to make it simple, think of all the information stored in a single crystal, or offered up from someone's mind, from that part they can link with the Net, and given, through a series of links and nodes, to another's mind to produce images, sounds... anything the mind is capable of processing. Then think that what information is given in either direction can only ever be a tiny portion of what might be given... and that portion depends on the all the other things. I would see something different in the same set of information than you would. A Spann-made Net system would offer a different subset of information than one used by the Piltsimic."

"So, the basic structure of the world-pattern is being changed? Like you did to the Temple crystals?"

"I think..." She paused, her eyes on the lines in the dirt that she hadn't used to explain any part of what she had just said. "No, not the basic structure. A Net system can be described in the same way a..." She looked up. "... in the same way a person can be. A world-pattern is different again. The only way to describe it or to create it is as a dynamic resolution."

"Which means what?"

"Two or more describable states that interact over time to produce another, many times more complex state."

"Within the limits each of the describable states imposes on each other?"

"Yes, imposes, not imposed. The describable states are always in the process of producing the other. You understand."

Not likely. "And one of the states is something a loom-master can control? Is controlling."

"It's what Anga created millions of years before, except that the results weren't all that he wanted. During the Opening, he attempted to modify his work, and yes, in that small way, it would be a cascade like what I am doing with the crystals. Not all of the changes happened..."

"Ulanda stopped them."

"Cassa." Her fingers made a complex shape. "Cassa stopped the loom-master. He would have... he would have made your bloodline tame."

A question of ownership. "And from her actions so far, this new loom-master still would?"

"Yes."

"The ability or the people?"

"Your bloodline, and I have to think, those lines on other worlds who are capable of directly accessing overpattern. She has to destroy the bloodlines, or leave Empire open to the same danger Cassa posed. It's possible the bloodlines, the people themselves, won't be compatible with the new world-pattern."

"And I'll die too?" he had to ask even though she had already answered that question.

"I won't let that happen."

Disempower. Emasculate. Castrate. He as good as felt the knife at his groin. And finally, very late, the last of his arousal died like the anger had. He didn't want the power, but couldn't think to yield it even if it had been possible. He wondered what Ulanda thought she was facing... and if given a choice, what her decision would be. Or, if it was something that could be decided. If they *were* their answer.

"The answer Niv gave... to keep Empire intact..." His eyes on the opal of his world-pattern, he began to laugh, the sound bouncing off the mountain opposite, the mountain at his back, careless that it might be heard. "... his answer, the question... it's not one thing but a dynamic resolution..."

"Lord?"

"It's still being asked and still being answered."

Kori nodded slowly. "The Overpriest Sarkalt from the same reality as Quin'tat... as a balance to the loom-master Anga, he gave the Ladybug what he knew of what was happening. I did much of the analysis, Allwyk the rest. The Overpriest said that only in the diamond were there real choices. Only the

diamond is connected to Empire, but still outside Empire's creation. If any questions are asked and answered, it's in the diamond."

The portal and a new reality. And he was being told only as much as was needed to point him in the direction others wanted. Olloss, Wilntinn. His father. Alicia. And now Kori. Choices. The diamond and the Wu'loss cass of the Zimmer. Was his death if he remained on his world so inevitable, or was it more the death of the Zimmer hope that Kori wanted to avert? *Gennady had abandoned his faith.* Had the Zimmer Lord only settled for the known - for Empire - not freedom as Kori understood the word? An understanding that didn't include her person?

"The loom-master would know how the diamond can be used," he said. "I wouldn't be allowed to use the portal."

"Leaving Wilni Capital has given you the time to shape that future. Empire won't have a choice but to let you go."

"And my choice?"

Her head ducked again. "Lord?"

He found Willi next to the flitter, standing on the dry edge of the steam, poking the cut-away bank with the tip of her knife, twisting the blade in the soil. Loose dirt littered her pants and high riding boots, her heels sunk into the soft ground. "Just mud?"

For a moment he thought she hadn't heard him over the sound of the waterfall. Then: "Yeah. Mud." She didn't look up.

Nothing again for a couple of minutes but the sound of the knife and the water. "What happened at the Holding to make you leave?"

"You know what happened."

"You weren't in any danger. Why did you trick Kori into letting you on the flitter." He already knew how.

"I didn't want to stay with *them*."

"Who?"

"You know who."

"You've been at the Holding for..." He realized he didn't know if she'd stayed with Eunni's sister and her family in Endica, or actually at the Holding. He'd left her with the choice. And from her Xintan clothes, had assumed she'd stayed at the Holding. "A while," he added lamely. "What changed?"

"Nothing changed. Nobody gave a damn at the start, nobody gives a damn now. Hell, Tam said he didn't even remember what he looked like. Him and Rossa..."

Tennin. "Willi, I give a damn and so do you. It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. And Tam will care when he's older."

Narrowed eyes glared up him for the first time. The same silver as Tennin's. "What did you do about him getting murdered? You just ran off."

And left Eunni to pick up the pieces as far as Tam and Willi were concerned. "I left, and you stayed at the Holding and took advantage of every opportunity you could find. Or make. Don't bother putting on an act now." Angrily wiped tears showed that it wasn't entirely an act. Rit put a hand on her shoulder. And wanted to do more, to hug her like the child she seemed just then to be, but she twisted away, stopping a few feet from him.

"Are you going to kiss me too? Like you did Kori?"

Damn her spying. Or the flitter's Net wasn't as locked as it still felt to him. Kori might have pulled a link with her, if only to keep a check on the cascade. And he'd only asked her to keep Willi from taking the flitter, not from accessing the Net. "That line won't work either. And if you're thinking about blackmailing me, think again. Your credibility with Alicia is about nil."

"I hate you. I wish you were dead."

"That could happen very easily. As far as the Empire is concerned, the whole idea is for me to end up dead."

"Cept you'll probably get the rest of us killed too."

He shook his head. "You're not going to die any time soon."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The night Tennin was killed, I saw you in a vision, you and Tennin by the glacial lake. You were picking at the clay on the shore with your knife, like you were just now... and he was watching you." His voice lowered with the memory. "And I saw you and Nisstin burying him near the same spot and I think it was later this year. I wasn't there. I would have been there..." He was discovering the future as he spoke. Nothing had changed, only how he saw it. Empire ships about the mountain. Nisstin's craft landing, the Warrior leading Heni... a man he recognized. Caull.

The last of that blood is...

Lies and more lies, and from a Strom he apparently couldn't read as well as he had thought he could. Sorsi and Caull. As far as he knew they were both still prisoners in Vancallin, the priestess condemned to death by the Xintan court. How closely related was he to them? The tumble of *knowing* had stopped. The cabin in winter, long straight lines in the snow from the warding. The crew of the pod walking through the birch grove, white on white. Alicia's remoteness. And hours ride away, Tennin and Willi and the young Warrior. He didn't know what had happened to him, couldn't remember his name or what he had ordered. He had sent the other two to Vancallin to keep Alicia from having further contact with them. He must not have thought of the boy ... not thought him important.

He took a step and stopped when Willi backed up, one hand on the side of the flitter for balance, water dripping from her fingers. Water pooled around her feet.

The knife was still in her hand, tip up, pointed towards him. "You think you're so smart. She doesn't care about you. She's just using you."

His mind felt left behind in the images. Alicia and... the boy's name? What had it been? "Who now?"

"Kori led the Empire ships to Wilni so that Ulanda could get away from the Holding. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I did and I know they would have come to Wilni anyway. And I understand what Kori feels a damn sight better than you do."

She spat into the water. "Strom stuff. Well, screw you."

His blood. And a future vision that left two alternatives: his death or his departure through the portal. "Yes, Strom stuff."

"Sire, am I interrupting something?"

Rit turned to see. Milla, her skirts gathered in one hand to keep them out of the dirt, and showing slippers, not boots. She had changed from what she had been wearing earlier, riding clothes like Alicia had on when she'd woken him. And now: a pale pink lace shawl over a dress of deep rose silk. Her cheeks were spots of the same colour in a white face.

"Call me Rit. And no, you're not interrupting anything."

She licked pale lips. "We're gathering things up... if we're to be in Istarom before dark, we will have to leave soon. Willi, Alicia asked me to fetch you to help."

He let his breath out in relief. "I think that would be a good idea."

Willi slapped the side of the flitter and a narrow section of hull tiles slipped over to make an opening. She hopped up, then one hand gripping the too fragile sides, leaned out and yelled: "Well, screw her too." The hull closed behind her as she ducked back in.

"Is there really anything to help with?" Rit asked, breaking the awkward silence.

A moment, then Milla gave her head a little shake.

Rit stepped up out of the streambed. "Too bad, I could use something useful to do." He gestured to her already soiled slippers. "Do you need a hand?"

A genuine smile and she bobbed a curtsy. "There doesn't appear to be a dry path anywhere."

He chuckled and offered his arm. "An oversight surely."

She put her arm through his and they began walking up the path. "Sire, I wouldn't be so bold as to think it a oversight."

He laughed out loud. "And I didn't think I cared for court manners."

Her return laugh sounded forced. In the deep shade, her pale skin was paler again, and with blue shadows to her lips. Suddenly, she pulled away from him and darted between two trees and behind a third. There was the sound of retching.

He was about to follow, when Alicia took his hand, then his arm as Milla had. He hadn't noticed her arrive. "Morning sickness," she whispered on tiptoe into his ear. "Don't embarrass her by mentioning it."

"You knew she was pregnant."

"Of course I knew. My aunt was pregnant almost every year."

"And your uncle was polite enough not to notice?"

The pain was still there but yesterday and now today was the first times she had voluntarily mentioned her family. "He noticed what he was supposed to notice. He was very good at that."

"And I'm not?"

"You have no idea," she said in a level tone.

"Maybe I'll start noticing now."

"You wouldn't know where to begin." As she spoke, she rolled her eyes. "Rit, just tell her how beautiful she looks. How the colour of her dress suits her..."

"It does."

She poked him in the ribs and giggled. "Don't you dare."

"So, I tell her she looks beautiful." With the flat of his hand, he ruffled her hair. "That part is easy, I've always been partial to dark brown curls and a fair complexion."

Alicia chuckled again as she ducked away. "And you'll tell her this where Roland can hear."

"To make him jealous? Would it be safe to go climbing on rocks with him afterward?"

"Oh, I think you'd be safe as long as an alliance with you is to his advantage." She looked up to meet his eyes. "Of course, he's been known to make promises he didn't know if he could keep."

"And take extreme measures to keep them when he could."

"You're not the only one who can take extreme measures."

Which ones was she referring to? He decided not to ask. "Roland knows this will mean his fathers' death, or, at the least, his permanent exile. And focusing the loom-master on Istarom..."

"And you're not the only one who can make hard choices."

A short steep section where their footsteps had already broken through the layer of humus to the gravelly soil underneath, and they were at the small clearing above the stream. At the far end, Roland and Pasi were folding a tarp between them like a bed sheet. The dog padded over and licked his hand, then sat, her short tail thumping against the ground, her head against his thigh. He kept a hand on her shoulder.

This time he did ask. "Which choices do you mean?"

Alicia looked away, her attention on something else. The dog froze and a moment later, Rit heard the whine of an aircraft, the direction uncertain as the

sound echoed off the mountains. Then, as though it had turned a corner, the sound was much louder, a pod, not a flitter. Moving towards the southeast, flying close to Mount Nesrin, possibly following the river valley and the direction they would have to take. The noise quickly faded to a distant insect buzz and vanished, and only then did he realize the dog was growling.

"Where's Kori?" he asked Alicia. She was still watching in the direction the pod had gone... or could still hear it.

She turned to face him. "Last I heard, she was still on the high ridge where you left her."

"Heard from who?"

Her look was steady. "Willi." She took his hand then stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

What he had felt after Alicia's rescue was something he had never been able to put a name to. It had been like waking from a vivid dream of holding someone you love, only to find your arms empty. And knew it hadn't been love between them. One night as man and wife, then months where only the focus of looking for her had made her real to him. He felt the same from her now. Did her loss include love?

"Was it so hard a choice?" he asked softly, feeling just then that he was vanishing.

A shadow crossed her face, but she smiled and pulled him by the hand, backing up as she did. "Come and be the Strom king for a while longer and tell us all what we're supposed to do next."

"I thought it was supposed to be Istarom."

"I know that's what you told Roland, but are you sure that's where we should go?"

"As sure as you were when you told him."

She looked sheepish. "It was only a suggestion."

The Net was still blocked, the hum of the flitter mixed with what else he could barely sense was happening. Alicia had that abstract look on her face that said she was busy and Rit tried not to disturb her as he got up. Using the local energy pathways on several of the hull tiles, he was able to clear them. Trees. They were skimming the canopy, mountains all around. He didn't have a frame of reference to say which peak was which. "He turned to Roland. Do you recognize anything?"

The boy joined him then pointed to a spire of black granite against the white-blue sky. "That's Baltinal. From Nes, you can only see the west face of the peak. It looks like a man's face on profile."

"Are we past Nes? I didn't see a city."

"Calling it a city is being generous. Besides, from where we are now, I think we were too far north."

From what he was seeing, not what his body told him, the flitter suddenly pointed nose up, then veered sharply, and dipped to follow a series of waterfalls so closely that he could see droplets of the spray on the outer side of the tile. Vision had him bumping down each dip.

"The Six Maidens," Roland said. "Milla...? He held his hand out for his wife. They were past the waterfalls before the girl joined them. Steep banks rose on either side, he had glimpses of glassy water, green with depth, then rapids in a froth of white. House size boulders were flashes of dark granite. "This is the Husquilstrom, we're less than half a days ride from Istarom. We're going east now; we'll meet the Ist tributary in a moment. The road crosses there."

Milla looked green and said in a small voice: "How long until we arrive?"

Roland looked to him just as they turned again. The simple controls set in the tiles allowed him to shift to the facing view. A dirt road like a ribbon, a shallow river to one side. On the banks of what was little more than a stream were willow trees, the branches faded yellow, the new leaves pale green in the light of early evening. The land changed rapidly as they climbed. From slow stream to mountain creek cutting through rock, then more level ground with alder and poplar and birch. Hemlock and pine on the slopes. Then, suddenly, they were over a bowl shaped lake, the road following the shore. Seconds only and they were past the lake, following road and stream again. Other than the road and the unnatural roundness of the lake, there was no sign that man had ever touched this land.

Then a brief twilight between vertical sheets of stone, the road vanished to follow some other course, the water a clear bottomless green far below, and suddenly, before them, was a wall.

The flitter stopped in an instant.

Milla gasped. "We're here," Roland said.

The wall was concrete, not stone. Iron bled through the surface, rust in streaks like blood. Even inside the flitter, he had the taste of the metal in his mouth.

"Can you see where to set us down?" he asked Kori.

Placement bloomed and he had a sense of scale that left him momentarily as disorientated as Milla. The wall stretched across the pass, arms reaching for the mountains on either side. It was an ancient dam. At the base was a small catchment lake, fed by arcing sprouts of water from cracks low in the wall. On the right side of the lake, at the top of a steep cliff, was the manor Roland had promised. Built into the dam, it was made of the same concrete, but broken, the pieces placed like they were worked stone.

"We're being shot at," Kori said through the Net.

Placement said from where: above and below, and that Kori was blocking their seeing the hits. Brief scans placed the snipers in dry cracks in the wall. Further in and the scan died against the iron in the concrete. Anything stronger might be

noticed by the searching pod. That he had access to the Net at all showed Kori's distress.

"Don't respond, just keep the warding up after we've landed. Roland, you'll get out first. Your grandmother, you said..."

"She'll be here." The young man looked grim.

"Say what you have to, but secure our safekeeping. And find out who they have here as refugees. Part of our agreement with your father was that he wouldn't shelter Royal Guard or non-local Heg troops."

"My father agreed to what suited him."

He couldn't argue it. He could also see why Aspier would think to use this place as a base. It wouldn't stand against Empire weapons - hadn't stood against human weapons during the Millennial war - the bomb that had formed the round lake likely had also cracked the dam. However, an attack against Istarom that had any chance of success would be an unmistakable step in a direction that Aspier could reasonably gamble neither the Empire people or the Xintan would take.

They landed in a small plaza at the foot of a flight of shallow stairs leading to metal pocket doors like those in the palace in Wilni Capital. Behind them was the sheer drop to the catchment lake. Above, the top third of the dam face blazed red and gold into the darkening sky, competition to the pattern lines. The rifle fire had stopped.

A Heg rifle strapped to his back, Roland stepped out of the flitter and walked to the base of the stairs, then stood, hands on his hips, and shouted over the muted roar of the water: "This isn't much of welcome."

Rit found himself holding his breath. Milla was twisting a corner of her shawl between her hands and Alicia put an arm around her waist and hugged her. A couple of minutes passed, then with a sound like metal nails being pulled from wood, the door slid open a crack. A tiny form - no, again it was a trick of the scale. The central figure was a white haired woman as tall as the two large men who flanked her. Leaning heavily on a cane, she stopped at the top of the stairs. "And does a son of the manor wait for an invitation into his own home?"

Still moving slowly, Roland walked up the few steps and stood before his grandmother. He was half a head shorter.

"I've brought guests." He spoke in a loud, clear tone as though his grandmother might be hard of hearing.

She had the Aspier eyes, black and piercing. "So I thought you might have."

"And a wife."

A very slight hesitation. "Have you now?"

"She's Denman Trihawk."

"Interesting."

"And a lady-in-waiting to the Queen."

"Well, a girl has to do something with her time."

"And she's pregnant. Two and a half, maybe three months along."

No hesitation at all for that news, not even a raised eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Your great-great grandson will be the next Heg king."

That gave her pause, then with a smile playing over withered lips: "The present king must be counting on living a long while. I heard differently."

"You haven't heard the latest, although that's something I'm sure my father will remedy when he gets here." As he spoke, Roland's voice began to take on the same accent his grandmother had. Aklif, Rit realized.

"And is he coming here in one of those cursed machines?"

"No, by horse, so my news will have outpaced his."

"News?"

"There is no king in Wilni Capital. The War Council rules Hegemony as a Regent Council."

"The Strom is dead, then?"

"No, he's one of the guests I mentioned."

A longer moment. The smile had died, but what took its place, Rit couldn't have said. "So you did mention guests."

"As Lord Aspier and a member of the Regent Council, extending my hospitality to him and his household was the least I could do."

"And your father's on his way here, is he?" She touched a finger to his face, to the bruises on his cheekbone and the cut over his eyebrow. "Was that a parting gift from him to the new Lord Aspier?"

"No, it's just that I didn't want to appear too eager for the Occupation troops to pick me up."

She tisked. "Your father must be walking not to be here already with that news. And this wife?"

Roland gave a small shrug. "Milla."

"A pretty name, I'll not deny."

"She said the Queen would help us..."

"Why not, you're practically cousins."

"And that the Queen was a kind and generous lady and..."

"A slip of a girl. A mouse."

"Or so you've heard?"

A match to the smile earlier. "So..." She tapped the end of the cane sharply on the concrete. "... do you have more nonsense to tell me, or is it you want to keep an old woman standing in a draft?"

"My position on the Council Reagent has the full support of the other members..."

"I should think so if they hold the strings you dangle from."

"Whether I've strings attached is something you'll have to find that out for yourself."

"Don't you think a moment I won't." Another sharp rap of the cane. "Do I get to meet these guests of yours?"

"It would be small courtesy on my part to escort them in under guard."

A look of annoyance flashed over her face. Then the same smile. "When the Lord of Aspier is in-house, who is an old woman to tell the guard what to do."

For the first time, Roland looked to one of the men-at-arms accompanying his grandmother. "Good to see you Rault."

"And you young lord." The tone was guarded.

"Lord Aspier."

A slow nod. "Lord."

"Have the men stand down. I want no weapons showing."

He looked like he was thinking about it, then finally: "Word's come that there's fighting in Nes."

"This isn't Nes. I want that order out now."

And, as the man turned to go, Roland took his arm. "Oh, and Rault, I want the hot-heads off guard duty. And any outsiders we've taken in service, get them billeted to the town. You've got ten minutes."

Rault looked to Roland's grandmother, but she didn't give a message back by any sign that Rit could see or feel. "Aye lord," he said in his slow way.

Roland let him go and turned to his grandmother. "Are there any guests I should know about?"

"Would you turn them out as well?"

"No, I take I've inherited them along with the walls. I wouldn't want it said that any Aspier was less than hospitable." A glance back to the flitter and his voice lowered to the point that Rit only heard the words using Net amplification. "Gran, there can't be an assassination attempt. I doubt even a bullet could kill him and what happened next..."

"I've never heard that the Strom can't bleed."

Uncertainty rose up from the challenge, an escalation Rit didn't want. Breaking through Kori's warding locks on the flitter tiles, he opened the side and stepped out. And immediately cut off the finger of warding that sought to envelope him. He couldn't see the rifles trained on him - and looking around would be folly - but knew they were there, and that the warding would be visible... and misinterpreted as being some kind of Strom magic. He trusted Kori could respond quick enough to stop his getting killed.

He bowed. "If it's any mercy, my stay won't be a long one."

"You don't look like your father."

"That's because he wasn't my father."

Roland broke in with: "Sire, this is my grandmother, Lady Islil, Gran..."

She interrupted her grandson with a wave of her hand. Her eyes never left Rit, taking in the Xintan style hair braid with the beads attached to the end, the tailored brocade jacket in blue and brown, the muddy boots, and again and again, his face. "So... you were king by a lie. Is that why you've been turned out?"

"No, I was king because it kept me busy and out of the way of the people doing the real work. And if I have been turned out, it's more like a pea that's been shelled."

"Whoever's child you are, you've inherited the Strom habit of talking in riddles."

He shook his head. "The plain truth."

"And what this young pup has told me?"

"The same. He dripped blood all over my Council Chamber and made demands of his elders."

"This wife of his, for one."

"For one." Through the Net to Alicia: "Let's get the introductions over with."

Alicia hadn't changed from her riding dress and Milla eclipsed her, a deliberate move on Alicia's part, Rit thought. The girl's court dress glowed in the deep shadow, taking the rose light of the sunset reddened clouds into the silk. Dark curls framed her pale, but composed face; she seemed ethereal as she floated at Alicia's side to join them.

Roland only had eyes for his wife.... *we were noble born and love was possible.* Had he ever loved that desperately? Roland would have thrown the country back into war if that had been the only way to win her. Or even the most certain way, and damn the lives destroyed in the process.

Estan and Pasi were next, the dog ordered to sit outside the flitter as the two continued on to flank him and Alicia. Just when Rit thought he'd have to go and fetch Willi, she came out and walked a little ways off and stood watching, a scowl on her face.

"My ward, Willinna."

A pointed look to Alicia then back to him. "The plain truth?"

Which rumor had surfaced here? That Willi was his daughter, or the one she had fostered herself, that she was his mistress. Or both. "If you ever intend to accuse Willi to her face of having Strom blood, I suggest you tie and gag her first."

He won the small smile from her. "Well, children can be a trial."

"So I'm finding. The last is my pilot, Kori... and for her sake, I especially appreciate having the hotheads off guard duty." Through the mounting non-verbal resistance Kori was gathering in the Net, he gave a direct order for her to come out.

She wore a cloak with a hood, but face to face there was no mistaking her for human. Lady Isliil reacted less to the sight of the alien than she had to him. "So."

The torch nearest her sputtered and threatened to go out. A trickle of water had found the crack in the rock the end of the torch had been pushed into. Ulanda moved their sole glow globe closer to where she sat, then to her other side when Niv stirred in his sleep.

With the edge of his robe, Garm brushed the fragments of moss from the first mushroom, dropped it into the bowl, and picked up the next. The caps had survived unscathed, the more delicate gills broken in places, but remarkably intact under the circumstances. He had picked them on their way here.

Bolda looked up from scrubbing the cooking pot with sand. "Are you sure about those?"

"Eunni?" Garm asked, and threw one palm-sized mushroom to where the other woman sat near her.

He missed. Moving like her knees had locked, Eunni got to her feet and retrieved it. "When we were with Sorsi, we practically lived on these for a week." She carried it to Bolda, not Garm. "They don't taste like much, but they won't kill you."

"They taste like freshly baked bread," Garm protested.

Eunni sat down closer to her, glanced at Niv, and whispered: "They taste like raw paste."

They hadn't gone far into the mine. This section near the mouth had been shored up with planks, the wood green and dripping still-sticky resin. Last year's repairs. There was a man-made ventilation chimney not much further in, partly blocked by rock, but enough to draw the air down from the mouth. It was damp and cold and she was glad of the heavy jacket over the Xintan tunic and pants.

The scent of the outside drew Ulanda: grass from the meadow, and dry smelling even with the patches of snow that held in the shade and the slightest freshening of new grass in the sunniest patches. The scent of fall carried through the winter under feet of snow. At the back of her throat she tasted the hemlock and pine from the forests that ringed the meadow.

"Will dinner be long?" she asked Bolda as she got to her feet. "I'm going for a walk."

Bolda looked at Eunni. "Do you mind?"

"What? Going with her?"

"Dinner."

Eunni sighed. "No, I suppose not." She got up again.

"Did I ask for company?" Ulanda said to Bolda as soon as they were away from the others. Not that she would have been alone for long. Nisstin was on guard at the mouth of the mine.

He only grunted his opinion. There were no torches past their encampment, and the light was soon consumed by the turns and twists of the sloping tunnel. She had less trouble making her way than Bolda did though. The walls were veined with ore; the rubble sparkled with silver. She needed nothing more, and scarcely noticed the growing light until the last turn to the entrance.

Nisstin wasn't at the entrance after all. There was no sense of danger, and she thought he might be scouting around. "The failures were mine," she said to the red glow in the sky, her breath visible in the cold air.

"Personal failure, maybe. Put the rest where it belongs."

With the sunset was a greater sense of the bands of pattern energy that crossed the sky as they had the day before the Opening. Even with the silver ore moderating her body's response, she felt a drawing now that she hadn't then. "You mean Rigyant, don't you? Will they get what they want? Is it even possible?"

Just inside the entrance, Bolda leaned against a splintered wooden piling, standing in shadow, darker in contrast to the light she craved. "To someone with access to the loom-master Archives that have the creation data? Maybe. Just maybe. It depends on what triggers of Anga's are still usable. Past a certain point, the world-pattern can't be changed, not by them."

"They can kill off anyone who doesn't fit into their plans."

"They will, but that's not a long-term solution. What they're trying here is. And just as deadly."

Was she being changed? Was what she felt direct Altasimic pattern? A changed Altasimic? At the least, this wasn't the never quite there water shimmer of Altasimic pattern that she had felt at the Choosing. "When I said the failures were mine, I meant..." She didn't know what she had meant, the words on her lips and into the air without her meaning anything. "I could live here. It's what I choose at the Opening and thought I hadn't gotten."

"You can feel them?"

He didn't have to say what. "Yes."

"Well, then whoever is running this show might think you're salvageable. They're certainly going to enough trouble about it."

"Are they selecting variants I can respond to?"

He just shrugged. "They still might not take the risk when push comes to shove, or when they have what else they want."

First chance, second chance. And now a third chance? "Panntin shouldn't be any trouble, and I'd be content with being salvageable. I've done what I was supposed to have, and now I've gotten paid."

"It's been your fight from the start."

"Cassa's, not mine. Don't you dare confuse us. I'll take that from Garm, but not from you."

"Seems to me you said you wanted Anga dead."

"I only opposed Anga because of his threat..." She was lying about the last part. Li-Fu. Words about love and loyalty. About possibilities still existing. And remembered wanting to see him dead, needing to see his rotting corpse and him still dead. Dead in all ways, including his memories. Had it been her need, or had she taken from someone else?

Freedom.

Could a Priest lie? How much of a Priest was she... and how different was the Altasimic being shaped by Rigyant? "I'm not what I was then. Not now, not since those lines reappeared."

"Except you're still running away."

Did he mean Ri-altar? He might have seen those records; he might even have been one of the Piltsimic waiting by the flitter when Niv and her had arrived. She had no idea how far back his relationship with Sarkalt went.

But it wasn't Ri-altar and the snow she felt, but Kalin. Suddenly, the scent of the evergreens was overwhelmed by that of marsh grass and mud walls dissolving in warm rain. And the whistle of air over stone became the beat of ci-ci drums as though the earth itself kept time. The ce'lini. A courtyard. Standing ankle deep in water, her blue night robe spotted and stained. And thought just then that the man in the room behind her was Niv, not Patyin.

The meaning of the change - and the location - was too easy. "That was a cheap shot."

"Hell, I just added what you won't see for yourself."

"I don't see it because it's not there to see. Bolda, I'll *be* an Empire Priest. It's all I've ever wanted. And right now, I don't give a damn why it's being offered, it just is." With her face turned up to feel the last of the light on her skin, she lied again: "He's not my fault."

"Did I say anything?"

"Was Kalin meant to..." She still didn't know. Didn't want to know what Kalin signified to Bolda. "Kalin was simply a place to be, or to pass through. It didn't matter."

"You made that clear. What about the Holding? Is Alisim just a place to pass through?"

She turned to look at the Piltsimic again. And saw only the shadow he stood in. "You mean leaving the Holding or leaving the planet? Ask me about the other in a week from now. If I'm still alive. As for the Holding, I didn't hear any other options from you at the time. Or from anyone else for that matter. My leaving must have allowed this to happen, or forced it." Or had Rit gotten away, forcing the Rigyant loom-master to this course of action? "Perhaps salvaging me is less dangerous now than trying to kill me. I've a Priest's instinct to live, how couldn't I have. I *am*. How could I cease to be?"

"The usual way."

The rapid fading of the light and that her eyes had adjusted as rapidly didn't change that she couldn't see him any more. "You're better at it than Anga was."

"What's that?"

"Hiding."

"You could see me if you wanted to."

"You're probably right that I don't want to."

"And everyone else?"

"What? See them? You're making less sense then you always accuse me of making. For one, Garm is someone else's responsibility. If I can, I'll see he gets to the portal, but I won't jeopardize Alisim Temple for it."

"I meant Rit."

From the entrance, the slope of the road fell before her, curving along the flank of the mountain to be lost in the forest. Overtop the mine tailings - still heavy with silver - had grown a rough meadow of grass and other plants as could survive the poor soil. They had landed... or crashed, higher up, past the tree line, the flitter disintegrating around them.

The sunset and the opal of the Altasimic pattern had joined to a single glow behind the dark shapes of trees and granite. She felt like someone had drawn a line on the ground and was daring her to cross it. She tucked her hands inside the jacket pockets, and without leaving the shelter of the mine, turned back to Bolda. "I know you meant Rit. You meant him from the beginning. What would you like me to do? Rit made his choices. We could have..."

"No, you couldn't."

"That's as cheap a shot as throwing Kalin in my face. I didn't mean sleeping with him."

"I know what you meant."

"The only blame I'll accept for what he is, is that I didn't kill him during the Opening. I didn't make him, I didn't provide the..."

"Shape?"

She remembered what she had felt while the portal was being forced. She might be salvageable only because they might need someone to stop Rit, someone with the discipline that Temple training imposed on any access to pattern. "Shape," she repeated back at Bolda.

"Didn't you? And what about his instinct to survive?"

"Sacrifice is more his style."

"Maybe, but I think Cassa has enough survival instinct for the two of them. And he's not salvageable, not by anything Rigyant understands of the Unity. And that goes for any of the Weaver factions that might be in power in this reality."

"Including yours?"

"I'm not a loom-master."

"How do you become a loom-master? How are they selected?" He didn't answer. "Your people wanted someone on the inside, didn't they? What does your oath to Cassa mean to you? You never said if you would be going with Garm into the diamond... or is it that another oath takes precedence over the one to her?"

"That's none of your..."

"It is my business."

"I was going to say 'concern'."

"Concern?" The word hung on a high note of incredulity. "Am I just one of the goats that gets to go home when it's all over? It was my concern from the moment you landed in Kalin and dragged me into this with lies. Should I explore the possibilities hanging on your *concern*?" She spat the word at him.

"Don't push it."

Turning her back on him, she took that step, that physical, that metaphorical step into the open. And knew she still wouldn't be seen if she didn't want to be. And still wasn't sure what she wanted, expecting the Banti Temple pod to appear overhead, expecting the creature that was the portal, was Rit and her both, to swallow her, the possibilities of her, expecting the world-pattern to begin to spiral above her, drawing her into its heart, expecting....

"Explore the possibilities," she whispered into the darkening air. And meant *this* now, not Bolda. And, as quickly again: him. "They weren't sure, were they?" He snorted. "You mentioned making sense."

"Your family. After Cassa left, they weren't sure if they could trust you. You knew what she was going to do and you didn't warn anyone."

"That's not how it happened."

His truth against hers? She was making this up, trusting in her pattern abilities that somehow it would come together and mean something. She suspected he was trusting to something as ancient if not as pervasive. Or more ancient. *Listening to Bolda and Cassa arguing about who was cheating at rings and stones.* Garm's words, but she couldn't remember the context.

Raising her arms to the sky, she twirled around, and for that moment, felt which possibility it would be: she was the world-pattern around her, she was the shape defined by the lines in the sky. This was what she had been promised.

The dance that was the beat of her heart, the sound of the ocean at night...

But it was different. And it tried to shed her like water. She could force herself to match the shape, but who would she be then? What would be left behind?

And what part of her would die? And who else would die?

Slowly, she sank to her knees in a huddle. Bolda's truth was that a part of her had never been alive. She remembered what she had felt, standing on the mound, about to dance the Opening. Looking at Li-Fu in the sand, her throat cut. Anga. And love. And after Sarkalt's death, Garm accusing her of only wanting Niv because Sarkalt had him.

Around her, the world, the sky, still twirled. "Then tell me how it happened," she asked Bolda.

"It just did." His voice was soft, not the usual low growl.

She looked up at him. "You were there too." Not just Ri-altar, but that stone room where she had made another choice, the room without doors or windows. His blood splattered, his throat ripped out. And wondered if he hadn't already been caught in the creation of stone and never left it. If this was part of the same thing and not something of Anga's at all.

Sight and sound, the texture of the night, the cold pine scented air, the foundation of the world, rock and metal and living soil, all crashed around her. And she was kneeling at the start of a mining road that led down the mountainside to a small town, in a province, in a country, on a world that meant nothing to her - whose people meant nothing to her - if it wasn't a place of refuge.

"What choice did I make?" she asked, not knowing if she meant now or then. Or in Kalin, or at South Bay Temple. Or Ri-altar.

"You tell me." The words weren't from Bolda. Standing on the road, at the limit of her vision, was another Piltsimic.

"Do you see her?" she asked Bolda.

He pulled on one ear. "Oh, yeah."

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From the plaza, they went through the metal entrance doors to find themselves in a large hall. Massive support timbers supported several sweeping staircases and bordered the central open area. Mounted on the timbers were weapons: swords and javelins, war axes and maces. And tapestries in local patterns, not the Xintan cloth found in lowland Hegemony.

The draft from the door sent the fire in the central pit flaring upwards, illuminating the darker alcoves. Groups of people watched back, men and women. Except for the crackle of the fire and the whistle far overhead from the draw of fire-warmed air, there wasn't a sound. Then, when Rit had the feeling of being suspended in time and place, came the shriek of the doors closing. A crash and the fire died back.

Roland walked to the fire, and stood there, hands on his hips, eyes going from shadowed alcove to alcove as though able to see who was in each.

"Faswin of Aspier has been declared a traitor to the Hegemony. I stand before you as Lord Aspier and as one of five on the War Council in Wilni Capital. For

those of you who served well as my father's council..." Turning, he listed several names, including the relationship within the family. "... the arrangements you and he made for peace will be honored. Other than to protect ourselves and to enforce the terms agreed on, we won't fight the Xintan invaders. And they in turn have only the right of peaceful passage through our lands."

A heavyset man stepped forward. "And your father's treason?" The raspy words were scarcely above a whisper.

"He seeks to overthrow the Strom Dynasty and the Xinta rule."

A woman's voice came from the back: "And what's wrong with that?"

Roland joined in the laughter. Then: "Ulica... is it that you see my father as a king-maker? And what Olum do you think he'd dangle in front of those he seeks alliance with?" He did another half circle of the fire. "I'm a mountain lord and I'll not rest easy under any man's hand, not even that of my father. And I'll marry where I will, and damned to all fathers." He held his hand out and Milla walked to his side. "My wife, Lady Milla."

His grandmother followed to stand at Roland's other side.

"The grandson, not the son," Rit whispered. "Why?" Alicia took his hand, but didn't answer.

Roland looked back to where they waited by the door. "I've guests to see settled, then I'll meet with those who..."

The first man took the few steps remaining and spat into the fire. "Lad, you say you'll not rest easy under any *man's* hand..." Firelight danced over reddened cheeks and thinning hair. Half of one ear was missing, the lobe replaced with ropy scar tissue that continued down the side of his neck. "... there's damn few of the Strom who can lay claim to being men."

Roland moved away from Milla and when she would have followed, motioned her back. "If you insult a guest under my roof, you insult me." His tone was neutral, almost casual.

Silence hung heavy, then the man spat again. "And here I thought I'd done both clearly enough." There was a quickly hushed laugh from the shadows.

"So you have." Said as casually as though he was only commenting on the weather, but Roland was closer to one of the columns than he had been. At his right hand were crossed swords of blue steel with bone handles. Then with a move that took Rit by surprise, he swung his rifle around, let the band drop from his shoulder, and tossed the weapon to his grandmother's man-at-arms.

In the dark there had been the slipping sound of weapons against leather and cloth: knives, rifles, even swords, Rit thought. And from behind him where Kori stood, came a shiver of a warding field being born. Then everything stopped. For the first time, the older man looked unsure. "Bare knuckles, lad? Do you think you're in the school yard?"

"No, but if I'm to be shot in the back, I want it plain it was by a coward."

Roland's challenger looked around, as though measuring his support. "I'd as soon not kill you when there's no other son of the house. For your dead brother's sake I'd not see you dead. I've not such qualms about your guest. Let him take the challenge. If he's man enough."

Alicia's hand squeezed his, but he felt her will holding him back, not her hand. "Rit, don't," she whispered.

He saw himself approach the flames as a shadow against the light. He felt he ate the radiance. Intent. Purpose. And blood.

But he didn't move and Roland answered. "He's not a man." And into the silence, added: "He's a weapon that's been forged for a different battle than this."

The answer was made anonymous by the dark: "Xinta bullshit."

This time Rit did move, and by his will, not Alicia's. "Bullshit or not," he said, "I'm here, and as you can see, whatever else I am, I'm a man." He stood close to fire so that there wouldn't be any shadows on his face as he circled. "I'm a man, who in exchange for an early peace, negotiated the end to compulsory military service, to a reduction in the metals taxes, and to a greater voice on the High Council for the Surri lords." He met the scarred man face to face. "Is it you'll bargain with someone made faceless by distance - made *safe* by distance - but not sit with them at table?"

Well, Nalwin?" Roland said. The name was one of those he had listed as being his father's council.

He eyed Rit up and down. "I'll let a snake sleep in the barn to keep the mice down, and not feel I need invite it to the manor for a drink."

Roland barked a laugh. "My father would and has." Roland's Aklif accent had become more pronounced. "He's ten days behind me, coming in from Anquin. You're welcome to him, and him to you." He looked around. "Anyone else?"

A tall man elbowed his way to the front. Black hair speckled with gray in a brush cut, with a matching beard that continued down his neck and under his collar. Close in age to Roland's father, and except for an extra half head in height, he looked enough like him to be a twin. Half-brother or more likely a cousin. The intelligence report had only mentioned two sisters, and only one of them living.

He had a rifle slung over his back and as Roland had, slipped it off and tossed it to the man-at-arms. "Why deal at all?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Roland turned to Rit. "Yelv cal'Meslin." Another name from the list of his father's councilors. "Yelv, Ritsiniti Strom."

Rit got a reserved nod. And: "We've a proven leader on his way here... and a fight not a few agree with."

"Besides, treason in Wilni Capital isn't necessarily treason in Istarom?" Rit shook his head. No one had called him a traitor here and it hadn't colored the talks as it had with other parts of the Hegemony. "It still leaves you with a choice. You're looking at war inside the house, war with the Xinta forces already

in Surri, and probably a rekindling of the war throughout the Hegemony, one that this time won't conveniently stop at the Surri borders or keep to the towns on the trade routes. And one that will mean the destruction of Hegemony. Are you willing to gamble that you can build better lives out of the blood soaked fragments, or will you accept the peace agreed on... and which includes at least nominal rule from Wilni Capital?"

"Rule and rulings?"

"Yes."

"And the king's rule?"

"There is no king. The War Council stands as Regent Council."

"Regent for what?" Nalwin asked in his soft growl. "One of your bastards? We've heard you've got one by your own mother."

"Yeah, and we heard he could fly like a bird too." It was the woman who had challenged the treason of overthrowing the Strom.

"And the Regency?" Yelv asked him.

In the negotiations with Istarom, there had been at least one voice asking for clear statements of fact and intent, a directness often at odds with Faswin's taste for subtleties. He decided to be as plain to whom he thought might be that man. "Ramsini Strom was the last wife of the man generally thought to be my father. My real father was Tirreniti cal'Fisstrom. My mother was a Bluestone priestess, who, I've been told, is dead. I don't know her name." He took a slow breath. If he had been stripped naked he couldn't feel more exposed. *Years of hiding what he was...* And faced with the need to insinuate himself into a struggle for power, he'd walked away from it every time. As a Patrol officer. At the Holding after the Blueknife attack. In Wilni Capital - every time. "The Regency is for the first son of the marriage between my son by Ramsini and Roland and Milla's daughter."

He had always had too little interest in the people or in the outcome. *Ambition?* No. And a sense of place, not person. He could walk the maze he thought Istarom manor was... and could see it in the flames his eyes had gone to instead of the men still asking him questions. Passages and rooms, cement and wood. Massive steel turbines and wheels. Ropes of copper. And air. The fire heated air licking the distant ceiling, finding cracks and shafts, dividing, regrouping, dividing again. And finding the night and the wind. He was over Istarom. And he was on fire, the pattern sparking around and through him.

And he was at the Mound, wings raised, each feather, each shaft, edged with flame. And within, ice burned as sharply. He screamed as he twisted in agony.

And he was standing in the cold night air on a road, the forest closing behind him, the Piltsimic girl before. And could see in her eyes, the lay of the land, Istarom and Erisin, the mountains, rivers and lakes. And knew that she knew where he was. "Back in Wilni Capital, you said you wanted to talk."

"I might have at that."

"And now? Is there a difference now?"

He had meant the lines and knew she understood, but without answering, she stepped aside and it was as though the motion opened a door to what was beyond her. And in the same way that he was on that road, he could see as clearly as though it was broad daylight. At the mouth of a mineshaft stood Ulanda and Bolda.

Around Ulanda, the pattern lines became narrower and closer together, appearing further and further away until vanishing before ever touching her skin. Perspective ruined... or more real in a way he couldn't fathom.

In that instant, his feelings coalesced in the same way that he saw the pattern lines. "Is it worth it?" he asked.

Ulanda looked past the loom-master towards him, and if she was surprised to see him there, she didn't show it. "Your death was only slowed, not stopped."

With her words, came what he only saw in dreams: the stone room.

Then he was blinking fire-blindness from his eyes, surrounded by the sound of people talking. And found his ears as blind as his eyes when he couldn't draw any meaning from the noise.

Milla was back with Roland, Yelv on his other side, his head bent as though he had been whispering into the boy's ear. He straightened, his eyes on Rit. "... what you are bringing on us here?"

And found himself as mute as he had been blind and deaf a moment earlier.

"Are they creatures of flesh, or like the shadow you pulled over the fire?"

Shadow? He squeezed his eyes shut and opened then again. And found his tongue. "Lord Aspier, you promised hospitality, not an interrogation."

"So I did," Roland said. And to Yelv: "Do I have your support?"

The decision must have already been made; there was no hesitation in Yelv's answer. "Yes." He looked around. "Anyone else have something to say about the matter?" He waited a moment, then in the silence added to Roland: "I give my pledge to your bride as well as she has no kin here. I'll see her as safe as one of my own daughters."

He bowed solemnly to the girl and Milla curtsied in return. "I'm honored, sir." Then looking past Yelv to Rit, she ran over and gave him a hug. "Thank you," she whispered into his ear. Alicia was next, with longer whispers between the two.

Lady Isilil took his arm. "Well, it looks as though you have your wish."

"Is it settled here so quickly?" Nalwin and many of the people were gone.

"Oh, I'd say not for a generation or two." She laughed. "But settled enough tonight for dinner and bed." With a shooing motion, she gestured to Alicia. "You've young legs, so go on ahead. Let your husband walk with me. I want to talk and he wants to indulge an old woman."

Rit nodded to the question he saw in Alicia's eyes and to Kori, a hand sign that she was to go with her. Roland offered himself as guide, calling servants, showing

the same energy as he had climbing the rocks earlier in the day. Lady Islil slammed her cane down. "The Imperial Suite," she announced in a loud voice and laughed again. "This isn't the first time Istarom has guested royalty."

Roland hesitated, his eyes on his grandmother. Then shrugged with the same almost secret smile as hers playing over his lips. And had bags and people moving before Rit and the old woman had made the first step. On the way, Lady Islil gained a following: the same man-at-arms, two ladies and several servants. Only Pasi and the dog stayed with him. He wanted Kori away as quickly as possible, and with the others to provide the needed buffer.

They moved at the old woman's pace and the sound of her cane striking the floor as though she felt it necessary to sound each step. Stairs rose to several levels with balconies overlooking the central area. At the top, he stopped to catch his breath. "Is Roland's father's greatest crime that he wants power in Wilni Capital, rather than here?" He nodded to the fire several levels below them. There was no railing.

Her eyes were on him, not the view. "As a king, you must have been a trial to your advisors. Do you always say what comes to mind?"

"Except when I talk in riddles."

She shook her head, but he'd earned the Aspier smile. "You don't seem a man who could have done half the things said of you."

"Not even half the things I've heard I've done."

"So."

He lowered his voice so that beyond her man and Pasi, the others with them wouldn't hear. "The arrangement your grandson has with me is based on expediency, not loyalty." He looked down but couldn't make out who was who. Expediency. And remembered the vulnerability Roland had betrayed: *I wouldn't do it*. What he had just said about Roland wasn't entirely true, but that wasn't something his grandmother should hear. "I needed the War Council and the succession settled quickly to the satisfaction of the other members of the Council. He provided the solution to both problems. Essentially, as long as I have his cooperation, he has my..."

"Support? How much support can a pea shelled from the pod offer?"

Support was what he had been going to say, but hearing it, knew it was the wrong word. "Not support, but good will."

"Or at least a good long stare at the fire."

"Was that what I was doing?"

"No doubt you intended it should unnerve the superstitious."

"Did it?"

"And the ignorant."

"Leaving you unaffected, of course."

"Flatterer."

"The plain truth."

She laughed then pointed with her cane to a hall, the metal door pushed half open. Widely spaced torches flickered in a long row into the darkness, the relatively warm air of the main hall creating a breeze that pushed at their backs. In his mouth was pine smoke tainted with iron.

Near the end of the corridor, Lady Islil paused at a double set of steel doors. "Part of the Imperial suite, the next rooms..." To several open doors further along the corridor. "... are yours and your lady's, more for your staff next to them. And the library here."

The library doors were operated by a set of balances, and slid open far easier than the main hall doors had, or the ones to this corridor. A puff of stale air breathed in his face.

"A private door into your sitting room..." She gestured to a wood paneled door half draped in curtains. "... and books enough even for a Strom. And maps." Followed by the servants carrying lamps, she walked to the center table.

Flat on the table was a map of Surri, a fine film of dust over top. Rit brushed a palm width streak away. More detailed than the Xintan military maps they had brought with them, the streams, crevasses, game trails... all the various dots and dashes, even the shaded lines of elevation were labeled in a fine old-fashioned script. Try as he might, the printing was too small for him to read.

Rubbing his back, he straightened. Except for Pasi and the dog, they were alone. He had heard the door close, but had expected her man-at-arms to stay even if the servants didn't. He wondered if he should send Pasi out as well, but wasn't sure that order would be obeyed, even now.

As the moments passed and the order wasn't given, the corners of her wide mouth dipped. She obviously wasn't pleased, but when she spoke, her words weren't about courtesies not returned. "Ruined your eyes as boy, did you? They had you studying at all hours, I expect." She leaned over the table and tapped her index finger against the map. "I came along that road as a bride."

The map might be from around the same time, he thought. "I thought I detected an Aklif accent."

Sharp black eyes met his. "Did you just?" Then the finger tapped against the paper again as though she intended to flatten a mountain or two. "What's of interest in that direction?"

Instead of answering, he stepped to the window and held a section of the heavy velvet drapes to one side. Spider silk stuck to his fingers, but if they were more than cobwebs, it was too dark to see.

Set flush with the outside wall, making an alcove behind the curtain, the window stretched from knee height to the ceiling twenty feet above him in a series of narrow panes of glass set side by side. For all his sense of place, sometime during the walk here, he'd gotten turned around. He had expected a

view of the watercourse that drained the catchment lake. Instead, they were on the opposite side of the dam from where they had landed. Before him, the valley was the dark between the mountains, the mountains only shapes against the sky. And the sky: a blaze of stars that the reflection of the single visible lamp did nothing to diminish. And in a layer of his mind - in every direction he let himself look, manor or not - were pattern lines.

"Roland said only a goat could get in or out of the valley other than by the road."

"He's a good boy, but he wasn't raised here."

"His loss."

"So I told his father, but I was speaking to a fool."

"Would it help if I said I don't know what is going to happen?"

"Any fool can think they know the future."

Too many fools had, and not just her son. Rit let the drapes fall, and from the window, looked at the shelves of books. Estate accounts, the year and span of months neatly printed, and visible only because of the reflective gold ink. When he touched one title, the metal tingled under his fingertips. There was nothing more recent than sixty years ago. And further on the same row, military texts. *The Nature of Conflict*. Written years after the last battle of the Millennial wars, it was one man's memory of the war, not a philosophical treatise despite the name. He remembered reading it as a boy, but the unabridged version that ran to twice the length.

In his hands, the book opened to the middle signature and a thread of the linen it was sewn with. Except for a slight yellowing along the edge of each page, it looked new, untouched. As he carried it to closer to the lamp on the central table, he checked the imprint date in the back. Fifty-five years ago. Below the date was the Imperial crest and a catalogue number. The book was from the palace library in Wilni.

Lady Islil pointed with her cane to the book he held. "What do you hope to find there?"

Memories. A sense of his past with his future so uncertain. And the past of his world. He put it on the table beside the map, but found he couldn't quite leave it, and ran a finger over the geometric design embossed on the dark brown leather cover. Stylized daisies, he realized. Of all things for a book describing the end of the known world, it was covered in daisies. "My father gave me a copy of this when I was eight years old."

"The father who wasn't your father, or the one who was?" When he didn't answer immediately, she added: "Well?"

"Actually, the reason I hesitated was I was wondering how much I have to allow you for the bluntness of age, and how much for your political influence here, and I suspect, with your Aklif relations."

Her lined face bloomed with a smile. "Definitely a trial to your advisors."

"I admit it."

"So." With more effort than she had shown during the slow walk up the stairs, she sat in one the armchairs. Dust rose from the cushions as they collapsed under her weight. She looked towards Pasi. "Does he understand Heg?"

"Yes."

A narrow look at him, then the same smile relaxed her features. "If we're to talk plainly, I have to say I'm disturbed at some of the things my grandson has claimed. I always feared that growing up in the lowlands might soften his brain. Or was it exposure to the Xinta religion?"

"His father never so much as attended the morning prayers when he stayed over in the palace after a late meeting. I doubt a son kept in his city manor was exposed at all."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to start lying to me?" She waved her cane around, pointing to the high shelves. "There are books secreted there you probably think exist only in Strom archives. I tell you that thing you arrived here in was never dreamed of in any of those pages."

"Airplanes are close enough."

"Nonsense. A bee isn't a bird. And people from other suns in the sky, people that aren't human..."

"Their own kind of human."

"I have eyes." The cane slammed against the edge of the table. Pasi didn't move, but Gana sprang to her feet. Past a glance, Lady Islil ignored the dog. A cough and she settled against the chair back. "My grandson wouldn't need to be forced to recite the Xinta Coda to be affected, just to look around him, to hear what is being whispered. Out of fear, out of hate..." She sighed. "And out of faith." She hesitated again, as though gathering strength. "In these mountains - and where I grew up - at the cross roads, in the grass, you'll see three or more flat rocks arranged one on the other, but with the smallest first, not like the waycairn's the Xintan build. Do you know what they signify?"

"Yes."

"Just yes? I don't get a lesson?" She chuckled. "Your teachers must indeed have had you studying at all hours for you to know such an obscure detail of Akliff superstition. Is it the mountains that ruin our logic, do you think? Does the scale make us feel so insignificant that we must make up stories to cope? As the Xinta did, faced with the endless flat of their plains. A direct connection to the absolute truth..." She tisked as she shook her head. "What that must do to a people."

"If beliefs aren't given to us, we create them."

"Like the Xintan? We were all born out of the cradle of the war, but they've taken it further than most."

"They weren't the first to incorporate laws against technological progress. No one has been overly quick to reintroduce the machines that destroyed the world."

"And to make such laws part of their religion? Makes a damn good excuse to invade others who in their opinion have erred." She coughed then sighed. "I suppose Hegemony isn't any different, just what was chosen. Write it down and it must be so. You don't need to do it or build anything, just write about it. Mountains of facts, and all the dominion of the Charter Houses, and the Charter Houses overrun by Strom."

Cane held in both hands, she looked as though she was trying to get up and Rit stepped forward to offer her his hand, but she only shifted position and sat back again with a sigh. "The *usi* stones, any he comes across, my son orders scattered. He calls them rank superstition. They *anger* him. His reaction is past any reason of them being simply rocks and foolish notions." A steady look. "They grate against his sense of what is real in a way that means one or the other must be destroyed. Your Opening, your Xintan Lady, the strangers to our world... they grate on the Hegemony mind in the same way, and much worse than the few machines the Xinta take offence against and the others they conveniently don't. These... events... have broken the barriers of what might be true. Anything might be true. Even gods."

And that she had traveled full circle in this conversation and arrived at the opposite side of her starting argument? Or traveled it as your fingertip might a strip of paper twisted once and the ends joined to make a single path. He could argue that the Xinta were following the same path and that only their starting point was different. "And you want the plain truth from me?"

Lady Islil's age showed in the quiver of her lips as she spoke. "The plain truth."

"One of these... strangers, once asked me how many definitions of god I knew, and if the Xintan Lady fit any of them."

"Does she?"

"I lied and said no."

She nodded. "And you? Are you a god? Can a god also be a traitor to his country, a man with a bad marriage, too many mistresses, and so out of shape he can't climb a few stairs without puffing?"

God? He found it hard to bear the word, even when wrapped in an insult that might pass as a joke. Might. And decided to reply in the same vein. "I take exception to my marriage being called bad."

His answer received as steady a gaze from Lady Islil, and for the first time, Rit directly felt the full force of the woman's intellect. The neural blocker must still be wearing off; his mind was expanding in increments. First place, then person. And then both, together. The room swirled to a cold wind and time danced in the motes of dust rising above the map. *I came along that road as a bride.*

Lives that he would as soon escape knowing about were in that wind. His back half to her, he sat against the edge of the table and waited for the spell to pass, trying to keep the *seeing* part of his awareness small, like it was a stitch in his side from running, something he might press against with a hand and elbow to contain.

"You promised me the plain truth."

He heard the effort it took for her to rise from the chair but this time, didn't turn around to offer his help. "You know there's no such thing."

"All the more reason to speak it. My books speak of ancient nations headed by god-kings, of gods warring against each other using whole peoples as weapons in their hands, of spirits infecting human flesh like a disease..." When Rit thought she might go on forever, she cleared her throat and asked again: "Do any of your definitions of god include you?"

Cold air still moved at his back. Was he imagining it, or was it something an Akliif princess might see for herself? And what of the years carried in the wind? Looking over his shoulder, his eyes staining at the edge of his vision, he saw her changed.

Tall, he hadn't realized how tall she would have been before age had robbed her bones. From under a headdress of gold cloth, dark hair like a wave fell to shoulders of smooth alabaster. Only her eyes were the same as he had first seen. Included in the vision were all the years since she had arrived as a bride, but not in sequence, she didn't age in steps. Or age at all, all the ages of her life were simply there in what he could see. And her death in branches of.... He scrambled back from that vision, not sure he wouldn't go too far. Or the reaction was instinctive, wrapped in logic only after the fact.

She asked him again, the words coming a mouth with full lips the colour of ripe blackberries, and from the folds in the skirt of her dress, came the scent of an alpine meadow under the summer sun. "By any definition at all... are you a god?"

He turned away as much from the life he saw as the death he refused to. "Yes."

A moment of silence, then: "If Istarom manor is to welcome more visitors, I'd best be off to see the rooms opened properly."

Rit raised his head. Lady Islil was walking through the door - he hadn't heard it open - and the only wind was a slight breeze that crossed the threshold from the corridor. At each step, she leaned heavily on her cane, a bent figure that even so was as tall as he was.

When he saw Ulanda, he'd ask her if she saw people in that way. *It's what Priests do*. For a moment, he didn't remember where he had heard those words and then remembered Bolda's explanation to Alicia about Priests and Empire.

Is that how she had seen Eunni, when she had said, in a soft voice full of pain and longing, that the other woman was beautiful? And how did she see Alicia? He

remembered their ride out to the cliff's edge, and Ulanda telling him that Alicia needed him as a husband, as a lover.

And the other explanation about Priests: that they could be molded or focused by the desires of the people closest to them. Prayers.

"Pasi..." The Warrior's face was as incurious as always. A god? That night on the roof at the palace in Wilni Capital would have finished any doubt once and for all. "Lock the library door... can you? From this side?" The Warrior nodded. "Outside these rooms, I want everyone armed and I want it obvious that while we consider ourselves guests, we're also on potentially hostile ground. Is Estan on guard in the corridor? Get him one of the Zimmer rifles, but have him keep his own as well."

In the sitting room, several of their bundles had been piled next to the dark fire grate, Kori's cloak thrown overtop. He tried the bedroom next. Alicia looked over as he walked in. A scarf wrapped around her hair and over her nose, with the help of one of the manor servants, she was pulling the last panel of the bed curtains down. A single large bed - stripped of covers and sheets - the bed curtains were more of the Akliff tapestries he had seen in the Great Hall.

"Has Lady Islil gone?" she asked, voice muffled by the scarf. He nodded. "I'm sorry, I had hoped to pay my respects first." Already unwrapping the scarf, she added to the servant: "No, don't shake them out to fold them, I don't want the dust disturbed any more than it has been."

Once the servant had left with the first armful of curtains, she whispered to him: "What a horrible, horrible woman. None of the servants were about to do anything until they had her orders."

"So you shamed them into starting?" He helped with the last turns of the scarf and let it fall to the bare floor. Dust powdered Alicia's eyelashes and brows, sweat had caked it into a layer of mud on every bit of skin that hadn't been covered. The rugs must have been taken out first, more footprints than theirs had made tracks through the layer of dirt on the floor. Where it was undisturbed, the dust still showed the weave of the carpets. "Do you pity Milla her new family?"

With a look around the stripped room, she shook her head. "No," she admitted. "No I don't."

Something more was bothering her, something deeper than dusty, unused rooms. That much she obviously could deal with. And the servants. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She pulled him aside as three women came in by way of the sitting room with rags and buckets of water in their hands. None of them looked at him. "Isn't being refugees in the middle of a war enough?"

She was lying, but didn't have to see more than the stubborn set to her face to know she wasn't ready to talk about it. "Where are Kori and Willi?"

She took his hand. "This way."

Pasi was in the sitting room going through one of the bundles, three Zimmer rifles lined up on the carpet. He looked up. "Sir?"

"Stay here and keep anyone from following us," Alicia told him. Pasi looked to him and he nodded. Telling him to take orders directly from Alicia was useless.

To the right of the open door to the library was another he hadn't noticed the first time. It opened directly to a stairway, and twenty feet or so up, a landing. To one side, double doors had been thrown open to a velvety blackness and presumably a balcony, to the other, a short blind-end corridor with four doors leading off it, two on either side. He could see his breath in the cold air as he puffed the last few steps. *Out of shape*. He was, more than a few months of sedentary life should have made him.

Alicia ran up the steps ahead of him, but waited at the top. Kori arrived from one of the back rooms just as he made the last stair. "This place is meant as a trap," she said in Empire plain-tongue. "There are too many ways in that we aren't supposed to know about."

From a pouch at her waist, she took a recording crystal and offered it to him. In the Zimmer fashion, the overview was at the center of the body of information. If the immediate area was any indication, the manor was honeycombed with passages. Of the three connecting passages that were mapped, the closest started at the section of wall between the balcony and the corridor. He carried the lamp closer. Oak panels, darkened with age to a dull orange. Despite Kori's analysis in his mind, he couldn't see the triggering mechanism. Or feel it.

Squatting beside him, Kori pressed one narrow white hand against the baseboard trim and part of the wall swung back. "With what I brought, I can't map the passages further." He heard the apology in the tone. "Willi is following this one." As though it was an involuntary movement, she glanced back at Alicia. And must have gotten some encouragement, because she looked relieved.

He poked his head in. Rising in a diagonal in front of him were more stairs, but made of metal, the mesh treads heavily rusted in places. The opening where he stood looked hacked into the concrete side of the stairwell about half way up the flight, the cut ends of the handrail capped by the wood framing of the door. There was a rank stink, and at the edge of his hearing, the roar of running water.

The passage might be original to the dam, he thought. The stairs certainly were. And much narrower than what he had just come up - a tight squeeze for someone his size. "How safe are they?"

"The hand rails are attached to the walls, not the treads, plus every fifteen feet the steps reverse direction at concrete landings that appear to be part of the original infrastructure."

Safe enough, then. As safe as climbing on a rock fall. "Any chance this one reaches all the way to the top?"

Another glance back to Alicia. "Perhaps," Kori said.

One hand on the rail, the wood of the frame pressing into his forearm, he squeezed through the opening. The stink was much worse.

"Rit, what do you think you're doing?" Alicia asked.

Twisting around, he held out one hand. "Give me the lamp." Even with the light held high, he could see only a short way into the dark shaft. He looked down next, and couldn't see any further. It was difficult to tell which were stairs and which were shadows.

He stamped hard on the mesh of the step, and when the echoing faded, heard the faint rain-like patter of debris. Except for the treads - and at the back of those as well - grit lay over everything like hail after a storm.

Willi wouldn't have cleared the steps like this, not with her pants and mid-thigh length tunic. A long skirt had swept them and recently, probably as recently as the map on the table had been brushed clean of dust.

It was with a sense of relief, he ducked back out. "Let me know when Willi gets back," he said to Kori. "And what she finds."

The first room off the corridor was joined to the one next to it. A sitting room and a bedchamber, the same as downstairs. Off the bedchamber was a tiled bath with a sink and toilet. He turned the handle on the sink facet. With a spitting sound, then a thumping deep in the works, muddy rust dribbled out. The flow of water increased as it cleared. There must be a cistern on the roof for rainwater. Cupping his hand, he took a drink and then wiped his face with the rest.

Alicia watched him, her arms crossed over her chest. "Our bathroom has a tub."

"And hot water?"

"There will be by the time we get into it. Dinner is in an hour and a half."

There weren't any towels, so he dried his hands on his hard used jacket. And on their way back down the stairs: "Are we guests to this dinner, or the main course?"

"Give our reception, I'd have to say the latter."

"We were unexpected," he reminded her.

"And we could be taking our ease in a reception room while these rooms were made ready. We're guests of the Head of a Noble House at his principal residence, not his..." She waved a hand around as the sitting room they had just entered might supply the word she wanted. "Besides, you don't leave unused rooms in this state. These curtains here in the sitting room, the bed curtains, cloth as valuable as this should have been taken down and kept in chests; the carpets rolled and stored in a dry place; everything too heavy to move, covered with muslin..."

He began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Did you ask who the last royal visitor was?"

She had a thoughtful look on her face. "Roland's grandfather on his mother's side. The previous king's uncle." She looked around again. "I assumed this was an insult on Lady Islil's part. Is it?"

He sat on the arm of the chair nearest the dark fire grate. "More a message, I think, but not primarily for us. Are you ready to tell me what's wrong?"

A moment's hesitation, then: "My uncle's here. In the Hall, when we came in, he was in the back. He saw me and he knows I saw him."

A familiar silhouette, a way of moving, a scent... then eye contact that solidifies the knowing. Months earlier, his queries had found only a single report of a Lord Camuit with the Hegemony forces retreating from Denman into the central provinces. This man had been traveling with a woman and two children, but whether his wife or a fellow refuge, the source couldn't say. There was no mention of him in later intelligence reports and Rit hadn't pursued it past keeping the file open. He had told Alicia only about her uncle, not the woman and children she might start to hope were the aunt and cousins she believed killed by the Xintan.

He held his hand out and waited until she took it. "One of the guests held in reserve, I suppose."

"He left... he wouldn't look at me, he turned around and..."

What had Alicia seen in that brief moment when her eyes had met those of her uncle? "I can't tell you what to do."

She stiffened. "Did I ask you to?"

"Just now, you sounded like you did at the Mound when we had just met, and you told me that Strom estates must be full of bastards and asked what was so different about me."

"And have you finished answering my question?"

"Kori thinks the answer is in the diamond."

"I know what she thinks."

Dust still frosted her eyebrows. Without willing it, he fell deeper into the shape of what he had said to her. "Does it only matter with rooms?"

"What?"

"Dust and dirt." He touched her forehead, traced a sweat trail marked by dirt, taking comfort from the touch even as her will burned against his. Wanting more than a touch. Wanting to prove himself human in that most basic of ways.

Anger was only the strongest of the emotions he could feel well up past the grief she had dangled before him like bait. "Rit, I wish I knew what you were talking about even half the time." Despite what he felt from her, her voice was wistful and she didn't resist his touch. She even moved closer as though as willing as he was for it to become a caress.

From her face, he ran his hand into her hair, separating the sweat tangled curls with his fingers, and again, a part of him enjoyed the sensation of her hair

against his skin and her scent in his mouth. "Or is this a continuation of the diplomatic game the housekeeping is? Or even the reason for it?"

"You're accusing me of a subtlety I don't possess. Sometimes the plain truth really is both plain and the truth."

He supposed he could thank Kori that Alicia must have heard every word that had passed between him and Lady Islil in the library. "Does even the truth have to be all one thing?"

Her face was blank in thought for a moment then she pulled her hand away even as she slapped him with the other.

The blow echoed down his body like the stamp of his foot had the metal stairs, stirring sensations he didn't like to be associated with pain. Cassa? Had she also been behind his reaction to Kori on the mountainside? Then remembered what he had said to Kori about ownership, and knew he could claim these feelings, then and now, for his own. "Don't do that again."

What he was doing wasn't like reading minds. Knowledge became solid, then faded only to grow around a different perception, his understanding fluid and to him, unpredictable. Still, he thought Alicia saw something of what had woken under her hand. "I won't, I'm sorry," she said then took a deep ragged breath. "I didn't want you to tell me what to do. All I wanted was to share... my feelings with you, I guess. People do that, you know. Just some comfort, some support."

"You know you have both."

"When? When did I ever?"

"Alicia, I won't be focused into making happen whatever it is you want done." She didn't answer. "And I'd never force you into going along with whatever I do."

She shook her head, closer to tears now, not anger. "No, and you're doing your best to make sure I'm out of your life. All I wanted was a small part of you... I'm your wife, damn it, and you push me away. Kori wants a god, she wants Empire to go... to go poof, like it never existed. She thinks that's what Cassa wants..."

"This has nothing to do with what Kori wants and everything to do with this ending in a cataclysm that would make the Millennial wars look like a skirmish in a sandbox. Alicia, I'm being forced into making a decision I don't want. Do you know what my greatest fear is?" She didn't answer and he continued: "That there are no viable choices to be made. Not by me, not by Ulanda, and not by Empire. That anything we do will end in total destruction."

"By Cassa?"

Cassa's very slow question and Empire's equally slow answer. His existence and his world's existence were a small piece of each. "There's a link between us, from the Opening, I think. And Ulanda. You already know that. And you've heard Garm's stories of the end of Empire at least as many times as I have."

"Probably a great deal many more times. You weren't stuck in a small cabin with him most of a winter. Besides, even he says it shouldn't be taken literally. Ulanda will stay here if she can and that means some kind of survival for Alisim and the people here. What can you offer? Kori's option?"

"This is my home. I'm hoping as much as Ulanda that some equilibrium is possible. This thing with Cassa has been going on for a very long time, as far as I'm concerned, it can keep on going. It's where the balance is set that I can't agree with either her or the loom-master."

"So for a small shift in the result, you'd risk..."

"That *small* shift are lives."

"Lives of people who only used you. They didn't care that their plots threw half this world into war. How many deaths have they caused?"

"You're blaming every Strom and Bluestone for the actions of a few."

"Rit, if there were no Strom or Bluestone, would the world be different in any appreciable way?"

"Yes."

"For you. Just for you."

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Empress.

To start, a challenge for the Office of the Third Concord on the High Council. Not Donotat, he had died with the Nexus Change. There was a new Emperor, the Priest-Select Tir'san. From the presence of the second Justice Cruiser, the Imperial House was an ally of Rigyant but that didn't appear to greatly concern the loom-master.

Ulanda hadn't been surprised that negotiations with the loom-master Vivan's representative had started with the end result already assumed. Garm had assumed it, and in the meetings with Quin'tat, acted as though he would be there with her, and not in the diamond, or dead, or whatever it was he thought would happen once he went through the portal.

One thing had become clear immediately: simply surviving meant making concessions to Rigyant, both in the formal agreements, and by accepting their people into her service.

Quin'tat motioned to one of his attendants. "The tea now, I think." And to her: "Lady Priest, is there anything in particular...?"

Niv answered for her. "G'sti with bitter water. Do you have it?"

A moment, then Quin'tat nodded. "Apparently."

The low table that separated them, the rug and cushions where they sat or knelt, all apparently floated high above Istarom. Brown and green of the land, then the blue of the ocean from the edge of the continent to the horizon. And overhead, stars.

The slightest shift in how she looked, and the pinpoint silver of the stars grew, stretched, and coiled in and around. The world pattern. She felt the change inside as well; those lines - an ever growing number - matched what she was. Altasimic.

Instead of supplanting or masking it, the new Altasimic pattern gave definition to what she could feel of overpattern. Gave her what ten years of Acolyte training hadn't when faced with overpattern alone. Even with the limitations that the changed Altasimic imposed on her - she assumed limitations as Vivan assumed her desire for power - she was frightened by her evolving sense of what she was capable of. She hadn't had an adequate frame of reference before this, the power had been there, but so much beyond her control that it might as well have literally been the ocean at her feet. Sarkalt must have known, both Sarkalt's.

One of her new staff, not Quin'tat's attendant, brought the tea. At Niv's order, she withdrew. A second woman served Quin'tat. They were both Ri-bred, one near her age - the one Niv had dismissed, the other was older, perhaps in her sixties. They hadn't been offered by the loom-master, they had been given.

After adding three scoops of sugar to the dark liquid, Niv poured what was now lukewarm syrup into a tiny bowl and placed it before her. The white porcelain showed the blue colour of the tea. It smelled like peppermint candy. She left it untouched.

With the slightest movement of her fingers, she signed a formal Opening. With the gesture, Garm slid a sheet of paper across the table.

At his side, Quin'tat's Scribe picked it up and studied it at length. Finally, the sheet went onto the stack of others. All he said was: "Ranking Priest. Alisim."

There would have been much more in the Net analysis that Ulanda could barely sense existed at all. Quin'tat made a formal motion of allowance: one hand raised and turned palm up. The ends of his oath band floated as he lowered his hand to his lap. He still wore Sarkalt's Ri-green cording. "Lady Priest, that is within the terms of our understanding."

Understanding was too nebulous a word for her. Turning her head, she looked past Garm to Bolda. He nodded.

The point of agreement had been written in old-tongue and despite what Bolda thought, she decided that the Scribe's interpretation was too limited. She tried again, this time in Empire plain-tongue. "As ranking Priest, those chosen as Candidates for Initiation on Alisim will be my decision."

"Within limits," Quin'tat said too quickly. The problem must have been anticipated in the first analysis.

Garm stood. "I think not."

Bolda told him to sit down. And then: "We'll go over each point agreed on again."

Quin'tat sighed then nodded.

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Heat rose in waves from the concrete. Late morning and Rit had been on the top of the dam since dawn. Shaped like a crescent moon, the surface of the walkway was as pocked, the larger holes - and the more dangerous areas - had been covered with beams and wooden planks, themselves warped and silvered from years of sun, rain and snow. Water from a recent rain was trapped in shallow drying pools, warm as blood now, and thick with twitching mosquito larvae.

Using the tiny linking sphere she'd given him, Kori signaled from the rock face. A single small craft was approaching, with only enough warding to protect the integrity of the hull. Two occupants and nothing that could easily be used as a weapon against the force she could mount. And there had been no resistance to her scan.

He felt a flood of relief that the long wait was finally over. Despite what he had chosen to take as an arrangement with the loom-master, he hadn't been absolutely sure that the first contact wouldn't be an attack.

A few moments after Kori's signal, he could hear the flitter, and shading his eyes against the light, see the craft approaching from the direction of Nes. It passed overtop of him and landed at the far end of the dam, nearer to Kori. Kori stood on the rocks, in plain sight, wearing the black Xintan style tunic and pants she had worn the day before, but now, with a length of braided cord wrapped around her waist and tied in the front with an elaborate knot.

Immediately after landing, Nisstin stepped out of the flitter. The Warrior shook his head as he watched Rit approach. "I always thought you had a death wish. Now, I'm certain of it."

As he approached, Rit ran a hand along the side of the ship. "Wiccin didn't patch this together from the work yard in Endica." Red ochre hull tiles, but in a different shape than Slicannin's or Gennedy's crafts. None of the tiles were overlapped, but set in what looked like a cement of small pebbles. Overtop in black, the colour seemingly in the tiles themselves, was the mark of Alisim Temple. "If I'd known it would only be you..." Rit held his hand out and the Warrior grasped it firmly.

"Only me for now, except for the pilot. He'll stay with the ship. I'm to work with..." He looked past Rit to Pasi, standing at the top of the stairs. "... your security to set the real meeting up. If it's satisfactory with you, Quin'tat can be here as early as this afternoon."

Rit motioned Pasi to be quiet and stay where he was then turned back to Nisstin. "And you're here first to test my temper."

"From how quickly the flitter was offered, I think the loom-master didn't want you isolated and wondering what was being decided elsewhere."

"What has been decided?"

Nisstin hesitated, his eyes going from Rit to Pasi and back. He kicked a chip of concrete down the steps and waited until it came to a stop half way to the bottom, before speaking. "I'm sure it's not my place to say." Without a word, Rit walked past him and started down the steps. Nisstin grabbed his arm. "Your oath was directly to the Lady. The big question in everyone's mind is where you stand now."

Rit shook the hand off and started down again, then stopped and looked over his shoulder. Pasi hadn't moved, and his Zimmer rifle was held loosely at his side. "That's not the question."

Nisstin took the steps awkwardly, favoring his injured leg, but motioned that they should continue. "What? Are you worried that I might have to try to kill you?"

How had they gotten so quickly onto this line? "If you tried, Kori would kill you. She heads my security, not Pasi. And there's no doubt about who she takes orders from."

They were at the first guard post. On Roland's orders but by his request, the metal doors had been left open and there were no guards.

"What if I succeeded?" Nisstin asked as they walked inside. His voice echoed slightly, more from the relatively low ceiling than the distant sides. "What happens after that?"

Rit didn't think he meant the political consequences. "What does the loom-master say would happen?"

Nisstin didn't answer, but instead turned around slowly, blinking as though to speed his eyes adapting to the much lower level of light. "What is this place?"

"Istarom manor."

The exterior staircase led to what must have been a viewpoint, the open space extending through to the other side, and about thirty feet to the left towards the center of the dam and as much to the right until it hit living rock. The ceiling was supported by concrete pillars as thick as a man at the shoulders. At both the near and far ends, most of the openings were blocked by wooden shutters. The stairway from here continued inside the body of the dam, and after a detour down a long corridor, opened high above the Great Hall.

"I expected people. Is this part inhabited?"

"On the lower levels, and in the town on the far side from the direction you came in. There not being any guards is a courtesy from Lord Aspier. I didn't want a mistake to start what we all want to prevent."

"Are you sure you want to prevent it?"

"It?" Rit laughed. "I thought I'd get plainer talk from you, not this run-around."

Nisstn had walked a little ways off, starting what looked to be a wide circle around him. His eyes were to the room, and only incidentally to Rit. "I've already said more than I'm supposed to."

Rit reviewed their brief conversation, wondering what he could possibly be talking about. "Are you deliberately picking a fight with me?"

Nisstn stopped, his back to one of the concrete pillars. "It's worked before."

Was Nisstn trying to find out how human he still was? "I remember the circumstances of our last fight and how close I came to slitting your throat."

"Ulanda isn't approaching this situation any differently than she did Tennin's death."

Feeling her way through it, the same as he kept finding himself doing? *Waiting.* No. He didn't think so. "Is she staying on Alisim?"

"That's never been a secret."

"And the loom-master's take on this?"

"I wouldn't know."

"She told me she wanted to talk. The sense I make of it is that she's stalling for time. She's waiting to see how much of a difference the changed Altasimic pattern will make."

Nisstn stared at him silently. *When did you see her*, his expression asked. And answered. "You could be right," he admitted, shaking his head then resumed his inspection.

Nisstn stopped at the shutters on the far side. Shrunk in their frames, the wood panels allowed slits of light through. Rit joined him, then unfastened the nearest shutter and let it swing outwards. The wind slapped it against the one beside it. What he saw before him was the same view as he had from the library, the greater height making little difference against the scale of the mountains encircling the valley. The town was clustered on a rise to one side of the lake - against flooding, he thought. Fields and tilled ground took up what had been the bed of the reservoir. The level ground ended abruptly, the mountains rising like walls crudely painted with trees. The forest, scrubby at best, quickly gave out to bare rock and snow.

Waiting on the top of the dam, Rit had watched the sunrise over the mountains to the northwest, the relatively quick decent of the shadow line on the sloping outer face of the dam to the built portion of the manor, and the catchment lake. It was midmorning before the valley on the other side had sunlight, and only in

the last hour, had the leading edge reached the town at the foot of the dam. Dusk would come early.

Nisstin shook his head. "What a claustrophobic place to live."

"Lady Islil compared it favorably to the plains of Xinta."

"In what way?" The Warrior sounded amused, just that.

No, he sounded like a man who has learned how to wait on events, and who had little expectation of being able to understand them when they did happen. Patience, even wisdom rode the words. Rit felt both like they were blows to his solar plexus, felt them like a physical violation.

React damn it.

Nisstin's words to him when the two of them had been standing on the cobblestones in the courtyard in front of the Assembly Hall at the Holding. And he wanted the same from Nisstin, if for different reasons. Or not reasons. The anger didn't follow any rules of logic he knew of. He forced himself to unclench his fists. "The vastness..." And to force the edge from his voice. "... the scale, of either place, makes it easy to believe in your own insignificance. So, you create gods and mysteries to explain or to justify your existence."

Rit had the sudden sense of the land in front of him as though it was a tapestry in the process of being woven. The dam was a crescent shape at the base, cream wool as it must have come from the sheep, with twigs and grass seeds embedded in the matted fiber. It took little to see the weaving: the raw fleece finger combed, the rough roving twisted between thumb and forefinger, no more than a palm width at once, then looped through the warp threads.

And the town... even at the angle that showed mostly rooftops, he saw the structures in more detail than he had first noticed in daylight with just his eyes. Steep thatched roofs... in the tapestry, the weaving was the same dried grass, slivers of it wrapped and tied about the threads, each bundle of stems distinct. The rubble infill between the squared off wooden beams that framed each structure... his view was vastly foreshortened, but still he could see it perfectly: flax and brown wools, all natural, And silk the colour of butterflies on an alpine meadow - the wood was carved in simple geometric shapes and painted, red and blue and green. Simple, unshaded colours, but aged by the elements. And layered, old to new, to newer, ages of the same design, the same palette.

Below the town, bordered by the inner face of the dam - the crescent of wool - was the lake. Silver in the sunlight, and silver wire in the tapestry... he looked down, leaning out. The water directly below him tasted of silver in the same way a breeze coming off the ocean does of salt.

"Your intentions?"

He straightened and turned towards the voice. And had more of the sense of the look-master this time, the place of her, and knew she wasn't actually here with him any more than she had been the other three times he had spoken with

her. The perspective for the tapestry had been hers, he realized. Her ship was directly above, but so high that if a passenger on board could reach out and touch the world, the mountains would be little more than a rough texture against their fingers.

"I not sure I have any," he said.

"I'm willing to listen while you explore your options."

Despite clearly seeing the floor, the ceiling and the walls, the tapestry image persisted in his mind, almost as though the cloth was a gauze curtain he could see through, but not brush aside. As he had turned to see the loom-master, the perspective had changed, but still centered on the dam and with the warp always in the same direction. The world-altar, he realized. If the threads were tied off anywhere, it would be at the world-altar. And the other end? Or did the loom encircle the globe?

"Listen to what?" he asked. "To what end?"

"What end do you see?"

"Can I match the changes to the world-pattern?"

"No."

He was relieved not to have that particular decision to make. An Empire Priest. Like Panntin. Would he have said no, when he knew the consequences? "Can Ulanda match them?" he asked. "And others of my blood? Panntin?" When the Piltsimic didn't answer immediately, he knew there wasn't going to be an answer. Not yet.

She repeated her question. "What are your intentions?"

Was she trying to force a decision on him? He shook his head, willing her to see the same thing he had in her. No answers. Not yet. The connection ceased to exist.

Nisstin was watching him. "Well?"

"I thought this space would be suitable for the meeting."

"It's a little bare."

"Some rugs, some chairs..." Rit sat on the ledge he had been leaning against earlier while looking out, the open air at his back, the sun burning into the tunic he wore. Hot silk and damp stone. A dichotomy of scent. The idea of having the meeting on or near the roof had been Kori's. "Do the furnishings matter?"

The other man crossed his arms. "Not to me."

It was a fair imitation of Captain Slicannin's voice. "How is the Captain?"

"Quin'tat said that she's keeping herself scarce."

"She told me she was going home to have babies." Nisstin only shrugged at the comment, but the look on his face made Rit laugh. "I guess you had to be there." He stood. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"You can."

Enjoying the freshness of the cool air, Ulanda sat as close as she could to the outer edge of the waist-high sill, stopping with the feel of the energy barrier crawling against the skin of her face. Although only late afternoon, the mountains to the south and the vast bulk of the dam itself cast an early twilight over the area. What sky could be seen was cloudy, only the leading edge directly above touched by the sun.

Located in the northwest side of the manor, near the top, the room was directly over the catchment lake, and the sound of falling water - both the waterfall and its echo from the rocky outcroppings opposite - was a constant backdrop. A fine mist wet the side of the building and moistened the air, cooling it further.

A breath of water scented air sent the gauze curtain ballooning into the room then died back. Earlier, Eunni had had the heavier draperies tied. The warding slowed the airflow, making the room stuffy. The suite had been gone over by the loom-master's people, and warding, like a skim of translucent blue plaster over the walls, was a part of the tight security. The manor could crumble about them and this space would remain as it was.

Alwir looked up from her sewing. "Lady, do wish your shawl?"

She shrugged, disinclined to think about it. Alwir left and returned with a plain black wool wrap.

"Nothing else seemed as though..." the aide began, speaking in Ri-native, her voice soft with apology as she motioned to the Xintan tunic and pants Ulanda wore.

"This will do fine," she said in the same language, and the woman quickly arranged the shawl over her shoulders, hesitating again at sorting the tassels that had become tangled with her braid ends. She nodded her reassurance, wanting to make this period of adjustment go faster, then looked back into the room to where Eunni was curled up in the overstuffed armchair, reading. Alwir had been kneeling on the floor beside the chair, sewing a drawn thread handkerchief.

"May I get you something?" Alwir asked, still hovering. "Perhaps some tea?"

Wrapped in a warming cloth, the last pot of tea sat untouched on tray on the floor, not on the table. Alwir had appeared at a loss of what to do with the piece of waist-high furniture.

She had a sudden vision of years of pots of tea, each occupying the same improbable space, each Alwir at a loss of what else to do. And all of it - shawls and tea and all the meaningless minutia of daily life - as a trap she would never escape.

Bolda walked into the room and Alwir retreated, leaving him to join her at the window. "Did you want tea?" she asked him. "Or is it a cording loom you need?"

He glanced at Alwin who was back kneeling beside Eunni, head bowed, her eyes to her sewing.

Ulanda laughed. The aide was considerably more anxious around Bolda than around her. "If you're not ready to play at being my House Weaver, then give me the security report Nisstín hasn't."

"He said you wouldn't take it."

"Just tell me if there is any change in the settings."

"No. The only places our own warding has grown into the infrastructure is here and the viewpoint."

"And Rit's?"

For an answer, she was again offered the security report, and this time, took it. More details, including that the Spann-style warding points set by Kori had not only survived their being placed in an Empire system, but had actually grown. And were proving more resilient to the effect of the iron than loom-master's.

As for their own system, they focused on her for here, and Garm for the viewpoint, with nothing substantial elsewhere. She was stretched too thin, and despite her connection to Altasimic pattern, nothing seemed quite real enough. Strange places, people she didn't know. And two she did know, who she couldn't count on. Three if she included Eunni, and she should.

Ulanda leaned her head against the frame of the window. The warding responded and her hair moved as though the slight breeze cared only for hair. "Have Wiccin set the points this time. Allow him..." What difference prompted her to suggest the Zimmer? His sympathy for what Rit represented? Or was it his response to Rit instinctive and only Kori who commanded his sympathies? Regardless, the freeborn Zimmer pilot had taken the Alisim Temple oaths - which might provide a connection to the other two that she needed. "Let him do whatever he thinks necessary, and keep the loom-master's people off him."

Bolda nodded slowly. "It's an idea."

"It's an order."

Eunni looked up from her book for the first time. "Instead of limiting what might happen, why not push it wide open?"

With the woman's words, she felt Niv's focus through the Net. As a demonstration of her willingness to actually abide by at least one of the points she had already agreed to, he was on the loom-master's ship, not in the manor. His connection to Cassa would have been included in Quin'tat's report. "Isn't that what I just did?" she asked him on her own behalf. If not wide open, she had introduced more latitude.

And had Niv return a subtle answer that didn't require words: indulgence as you might a favorite child who is unlikely to get themselves into serious trouble if only watched.

"Did he mean you or me?" she asked Eunni as she released Niv's answer.

"If he means me," Eunni said, "I can be watched just as easily from anywhere in this manor. I believe Lady Islil mentioned a tour..."

Bolda snorted as he shook his head. "Before you make stupid decisions, take the security report."

"I'm no threat to the loom-master, and certainly not to..."

Ulanda cut her off with a sign of Closure. Where she leaned against it, the warding sparked, fed other nodes as the energy flared once around the room, then settled as the system compensated.

With her hands making a shape of formal apology to her, Eunni asked Garm though the Net: "Will you come rescue me?"

Around the question, the meeting room formed. Deserted but for Garm and Quin'tat, the two discussing points of protocol and seating arrangements. "You won't learn patience without practice," Garm said to Eunni, then cut the lead.

Eunni let her book fall face down on the floor as she stood. "Lady, if you'll excuse me."

Ulanda waved her allowance to Eunni's back as she left the room. And in the Net, confirmed the limits on coming and going that had been set earlier. Eunni wouldn't be able to leave this cluster of rooms.

Careful to keep a finger between the pages the book had fallen open to, Alwin picked it up and slipped in a length of thread to keep the place. "Lady, I know she understands the situation, we've spoken of it, but she's..." The book still in her hands, the aide made a motion of apology much as Eunni had a moment earlier. And seemed to realize it as she unsuccessfully hid a small smile. "Impatience, if I may use the word, appears to be a common attribute of your species. It might help if I talk with her."

"To offer tea perhaps?"

This time the smile lit the Ri woman's face. "Perhaps."

"Give her some time to work it out first. Then tea. I might have some myself at the time."

So, let her go.

She shook her head as though answering a question. She couldn't afford to loose her to Rit. She had too small an influence here as it was.

Only four days since Gennady had fled the Empire ships. Three days since the loom-master had started the cascade that was changing the world-pattern. Two days since some semblance of an agreement had been reached between her and Vivan. And, if Garm's hope carried through, only three days left until the portal opened again.

Using the node systems set by the loom-master, Ulanda let her mind float. Close by was Wiccin, the Zimmer reviewing the security system, slight changes growing outwards even from that much of a difference. And over a much wider base than she had appreciated from Nisstin's security report, were Kori's points within the node system. The shape was already familiar from the hybrid system at the Holding, especially in how they reflected the freeborn's mind, but different enough that the feel of them snagged her attention.

Spinning tops. Spann prayers. Caml't Temple in the diamond. Anga.

"Convince me that all of this will work," she said to Bolda. He had followed her into the Net, adding to what she sensed even as barriers against him - not her - snapped up all around. She felt him do something, and although the restricted areas still existed, on another level again, the system continued to open to them unimpeded. She couldn't match his expertise in this Net, so did what he couldn't: added Altasimic pattern. With her awareness in both, she felt for the first time how the loom-master had structured the Net system to compliment, even support, the world-pattern. To help? Or the further restrict Rit?

From the loom-master came a message like a spreading stain: declarations of intent, specifically the points settled between them so far.

She countered with: "All we have is an agreement to talk." And what had been acted on - Niv remaining on the ship, for one - was simply acknowledgement that a mutually satisfactory resolution might just possibly be reached.

With her response, rode another interpretation. From Kori's share in the system - and to a lesser degree, Wiccin's: "All this is, is an exploration of possibilities."

Throw it wide open.

Words to concept to action, and with those senses not defined but still limited by the body, she felt the rapidly receding dual structure of Altasimic world-pattern and Net as no more than a local event, a convenience of description.

Freedom.

And in how many ways did she have to say no?

A parquet floor in shades of brown. Green silk walls with a subtle stripe. The windows were shuttered and there were no lights, but the room wasn't dark: sparkles of pale luminous green reflected layer on layer by the crystal bands in the reeds lit the space with tiny diamonds of light. In the cold, still air, hung the scent of lavender. And music, seemingly coming from every direction. Ci-ci drums. And a flute, very faint, very soft.

When she had been here before, she had worn soft-soled brocade slippers to match the formal black robe, and the scratch of the robe hem against the parquet had been louder than her footsteps. Now, as she turned, her boots sounded hollow on the bare floor. There were no rugs of any kind, or furniture, or books.

And no bird traced in silver wire on the wall. And no door leading to Simquin Hall, or to the bedroom, or to whatever room there had been on the side opposite.

By the conventions of Empire's Unity, three things imposed structure on a Priest's access to pattern: training, the world-pattern itself, and the death of the vass'lt as an anchor.

Any and all agreements with the loom-master hung on that last.

Once, in this room, she had been within moments of killing Garm, and having that vass'lt. Having that grounding in Empire.

Even as she tried to add each of the missing elements to the bare room, she felt herself slipping away. Limits - of her body, of time, of what she could survive - crashed down around her and once again, she was sitting on the windowsill overlooking the ridge opposite. Bolda was still next to her, leaning against the wall now. "Is her error irreversible?" she asked him.

"Give me some particulars."

Particulars? The scent first. Lavender, the scent in the robe of Cassa's that she had worn for those few hours in Garm's rooms, and a few more in the diamond. And the colour. Then the feel of the stem of lavender, the texture of the cording the Trill'kon dresser had brought with the Empress' robe.

In the cup of her hand, was a stem of lavender, the flowers barely dried, not yet brittle. She held it out for Bolda to take. Before the changes in the Altasimic world-pattern she hadn't the control to deliberately and substantially create an object like a flower. Except that with all her newfound control, she couldn't hold onto a simple image of a room. In a few words, she described what she had seen. And repeated: "Is her error irreversible?"

Bolda flicked the lavender stem out the window then leaned both elbows on the sill. "Call them errors. Plural." He puffed his lips out with a sigh. "Shit."

"Was Niv one of them?"

He cast a sideways look at her. "You plan on sticking him in that room?"

"*That* room?" She touched her fingers to her nose. The scent of the lavender lingered. "I thought it was *your* room. And *your* robe." She had never seen it again, hadn't thought about it at all.

"It was just a room."

"Don't hide behind evasions. You know what I mean." Bolda's actions had put her there with Garm, and when the first attempt had failed, he no doubt had tried something else. *Explore the possibilities.*

At her giggle, Bolda gave her another sideways look then shook his head. "Vivan knows that one way or another, even with the best case scenario, you'll still be a Select."

"I'll be what Empire *allows*."

"If that was all, this would have been over a long time ago."

As long ago as a room with walls the same colour as Garm's eyes? Or a stone room she wasn't sure was from Anga or from Cassa? How many chances were left her? And how far along that different path she had first seen at the Opening could she go and still have what she wanted? "Are you saying I have free choice in this? Have you taken to burning black joss sticks alongside Kori?"

"It probably wouldn't hurt."

"Is she your daughter?"

He pushed himself upright and turned to her, a scowl on his face. "What now?"

"Vivan."

"Hell, I knew it wasn't Kori. Different reality, remember?"

"Do you have a daughter? Any children at all?"

For a moment she thought he wasn't going to reply, then: "No."

"They didn't trust you for that either, did they?"

It was a continuation of the questions she had asked him earlier about his family and the politics among the Piltsimic weavers, and she thought she might get the same response, but he shook his head. "No, they didn't."

"I'm sorry." Pulling her shawl closer over her shoulders, she looked out the window. Razor thin lines of crystalline blue flashed here and there amidst the dark green and gray - appearing like slashes and dots between the trees - then died to red afterimages. A few moments later, another flash, twenty feet or so over from the last one.

Placement showed many more warding points than the few thin columns of blue that were visible. For a short way, the points were set along a path that crested the ridge instead of going around it as the road did. She didn't remember seeing it on the flight here.

As suddenly as she had found herself in the closed green room, she was on a hillside, widely spaced trees around her. From nearby she heard the sound of flowing water, and much further away, a waterfall. The path was stones, dirt, and coarse tufts of grass, the leaves and stems broken. In the distance, the dam was a gray mass, a line of yellow lights high up, then an even narrower line of sunlight at the very top. The sound of the waterfall was coming from that direction.

Bolda was beside her still, Alwin stood about where she had been sitting when this was still a room in the manor. Lacework still in one hand, the fingers of her other flashed a sign: acquiescence.

Pulling at one long earlobe, Bolda grunted, then winked at Alwin. "I've seen that said before. Didn't turn out well at all." Then to her: "A pattern pull?"

She didn't smile at his joke. Kalin again, and the first time they had met. She probably deserved it for pushing him about Vivan. "No, I don't think it is." Or, if it was, it was so close to what was real as to meld seamlessly with it. Unlike what

had happened with Sarkalt, Niv and Garm at the Holding, this time, she thought she could walk the mile or so and find herself at the real Istarom Manor.

A noise from behind her and Ulanda turned. Eunni was perhaps thirty feet away down the slope, the trail between them, packed dirt and rocks. The wrong direction if direction and distance here had any relationship to the manor. A broken tea bowl was at her feet.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked Eunni. "You wanted to leave, and now you have."

"I haven't left," Eunni said. "I'm still with you."

Familiarity lent some protection, the world-pattern, especially the changed world-pattern, lent even more. But nothing just then could keep her from seeing in Eunni what she had first sensed. "Look at the path."

Eunni looked around her. "What about the path?"

She shook her head. "So literal."

"What about the path?" Each word separate and almost shouted. "Bolda?"

He just shrugged.

In Ulanda's hand was a stem of lavender. She let it fall then ground it into the dirt with her boot. "The path reminds me of you," she said, looking back to Eunni. "Both so filled with purpose."

Eunni turned away and walked a few paces before stopping. Without looking back, she said: "You're waiting for Rit to die."

A different room. Closely dressed stone, a diffuse, even light. It wouldn't take shape even as she willed it to. If the two room, this and Garm's in Palace, described possible end states, she apparently had lost the one without gaining the other. Would it depend on what happened with Rit? And if he was excluded from the world-pattern as seemed likely? "If that's what happens," she said to Eunni. If the woman heard her, there was no sign.

She watched Eunni descend the path then vanish behind brush and rocks. "Where does the path go?" she asked Bolda.

"Joins up with the road. It's about half an hour's walk to the manor."

Would Rit's death be a resolution within the limits of the Unity? If she understood what had happened at the Opening, his death then would have been. A different vass'lt. Altasimic, not Simic.

Or Piltsimic. And now? There was a gap in what in Quin'tat knew of the opening and therefore a gap in what Vivan knew.

"That's not what I meant," she answered Bolda.

"Then say what you mean. Being literal has advantages."

"How can I be anything but literal? All my words have been supplied, everything I've uttered since the ships arrived has been in Empire's context."

"They hope."

"Sometimes, I hope."

"Do you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes. Perhaps now." She looked back to where Alwin stood. "I want more than what's being offered."

Alwin bowed. "Lady Priest, that's understood. As Master Bolda indicated, if you didn't, this would have been over by now."

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By the time Rit walked out of the meeting room, the remainder of what had been the viewpoint was being set up for refreshments. Several long trestle tables covered in linen and lit by glowglobes were end to end in the center. So far, there were more servants and security people than guests. The guards were a mixed lot: Xintan, local and Empire, all of the later human looking, and each faction keeping to themselves.

He caught sight of Alicia at the opposite end from the meeting area, closer to the stairs leading down to the Great Hall. Talking to her uncle, she didn't see him watching and he had no sense of her in the Net. In one of her hands was a crystal goblet, the other briefly touched her uncles' arm, then her head dropped and she looked away as though what she had to say was too intimate for eye contact.

The columns supporting the roof of the dam cut the light of the setting sun into narrow slices, and as he watched, Alicia stepped into one, the light flickering as people closer to the windows passed. In the uneven light, the silk of her Hegemony-style dress was as luminous as a sunset. As she turned, she saw him and waved, the bracelet of silver and emeralds on her wrist sparking. And more: suddenly he could feel the metal, and as suddenly, feel her.

"I'm on my way back to our suite," he said through the Net.

"Not yet, you're not," she replied through the same means. And added a plea for simple manners.

He shrugged but didn't leave and she walked over to meet him, Camuit's arm in hers.

"Are you sure I'm not interrupting anything," he asked them.

A small bow from Camuit. "Not at all."

Camuit's face had shrunken, the skin wrinkled and yellowed and there were deep furrows across his brow. His hair, close to the scalp in the Heg military style, had thinned, the colour little different than the skin showing underneath.

Rit remembered him from the viewpoint of a man used to rougher living than in a Noble House manor; he wasn't sure he would have recognized him out of this context, and saw the same searching look directed back at him.

Alicia pressed her goblet into his hand. "I didn't think you would be finished this soon."

Just water, but the blocker made his mouth dry and he drank several mouthfuls before speaking. "Ulanda wasn't there, just Garm at his worst."

"Do you want me to try to talk to her?"

"If you wish." Another swallow finished the water. "You look dressed for a party."

She glanced at her uncle, then back to him. "I told you this morning."

Camuit captured two glasses of wine from a passing servant and handed one to him. "The wedding reception."

"Oh." He'd forgotten.

Alicia took the wine glass from him. "And you shouldn't drink. Not if you don't want to fall on your face. You are expected to be there."

Camuit spoke into his wine as he raised his glass. "She hasn't changed."

"How mean to say so. I was a terrible, bossy child." Her tone was indulgent.

Camuit almost, but not quite smiled. "Yes, you were."

Alicia did smile, dimples in her cheeks then turned to him. "Come with me. The two of us...?" She didn't finish the sentence; his expression must have answered her. Then: "Uncle, would you look after him?"

Camuit watched her leave. "Definitely hasn't changed." Then faced him, the appraising look still on his face. "Do you need watching?"

"No."

Camuit drank most of what remained of his wine with a single draft. "I preferred it when I knew who the enemy was. Aspier doesn't even know yet that events have overtaken him, does he?"

"I assume you mean the ex-lord Aspier."

A thin smile finally broke what had looked to be a permanent scowl. "I could probably mean both."

"Which do you consider yourself a guest of? Father or son?" Even as he said the words, he lost interest in hearing the answer.

Another swallow finished the wine, and Camuit raised the glass to signal a servant. "I've been told... by the North Marshall no less... that I can have my holdings in Endica back without prejudice or having to give guarantees. Did you arrange that minor miracle?"

He shrugged. "At best, only indirectly. You might ask Alicia how it came about." The move would give her back what could be given back of her home. Was it on Ulanda's orders?

"And you?" Camuit asked.

His mind had drifted. And him, what? He shook his head. "If you'll excuse me." And to Alicia through the Net: "Would you take care of this, please."

Camuit grabbed his arm as he turned to go. "Do I get my wife and children back too? Can you do that?"

Through the Net from Kori, not Alicia: *he's unarmed*. And that seemed to be that. She at least, didn't think he needed looking after if it came down to fists. "Let go of me," he said, keeping his voice calm.

Camuit didn't let go, but he did lower his voice to a throaty rasp. "Islil said you called yourself a god." The intensity of the emotion tore against the limits of what neural blocker remained in Rit's system from that morning. "People, people I can trust, said you were you with the Xintan troops that took Endica. Oh, not with the first assault, you wouldn't be put at that much risk, but that... that you were at the manor when it fell. Tell me, how was my sixteen year old daughter? Did you rape her too?"

Sometimes I think I killed her. Panntin's words. And from somewhere: she drank their blood from my hand.

Camuit hadn't waited for an answer. "You killed Gannett to make sure Alicia knew she had no other option than to marry you. What would you do to keep from..." All the people around them seemed frozen in watching. Camuit drew his hand back, the motions jerky, his fingers still clenched. "What would you do for a chance to live after seeing that? Would you even marry your worst enemy?"

He felt Alicia in the Net, only watching, and realized she had been all along. "Was that how it was?" he asked her. And knew it might be the truth no matter what she had actually said to her uncle, or might say now.

But she was there, in person, one hand on her uncle's still raised fist. With infinite gentleness, she lowered it, then both hands holding his one, shook her head. "I've heard you deal diplomatically with enemies before, including the Xintan after a Border skirmish where lives were lost. And here too. You spoke civilly to the North Marshall."

"This is different." Camuit's eyes never left his.

She had put herself between them. "Yes, it is different, but not because of what you're accusing him of. Uncle, he wasn't there." Camuit looked puzzled. He would know about the Net, Rit realized, but wouldn't have had time to fully appreciate that Alicia's attention had never completely left them.

Through his security lead from Kori: a party of people including Lady Islil and Roland were on their way up the stairs.

"Alicia," he said, "it doesn't matter." And from the look on her face, wished the words hadn't been spoken. *Matter just now*, he had meant, and knew those were as damning. He shook his head, setting the room spinning. The need to get out of there was becoming overwhelming. Taking the privacy the Net offered, he said to her alone: "Unless you want worse, I suggest you get him somewhere he can pull himself together." And out loud: "Please, we can talk about this later." And to Camuit, gave just a nod.

He watched as Alicia managed to get Camuit started down the stairs past Roland and the others with no more than a minimum of polite greetings. He didn't think he could manage even that much himself, and decided the roof would do for some air. He could always retreat to his suite by means of the hidden stairway.

He turned and was face to face with Ulanda. Behind her wasn't the reception area and the stairs leading to the roof, but solid appearing trees, dark against sunset-touched clouds. And barely visible warding, more a texture than any real sense of the blue crystal colour, but still complete. The landscape didn't fade, his sight of it closed like a lens does, not a door.

Was she actually here? He had his answer as the security leads found her, flashed, then died, all but those portions Kori had set.

The first challenge?

That was from her. As the security systems regrouped, he signed a formal greeting. "Lady Priest."

"I understand you won't talk to my representatives." She folded her arms, her braid ends floating. There was the scent of bracken from her as though a part of where she had been had come through with her. Or she had been walking through ferns. Her boots and below the knees of her Xintan pants were streaked with reddish mud. More than at any time he had ever seen her, even at the Mound that first night, she showed her breeding. Bluestone. "And to me?" she added in old-tongue.

He got the words in translation through the Net. Inclusive. "Any talk I'm capable of seems inadequate to that. As for the other, I no stomach for genocide."

She had been looking past him, to Roland, Milla and his grandmother, the three of them and several others, standing at the top of the stairs. Returning to him, her eyes narrowed. "You mistake yourself. You mistake me."

If he had a choice not to follow her, he didn't know how to take it. Early evening at the world-altar, and allowing for the time difference and the relative flatness of the land, it was now. Time didn't remain steady however, and the sky darkened rapidly. In what seemed like moments, he was looking up at stars, their light rippling as though the skin of atmosphere around this world was the surface of a pond and his awareness, rising water. Altasimic pattern was there - the world-pattern began there - but it wasn't alone.

Feeling this through her, let him know a little of what he had lost, even if he didn't fully understand it. Desire for that kind of power... ambition. *The man I knew has none.* Eunni had said that... when? To Ramsini? She wouldn't have meant this at any rate.

He lost the question as a small portion of what he and Ulanda shared twisted around and through the world-pattern. The bird opened its long beak and gave a shivering cry into the night. And the rise of water became flame.

And stopped as he found his attention back to the here and now, but with the air shimmering in lines and circles, the room drawn in fire the colour and scent of blood and the temperature of absolute cold.

More blocker? That memory wasn't his. Simitta.

"Where did you get it?" Ulanda asked.

"Get what?" he said, confused.

From Alicia through the Net: "I gave it to him."

The blocker, then. And Bolda had given it to his wife before they had left for Wilni. To keep him sane? Or to keep him from mounting an effective opposition?

"Or to gain time," Ulanda said.

"Get out of my head."

She smiled, and made a half turn and back, her eyes sweeping the room without appearing to settle on any one thing or person. "I can taste the wine your wife wouldn't let you drink."

Around them, the warding was changing to energy pathways of a kind Rit had never sensed before. All the nodes, even those that moments before had held the Net, were engaged. As though he was copying Ulanda's steps, he looked around again. Quin'tat, who he had last seen in the meeting, was near one of the banquet tables. There was no sense that he controlled the warding, besides, there would be specialists to handle the systems. *Two rogue Priests and neither predisposed to kill you.*

"Should he count on it?" he asked Ulanda.

"So, you're talking to me after all."

"As inclusive as that?"

"I am here to talk... you do know that."

"I'm sure I don't."

"I want..." She nodded past him to Lady Islil, a motion the elderly woman took to mean that she and the others should join them. "Words... your words or mine, you know they aren't important. What you've shaped here... the people, the place... what are they saying?"

With a sharp tap of her cane on the floor, Lady Islil announced her arrival. "All the protocol I learned as a girl and since doesn't tell me what kind of greeting I should give a god."

"Few people do greet them," Ulanda said, but her attention was towards Milla, not Roland's grandmother. Milla appeared as transfixed. "They simply make demands."

Roland looked to him, then back to Ulanda. He bowed. "Lady Priest. Welcome to Istarom."

Finally, Ulanda's attention left Milla. "Thank you Lord Aspier. Lady Islil, I understand you offered a tour."

That should please the loom-master's security, Rit thought.

Islil stamped her cane against the floor again. "Indeed." Then to him, the Aspier smile softening the stern line of her mouth: "Should it be to the fire in the Hall again? Are you ready for another great long stare?"

"Did he?" Ulanda laughed. "And what did he say he saw in the flames?"

The elderly woman shook her head slowly as though in regret, but if anything, the smile had grown. "Didn't."

"What did you see?" Ulanda asked him.

Was this all a game to her? Her tone said so. "A mining road a few dozen miles from here. And you." Her expression didn't change; she still looked amused. "You told me that my death was only slowed, not stopped. I thought those words were plain enough."

Her fingers made a sign he took as being a protest, the braid ends barely moved. Head cocked to one side, speaking to Islil, she said: "He makes too much of those kinds of words."

"Men do," Islil said, then nodded to her grandson. "*His* father does."

Rit made a motion similar to Ulanda's, and found his fingers knew the shape. High formal. "And the stone room? Do I make too much of that?"

"There's only what we make between us." Ulanda's fingers made another shape, or part of one, all the heavy braiding would allow. "Do you know what this means?" And when he said no: "You saw it once."

Just then, either from her, or from simple memory, he did remember. The start of Panntin's Initiation. "I saw a young man have his hands held in place to make that shape."

It must have been his own memory, and faulty, because she shook her head. "A similar gesture. A mirror gesture. *And* the defining action here. Nothing else is important. Don't make the mistake of making too little of it."

Had the Bluestone Warrior turned vass'lt made that shape with his hands? As far as he understood, the complex Empire hand languages were used to show what the speaker intended in a way that both complimented and was more visceral than the spoken equivalent. Initiate and vass'lt. *Mirror signs*, Ulanda had said. *Stone and flight*. Around him the air shivered to the sound of wild laughter. Cassa. "One life for many?" he asked. "Or is it one for one? Would it stop what the loom-master is doing with the world-pattern?"

All trace of the coquette vanished. Had she sensed what he had? "Wouldn't you?" she asked.

"What? Which?"

"There's no difference. It's already happened."

"I don't see it."

"And what do you see?"

Afterwards, when first trying to put the images together - to sort what he had seen into some kind of sense - he thought Ulanda had said the words, but concentrating harder, realized Lady Islil had.

Enough was what he expected that he thought he was back in the image he had first seen during the Opening: stone blocks, set without mortar, a closed space. But, as he stepped backwards, it was a different room that formed around him. To his right was a low door of unpainted wood, the planks held by rusted iron bars. Behind him the wall opened in an arc to the water outside, the surface obscured by a thin drifting mist. There were trees along the not-too-distant horizon and above them, a slice of sky as pale as the mist.

He was in a boathouse, space in the single berth for a fishing skiff, not larger, and from the smell, it was off a river or lake, not the ocean. As his eyes adjusted, he could see further into the closed end of the room: coils of rope, several wooden barrels of the kind used for storing wine, but with their tops sawn off. Leaning against the back wall were a dozen oars. Above were planks laid over heavy cross-timbers to make a flat roof.

Expecting at each step for the vision to fade, he walked towards the water. A boat had docked there recently, the side of the berth freshly scrapped as though the person at the oars had underestimated either the size or the speed of the craft.

The flooring extended beyond the boathouse to make a pier, the far end vanquished by the mist. He ducked through into the open, then walked along the pier, barely able to see the wood directly under him, but strangely unconcerned, his mind taken up by the clomp of his boots against the wood and the sucking sound of the water against the piles.

Dense forest surrounded him, deciduous along the shore, evergreens further away, a green-black swath coating a rise of land that didn't quite become a mountain. High in the otherwise bare crowns of alder were a dull gold scatter of leaves, but the others, anonymous with distance and the season, were vertical gray and black lines growing out the mist tangled brush. Either the lake was very small, or this was a cove of a larger body of water. He could have thrown a stone half the way to the further shore. Part of a larger lake, he decided. The pier would have been excessive for what he could see here.

He had no sense of 'where', but thought it might be early morning between first light and the true dawn. And he remembered feeling like this that first morning at the world-altar when all it was a sandy rise in the surrounding land, and a spring of sweet water.

Was the water here meant as a metaphor, he wondered? And was what he supplied to him by Ulanda or a creation of his own? "How is this important?" he said to the sky.

"Is what important?"

The question came from behind him. As he turned, some part of him expected it to be a trick, but even with the mist, who he saw beside the boat house had to be the man whose voice he had instantly recognized. Terreniti. Dressed in riding clothes, his father held the reins of a large bay, the horse draped with a gray blanket.

Rit started back along the dock. As he drew closer the mist between them thinned. He was being examined. The tailored court jacket in Strom brown and blue, the hair braid that was the only acknowledgment of his Xintan heritage. "Are you alone?" he asked in Hegemony.

The man he saw would be in his sixties, and at that age Terreniti had been the King's Councilor for a decade or more. He wouldn't, couldn't, be riding alone. *In a vision he must have made up, or even one from outside himself, did reason govern what he saw?* And what place did reason have in a universe where gems and silver can become grass and flowers?

Still holding the reins, Terreniti put both hands on his hips. "Should I answer that?" he called in a so-familiar booming voice. "Are you an assassin?"

"If I was, would I say yes?" he asked in return.

Terreniti nodded at him, and from his words, meant the jacket. "You don't look Strom. Or are you a thief as well as an assassin that you'd be wearing those colours and that cut of cloth?"

Between the frustration of not knowing what was happening and the relief of being in this man's presence, vision or not, he only smiled, not laughed. "It's mine. And if I don't look Strom, it's because I'm told I resemble my father." Then looking around at the lake and trees, added: "Where is this?"

One bushy white eyebrow rose. "Where were you to get here?"

Along the side of the boathouse, the pier continued on to form the floor of a covered porch, the end butting against the slope of the land. The clearing didn't extend past the boathouse; alder trees shaded the building at the far end, the faded gold leaves in drifts across the roof and porch. Rit jumped the two feet down from the pier onto the gravel shore of the lake, his boots sinking several inches into the mud under the stones then he stepped onto firmer ground, the round stones making a grinding sound under him. "Are we going to ask questions back and forth until one of us tires of it?"

Terreniti's answering smile died as he gestured to Rit's hands. "That's an interesting ring for an assassin to have. Where did you get it?"

On the forth finger of Rit's left hand was the royal seal, the one he had given to Roland. Slipping it off, he held it in his palm, feeling the weight of the gold, then looked up. "You gave it to me."

Rit saw the *knowing* grow in the red-flecked eyes of the man standing before him. Letting the reins fall, Terreniti walked over. Freed, the bay gelding shook its

head, then followed along the edge of the clearing away from them, searching out the clumps of grass between the leaves.

"If I might extend the questions to one more, I wish to ask *where am I?*"

Rit passed the seal ring to him. "Where were you to get here?"

Terreniti examined it closely then passed it back. "Cilowt Province." He nodded towards the opposite shore. "That's the Catalli border there." Then after a longer, more searching look at Rit, added: "I take it we were successful."

"A single... encounter?" Terreniti smiled broadly, then barked a laugh, and Rit continued with: "Was there room to doubt your success?"

"Now, I don't claim to be infallible. Even in that."

And my mother? Who was she? There was a lifetime with that question unasked between them. Rit faced the water where a short time ago, a boat had pushed off and landed on the far shore, or rounded the bend of land that kept this small cove secluded. What had been the state of Heg-Catalli relations at the time of his birth? And with Xinta?

Around them, the light had reddened, the weak glow concentrated to a point just to his right, over the boathouse. He had his time of day wrong; it must be evening, roughly the same time as at Istarom. Or - and the thought startled him - the previous vision of the world-altar was blending with this one.

"You told me once that you had seen me looking back at you, through the blood-wind, you said. You were dying... I don't mean soon, a long time from now."

"A long time in both directions?" A pause, then: "Yes, I think so. And now, here I am again."

The shape of the light behind his father was the same as in the pattern that had resisted the fading of the other vision. And the same as the specks of colour in his eyes. Would it be night here as soon? Was he following a persistent change in time?

Terreniti's russet eyes were to his hands again. Rit looked down. The seal ring was gone. His fingers were entwined to make a shape he scarcely remembered. Mirror signs... which of the two was it? He stuffed both hands in his jacket pockets. "I don't know what to do next," he said.

Terreniti chuckled deep in his throat. "And thought I could tell you?"

"You started this."

"I was a party to it." Terreniti shook his head. "We talked about the future... your mother and I, I mean. A strange sort of foreplay, but any unfortunate on-looker would have thought us even stranger lovers as we each yielded our considerable dignity to posterity. The entire episode has been inconvenient all around."

"Who was she?"

"I didn't ask." An amused look. "Oh, I have a fair idea, but believe me when I say that her own sense of consequence was enough for her. She didn't need to impress me with names or titles."

"I'm half her."

"I suspect you are wholly what you were meant to be. I'd say that this..." He waved an arm around. "... has nothing to do with who your father is, or who your mother is. I can tell you that I'm here because I could never endure being a bystander to the only significant end. One of the curses of seeing the future, however imperfectly, is knowing the truth of ones own infamy." Terreniti turned his back to him and walked over the dock and sat. "You're so literal minded. Perhaps you aren't my son after all. Did she play me for a fool? I wouldn't be the first man to be so used, even the first Strom, I dare say."

"You know you weren't."

Another laugh and he answered a little out of breath. "No. Or, yes, rather. I wasn't. Tell me, how does the end of the world look to you?"

"Inconvenient." As he spoke the word, the world around him darkened.

"And did we win?"

His father's voice seemed to come from far away. "Win?" He took a step towards his father and the world dissolved. All that remained was the word echoing along the lines of fire superimposed over the corridor he was in. A moment to orientate himself and he realized he wasn't in the reception area any longer, but standing at the doorway leading to the Imperial Suite. Other than for a pair of Empire people on either side of the entrance, a man and a woman in identical uniforms, he was alone.

"Sir?" the man said with a deep bow, his eyes to the floor. "Our being here is a courtesy only, please..."

Neither of them had been there when he had left only an hour earlier. And there had been another change: the loom-masters node system now extended this far, strengthened in this case by a linking sphere attached to the woman's girdle.

He ignored them, and as he passed, neither person met his eyes. Just on the inside of the warped stainless steel door, Estran had worn a path through the fresh polish on the floor. "Sire, do you require a report?"

With that, he was dragged back the rest of the way into the world, and he gave the answer he knew he should. "Tell me the short version on the way."

There wasn't much - even Kori's report through the Net had little more. "I want you to join the Queen on the tour," Rit told the guardsman. "Check with Aspier's Guard, they'll know the direction they took."

He watched the man leave, then turned and went in. Willi was in the chair nearest the fire. Wearing a ball gown, but with the skirt bunched around her thighs, most of her legs were bare to the heat. On the floor next to the chair, was

a pair of leather dancing slippers. The dress was similar to what Alicia was wearing, but in a dark blue silk that showed off the girl's very fair skin. Around her neck, catching the red of the fire, was a fine gold chain, and in her ears, small gold balls.

As he entered, she looked up. Her eyes were red, the long dark lashes wet. "Why are you back so soon? I thought the whole idea was to talk. I thought you'd be..." The moment fractured as he lost her in the Net. "... in the kitchen? I'm sure she's really interested. That's just dumb."

He realized he could have told Estan exactly where to find the tour in progress. About to mention to Kori that she could have volunteered the information, he got from her instead: "I've allowed Willi to monitor the security system. Is this satisfactory?"

He gave a non-verbal allowance to the Zimmer, and kept his complaint out of it. The allowance was barely within what he agreed to for the girl, but he wasn't in the mood refine his admittedly vague instructions... and he shouldn't blame Kori for his own oversights. *Inconvenient?*

To Willi: "You have access only. Authority to change the security systems, not at all."

"I wasn't going to," Willi protested.

Kori was on the second floor of the suite handling the system through the Spann flitter crystals. In the upstairs landing, a small portion of the window over looking the valley had been removed and their flitter brought through in pieces that had immediately reassembled themselves. You had to squeeze around the sides of the craft to get to the rooms.

He pushed another of the stuffed chairs closer to Willi's, bunching the carpet between them. Tika, asleep on the cushion, woke and he picked the cat up and sat with the animal on his lap. With the softness surrounding him, the purring cat, and the heat of the fire on his legs, some of the tension that had been building faded.

Willi stood, brushed her skirt smooth, then bent to get her shoes. "This is entertaining. I might as well go."

"Go where?"

She straightened, a shoe in either hand. "The reception."

"I want you to help Kori to deepen the nodes."

"I can help her tomorrow."

From Kori came acknowledgement that help wasn't needed. "Now," he told Willi.

Expecting more argument, he was surprised when she left without another word. And moments later, as subtle as though it was a passing thought, came the image of Willi climbing the spiral metal staircase to the roof, full skirt gathered in

her arms so the hem wouldn't brush the steps. Net or pattern? Net, he decided. And from Kori.

"Fine," he said, mentally throwing his hands up in the air. And felt, again as subtly, a hint of song, or of scent. He let his mind open to the Net, absorbing anything to do with comings and goings. One instant in the system, then out. And took with him the knowledge that a contingent from the Holding was expected.

"Will Meeden be with them?" he asked Kori, wanting at least one clear explanation. What he got back was as fragile and passing as the first had been.

It is believed so.

And there were more important things than nodes. More important than tomorrows he wasn't sure would happen. Both of the recent visions had followed the same telescoped sense of time. And when did both end? Past midnight? There were still three days before the portal was due to open.

In the library, instead of the brandy he wanted, were several bottles of wine. He took the first at hand and was back in his chair, cat again on his lap, and half through the first glass, when Alicia arrived.

"Well?" she said from the doorway. "Are you going to get ready for the reception?"

He looked at her over the top of the wine glass. "No." Reaching to the side of his chair, he picked up the wine bottle, and topped his glass off. A sweet desert wine. He'd have a headache in the morning. IF there was a morning. "Would you like some?"

She nodded, and he passed her his glass then went for another. Sitting where Willi had been, she seemed content to watch the fire as he settled again. Tika had traded his chair for her lap, and Alicia rhythmically stroked the animal's fur with one hand, the wine glass in the other.

"How was the tour?" he asked.

She didn't look at him. "Short."

"Accepting the offer was the point Ulanda wanted to make."

Leaning forward, she tossed the wine into the fire and put the glass on the floor. "And what point did you make by leaving?"

He didn't know any more than he knew the meaning of what he had just seen. The truth? Had Terreniti been that man? And his memories of his childhood... did anything he remember contradict that vision? Or would any reconstruction of memory be contaminated? Or was only the timing important?

He took a sip of his wine, misjudged how full it was, and spilled some down his chin. He wiped the sticky drops off with the back of his hand. "I don't feel like obliging her."

Alicia turned in her chair to look at him. "She says..."

"What she says doesn't matter. She's..." Eating circumstance. Consuming him. As she would have in the spiral. With the thought, the distinction between the

dream-state spiral of the Opening and a real one of Panntin's Initiation, faded to an uncomfortable degree.

He stood quickly, swayed then steadied himself with a hand on the back of the chair. "It's almost funny that a victory one way or the other isn't something that most people will even notice."

"Then is it worth fighting over?"

His life. On his terms? "Is my death so inevitable?"

"Isn't all death inevitable? Unless you're a Priest."

She had used the Empire word for Priest. High formal. "Or a vass'lt," he replied, the last word, like hers, in High formal. Only a faint click of the tongue differentiated the two words. "Immortality." Another related word in a language he would have said he didn't know at all.

He gripped Alicia's wrist, the one where the emerald bracelet covered the oath tattoo. "Was your coming with me here from Wilni only to help gain Ulanda time to deal with the loom-master?"

"Is that what your Strom senses tell you?" Her tone was cold.

They told him damn little. "And why should it have to be all one thing," he said again then let her wrist go.

She stood. "I'm not the one doing this."

His sudden temper faded as quickly. No, she wasn't the one doing this. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't enough."

He spread his hands. "Then what is enough?"

"Come with me to the reception. Try."

Another choice. He shook his head. "I don't have anything to say that can't wait until morning."

"Fine." Alicia turned and walked out.

At the arm of dam where it curved to join with the side of the mountain, Rit stopped to sip the near-full glass of wine. He had left the empty bottle by the hatch door at the top of the hidden staircase from his suite.

With the next swallow, he toasted the stars overhead, backing up as though to win a better view, until his stumble over the uneven surface threatened to turn into a fall off the edge. He was wobblier than the few glasses he'd had should make him. The combination of wine and the remains of the neural blocker made his head feel like it was a massive balloon floating above a tiny body.

There was a guard post at this end, stacked concrete like the manor front, and probably built around the same time. Unmanned now, but for the warding. As he passed it, Kori's mark was prominent, but he recognized Quin'tat's signature and that of Alisim Temple. Wiccin, he thought and then wondered why the pilot would have been involved. He could be wrong and didn't dare check further in case he

set an alarm off. Left to its own devices, the ward didn't see him any better than the ones he'd already passed. He seemed to slip between what might be seen and what might be missed. Or, he simply didn't want to be seen, and simply wasn't. The blocker didn't seem to make a difference. He'd learned the trick while still in Endica and couldn't explain it any more than he could the sometimes-on, sometimes-off again, ability to be Zimmer.

And the sometimes-on of being human. One of the changed pattern lines twisted and caught him, an almost-match that mocked his earlier connection to the pattern. There weren't many of them that came that close, but they dragged some part of him too near an end he couldn't survive. He started to fall again, but managed to turn it into a sit instead, and only jarred his back. He even managed to set the wine glass down, only a mouthful or so splashed onto his hand. For focus, he kept his eyes on the glitter of glass and dark wine. Silver for stars and blue for the warding, minute ruby tainted rainbows where the cut crystal acted as a prism. For a long time, he couldn't breath. He still expected pain, could almost feel the alienation of his senses as a kind of pain.

Too short in the fiber... it won't take the kind of fiber matting this weave requires.

Bolda at the Mound... a Xintan Matron. Bolda had been speaking to a Xintan Matron about the weaving...

Silently, Rit started to laugh, rolling over, then curling up, holding his stomach when he couldn't stop. Cassa's weaver.

When he straightened, he inched backwards until he hit rock. The top of the dam had narrowed to less than ten feet wide and ended not much further along in a tumble of rocks.

Did he have goodbyes?

Where had that thought come from? Not goodbyes. A lack of hellos. He wanted Alicia asleep in their bed before he took to it. An hour? Or she could be back and sleeping already. He'd have to check with the Net or ask Kori eventually.

Goodbyes?

The thought was persistent at least. He had no feeling of Ulanda being near him, and despite his snagging one pattern line, no sense that any action was being directed against him. He felt as invisible as the warding found him.

And the timing of his being here? That thought he recognized. From the position of the stars it was only minutes from when both the earlier visions had faded. Pulling his knife from the sheath in his boot, he held it to the stars, turning it this way and that, looking for the sasi markings along the white ceramic blade that would make it an honor knife.

There was no transformation. He was very humanly confined to the body and mind and memory that honestly belonged to him. And the senses, Strom included. If he let himself notice, the fire of overpattern was all around, the same

as it had been since Ulanda and his shared version of the world-altar. And now? Just his, nothing of Ulanda that he could sense.

Bracing his left arm against a bent knee, he put the tip of his knife under the braid encircling his wrist. He hadn't removed it after leaving Endica, hadn't wanted to force the Xintan to take notice of the split between him and Ulanda. The oath band separated and fell away. The tip of the knife stopped against the fleshy base of his thumb, splitting the skin in a tear an inch long. Clumsy. The wine. The poor light. He thought about pouring the last of his drink into the wound to clean it.

Pain is a prayer.

That wasn't him. He hoped. With a hand sticky with his own blood and the sweet wine, he picked the glass up and threw it as hard as he could over the edge of the drop.

"It's not," he said out loud. "This isn't. Not a prayer."

He felt suspended, time as meaningless as the emotion that had made him throw the glass into the dark. The blood on his hand was drying, pulling at the skin. Half an hour? More? Above him, more and more in his consciousness, was the fire. The sky burned, cracked with explosions of sound, twisted as though the fabric of space would tear apart.

And still no sense of Ulanda. No battle over who lived and who died. No war of wills. No weaving in and out of who controlled what or whom.

Just the fire around him.

"What happens now?" he said to the night, the human night of wind-blown shadows and starlight.

Apparently nothing. If Ulanda was trying something, she was failing. And the loom-master... the world-pattern wasn't lethal to his kind. Not yet. He pushed with one hand to get up and only managed to skid his arm outwards with the hilt of the knife still in his hand. He had thought he'd sheathed it after cutting the oath band.

From the amount of pain, he'd managed to scrap the new scabs off the knuckles he'd skinned while climbing the rock face. He left the knife on the concrete and straightened.

And found the knife still in his hand, the tip pushed into the flesh of his other arm just under the oath tattoo on his wrist.

Pain is a prayer.

The fire around him echoed the unspoken words. He tried to let go of the hilt and felt the movement in his own flesh through the blade. Blood that seemed too cool ran down the slope of his leg, soaking the cloth.

He let go of the hilt. Again.

The knife fell, flicking blood onto his face. He was sitting in a pool of blood, much more blood than a small cut or stabbing wound would make.

Apparently reality followed its own course here.

His choice?

Freedom.

What use was freedom if he was dead? Suddenly, the reality of his death was everywhere. In the human night, in the stars, and in the pattern lines and in the fire, in all the lines of what he understood as probability. His sight fractured along those lines, growing smaller with each division, like following the branches of a tree to the tips.

"Do I know you?" he heard.

"No," he answered as he had before.

The wind moved in the branches like a song, Rit felt he could fall asleep listening. There wasn't much left of him now that was aware, he was sitting at the base of a tree, a pine like in the garden Ulanda had created at the Holding.

He was wading in water, clumps of reeds along the shore he was facing and thin grass beyond those. Trees in groves in the distance, shimmering from the heat, not the wind. They weren't pines, but looked more like poplars. It was stunningly hot.

"Do I know you?" The voice came from behind him. She was on a flat rock, sitting carelessly, one knee bent and held with her hand, the knee practically under her chin. Brown tunic and pants, boots the same color. A knife sheath was strapped to the scarred leather. Brown gloves covered her hands and went high over her wrists. She smiled. "Of course I do."

The water was sand, he was drowning in it. The dunes and a skin of moisture over top that he couldn't break through. The ocean was near, he could hear it coming from the sand in a slow rushing sound. He stopped struggling, still face down and holding onto the sand.

Water splashed, he'd slipped, his head was under the surface. Rit got up slowly, feeling for his balance and then shook like a dog. The water he spat out tasted of algae, warm as soup in the shallow where he stood and cloudy now.

He looked at his arm, the one the knife had cut. Unmarked skin. The tattoo was gone.

She wasn't looking at him but picked at a thread on her sleeve while humming tunelessly. He watched her for what seemed like a long time, watched until the water around him was clear, a quick settling of the sand, more gradual for the lighter particles. Cloudy water spread downstream slowly as it cleared. He couldn't feel the current.

All the things he could say. "Am I dead?" he whispered.

"Do you want to be?"

"No."

"No?" Cassa started to laugh and he cringed at the sound, expecting madness. But it was a laugh such as a woman would make to a lover, as gentle in part as it

was sad. "No, of course not" she said, lifting her head to look at him. Her eyes were Eunni's eyes as her laugh had been. "Everything you've done has led to me. Everything I've allowed to happen has led you to me."

When he didn't respond, she shrugged and looked away, her eyes going to the nearest stand of trees, grayish green against a backdrop of sand. "Do whatever you want, there's no difference."

"There is to me. Whatever happened on the roof, I wasn't there to kill myself. Was it your intention that I die there?"

A look back to him. "It's no difference to me."

"And Simitta?" he said, sitting heavily. His words sounded stupid, trivial, even as he spoke them. No difference. He took a deep breath, remembering the feel of the Zimmer's skin under his hand. "You were his god. Did it make a difference to him?"

She sighed. "What do you want from me? I don't have anything that you don't already have. How could I?" The white blade was in her hand; he hadn't seen her draw the knife. Sasi blooms showed along the bloodline as she turned the surface to catch the sunlight.

"I need to know what is possible. And if that does mean my death..." He shook his head. "I need a choice that doesn't include the kind of slavery that Empire means even with whatever difference Ulanda brings to the Unity. I need a choice that allows... people like me..." Like his son. "People like me to live. People like you... were." He stopped as white then red flooded his vision. He covered his face with one arm. Lavender in the cloth, burning hot from the sun.

She laughed again and the madness was as clear in the sound of her voice as it had been in her eyes the first time. "Ritsiniti, there's music in your name. Does your wife sing you in the bath?"

He blinked the sun glare away. They were at the center of a double spiral inside a Temple, a red touched night showing through the open dome above them. She was in a white robe streaked with blood. Darker blood showed in narrow curves on the cloth. She must have fallen, the spiral cuts where she sat were filled with blood. Two doubled rings, like strangely complex slices of a tubular seashell were cradled in her lap. Milky pink shell, red stained from her handling them. Wrist cuffs, he knew them from Panntin's Initiation. No Priest braids, no gloves and her hands and wrists were bare and unmarked by anything more than stains.

"Cassa?" He knew it was and wasn't sure at the same time.

"The night was very long," she whispered, looking for the first time to where he stood. A braided coil of hair had fallen around one ear. "And very cold. One ocean or another. One person or another. What does it matter?"

He wanted to hold her; she was freezing cold, her fingers shrunken and white with the cold. She wet pinched lips, frowning as she looked around. Puzzled, and turned the puzzled look to him.

The sky was a mounted emerald, set in clouds of silver. An ocean stretched out wide before him, an even richer color and more variable in hue, a molten gem. Pale sand and dune grass and small white flowers. Ocean, sky and sand, that was all he could see. Cassa was dressed the same as in the spiral, the blood on her robe darker in the green light, the white cloth as silver as the clouds. Her arms were crossed, hands hidden by the sleeves, he couldn't see her wrists.

"What's happening," he asked.

She looked at him. "The diamond."

What part of her was mad, he wondered. Any? Or just what he understood of what he saw and heard. "Kori called the diamond the egg of the phoenix, she said that the diamond means freedom." He used the tone he had before although she had changed again. She was open, she felt to him as though she was a hollow waiting to being filled.

She walked to the edge of the water before replying. A wave came to greet her, and left, lingering only as foam around the slight depression her feet made in the sand. The hem of her robe stuck to her bare legs. The breeze smelled of salt.

"I might have at that." She spoke to the water in its own voice.

He knelt on the sand, his legs wouldn't support him any longer. "You?"

"Now or later..."

"What?"

"Your life?" she asked. "Would you exchange it for Ulanda's? Or Kori's? Or Eunni's? Or Alicia's?"

No! he wanted to shout. Then to laugh the word except he thought that if he did laugh it would sound the same as hers had. "Is that the choice I asked for?"

She turned to look at him. "What would you do if you were me?"

What she had asked Niv. I don't have his sharp teeth, he thought wildly. What am I doing? "Where am I?" he asked.

"Wherever you want to be." She looked up and past him, towards the land. He already had once. Sand and clouds as though the land was wrapped in brilliant silver. He turned his head to look again. A square of white marble with veins of crystal spreading out from the center like the branches of a tree. He took a breath to ask something more and his mouth filled with thick air, he choked on the richness, peppery and hot. The sky was as suddenly lavender, and twin suns rose above the marble square to blind him. Wind in the reeds, in the branches, he lost the question in the howl of the wind.

"Home," the wind cried. And walls of dark stone - they rose all around him, he didn't think there would be an end to them. Snow on the wind, crystal ice over lavender stems, the reeds brittle. The light was dimming and still the walls grew.

"Am I dead now?" he shouted, reaching over the wind. The stones swarmed, snapping together unevenly, spikes of a growing wall shaped like teeth, like lips, he was being eaten by stone. A lunatic's castle of ramparts and towers and keeps. Building blocks: the first touched the base of the marble square.

"Home," the wind howled.

All around him, only the square was clear. The blocks moved, starting to rearrange themselves. Streams of building blocks, they flowed around the marble square like fast water does around a rock. But after each moment, there was less showing.

A stone room, a flash of blue.

His death at Ulanda's hands. Vass'lt.

It was going to happen, here, now. Six streams, a spiral of stone, with a center of rapidly vanishing white. There were no reeds, no grass, only black and white. He might have been falling but had no sensation of movement.

Was this the only option? Had he run across half a continent in a futile attempt to escape the inevitable? Was his death as Ulanda's vass'lt the only chance for life for his people? Was it the only antidote for what Vivan was doing to the world-pattern?

Or was this the alternative to his answering yes to Cassa's question. Would he give his life for Ulanda, or for Kori, or for Alicia, or Eunni?

It wasn't a question that should ever be asked, but always, always, the choice of a moment.

Would he?

Moment enough. "Yes," he said within his mouth, a breath of a word. The finality of it ran down his spine like fire crackling.

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The glowglobe faded until it was no brighter than the stars. Standing in the dark, Ulanda tried to feel what Rit might have. And felt only the lines of fire that connected everywhere in this world to the void at the center of the world-altar. And saw through Bolda's eyes the starlit night and a web of Net systems, and through those, in the ghost-image the Net could sense, Altasimic pattern and overpattern, both centered on the world-altar. The portal had opened two days early.

"And the result of the search?" she asked him.

"Nothing. He's either made it outside the search area or he's alive enough to decide he doesn't want to be seen. The trail of blood from here gives out maybe

twenty feet onto the mountain side." He bobbed his chin towards where Alicia stood. "How's she doing?"

Alicia was standing with Garm and Lady Islil at the top of the stairs that lead down to the reception area. Her guardsman was on her other side, had been so earlier too when the girl had been here, asking questions as stupid. "Your constant concern for everything other than what's important is a wonder."

Bolda snorted a laugh. "Ask yourself what's important to Rit."

Individuals could matter. And responses be independent of resolve or plan. And Rit gave out his 'concern' willy-nilly and without regard for consequences. "My being here is asking that question. Why the hell else am I at Istarom?"

"Just checking."

"That I haven't lost *my* ability to reason?"

"Or your bad temper."

"Which has to do with what?"

"With who's here."

She looked at him down her nose. "Is there someone missing? Why don't you enlighten me." Just then Willi climbed up through the hatch of the narrow spiral stairway that wound down through the concrete to the Imperial Suite, carrying something that the Net system refused to see. "Or is it one too many?"

Bolda pulled at one ear. "Your call."

Going to her knees, Willi put the fist-sized object on the concrete then folded back the covering. Eyes were enough: it was a large crystal. The girl did something else the Net couldn't see and the security systems clashed. Almost at once, they regrouped with the nodes outside the Imperial Suite as the focus, then separated, taking with them a new configuration, Kori's signature prominent on each.

A vague *something* at the back of her mind, vanished. Through the reformed Net system - with a sense of *allowance* - came a message from Alwin. The perimeter warding for her suite was down, apparently for good. Eunni had already left.

Another that was missing? Or be one too many? "Follow her," she sent back.

Bolda stepped away from her, waving his hands to the guards along the inner curve of the dam. "Clear a space. Move it!" As he spoke, the dark shape of a flitter rose from along side of the dam. As the craft pulled forward to land, the web eye blinked. It was in the first stages of setting up for a web jump.

Suddenly light flared above, blue-green, lasted scarcely long enough for the mind to register, then vanished along with the stars. Immediately overhead was a solid appearing black mass. There were no sides, just a too rapidly diminishing perspective. Space appeared warped. The only light was from the scattered glow globes.

And through the strange dark, came a sound too ordinary to be expected. Rain blown against a shutter. Or the patter of a sudden shower on the roof. Without thinking, her mind followed the sound out. Not water, but waves of energy pushing against the outside of the bubble-thin warding. Like a dance between rain drops, layers of the warding yielded, absorbing the energy as it died, feeding the power to other sections, more layers forming underneath, growing in from the sides.

It couldn't last. One breach and the system would collapse. Kori had the element of surprise, but she couldn't match one Empire ship much less the combined resources of three.

Reaching out with one hand, Ulanda traced a shape in the air much as Garm had done in the center of the diamond. She had the person, she knew the place. The traced area opened into the loom-master's ship, the center clear, the edges with as distorted a perspective as the further portions of the warding.

Vivan looked up. The attack stopped. "Our agreement stands," the loom-master said.

"Because I'm here? Or because you are?"

Willi had walked over to join her. Her patrol knife was slipped through the waist tie of her ball gown, one hand wrapped around the hilt. "Kori says it's less than an hour until the portal opening collapses." As she spoke, the girl edged around, apparently trying to see as much of the inside of the loom-master's ship as she could. "Kori says it's more than just the portal opening early and closing early. She says there's something wrong with the diamond."

Vivan's eyes followed the girl's constant movement.

Bolda grabbed Willi's arm. "Stay put. You're making me dizzy."

"Like I care."

"Then stay put so one of the guards you can't see won't kill you."

Ulanda motioned to Bolda to get Willi away from there then looked to the loom-master. "And what do your people say?"

Vivan got up and walked towards her, stopping at where the ship ended and the roof of the manor started. She waited until Bolda had handed Willi off to a guard then waited again until it was apparent he wasn't going to rejoin them. "Let it go," she said in a soft growl.

And accept what was being offered?

Letting it go would be as simple as taking a step onto the ship and letting the portal dissolve behind her. Once, she had thought she had had all the time needed in which to take that step. All of a sudden, that moment was as much the present as where she stood now. The diamond. Garm standing in front of the portal that lead back to Palace and Sarkalt. Bowls of soup and the flowered rug. Fragments of Temple Net. Shouts. And the seconds counting down to the inevitable.

And here? Now? What was as inevitable?

Niv was beside her. Had he been then? Of course not, but chance and circumstance were as mutable as memory made them.

And Niv had given Cassa his answer.

Towards the world-altar, Altasimic pattern sparked against its older echo in the overpattern rising from the open portal to the diamond. And different again from what she could sense all around her.

In the diamond - through the diamond? If the diamond was damaged past it being able to reshape reality from what Gennady had had created, she wouldn't be an Altasimic Priest. Gennady would have had no interest in having Poss a'ltic change Altasimic. And Rit would be an Altasimic Priest, a rogue, but at least with a buffer against the overpattern consuming him. If he was alive.

There was movement past them. Then shouts. Roland. Leaving Garm by the stairs, Alicia ran past her towards where the narrow arm of the dam became part of the mountain. The flitter turned, nose following the direction the girl had taken. People backed further away. As the ship passed, the still growing web energies felt like stinging insects against her exposed skin.

The loom-master opened her mouth in a grimace but didn't withdraw. "Well? The diamond's dead. You know that."

Did she? She was being invited to think so. Niv hissed in her ear, breaking her concentration: "What would you do..."

She silenced him, words and will. "The question is what will I do. That includes the diamond."

She knew she was human enough still to think of herself as being this and that, saying she likes some things, dislikes others, thinks this or that... as though only in the extremes could she could be defined.

And to define a world?

"If Rit dies..."

"If?"

Was he already dead? Again, she was being invited to think so, and with his death, the loom-master's offer still open. No. That was a lie. "...if he dies with this unresolved..." Istarom - his choice, his collection of people, his timing. And, despite that she now knew where he was, she still had no sense of him. Vass'lt. Priest.

Vivan's answer: the sound of rain started again. And: "Do what you want. My death is a small price for ending this here."

The world-pattern cascade suddenly gained momentum, simplifying as it did so, shedding the options that allowed her existence. There were minutes to completion, not days or months.

Ending *this*? Where did it stop? A bloodline? A people?

Starting over.

Fire dripped like blood. Pattern lines like fire. Overpattern reacting to the changing Altasimic.

This was what she and Rit had seen, the time span of each vision shaped to an end as near as the finish of the loom-master's work.

Causality was as mutable as memory. The portal shifted so slightly just as she let it fail. The sound of rain stopped as high above this place, a new star bloomed.

The cascade continued. And moments later, the attack. One of the other ships. She knew it would be joined by the third, could see the ship moving into position. And knew that Kori's fragile shielding wouldn't hold.

Her options?

Destroying the ships wouldn't end the threat, not the personal threat or the one against the Altasimic people. The cascade was reaching end point. And the people across an entire sector would start to die.

As though the air were poisoned. As though water burned instead of quenched.

There will be survivors. There always are.

Bolda shook her. "Make up your mind now!"

And pulled her back into a sense of her body. The building web energies from the flitter had driven everybody but her and Bolda off the roof. Or into the flitter. She didn't see Garm.

To one side, movement caught her eye. Roland. An arm shading his eyes, and in a half crouch as though the energy field above him rested on his shoulders, he edged closer. Lady Islil stood closer to the stairway, a hand gripping Alwin's arm, holding her back. Her aide had Ulanda's black shawl over her head and covering much of her face. She was watching Roland, not her.

Blood soaked his sleeves and the front of his jacket. "Lord Strom, he's alive. Lady Priest..."

And of no use to her alive or dead. Not here.

Her people.

She had once created a part of Zimmer on Alisim out of no more than warding energies. And when she was no more than what Vivan would make her now.

And from lines of overpattern centering on the portal - and from the diamond, damaged or not - came the echo of the earlier Altasimic.

Her problem wasn't a lack of power, the Opening had proven that, but of control. The Opening had proven that as well.

She had no memory of the Zimmer pull, none of making it. Somehow she had drawn the protection of the Zimmer warding barriers over herself and where she was like a blanket you pull over yourself even if asleep. And with the echo of the Altasimic pattern coming from the diamond, did the same.

Garm looked around slowly. The diamond spun in his mind as it had for most of a year. He remembered white marble and crystal. Now shards of stone littered the gray surface, the clear veins mined. The air choked him.

From his refuge on the first landing of the exterior stairs, between one breath and the next, he had found himself on Rit's flitter and the flitter here, in a smoky twilight.

Kori was doing the scans, repeating them constantly, waiting for some kind of change that would give them more information than they could easily see for themselves. From what he could sense, she was working mainly from the modified data points, a Zimmer addition to the Temple flitter, the Net effectively inoperative despite the changes.

Bolda brought him a bowl of the tea Alicia had made. "We could get lucky." He scowled at the flecks of gray all over his toes. "This could be Zimmer dust."

Lemon tea. The scent came from both tea and burning. Alicia was in the open flitter, sitting next to the brazier, feeding tea leaves one at a time to the embers, a habit she had taken from Ulanda. The wrapped teapot was beside her. She hadn't liked the burnt marble smell.

Garm shook his head at Bolda's comment. "More likely it's what Gennady left behind him on his way out."

"Or he didn't get out."

Garm looked around, letting the tea warm his hands. It was cool in here, as it had been before. "He's not here."

"You don't know..."

"I do."

"...you don't."

What did he know? His own mind? This was as close to her as he could come on his own. He thought now that he would die here, his blood on the white marble - it was still white when he thought of it instead of looked. A promise and one way it could be kept.

Garm took a sip of the tea and nodded towards Alicia with a smile for her thoughtfulness. The flitter was dead black against the gray around him. No reflections showed, the overlaps of the hull tiles were like quilting lines in velvet. Slicannin's craft. Rit's. Ulanda had accepted what was at hand, had accepted the 'terms' set by Rit in his attempted suicide, at the Zimmer woman's actions because of it, and the loom-master's because of that. At no point had his own opinion been given any weight.

He rubbed his eyes with one hand. Sand. Acrid smoke. Could marble really burn? "Let's hear your opinion then."

Bolda bent low and ran a blunt finger through the debris on the surface of the floor. His earlobes jiggled as he talked. "You're probably right." He clapped dust from his hands as he straightened back up, frowned at the dust remaining, then rubbed his hands on the back of his pants.

"What did we leave behind us?"

"Ask Ulanda."

"Would I get any sort of answer?" He looked to where the diamond mouth would be although he knew that even without the smoke, it was too far to see. "Cassa!" he shouted, throwing his head as he swung around violently. No echo returned his words. The laughter in him was ashes. The diamond is dying, he thought as he started to pace. Marble dust and soot - he was sure it was soot - soiled the hem of his yellow robe.

The tea was cold and bitter when he finished the bowl. He let the last drops fall as though they were words of temper and he was the cup.

The veins in the marble were hollow, the surface runs at least. He cleared a larger one with the toe of his leather slippers before kneeling. They took his breath; he blew tunnels into the stone. Suddenly exhausted, he stopped. What had Gennady done? And the Ri-priest?

"Get back in here," Bolda shouted from the door of the flitter.

Shielding budded out to catch him before he could think to get up, the isthmus a corridor of translucent blue with the ship coming at him fast. Stars rose up from behind him, then around him. He opened his mouth to scream as the shields hit.

When he opened his eyes, his head was in Eunni's lap, the warm brown chenille of her robe tickling his cheek. Her fingers were smoothing his hair, touching his face, he could feel that as well. The breath had been knocked out of him, he couldn't move or answer.

"He's fine," Eunni said to someone he couldn't see.

"The shields are holding," Bolda said, bending over him. Eunni withdrew her cool fingers as warmer ones touched his face. Blue shivered in the air. Without thinking, Garm pushed himself away, forcing the other man to step back and almost knocking Eunni over. She caught herself against a chest staked on top another. The two wobbled, but didn't tip.

"Eunni, I..." She turned away as he spoke, her mouth a tight line of anger.

Bolda shook his head, squinting from the smoke. "Work it out later," he said, righting the brazier with his foot. "You're alive, that's something."

Smoke, a burning wool smell. The brazier was on its side, empty. Sand and ashes spilled across the rug and onto wood floor. Alicia was frantically gathering the coals in a teacup. Bolda had found another cup and was helping her.

"You can thank Kori for that," Alicia said.

"Remind me to," Bolda snarled, dumping his bowl of glowing coals into the teapot.

"I meant being alive," she answered.

Garm ran one hand over the tiles, feeling the shielding. The surface moldings of the tiles showed the flitter's Temple origin. And Vannsit modifications, the arches of the frame had been carved into a boiling mass of fish. Hooked scales and stubby forelegs showed on those that made the surface of the dark green wood. "Where are we?"

"Still in the diamond," Bolda said as he touched the hull nearest him, leaving clear areas where his hand passed. "All the power we can manage from our crystals is being used for shielding, the setting on these have to be changed individually."

The other man smelled of wet cotton as though he had been working hard. Garm forced himself to go to the cleared tiles and Bolda moved to give him space as though he found the close company distasteful.

As he had said: they were in the diamond. Footprints outside, worn over several times, and a cleared patch between as though the marble had been dusted with a flitter sized mop.

"Kori will keep inside the piloting system until we know more," Bolda said. "Everything like the hull tiles is set for manual changes only, all of them will revert automatically when she interrupts the signal. She's going to have to handle it, there's not much room in what system we've managed to get going for anyone else until we find out more about what to expect next."

"What did happen?" Alicia asked as she added another collection of coals to the liquid.

Bolda shrugged. "Apparently the diamond points have collapsed. The probability increases with each analysis, we'll know more when we get someplace the Net will work properly. Kori might be able to explain more of it. If she has time."

"Time now," the Zimmer woman said. She had come from the nose of the craft, the area past the narrowing of the web eye. The crystal array was there.

She squatted at the edge of the rug, feeling a burn mark with the tip of one finger, her reluctance as plain to see as her need. "It wasn't a Web-jump wave," she said, still staring at the rug. Mesmerized, Garm thought or she saw more than silk and wool. Or more likely, had heard enough to allow her mind to supply what her eyes couldn't.

"What was it?" Alicia asked gently.

She looked up at her with the same dream-like expression in her blue eyes, a delicate color like the flower blooming on En'talac's grave. But they widened immediately as though she was startled to see her. As though she had expected the girl to be no more solid than her thoughts had been.

"It wasn't like when the Lady opened the last diamond point. The flitter would have cracked trying to ride it. I worked the systems on the Ladybug, even we almost broke getting hit with it." Her concentration was robbed by the murmur of voices from behind the stacked chests. Her pale eyes darted there then fell. "And we're still here. This place holds probabilities like a teapot does water. Except it's leaking. And the points..." Her narrow shoulders hunched. Thin white hands tried to cup a sculpted rose bud. She had chosen a compromise between real and apparent. "There are no points now. The four are now joined somehow, and that one is collapsed so that it can't be reached. There is no way to shape any new reality now."

"And a way out?" Alicia asked.

"No way out except the portal we came in through and it closed behind us within moments of our jump."

"What about the mouth?" Garm asked.

She swallowed and turned her head away from him even further, straining her thin neck. "The wave came from there. What else is there, I don't know."

"Any idea what Gennady did?" Bolda asked.

"Lord Gennady tried to teach that one by using warding energies to force the way she handled pattern, like an et'linu is taught. She was very hungry."

"Poss a'ltic?" Garm asked, taking a second to realize whom the Zimmer woman was talking about.

Kori nodded to his question but she was still looking at Bolda. Her clan marks were white on white. "I worked those systems too. I did not think he would succeed. I did not know he had until now. Not really known." Her white hair rose to make a crest and she shivered once, a violent tremor that shook her entire body. "When the portal had opened early, I thought..."

Kori hesitated and looked to Alicia. The girl nodded her reassurance. The Zimmer's skin was like fine porcelain with the heat of the kiln still in the clay. Blue flower petal eyes, the blue of an early morning sky with the mists still rising from the dunes. "The woman..." Kori continued and hesitated again. "The Priest. She can touch the Wu'loss cass. Allykh told me this before they jumped into the portal. He was piloting the flitter that brought Lord Gennady to the Holding for the Naming celebrations. How that changes what is possible..."

The scent of musk flooded the air. Niv had just come through the curtain, then stopped as he looked back the way he had come, blocking anyone from seeing past him. He said something softly, Ulanda answered him then he turned and walked over to them. "Lord Gennady forces the shaping."

"Has forced," Garm corrected automatically. The few clear tiles were black between one blink of his eyes and the next and Kori was on her feet as fast and past the eye to the nose of the flitter.

The flitter rocked, the motion increasing until the tiles seemed to grind together as though they were teeth. The glow globes dimmed, then flared. He reached Eunni as the motion abruptly stopped and his hands reaching out to shelter her were left empty as she drew away.

When the shaking settled, Bolda puffed his breath out then palmed a small spot of tile clear. "Didn't get us very far."

Kori came back a moment later. "That was only the reflection of the wave we just went through. It did tell us that the diamond is degrading, the veins..." She frowned but her eyes were distant. She kept glancing back to where Rit was.

"What about the veins?" Garm asked.

Kori turned to look at him. "They're being worn away. When they go, the diamond should collapse."

Alicia coughed. "What do we do now?"

She was interrupted by Niv's whisper. "It will happen again."

Kori looked at Niv first - the Camerat had his eyes towards the rear of the flitter, he was lavender with distress. Then she turned to him. "San Garm... from the Empress, do you have any suggestions?"

"The mouth of the diamond must be the only way left," Garm told her. Ri-altar had been close enough to bleed into the island. Eyes still dazzled by the flare of the globes, he ran his palm over several tiles, clearing them as Bolda had done. Needing to see, not just know. The small effort to take the 'how' from the tiles themselves made his knees want to buckle. Twilight had darkened the diamond even more. Or the smoke was heavier, he thought. Or his vision was blurred. Footprints still showed but around them, more obvious now, were hollow lines like the fractures in thick ice. They moved, twisted as he blinked, and with each blink, leaked a deeper night into his vision.

He took that vision with him to the far end of the flitter. About a quarter of the flitter had been partitioned off by the chests that had apparently never been unpacked after Rit and Alicia's flight from Wilni. And more from Istarom, he thought. Prominent on a few were designs he remembered from his one trip to Riwan. Fastened on either side of the carved rib of the craft, was a square of cloth - a shawl or large scarf - to make a curtain.

Fashioned out of what had been available in the flitter was a bed. Cushions and clothing, another rug but not one of Bolda's. Istarom again. He hadn't realized it until just then, but apparently the flitter had been stocked in the event that another escape might be necessary.

Except that Rit had attempted a different form of escape. Asleep on the makeshift mattress, he lay on his right side, hands crossed in front, several fingers tips touching his lips, his left arm heavily bandaged. Moisture from his breath had wet the cloth.

"How is he?" he asked Ulanda.

"Asleep now. I don't sense any residual draw of pattern at all, not since we jumped into the portal." She stretched as she got up. "Given his body size, the sedative portion of the blocker will wear off in about an hour. He'll be groggy... which should help the pain as well."

"And you? How are you?"

She looked at him without expression. "You know how I am."

What had she said to him after the Camerat pull? That she hadn't existed during the pull, only in the diamond... and the diamond was breaking all around them.

Kori lifted the curtain aside. "We're going to try for the mouth," she said, her eyes on Rit. From the whine, the flitter was moving slowly. "We might survive the next wave but not the one after."

Ulanda looked around, obviously seeing more than the hull tiles and boxes.

Kori bowed. "Lady Priest, the spins give that the waves are a form of condensed time. It's what lends the wave its shape and also what is stripping the essence of the diamond away. I think that if we hadn't jumped when we did, we wouldn't have been able to make it in at all."

As she left, Ulanda beckoned to the Zimmer to follow her. "Was it triggered by the points collapsing, or from..." Her voice faded but not from distance - the flitter wasn't large enough that without warding, anything could be said in private. Garm had the sense that the conversation was continuing in what existed of the Net, but when he tried to join in, he lost all sense of the Net at all. He hadn't expected more than data points, but at least a few of the neural linking systems were operational. At Ulanda's discretion. And Alicia's. Probably Bolda's. And certainly Kori's. But not his.

A few moments later, Alicia came in and knelt close to Rit where Ulanda had been. She stroked her husband's face with one hand. "They're all dead now," she said in a small voice as though talking to her husband alone. "Kori said that it was hundreds of years in the last wave alone."

"You could return to anything from the diamond," Garm said, trying to keep his voice from shaking as he comforted her. This he could do - was allowed to do. But even as he spoke them, he could hardly believe he was saying such useless words. All the people, the concerns that had been so vital to the girl just hours ago were dust and memories.

Alicia had the single braided strand of Rit's hair in one hand, toying with the warding beads. Instead of more words, Garm took her in his arms, his chin against her soft curls. And fought a sneeze. Lemon tea, the smoke was in her clothes.

"Do you know what's going on?" he asked after a few minutes. She shook her head. "You'll be leaving here..." The words were sticking in his throat. "Leaving me here. Will this do as good-bye?"

The smooth red beads slipped from Alicia's hand. "No good-byes."

He let her go. "I asked you what was happening... if you don't want to tell me, then release the Net." Alicia continued watching her husband. "At least tell me how long until Kori tries to get us out. She needs to drop me off first."

"Garm, I'm sorry. Kori says there's not enough time."

"Make time. There's almost three hours until the next wave..."

"We won't survive that long, not if we compromise the shielding to let you out. When the waves reflect off the sides of the diamond, they lose power each time, but it's still enough to drain our crystals. Like they are the diamond, only much faster."

He got up and grabbed the curtain to push it aside, but the cloth came free in his hand. Trailing it behind, he walked to the side of the flitter that usually became the doorway. Habit. "Here will do," he said. Wanting to scream. Here! Kori had budded the shielding out once to catch him, she could do it again to let him go. And whispered into the air: "Cassa, now."

And from Alicia: "I'm sorry."

Images formed in his mind - allowed him by Alicia, a gift of what he couldn't directly make Kori give him. There was no diamond mouth, not intact at least. More images, they were solidifying. A woman's body. Poss a'ltic. He hadn't known her; they weren't his feelings, not all of them at least. Kori again, suddenly the keening voice of the Zimmer woman was tearing at his mind. The ship rang with the sound, the entire diamond did. An echo, he thought, or much of it was. He was getting it from the diamond through the Net link with Kori, but how was she getting it? Rit?

Then he forgot about the man lying unconscious at the rear of the flitter. "Who?" he started. Not only Poss a'ltic, the scan had revealed another body, deeper in the wash of dark water. Purple reeds, glimpses of a lavender sky. Smoke and gray marble, the dark lines like snakes... "Who is he?" he asked again. Then realized who it had to be. Clanny. The Piltsimic's staring black eyes were traced with silver like a pattern of frost on ebony.

Bolda growled to Alicia and through her to Kori: "Don't we have somewhere to go?"

Garm scarcely heard him. Through the Net link that Alicia still shared with him, he had the sense of the time surge reflection begin to roll towards them as though drawn to the square of glistening white marble in the center of the ruined diamond mouth.

What he actually saw was a wave of water. Foam on the crest. And heard the roar that you hear as the force of the wave is condensed into an ever smaller area by the rising ground of the shore. Except the ground didn't only grow up from the ocean's depth, but narrowed all around.

They weren't going to make it. There was no place to go. A white square? An arm-span across, too small. And too solid.

The flitter centered on the image, seeming to Garm to be a toy, his perspective suddenly from well outside the craft. Then from even further away, his vision retreating as though racing towards the points that didn't exist any longer in the ruin the diamond had become.

And he remembered Ulanda's fear that leaving the diamond would mean her death, Gennady's blade slipped between her ribs. And that instead of almost anything else he might have done, he had told a story about a Ri and a Lillisim that had never existed. And about goats.

What did survival mean to her now? Over and over, she had lost what had been promised her.

Overpattern had created the diamond and then destroyed it. Would it take overpattern to get them out? "Ulanda..." he began.

He might have been a feather in deep water, the wave passing barely felt under him. He might have been a grain of sand, simply rolled with the water in a tight topsy-turvy circle, to settle again on the ocean floor as the energy of the wave moved on.

He had no frame of reference, hadn't with Cassa either. Ulanda was doing something, and she wasn't doing it for him. Other voices. Other hands. Collecting people, Alicia had called it. And he wasn't one of them any longer.

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Nisstín waited, schooling his patience. An hour or more and Panntín still stood at the start of the world-altar where the mound of sand had once grown out of the waste.

He shifted his weight slightly, his leg ached. And he had made a poor choice of a place to stand: white flowers bloomed nearby, mixed in with the enitree bushes and protected from the deer by the long thorns. He lifted the fabric of his tunic off the sunward shoulder; the black cloth was burning his skin. The smell of sweat and hot silk mixed with the flowers. His dress uniform.

It smelled like a battleground, the heat intensifying the carrion stink of the Lady blooms. Like bodies left to rot. He had to think, it was hard to remember where Fontil's grave was, the land had changed so much. Where it had once been flat, now there were rock-strewn gouges in the earth. The outermost arms of the spiral curve of the world altar had been repeated, larger again, in the surrounding

area. He stood in a narrow path of sand, rounded stones and rubble on either side.

Here, he realized. Nisstn backed until he hit more stone. Panntin turned his head at the movement. Did the Priest see Fontil's death as clearly as he did, Nisstn wondered. Did he remember at all? He glanced back at the flitter. Salin a'Banti^sanli returned his look without comment, apparently satisfied with waiting.

"Shall we get on with this?" he asked Panntin. The only answer to his question was the movement of the prayer flags. And further away, the slapping sound of the wind in the tent set where the Temple ship had once been. Alisim Temple was further away still, or the beginnings of it rather. Stones, silent in the heat.

Nisstn waited a moment longer, but Panntin had gone back to watching whatever he had been before. He shrugged and signed to his own people at the flitter. Panntin could counter the order if he wanted. Two Alisim Temple guard brought Sorsi out, her hands tied behind her. Salin a'Banti^sanli didn't leave the shadow of the craft until the three were clear. Her fingers were shaped in a query of form but she still didn't say anything. Two of her aides and Ro'lin quis'Palltin came with her.

"You have said it was your choice," Panntin said evenly and without turning.

Sorsi coughed before answering. The priestess was as bleached as the white Temple robe they had put on her but her narrow dark eyes were clear. "It was then and it is now." She ignored everyone except him. "Bringing me here won't change my decision."

Nisstn looked from her to the Priest and back. The land fell away in both directions, leading to the river or the mountains. "Would you take everything from them?" he asked, too ready to be angry here. She was right though, Cault at least would have followed her to a more certain hell than this, oaths or no oaths.

She laughed. "You of all people, Nisstn, how can you ask that? What did the Lady leave you?"

Ro'lin answered, not him. "He has his life, as your brother will have his."

The Salin began the sign of a formal Opening, but the old priestess wasn't finished. "Sorsi is correct in this, Nisstn. There are as many forms of death as there are of life. The patterns here are still growing... and one of the gifts the Lady left behind is that Sorsi and I, we'll both be in them. And both of us well content to leave it at that."

Bare feet in the fine dirt, the Salin's long toes held each footstep. "If this one may speak now...", she began, her voice doubled, a translation from the small globe suspended in her girdle and being constantly touched. Standardized Xintan but mixed with a language half of whose words were missing beyond his ability to hear.

"Temple Examination has shown that she is not a Priest, rouge or not..." Her voice warbled higher then faltered entirely. For several minutes, the only sound was the wind. "Salin status, if such applies here, would not exclude her from judgment," she continued. "But because of the oaths given and her apparent... special status, the Temple Court concurs with the Xintan High Court's decision that both the responsibility and punishment are hers."

Nisstin felt the woman's tenuous link with her flitter's Net record the words. On the smooth surface of the globe, fingers with too many joints signed indulgence asked for, then as quickly, a giving of it with the next words. "After her death, what is done with the one man surviving can be dealt with as a local matter."

Sorsi looked at Panntin, not the other woman. "And my execution? I've been sentenced to death by three separate courts and I'm still alive. Is this why I'm here?"

Panntin didn't respond.

"This one is prepared to act," Salin a'Banti^sanli said after a moment of waiting. "This has been drawn out long past what is usual, and for this judgment, Alisim-altar is most suitable as the site of execution."

The hands continued to move rapidly, signs that Nisstin didn't know and his own Net link wouldn't hold this close to the world-altar. Her two aides came around on opposite sides to flank him, taking the higher ground, his Temple guards moving to watch them better. "This one is not a vass'l't," the Salin said. "This must be understood."

Nisstin signed his two to relax. "Warding restraints would remove the uncertainty."

She looked shocked. He knew the reaction, having seen it before with an intact Net to tell him what the play of her features meant.

"They won't be necessary," Panntin said. "Or your people to distract her either." Nisstin heard the amusement in his tone, but the Salin would have been more aware of the rise of pattern that was answered instantly from the center of the world-altar by a flare of opal light. And in the enitree bush by his foot, a rustle. Nisstin kicked hard at the bush and a sagehopper darted out.

"Lord Priest, for such a use, warding restraints would be against Empire Law." The Salin was watching the flight of the bird. There was no emotion in the bland translation but her toes had dug holes in the hard dirt. Even at the Holding she held the translation to words alone where the Net was capable of more.

The hang of the prayer flags had changed, the narrow strips of cloth were blowing straight towards the center of the altar, to the column of light. "Other precautions though..." she added, the words lost at the end as they had been earlier Long fingers worked into a complex sign as she turned to Sorsi. The aides moved back to where they had been. "Would you kneel?"

Sorsi looked once to the Alisim light rising in the center then knelt with her back to it. "Untie my hands," she said to him, making it a command. He didn't think she had any doubt she would be obeyed.

Nisstin signed the two guards away first then pulled the knife from the sheath on his boot. A Zimmer blade, white but with the Lady's colors in silk cord wound around the handle. He knelt awkwardly behind her on one knee, ignoring the pain in his stiff leg as it took the extra strain. He dropped the knife beside him along with the rope when he had finished. She worked her wrists, pushing back the full sleeves of the Examination robe. Three parallel cuts were on one forearm: Blueknife mark. They should have been pale scars but were freshly drawn, the shallow scratches caked with dried blood.

He turned the cuts to the sunlight. "If I had seen you at the Holding during the attack, I would have killed you." The new lines ran beside the old scars.

She shrugged away from his grip. "Then how is this different?"

Except it always was, at least for him. He wasn't sure about Sorsi, he had never known her to change her mind about anything.

"Your battle is over. There was no shame in what you did, there'd be none in your going through Initiation now."

She shrugged again. "I said no."

Nisstin looked over her head to the Salin. "An Alisim Temple matter, I think."

The Salin bowed. "Then this one will serve solely as Witness."

The watch fires - one each at Sorsi's head and feet - fed the night air, sparks and ash danced upwards together. Ro'lin knelt opposite Sorsi's body, the rites long finished. Wiccin would come for them at midday.

Nisstin brought her a bowl of water from the spring. "I did this for Fontil after the Initiation," she said after a long drink. "We've lost much here."

And gained? He sat next to her, too exhausted to reason any more. "I didn't think you'd stay. This won't remain a secret."

"And what else would we be doing out here? And if I was twenty years younger?" She chuckled and patted his knee when he apologized. "Who will dare question either of us? Or you rather, some would believe almost anything of me. But you? Someone who shared the Lady's bed? Performing the rites of honor for the death of a traitor?"

Her blood had spilled over his hands. "I don't know what she was."

"And yourself?"

"Ro'lin, I'm too tired for soul searching."

"Or afraid of what you might find?"

"I know what I'd find. And as you said before, I have my life." He got up awkwardly. A fox barked. Towards Dog Mountain, he thought. "Fontil wouldn't have done the same for her. I don't think he even loved her."

Ro'lin got to her feet easier than he had. "Sorsi would have known if he had or hadn't. Even without the blood-sight, she would have known. She wasn't a fool and she wasn't blind to her own mind. Nisstin, what she did, she had to have done."

Sorsi's tattoos appeared to move in the flickering light of the fires. He looked to the old priestess. "No, she wasn't a fool." He rubbed his eyes. "I'll bury her with him. There's enough stone there, a couple of days of wind and no one will know the difference."

Ro'lin chuckled, he knew she wasn't surprised. "They won't be looking."

He shook his head. "Panntin won't have to look."

"I had meant nobody who is likely to scream for your hide. Our standing here is written in the Coda for those who have the eyes to see it. And in the Strom Archives. Panntin is those things, Nisstin."

"And Sorsi?"

"In a different way she's also a part of them. She stands in for all of us, a path we didn't follow. Her choices will be honored by more than one boy's suicide."

The old woman's tattoos danced with the movement of her face as she talked. The moonlight was as strong as the fire, her face raised to the sky as though she saw these things written there.

He saw stars and a full moon. "I've studied what Rit took from the Archives, and the Coda, the Net spin correlation he did between the two." He picked up a bundle of dry branches to feed the watch fires. "We argued at length about the responsibility, the accountability of the rebels for what they did. If it had been his decision, he would have let them all go."

"And you wouldn't."

"If I deny them the consequences that come out their actions, what else do I deny them? Should I treat grown men and women as having no mind of their own?"

"In this thing - did they? And they would have their lives. And a future they will make, something they can give to this world. Children that wouldn't have been born otherwise."

Nisstin smiled. "So he said."

"And would give them a freedom he denied himself." She stopped his adding a branch to the fire by Sorsi's head. "Let the fires die out," she added gently, her hand on his arm. "The pattern they have now is pleasing."

He dropped the branches and straightened, but held the touch a while longer with his hand over hers.

The lower valley was golden with the fall, but a dry winter had come higher up, the few small birch trees were bare of leaves and there was a thick covering of ice on the lake. The ice would remain now until spring, but cracks showed deep

under the clear surface from the earlier cycles of freeze and thaw. Glacier worked stones made the landing site for the flitter.

A brittle morning, the sun hadn't risen over the low mountain to the side of them. The warding posts in the near distance were bright against snow and stone at their base but were soon lost in the blue sky. Ranks of them skirted the mountain and with odd ones set here and there in no pattern that he could see. Different than the ones they used at the Holding, these were more complex but essentially passive. They had been recorded as they passed through them, not challenged. The challenge had been through the other ship's Net. The Empire ship was on the far side of the streambed; they were inside the area covered directly by its Net, but further links snaked to each warding post.

Nisstn led Heni out of the flitter, the small mare puffing steam into the cold air, her hooves noisy on the stones. She seemed to like the sound, digging with one forefoot until he made her stand still. Her winter coat was coming in, and she needed clipping, coarse black hairs were forming a beard under her chin. She had been let run almost free since Rit had gone. He would breed her next year, he thought. Not blood stock, not even by Hegemony standards, but he had grown to appreciate her temperament. He felt the fields made by the warding as an irritating buzz in his mind that he had to make an effort to ignore, but she didn't seem to care, even when they were hit with a scan from the ship, her only response was to shake her head.

Caull stepped out, throwing him the wool cloak he'd left in the flitter. The Warrior's freedom was new and he had the wary look of a man expecting the doors to close again.

"Company," Caull said, nodding to the three people approaching from the large ship. All the same species, human in appearance, although the stiff garments they wore obscured their body shapes. Cilwennti, the flitter's Net said. A Simic derived echo line, it added, along with a brief cultural description. Past a look, Heni didn't mind them either.

"This is a restricted area," the first said speaking Empire plain tongue. Nisstn understood the insult even without the flitter's Net offering the nuances.

He passed Heni's reins to Caull. "Into which your Net has already allowed me passage and landing." He replied in the same language while signing a standard greeting. Were people who had no business being here expected to come sightseeing?

A hesitation in the man's response then the greeting was returned. "There has been a misunderstanding. Landing is allowed in the valley, towards the dwelling, not here."

"I am Nisstn quis'Sallin of Greywolf, Chief of Security for Alisim Temple. I have authorization from Alisim Temple and the ranking Priest to inter a body at this site."

"This is a research installation," the other man said, speaking slowly but raising his chin and his voice a level. Human enough that Nisstsin recognized the man's response without needing the Net. "This is not a burial site. I am Salin Algeen of Rilticon, assigned to..."

"My apologies, Salin," Nisstsin interrupted. "But I have work to do here and I don't have time for chatting." He motioned to Caull to lead Heni out. Algeen and the other two backed up. Nisstsin picked up his pack from the doorway then sealed the entrance. "My pilot is Zimmer," he said, looking up from attaching his rifle sling. "He's oathed to Alisim Temple now and not to you people. I won't have him badgered. We'll be back in a couple of hours, we can discuss authorization then." He kept his eyes on the other man, not needing to look in order to slide the Zimmer weapon into place.

"Where...?" Algeen started, sounding distracted. He was watching the rifle.

He put the cloak on before answering. "The cabin in the lower valley."

"Then there was no need for you to have landed here."

Nisstsin pulled his braids free from under the cloak before answering. He had already told them he was burying someone here. "I thought it would be a nice day for a hike."

He tried not to limp as he walked away, ignoring the continuing protest from the Salin, then smiled to himself at the vanity. The round stones slid underfoot with each step. He'd be doing good not to fall on his face. Caull had stopped not too far ahead and Nisstsin took hold of Heni's pack band for support.

"Why don't you ride?" Caull asked, his heavy face creased into a frown.

"Why don't you shut up?"

He laughed. "I didn't think you sounded happy back there. Or them."

The footing was easier when the grass started, the slope leading to a rough trail that followed close to the ice locked stream. Another warding line showed further on, narrow pillars of red that blocked most of the valley. They would come down today.

Willi met them half way. "How come you landed up there?" she asked in Xintan, hands in fists on her hips.

Caull looked at him. He shrugged. "Some things shouldn't be done too quickly."

Willi looked like she was thinking about it then nodded. She'd been here for almost a month, her own slow time, he thought.

"Who's he?" she asked, nodding to Caull. "Oh," was all she said after the introductions were made.

They started walking towards the cabin. He was still limping, but the pain had worked out with the exercise. "How long has the ship been there?"

"A couple of weeks. They haven't bothered me, just checked the wards from the outside and left. Their passive system isn't happy with the Zimmer boundary wards so close but I guess they knew enough not to interfere."

Or complain, Nisstin thought as he canceled the wards, watching the red light fade more slowly in his eyes than they did in the air. They had outlasted their original purpose half a year.

He left Heni to browse in the frost blasted remains of a kitchen garden while he went into the cabin with Willi. Caull stayed outside.

After killing him, Gennady had changed the setting on his rifle and shot again, burning flesh away with a fire that hadn't touched the stray grass and leaves of the ground where Tennin's body lay. Different customs. "He's dead enough," Nisstin had said, seeing the bones start to go, the smaller ones in the feet and hands already ash. He had buried what was left of Tennin where he had been killed, had thought at the time, he would stay there.

A cairn by the lake, Rit had said. And, in time, Willi's burial in the same spot. Twin cairns much as the graves of Sarkalt and En'talac on the cliff overlooking Endica Harbor. Nisstin hadn't told anyone the last part, especially not the girl. How long? Had Rit known? And why?

They weren't the kind of questions he normally allowed himself. "Where's the shovel?" he asked Willi.

"I did it already."

Her look held a challenge, but he nodded as though he had expected it and perhaps, in a way, he had. Tennin's bones were in a blanket. There had been care in that, some ceremony of her own, he decided, feeling the shape of dried flower heads under the first layer of the wool. The scent of pine was strong. And Lady flowers, the seeds at least from the knife sharp points. He didn't know they were growing here already.

"Get your things then." He lifted the bundle and walked out of the cabin to give her some privacy. Her chin was trembling and her silver metal eyes were full of tears.

Caull was by the goat pen chipping bark off the fence wood with his knife. "You need help?"

Nisstin shook his head. "Take as much time as you want. We can come back for you if necessary."

"I was wrong." Caull stabbed the wood one more time, leaving the knife behind. "There's nothing here for me."

Willi had come out, her face composed as she deposited two carry bags on the porch. She didn't look at him. "Then I could probably use some help at that. Or she could. And there might still be things of yours or Sorsi's in the cabin as well. Check it out."

Caull looked around, the same look on his face as Sorsi would get at an offering fire. Nisstin hadn't been sure until then that the man would leave here alive. "I've got enough," he said.

Nisstin made it a slow journey back to the lake. The land steamed as it warmed in the sunlight and they walked through patches of mist up to their thighs. Only the mountain was clear before them, a stepped mass of gray and white, filling the sky but remote in its starkness. He felt at peace here as he walked quietly, with the muted sound of water under the ice and the slow steady beat of the mare's hooves against the frozen ground. He would have liked to stay in this moment, it was the same feeling he got when he stole the morning in a ride to the cliffs and burnt a single black stick to the sunrise.

Wiccin was sitting on a mound of stones in the shade of the flitter, the side open to the cold air. He stood when he saw them. Nisstin tossed him the warding spheres from the barrier. The stones hadn't been there before, not in a pile at least. "Any trouble?"

"The Salin Algeen has used the relay outside the warded area to contact the Lead ship in orbit. He told me this after checking my affiliation, after saying there were no Zimmer at Alisim Temple."

"You look real to me." He used his best Slicanin imitation.

Wiccin showed blunt teeth in a human style grin. "I am today and I told him so."

Caull was untying the body, tossing the ropes to Willi. "What's going on?" he asked, frowning. "Can you put him here?"

Nisstin looked around. Rit hadn't said anywhere in particular, just near the lake. He nodded. "Here will do." Caull took him literally.

Willi watched as she wrapped rope into a coil around one elbow. The sun was overhead but her hair was still cold silver. Cut recently he thought, and from the effect, she must have done it with a knife.

He looked up at the mountain. "Rit just said to build a cairn around him." He looked back to Willi. "Do you have anything else you'd like done?"

She shook her head. Was there hair mixed in with the flowers and pine needles under the blanket, he wondered. And the Lady seeds, he'd meant to ask her about them but had forgotten.

He took his cloak off and put it over the mare. It would only get in the way piling rock, and the exercise should make him warm once they started. He left the rifle sling attached to his leg. "Wiccin? Are those stones anything special?"

The Zimmer signed a request for indulgence. "The shapes will fit together. I scanned the area, the Net gave a design from what was available of stones nearby."

Caull passed the stones to them as they worked, he was deaf to the Net. The stones for the cairn floated in Nisstin's mind, the image existing in time as well as place, from the first small piece of granite to the last, a complex puzzle. Like seeing the plan of the Ocea ship, but he hadn't gotten any better at it, despite constant security training runs on similar problems. He had to stand back from the cairn to check frequently, even this much of the puzzle was in static layers. Wiccin and the girl worked steadily as though they saw it in all its forms, and all at once. His best people at the Holding could have done as well; they thought him too old to be running mental mazes.

They had almost finished before the other flitter arrived. Salin a'Banti^sanli was joined by Algeen as she walked towards them. Armed guards from her ship stayed back, five of them that he could see. Willi kept placing stones, ignoring those approaching.

Out of deference to the Sanli's rank, Nisstin made the greetings very formal, using the flitter's Net for the translations. The two Salins weren't accessing either of their Nets, even what he could sense of the usually pervasive domestic levels were heavily blocked. The translation globe failed when he introduced Caull.

The woman had met Caull; Nisstin had seen all the records of the hearings he hadn't attended. Or did they all look alike to her? He repeated the introduction to the same response.

Caull gave him a wry grin then went over to stand next to Heni, rubbing the mare's neck with one hand. Nisstin didn't know how much of this he was picking up. The Warrior would never admit to any of the abilities that his sister had shown but the pattern deaths among the Bluestone certainly hadn't been restricted to priestesses.

"A very small disturbance of the work here," Nisstin said into the silence. "We'll be leaving now we're finished."

Salin a'Banti^sanli silenced Algeen with a gesture when the man started a protest. "The Alisim Holding's Chief of Security mentioned authorization." Her fingers didn't move against the globe.

The last stone was in place and he let the form collapse in his mind. Willi brushed her hands against her pants as she straightened, scowling at the two strangers. "Will you join us in prayers?" Nisstin said. "Do your people keep that custom?"

"We can bury our people where we want," Willi said over top of the last words of his question. "We don't have to ask you." Her tone was as colorless as her eyes.

His response to her was in a very tight link of their flitter's Net; he didn't think it spilled over into anything that the Empire people would hear. Wiccin heard, he backed up to the door of the flitter, his eyes turned away as though he was the one being chewed out. Nisstin didn't get the apology he had asked for. Salin

a'Banti^sanli watched motionless as Willi stomped into the flitter. Wiccin followed her in, bowing and signing apology as he backed up.

The woman waited until the door had sealed behind the two. "This one does not mean any challenge of Alisim Temple, but no disturbance in this place is small. This might not be known."

"I've seen the spins done by Gennady's people. If this is just bones and a few rocks, then there's nothing for anyone to worry about, any more than if a goat died here."

She shook her head, the one expression they shared, but he had an intact Net here to see more of what she felt. She was angry. "This one requires authorization from the ranking Priest."

He wondered if the protest would stop with authorization or find a new direction. He could almost wish her on Panntin. Or Viy'lana. "My instructions were from a member of the Lady's Household," he said. "How could he speak of something the Lady didn't wish?"

"The stones will be replaced, the body removed." The words were as bland as usual in translation, but her fingers moved in a sign of Closure. He would have expected some show of diplomacy, a counter motion of regret at least, but there was nothing else.

Did she think them all rude children? He crossed his arms, cold now after working up a sweat piling rocks. "I have no understanding that your authority in this matter is superior to the authorization I received."

"There is no record of Temple ranking for the ones you speak of."

He laughed at her. "Ask Salin Algeen if the sasi have bloomed here again this winter. The wind should have uncovered more seed on the glacier. Or have you no record of those things either?"

She signed a query at the other Salin, adding silence when he opened his mouth. He nodded slowly. "Is this relevant?" she asked.

Nisstn sighed. "With a little imagination. Or if you wish, I can push the authorization I received into your Net for verification of ranking. The fit might not be comfortable, our systems are not highly compatible."

Salin a'Banti^sanli again silenced Algeen. "This one will study the situation further," she said.

His turn to be excluded, he felt them consulting the research ship's Net. Nisstn looked around as he waited, but not at the people. When the Temple was built at this place - if he was still alive - he might move here. Close to her, or to what she was, but some distance from the memories of the woman he had known, those were the ones that haunted him. The feel of her skin, her scent. Her sense of humor, usually well hidden, but which came out in intimate moments.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back. "They look like they'll be awhile," Caull said.

"A very long while if they're smart." He stretched, the cold air had made him stiff, the first step and his leg almost buckled. "We might as well get Heni inside," he said, taking the lead rein. The mare settled quickly with a bag of grain.

Willi ignored him; she was going over flight programs with Wiccin. "Can I fly it back to the Holding?" she asked. The Zimmer looked to him but he threw the decision right back again, signing the polite form of indifference. He had to pull the configuration of the fingering from the Net and she caught him at it. Her response was as silent but far less polite.

"Hold that thought. I'll be through here in a few minutes, you might want to say good-bye to the Salin with the same gesture." He signed a negative twist.

The girl glared at him then laughed. "They make me so mad."

"You're welcome to the feelings, just learn to control their expression better." He thought a moment. "Do you mind if I say the Warrior death rites for Tennin and light a joss stick?"

Her look was sober again but she shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter. I said stuff already, more won't hurt."

"Caull? Would you join me? At least for the first of it."

Caull squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't keep the Ways anymore." Small dark eyes blinked open at him. "Why are you doing this? He wasn't Xintan and he sure as hell didn't believe in the Lady..."

Willi was chewing her lip. "Believing isn't the same as liking."

"And you?" Nisstin asked her.

"I understand why the Lady had Gennady kill him."

Nisstin wished he did. "And my part in his death?"

"The Lady told you too." Willi shrugged but with a sideways look to Caull. "I heard that you said the rites for Sorsi, that you buried her with Fontil. That the Lady told you to do that too."

Caull looked up suddenly, his face blank with shock. "Yes," Nisstin said reluctantly, turning his face from the Warrior's to give him some privacy. He hadn't wanted that particular debt owed him. He'd wanted the man free and gone. "I would have anyways. Willi, I'd known Sorsi since she was your age and new to the tattoos. She met Fontil through me, he'd been my Squire."

"What did the Lady say about that?"

"I never talked to Ulanda about it." The girl looked startled at his saying Ulanda's name. "Willi, she saw things whole in a way I can scarcely comprehend, or in tiny pieces around her. My life, the people I had known, all that would only have confused her. It did with Rit's life, the people he knew, only much more so. I think a great deal of how she felt about Tennin was confusion on her part or she would have had him killed earlier, probably when Sarkalt died."

Her delicate features were contorted. "But she's a god. How can she be confused?"

He bent to take the box of joss sticks out of his pack. “Yes she is a god.” The lid of the box slid open. Black sticks, faintly scented with lavender from Seven Points Province. He took one in his fingers and held it to his nose as he looked at Willi. Would she understand? She was old enough to have taken a lover, by Xintan custom if not Hegemony. Her status as Rit’s ward combined with her beauty wouldn’t have counted against it. Or her spirit once you made it past the surface abrasiveness. Medeen? The young man was certainly running fast enough to get caught.

He kept his smile to himself this time. “When I first met her, we were still all living in tents at the Holding, this was after the storms made us leave the Mound. Few of us could use the Net; I had barely learned to feel it was there. I had seen her during the ceremonies, had spoken briefly to her, but courtesies only. I don’t know what I thought, unsure, I suppose. Many of us were, it just wasn’t wise to go around saying so. Then one night long after I’d gone to bed, one of the night watch came with a message that I was to go to the Lady’s tent. I assumed San Garm had a question about a security matter, still assumed the same when I saw it was Bolda in the outer chamber. He told me to go right in.

“I didn’t get very far before stopping. The only light was through the curtain I held in my hand and a small brazier further in, but I saw her right away.”

He could still see her. Kneeling in front of the fire, wearing a pale blue sleeping robe. Open in front, it fell in folds across her thighs and hid nothing. The ends of her overbraids were like black snakes on the cloth and on her pale skin. She had looked up when he entered. She had been crying, or still was, but silently. He hadn’t needed Bolda coming up beside him and asking if he needed a roadmap.

“Willi, from the first time I held her, I never had any doubt in my mind that she was everything the legends said. I felt burned up by the power in her.” He slid the lid of the box closed. Wiccin took it from him, pale blue eyes searching his, and then looked to the girl, with the same searching. “Willi... if all she was was my god, then what have I lost?”

Wiccin held the box to his chest with both hands. “The Wu’loss cass. We are all lost in that ocean.”

Nisstin shook his head then realized he had misunderstood. “We might be, but we still struggle to live our lives regardless, and so did she. And Rit.”

“Did my sister struggle when you slit her throat?” Caull asked, his jaw tensed.

She hadn’t struggled against her death any more than Tennin had his. He held out the joss stick to Caull. “Why don’t you ask her?”

Caull slammed the stick away, then stood panting. Nisstin didn’t move. A second later, the side of the flutter was open to the freezing air. Caull didn’t stop running until he reached the shore of the lake.

Willi went to the opening to see rather than clear the tiles or push the Net out further. Wiccin had retreated, still clenching the joss stick box. "Did she?" she asked after a moment.

"Not like what you mean. Her struggle was a different kind."

"Didn't he know what you meant?"

Know what, he wondered, feeling as confused as she looked. "He knew I killed her." And had accepted it, he thought, much as Willi had Tennin's death. "There is... well, it can be a way of honoring someone, not to delegate the responsibility." Or to let strangers do the killing.

She shook her head. "I meant that you said he should ask his sister."

Had he? He picked the stick up off the floor and walked to the doorway. The sky was clouding, bands of white moving swiftly in from the south. The air smelled moist, the cold was biting. "I don't know," he said as he stepped out. She followed, Wiccin taking her place at the door. The Temple people were still consulting, their Net as heavily blocked as before.

The cairn looked as though it was a natural formation of stones, a dragging of glacial ice to make an odd shape. Nisstin rolled one sleeve up then removed the Temple oath band, exposing the tattoos on his wrist. He let the blood flow over the marks to make the lines on the grave, the words following as slowly as the drips. The white knife had already been stained with Sorsi's blood, or what little of her blood the surface would hold. He passed the knife to Willi when she held her hand out for it, her face didn't show the pain the deep cut she made would have caused her.

He'd gotten blood on the joss stick; there was a mix of lavender scent and copper in the gray smoke. After a while, he didn't feel the stones under his knees or the pain from his bad leg. Or the cold. Willi was as quiet.

The stick was gray ash before he looked up. The woman was near, watching him. Bare feet, he noticed absently where he hadn't before, even in the cold her feet were bare. No shoes, no personal name, and she didn't mind waiting. "The world-pattern is still forming," he said to her in Empire plain-tongue, only managing a whisper. "Do you feel it?"

"This one is a Salin."

Lightening flickered around them, brief bursts of light that illuminated the high cloud layer. There was no thunder. "What are you worried about here? Do you think the lake is the Wu'loss cass?" Caull wasn't by the edge; he hadn't seen where he went, or Willi.

"Temple protocol requires authorization."

The blood had frozen on his arm; he tried moving his fingers and failed. "It's all around us," he said. The lightening was in sheets against the granite face of the mountain.

He heard Willi before seeing her. She brought a familiar smell with her, the stink of the flowers knife sharp in the frigid air. "I meant to ask where you had gotten those."

"Found them growing around where the flitter usually lands by the cabin. Wiccin says the points of the seeds stick between where the tiles overlap."

Lady Flower seeds and long winter-gold grasses made into a wreath in the same shape as a Harvest circle. He had seen them over the front doors of many of the houses in Endica since Ulanda had gone. White silk for the flowers, the seeds made of paste. Willi put hers on the top of the cairn, the spent joss stick in the middle. Snow had started falling.

He called Wiccin through the Net, the Zimmer appeared a moment later but Willi was already helping him up.

"I held my god in my arms," he said to the Salin. "She felt like this does around us. Listen to her, what more do you require?"

End of Book 2