



# Ji'jin Station

Eye of the Ocean Book Three

A fantasy trilogy by

**Laurel Hickey**

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The grass on the pathway was wet with dew and colder than she had expected. I should have put shoes on, Poss a'Itic thought. She looked back the way she had come. The stone of South Bay Temple glowed with the sunrise. They would be busy there already with the final preparations for the Spring Blessing. People were looking out the windows. The Priest House crèche, she realized, seeing small faces with the larger.

She was trapped: the path led around and back the way she had come, both the far end and free side of the garden enclosed by a thick hedge. Under her feet was a puzzle of shorn green, the path was part of a lawn that wound around a formal maze of herbs and trimmed boxwood. The last time she had been here, this garden led to a view of the ocean with terraced fields on the down slope.

Poss a'Itic pushed through the tall hedge; her robe caught on a branch and she sat suddenly on the other side. Tucking her hands in was instinctive. Even hidden in the folds of the wide sleeves, they felt like weights pulling her down.

Rough gravel under her for a seat. A fence of woven willow on three sides. Another barrier to the ocean she sought. At one end of the small enclosure was a hut made of the same willow but with an intricate weave where the fence was plain.

Was it a pavilion? A gardener's shed, she decided. Shallow orange clay pots lined the fence, three deep, the spiky shoots of bulbs just showing above the rims. The winter brown leaves in a pile to one side of the shed must have been pulled off the pots quite recently, the shoots were still yellow.

The Wa'tic who came out of the shed wore a leather apron, pruning shears tucked into a loop on the belt. "Lady Priest," it said, a light tic-tic sound accenting the Ri. A haze of yellow lightened the dark brown of its chitin. "Your attendants?"

She blocked its attempt to reach for the Net. Pincers scared with age were already tracing the torn silk to the branch the delicate fabric of her hem was caught on. "Are in their beds asleep," she said as it tugged the cloth free. "I had a desire to see the ocean.

It showed no resistance to the Net block. "By the springs, the bath house. Lady Priest, a different path..."

She laughed, twirling around and around in her new freedom. "I like this one." And sat again, dizzy. Her hair had come loose, a shower of crimped gold fell over her shoulders. She had bruised her elbow. No, grazed it. There were spots of blood on the cream silk of her sleeve.

The gardener watched her moment, then turned and started working. What did it think of this, she wondered, but wasn't curious enough to break through the barriers she had set. Both of them with a singular lack of curiosity. Did the lack have the same source, she wondered? She almost smiled at the contrary nature of the thought, but kept it, adding words if not pattern to her inquiry.

She drew her knees up to complete the nest she had made for her arms. She had lost her sleeping mittens somewhere. "Do you ever dream?"

The rhythmic clicking of the snipers stopped as age-frosted eyes sought hers. "Dream?"

Dreams. Had the gardener been making a pathway back for her? Bits of cut cedar had fallen on the gravel path, the scent fresh and for a moment, mixing pleasantly with the rosemary and lavender in the herb beds on the other side. In contrast, the pile of leaves smelled of winter, rotting leaves, skeletons of leaves and old flowers mixed in, all of them browned by snow and frost. But more now. Even in the decay of the year past, she couldn't help but feel the awakening of the land around her.

She hid her face against her knees, away from the Wa'tic. There were too many of her in those multifaceted eyes.

When she looked up again, the Wa'tic was snipping the hedge again. "What's your name?"

"Ca'mi'ti, Lady Priest." He used the male inflection, a fiction, she knew, but common with Wa'tic on Ri. Or at Palace. The pruners were still again, but raised as though he was judging how long this interruption would take.

Poss a'tic got to her feet. If the Emperor were male, they would ask to be spoken of as female. "Would you show me the way to the ocean?" She raised her hands to politely sign indulgence, the overlong sleeves falling back slightly. Blood showed deep in the braiding that extended to her fingertips. Ca'mi'ti saw it too.

"Lady Priest, please. Your people must come." The pruners were tucked back into the belt. A spotted forearm rubbed rapidly across his eyes as he spoke and the tic-tic had turned into a chorus of chittering. "Guards, an aide, someone. Please."

He was speaking the words as they surfaced out of his fear, she could tell they were most of the words he knew in Ri. "Ca'mi'ti, do you dream?" she asked again, but in the soft form of Wa'tic that was all she could manage on her own without a Net. "I've had the strangest dreams lately.

His eyes darkened to bronze in a Wa'tic blink, a brief shadow of sight. "I dream," he said in the same language. "I dream of my garden."

She sighed. He had spoken in the familial possessive, the time scale left ambiguous. Very slightly, she opened the shell around her and looked. A cedar hedge, older than the Wa'tic who trimmed it. The high fence was yellow-stemmed willow - grown for the purpose. Through the weave, the sunrise was broken into

arrows of light. Tollupi vines grew on the other side, tendrils gripping the bark of the willow, their leaves a swollen promise beneath brown scales. They would bloom in late summer but, for a moment, the potent scent of the large hanging flowers filled her mouth, honey sweet and heavy. Pink tubes fading to white in the hot sun, the whirl of the tollupiana beetles at the nectar... then that scent was gone and she could smell the ocean in the breeze.

"I had the dreams long ago," she added, her voice reduced to a whisper and shorn of the tic-tic sounds. "Then the same ones again now, and new ones. Camerat, a reed garden on Camerat, overlooking dark water. Do you know it, is it the garden you dream of?"

He was silent. She had frightened him even more. She had included herself in the dream, using the phrasing that made the speaker part of what they spoke of, part of his garden. "Your garden would have a different ocean, I think," she added in Ri-tongue. She walked to where he was, stepping carefully on the stones. Why were her feet bare?

He had the scent of the cedar on him. She would have liked to touch him. Cedar and oil of lemon, a moldy lemon scent, blue-green mold. He came to her waist. She was part of his dream and he would know she had changed languages to make the lie easier. Not a different ocean at all.

"Would you show me the way?" she said, wanting to laugh now instead of touch.

He bowed deeply, eyes darkening again. No words, only the noise of his mouthparts clicking together and the shape pincers of four arms held together made. The shape was enough to earn him dismissal from Temple service if anyone saw it. Or understood it sufficiently to request a Net translation. A Spann prayer. He didn't move from the fullest reach of the bow, caught in the pose.

Gravel crunched, footsteps behind her. Her tass'altin. He had one of her mittens in his hand. "When our bed got cold enough, I woke up. Do you mind some company on your walk?"

Kascin's thick brown hair looked slept in, flattened on one side, but he had managed boots. She sighed as she held one leg out to show a wet and soiled foot. "Only if you brought some shoes for me."

He tried for the Net and kept pushing until she relented. Needlessly stubborn, she thought and accused him of it.

"At least I don't go around terrorizing people."

"Where's A'in?"

Kascin wasn't looking at her; his swollen fingers had gone from separating the form of Ca'mi'ti's prayer to tapping the thorax, using his nails on the chitin. Moments later, the Wa'tic shuddered, then backed away, and disappeared through the shed doorway.

He watched the old gardener leave before answering. "How would I know where he is if you don't?"

The fields she remembered from before were lying fallow now, grass stretching in terraced layers all the way to the start of the dunes near the shore. Poss a'ltic knelt on the side of the roadway, wild grasses under her knees. The sun hadn't warmed her after all, or the wind was colder here. Stronger at least, without the shelter of the buildings and trees.

Kascin brought a wool cloak and let the thick warm cloth fall by her side without offering it. As stubborn in that as he was in everything else. She ignored the cloak as she had the tea and doughnuts. He turned to look at Raswini and Cayse but didn't go back to join them.

He had thought she was beautiful. When he had first come to her, he would watch her every movement as though spell bound. He'd grown calluses on his innocence very quickly.

She looked at him. He was worse than the cold she usually didn't notice. "You're very distracting."

He laughed as though she had made a joke. His round face was soft, puffy with fluid. Her tass'alt was right, she should send him away.

She made a motion of allowance and he joined her. And took that much as encouragement to wrap the cloak around her shoulders. Dark green, the wool was brushed on both sides like a blanket, too soft to scratch. "A'in has a family in Haltinport," she said. "He's probably there now. He sees little enough of them as it is."

Kascin glanced back at Cayse and Raswini. Had they told him where her tass'alt was? He hadn't come to South Bay simply because she had wanted to, she thought. Because she had taken Kascin as a lover. Because she was behaving like a lovesick girl. "I never thought of changes happening here," she continued. "I expected South Bay Temple to remain the same, waiting for me."

He never had words to say when she spoke of her tass'alt. I should send you home to your world, she thought, taking the tea he offered. The fingers that supported the tea bowl to her lips tasted like the sugar doughnuts he liked so much.

"What's changed here?" he finally said, sitting back on his heels.

The same as the other about A'in: nothing that she couldn't have found out by simply asking. Except, this one she did, taking her memory of the pathway to the ocean view and holding it open to the Temple Net records.

In a leisurely stroll that he would find comfortable, the years peeled back one at a time. Nothing matched. Kascin frowned as he took a sip of her tea. "It must be a very old memory."

The years flipped backwards like the pages of a book against an impatient thumb. He pulled out.

The years went backwards, one at a time, but in a flow like a strong wind. And stopped. Poss a'ltic saw two young women walking the grass path. Late summer, not spring. The bordering hedges were taller - and trimmed lavender, not boxwood. In the centers were sprays of tiny yellow flowers. A cultivator of w'tin, the flowers that grew wild in the meadows. A willow fence, where the cedar hedge was now, backed a deep planting of perennials, Tollupi vines showed along the top of the fence, a few of the blooms hanging to the shadow side. There was no pathway.

Kascin hung his head in a laugh then looked sideways at her through a scruff of wind-tangled hair. "Nothing's changed. You look just the same. Who is that with you?"

The record hummed the date of its transcription from across the Nexus Change, and the reference, why it had been kept. All the records they had of her had been kept.

"Tissa, my aide." She wished she had fingers she could use to push his hair into place. Could he smell the Tollupi flowers? "That was just before my Initiation." Her own memories. She would have thought them gone by now, buried by the years or pushed out from the sheer volume of events. Thousands of years had passed since she had walked at South Bay Temple with Tissa by her side.

"The peaking of Nexus Change forced the timing of my Initiation. It was act then, or let me die." When she had stabilized, Nexus Change was over and the old Emperor and the other Priest Selects were dead. "It all happened very quickly as such things are counted. South Bay Temple supported my Challenge for the vacant Office of Forms. I was Empress the same day."

She stood, letting the cloak fall. Kascin caught it, holding it bunched in his hands as he looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face. His eyes held the Net record as clearly as they did her. Raswini and Cayse were already on their feet, waiting.

Poss a'ltic turned to the way they had come. The rooftops of the Temple buildings showed through the bare branches and the Temple itself further to one side. Only the smaller trees and the brush had leaves as yet. By high summer, all sign of the buildings would be hidden. Behind was the mountain, Ri-altar at the summit. She couldn't see Palace from this angle; the mountain hid it. Their path had followed by the stream, white clouds from the hot springs next to the bathhouse rising in the cold air. Steam and chanting, a deep base voice, slow and practiced. Only one voice had been an adult, the rest were higher pitched and held shivers of cold and excitement. The children from the Temple crèche. Purification rites for Spring Blessing ceremonies.

She had envied the young dancers, she remembered. The first time she had come to South Bay with her father. The Winter Turning. The farm had been left cold and silent far behind them; a week's journey on foot but the trickle of farmers and village people had formed a parade over the distance. Town people and visitors, they had all lined the streets for the procession to the dances at the square. Her father had held her hand as though afraid to loose her for all she had stood quietly, mouth open, watching. Near the end, the younger children from the crèche had come dancing and she'd pulled away, wanting to be with them, her feet trying the steps as they passed. Their banners whipped above their heads, and they sang with clear high voices, sounding like birds in the frozen air.

"Not our kind," he had said, both hands gripping her arms as she struggled. His breath puffed white in her face as though he had been working hard. "What would you want to go do that for?" Large work-coarsened hands. A farmer's hands. The town children hadn't been their kind either, or the fishers. Or the few who were obviously from off world. There hadn't been meanness in his words, or if there had, it was from a limit in feeling, not from a wanting to hurt. He just hadn't understood and saw no reason to try. Much later, he found the will in himself to think her different, and the pride that she was his blood.

"You would have liked my father," she said to Kascin. "He had wanted a son." His frown deepened, he hadn't followed her memory as he had the Net. He couldn't.

"Possi," he started but let the rest go, along with the cloak. And again, he looked back at Raswini and Cayse.

She had her mittens on now; she felt his arm through quilted silk and with the tips of her fingers only. "I dreamt of a garden," she said as he turned back to her, a quick smile starting to grow at her attention. It died. Fear was like an explosion on his face as he stepped away. They stood on a square of blindingly white marble. He had followed here. He had had to.

Raswini grabbed his arm before he stepped off into the black water. "Take it slow," she said into his ear. "Deep breaths." Then with an appraising look to her, the faded blue eyes steady. "Have you set limits on this?"

She looked around. The distance was lost in mist. Or smoke, a burning smell clouded the air. They were on a raft of intact marble, the rest was broken, floor and ceiling both, eaten with black that flipped to white if she stared. Pools of water were around them, hemmed by purple reeds and hills of sand littered with ash and blasted stone.

Limits. "Just us," she said. "I haven't looped it. You could walk out in a couple of minutes, like tearing through a soap bubble."

Raswini nodded slowly, not taking her eyes off her. Cayse had Kascin's other arm, the two of them supporting him. Then she let her breath out and nodded once more. "Okay. Now how about where?"



"A dream."

"Possi..." Cayse pushed at the back of Kascin's knees to get him down. Her man coughed and spat into the water before continuing. "If we're going to be here long, you should let him out."

Brother to A'in, but without the tass'alt's roving eye. He'd never taken a lover outside of her Household that she had heard of. Cayse took after Raswini, the same classic Ri-bred look. But A'in was more his father, at least in appearance if not manner. Dark haired and sallow in complexion, the deep shadows in his skin were greenish even away from Ri. Their father had been a fisher out of Haltinport, the alien blood forgotten only to show up in the dark hair and heavier build every few generations. A'in's wife lived in the same house where he had been born; he had known her since they were children.

Poss a'ltic had first seen him through a pattern pull, as a newborn, only days old. Through long acquaintance, she was able to put a name to her feelings as she watched. A young man and Raswini, standing on a dock in a light rain, arm in arm, sheltering the baby with their bodies. He left her there when his crew had assembled and the boat was ready. Each man and woman had nodded respectfully as they passed and there were kind words and some jokes, ribald and good-natured. Raswini had been wearing clothes such that a fisher might wear and the shawl she had over her hair and pulled around the child was plain-weave wool in the Haltinport plaid, but she walked back home alone with her child. If they hadn't known Raswini served the Empress, the townspeople had known she was a stranger to them.

Poss a'ltic had been able to feel what Raswini had, the complex shifting that had included love, but also anger and pain and a refining of the pride she had taken for granted. And her own feelings? Had they lasted the day? The hour? Was spying on her wayward servant an indulgence or a test that she was still human? Except that she still remembered the feeling, but not when it was Raswini's husband died, or how Raswini had become so old, she just was, it seemed, all at once.

Raswini still stared at her. "At least dampen this down from a pattern pull to a viewing. Let the Net do the work."

"Raswini, we aren't anywhere the Net could find." She forced herself to see the live woman through the layers of memory. A single lifetime, a long time to someone who expects to live only one. "A construct from my dream, that's all. I can't even find this place in overpattern. A lack in me, or..."

"Found some other limits have you?" The wrinkles around her mouth deepened in what was a private smile between them. "Fancy that." She looked to the boy and the lines deepened to a scowl. "If none of us are really here, then he can be 'here' even less. Unless you want..."

"I'm okay," Kascin said firmly.

"This is what I want," Poss a'Itlic said to both of them. Unless I want him dead sooner rather than later, Raswini had been thinking. She'd gotten worse, mothering Kascin at every chance, defending him from A'in, keeping them apart as much as possible.

Kascin squinted into the dim light, avoiding her. Had he thought Raswini would have talked about his death where he could hear? "Where is this place?" he asked.

Poss a'Itlic shook her head. "A path to the ocean, I think." She spoke in trade-Zimmer and the words shared intent, if not form, with the Wa'tic language. He understood what she had said, as he had the Spann prayer. He was Altasimic and where there were Altasimic, there were freeborn Zimmer. "Stay here with me, Kascin. Raswini, Cayse, look around."

They called her a few minutes later. "Keep the boy back there," Cayse said. "He doesn't need to see this." Kascin followed regardless. Poss a'Itlic waded through dirty water, the hem of her robe soaked. Raswini stood solid blocking her, storm battered reeds on either side hid the rest. "He should go back," she insisted.

He didn't. "It's you," he said, his tone empty of either horror or wonder.

"There's another body," Cayse said. "An older Poultat male with tattoos on his wrist."

She breathed burning stone. Raswini held her from behind, watching her younger son from over Poss a'Itlic's shoulder. "That one of you died hard," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "You said you dreamed this?" Cayse looked up waiting for an answer as well. Had she?

Kascin was standing by a clump of lavender colored reeds, one broken stem in his hand. He had glanced up at Raswini's words but his eyes didn't meet hers. "Some," she said.

Cayse nodded then went back to work, running a crystal over the body. The braids were next. Overpattern mark over Simic and Ri, not as extensive as her own, but come on faster, she thought. The cycling cuts were barely healed. The rest of Cayse's examination was as clinical and thorough. He tossed the crystal to his mother when he was finished and washed his hands in the water. Purple specks caught in the fine, almost colorless hair of his arm, the pungent scent of pepper was everywhere but masked by the burning smell. Pemt'ka algae, she remembered. Camerat, but she had known that from the dreams. And the bodies.

"Shall I do the man?" he asked. She nodded and he took another crystal from the pouch on his girdle.

A pocked moon, a silver-skinned crescent of reflected sunlight, a dusky plain directly below. No atmosphere. They were in the sun shadow, in orbit. On the light-capped forward horizon, small with distance, a clouded world rose. They didn't know where they were.

"Try again," Rit said to Kori. She was kneeling before the crystal array and the interface systems with the data points. "We'll fall apart if they keep this up." The larger ship had ignored each of their attempts at a greeting through the Net. They were being scanned or attacked, he wasn't sure which of the two was intended.

The ship had come out of the direction of the sun, its shielding an aurora of flaring energy they hadn't been able to distinguish from the natural until it was practically on top them. "It is an attack," Kori had said and then repeated each time he suggested an alternative explanation. She had reset their shields at the same moment the first scan hit, the need to complete the action with a return attack obvious to Rit even with the blocker still in his system and his pattern senses muted. An attack wasn't possible; they didn't have the power in the crystals to spare.

*Istarom*. Rit caught a faint sense of what Kori had done there to hold off the Empire forces. At each point where he tried to see it more clearly, the impression retreated.

The flitter groaned as the effect of the scanning waves on the shielding bled into tiles already weakened by the time surge in the diamond. "They don't like what I'm doing," she said. And the reason expanded: they didn't like her.

"Bolda?" he asked through the Net, offering what they had so far. "What do you think?" The equivalent of a shrug came back.

Kori had turned her head away. She might be right. It hadn't worked and whoever was in the other ship didn't like something about what they had been doing.

Spreading his mind over the Net focus she had been using, he pushed it past the shielding, following the last signature path Kori had tried. "Alisim Temple," he said simply in Empire plain tongue as the Temple colors flared on their hull in the Altasimic mark. The opal light from the six radiating lines - the stylized petals - half blinded him. Outside and in, he hadn't thought to set a different inner shell. The light dimmed as Kori took over.

The scanning stopped. Rit sat back against the support of the nose rib of the craft and let his breath out.

From near by, Bolda snorted. "As Alicia would say, that let the cat out of the bag." The weaver was sitting on one of the chests that made this area almost a

separate room. He had been riding the Net the whole time, feeling like a burr on the edge of his awareness, but Rit hadn't seen him come forward.

"We have to be from somewhere. And at least there's an Alisim in this reality."

"Maybe," Bolda said grudgingly as he took the summary of their attempts from the spin Kori was doing. "Your first signatures were heavily accented with a'Genn," he added a moment later. "Kori's right, I don't think they like her. Maybe you should have fallen back to the original flutter crystal configurations and not the Spann..."

"It wasn't as good," Kori interrupted, looking at Bolda. Black ringed her eyes.

"Stand down all non-support shielding," came the order over a tight Net link and in the same language he had used. The riding signature was different enough that the ranking was inconclusive, at least to him, and the Net didn't offer more.

The Temple ship was out of Reema Gate Station. There was no Reema Gate Station recorded in their Net files. They did have the species if not the rank: E'kalt, their own Net had said from the style being used. There wasn't much else in the record other than a few images. A close human line but didn't look it to Rit's eyes, no more than Niv did.

"Well?" Rit asked Bolda. "I'm out of my depth here."

The other man puffed his cheeks out. "We could get Garm to talk to them. He's the diplomat."

"Or Ulanda."

"That would cause more trouble than it would solve."

"Or you."

"No. We don't know the politics of this reality, and until we do, the less anyone knows about us, the better."

Rit's attention shifted again. Space. He was floating, the world below, another on the horizon now fully visible - red clouds? Not Zimmer at any rate. The sun... the star. A Net image from the navigational leads? He pulled his attention back to Bolda. "More of what we could do would help, and less of what we shouldn't."

"We need some distance between them and us."

That was positive enough. And he'd already been told that outrunning them wasn't possible. He turned to Kori. "Do we have the energy to set a Web jump out of here?"

"Lord?" she asked. "Where?"

"Anywhere you can," he said. Then to Bolda: "Unless you have a place in mind."

"Nope."

"Lord, I'll need time," Kori said in a light thin tone, sounding exhausted all of a sudden. "The coordinates might not match. Like the signatures didn't. As soon as I start forming the Web energies around the ship, they'll know."

Another scanning wave hit them, stronger than the others but mercifully brief. A warning shot?

Rit leaned back against the hull tiles again. His vision was graying at the edges. Adrenaline had gotten him to here, but between the blood loss and the drugs he'd been given, he was going to crash hard.

Harder than dying?

Alicia edged past Bolda, a glass in one hand. She handed it to him. "Tea will have to wait."

He sniffed what looked like water, but from the smell, wasn't entirely. "What's in this?"

"Just drink it."

One sip and a stomach cramp doubled him over. Whatever it was splashed over his hands. Alicia took the glass before he dropped it, then squatted beside where he sat, putting them face-to-face. "Come and rest for a while. Let Bolda take over here."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

She hesitated a moment, glanced at Bolda then back to him. "Sorry about what?"

He'd meant only to be polite, but fell easily into the 'more' that she wanted from him. *Sorry? Sorry that he lived? Had he? Would you give your life for Alicia? For Kori? For Eunni? For Ulanda?* Cassa's question. And he'd said yes. He rubbed his forehead with one hand. Cold sweat. He felt like he was a hundred years old.

"Are you sorry that I lived?" His words were flat, scarcely breathed.

Her face a mask of concern he didn't want to lift, Alicia straightened and said to Bolda, "He's in no condition to be doing this."

Rit wiped his wet hand on his pants. "That's my decision. My pilot, my ship. And you can go back and tell Ulanda that. And tell her, her timing is lousy."

Another scan stopped Alicia's response. The ship creaked in protest as the energy burst hit. Their shields held, but just. "Bolda..." she started. The weaver just shrugged.

"Then let it be on your head." For tone, she might as well have stamped her foot.

Bolda snorted. "What does her nibs have to say about it?"

It. It. It. He hadn't been talked around since he was a child. And 'her nibs' was most certainly listening to the entire conversation and could say what she wanted without an intermediary.

Except that she hadn't. Was she using Alicia as she had at Istarom? And Bolda's reaction just now? He had no idea. "Alicia, get out."

For an answer, she stared at him and didn't move.

In the continuing silence, Kori glanced first to him, then Alicia, and as quickly turned her eyes back to the crystal array. *His ship*. She was waiting for orders; he

could feel it in her like it was a roadway she kept watch over. And would take Alicia's over his.

Which Alicia knew and didn't know, not at the heart, not at the soul of her. He got to his knees and his stomach twisted again, but not from the movement. Kori had found a jump. A Gate Station from Slicanin's reality, the lines here matched well enough to try for it.

"And from there?" he asked her.

"I should be able to use the Gate for a second jump without any special notice, especially a jump into the regular trade routes. This one jump will drain us, we won't have power to make a second one on our own." From the time-line, a funnel grew to show the start of a Web pattern. It was a change in their signal that the other ship had to notice.

Alicia was still waiting for him. He palmed the sweat off his face. "By whatever did or didn't happen at Istarom, I haven't forfeited the right to make my own decisions."

Another energy burst and black grit showered down around him, sparking to a rainbow of colors before dying to the natural ocher of the clay. With the shot, a Net focus crossed their own. The interface flattened then spread into visual image that couldn't be mistaken regardless of the language or his lack of knowledge. The jump funnel he recognized from Kori's time-line was duplicated to a point a few minutes into the future but still well clear of the actual jump time. Then two possibilities were offered. Stopping the jump or being destroyed.

"Is that separate from our Net?" he shouted at Bolda over the screaming of the tiles. He couldn't tell. They might not have secrets anymore.

"Yes and it will stay that way if you'd shut up and let me work." Then: "Shit!"

The reason for the last came through on a separate lead somehow under the other. There were two full depth breaks in the tiles, only the exterior hull shielding was keeping the ship intact and that was fluctuating badly. Then three separate flares, Alicia had set warding beads of her own, giving extra support to the ribs of the craft.

Using the same lead, he sent to Ulanda: "Are you getting any of this?"

And got back: "*Your* ship."

Two words but the other ship's Net interface sizzled and died. Kori stripped out of their Net with an audible hiss of pain.

Through the same route he had used earlier, he sent: "Our hull is broken, we need to keep the shielding we've got." Without thinking, he put his own mark over the message. Strom Noble House.

The ship rocked again and with his right arm, he grabbed onto the hull rib closest to him. And blanked out a moment from the pain. His left arm, he'd tensed it. When his vision returned, there was hole he could have put his fist

through in the hull over his head. He was covered with broken pieces of tile, his chest felt like it was on fire every time he took a breath.

Bolda stood, brushing clay from his hair as he scowled at the breach. "So they're not impressed." Stars showed past the flickering blue of the shields. Clay dust floated towards the hole, they were losing air. He took three beads from his jacket pocket and set them around. The drifting stopped. "The beads won't last if they keep shooting at us. We can't get away, so we might as take the next move and tell them we've got a Priest on board."

"You mean they don't know by now?"

"Maybe."

Maybe like hell. "And me?"

"You've already told them you're Strom. Add Salin to that and you might pass."

There wasn't time to argue details. He did as Bolda asked.

He swung his legs around to get them under him. He could hardly move. "They're sending a flitter to investigate. Armed Temple guards and a Salin. Kori..." He twisted around to see her and his vision grayed again. "We've got to get you hidden." The words were out before he knew what he was saying. Kori looked at him without moving her head. Her Clan marks were silver, her eyes not much darker.

There wasn't any place in the flitter to hide her. "Bolda..." He tried again to get to his knees, and barely managed it. Then one foot under him, his back braced on the wooden rib. "Bolda, they'll kill her."

The weaver grabbed him as he started to collapse. "Knives," Rit whispered. His. Did he still have it? He didn't remember anything between the Cassa's vision and waking up in the flitter. Alicia would have hers. Kori? She was damned regardless.

The *knowing* took his mind further, back down pathways of probability, weaving the changes from one reality to the next. A Clan Lord...

Then Net sizzled, the sensation exploded in his mind, and was gone, leaving him blinking red and white lines from his vision. Gone with it was his pattern sense and any concrete understanding of what any of this meant.

Arranged before her, Kori had spread out nearly a dozen of the smaller crystals. Filling the void of what he had just lost, what she had been saying came back to him. What could be used as weapons and what their options were for taking the attack back to the invaders. "Bolda?" he asked.

"How badly do you want to die?"

"You asked me that once before."

Tentatively, he reached out for the Net. Nothing. They were still alive and breathing air so the shields were working but he didn't have contact with them. Moments later, the flitter moved as though bumped and what he could see of the

blue through the hole in the ceiling changed color and texture. Something else as well, a buzz that sounded between his ears.

"They didn't waste any time," Bolda said. Then looked at him, frowning.

"You don't feel it?" Rit asked. The other man shook his head. "Never mind," he added as he pulled one of the smaller warding beads from his hair. It took a moment to think how to reach the simple crystal core and before he could begin to think what setting to try, Bolda took the bead from his hand then gave it back. The buzzing stopped.

"They might have been impressed after all," Bolda said.

A reality with Alisim and Strom.

"Lord?" Kori whispered. Two of the crystals were in one hand, in the other, her knife. Wanting orders. Needing them.

"Keep them for when we've run out of other options.

They had been waiting, Rit decided. On top of everything else, he was still dazed by whatever they had done to him. Part of his mind felt gone with it. There was a way to prepare for possibilities, an ordinary way. They must have planned to board them from the start, escalating the scanning to feel out their capabilities.

Tiles were falling on wood as he managed to get to his feet with Bolda's help. By the time he had taken the three steps past the web eye, the last of a man-sized hole was being punched out of the main part of the flutter. Glow globes competed with the blue shielding showing through other breaches in the hull. Garm and Alicia were at the far end; nobody else was in sight. Rit signed Alicia to stay put when she started towards him. He kept the hand with the bead in it for balance on the carved wooden arch, feeling hooked scales under the heel of his hand. I should have gone swimming with Slicanin, he thought.

The first E'kalt through had a stick in his hand, a weapon from the way he handled it. A light green male with white head and lower limbs. Green feathers?

The E'kalt Salin was in the same, dressed in her own feathers, not clothes. Braided cords looped around her chest. Temple colors. No, not feathers, flexible scales, he suddenly remembered from the Net. They looked like feathers. Hers were a soft gray over her entire body and moved as though there was a wind blowing through them.

She pulled Net with her, the limited domestic level offered without preamble. "You are the Strom," she said to him in recognizable Xintan, signing a neutral greeting.

"Salin."

A pause, then: "I am Salin Rilla a'Talla of Temple Assuralla at Reema Station." She turned her head to look at Garm next, and Alicia and back to him. Small eyes surrounded by writhing scales, the eye entirely black except for pupils that appeared to open to shining red depths.



Those eyes took in the energy lines from the warding bead he held, then the shape of the Zimmer knife in his boot. She saw those things in the same way he knew she was female.

"You don't look Strom," she continued, still speaking Xintan. Or the Net was - her lips took on shapes that wouldn't have made those sounds.

"Strom and Salin," he replied in the same language. Was their Net so complete? And Alisim so static? How much time had passed?

He nodded towards Alicia. "My wife, Alicia. And a colleague: Garm. An explanation is due us, I think. The attack was unprovoked and our ship very obviously incapable of causing you harm."

"A ship on the border to the Clan worlds, showing a'Genn in the signatures, the wrong signatures..."

Clan worlds. Poss a'Itlic must have given Gennady what he wanted before he killed her. "And unarmed," he reminded her, but she had stopped listening, her attention past where Alicia and Garm stood. The long narrow scales around her eyes stood on end to form tunnels to her vision.

"Explanations are due," she said slowly after a moment. "But they are due to us."

This one was the ship's hunter, Rit realized. Not the Captain. From a world of dark forests, she'd hunt the dawn and twilight times. He glowed in her eyes, all heat and soft skin. The *seeing* took the last of his strength and he slid down the wall to the floor.

A smell of spiced walnuts. From her? The push on him had increased or the warding bead was dying. "We're not on E'kalt," he said. "The Priest I serve owes explanations to no one."

Serve? He almost looked to his wrist, bandaged now. "You sense her power," he added. "You have to know what she is capable of. Rilla a'Talla, I've knelt in the snow at Ri-altar with Palace over my shoulder. I've watched the sasi fall on Zimmer and almost drowned. I've walked the halls of a Clan Holding built of white shell." The truth spoken in plain Xintan with what he hoped were the proper Empire words in this reality. "If my Lady Priest chooses to take... things or even people with her out of the pull, she still owes no explanations to you."

"People?"

He didn't answer. If she was a Salin - enough to feel Ulanda's power - then for all he knew, there was a danger she could tell he was lying. And that he was more than what he claimed. Or less. No pattern sense, just a dull throbbing in his head. Drugged. He didn't know what he was here. Or what Ulanda was.

Delicate fingers unfolded from under hard plates to make a shape he didn't know. He had thought the darker pointed scales were simple claws. "If you could translate..." The push on his mind stopped and he could reach the Net again. A request for peace between them, coupled with one for waiting. The shape was

from High formal, he looked for a translation in E'kalt to give back to her out of politeness but there wasn't one in that language that meant what she had chosen. He nodded. A truce for now.

The Temple ship's flitter dropped them then settled at the other side of the hold. The blue warding light dimmed but didn't quit entirely; likely their ship would have fallen apart without the support. Their tiles were too badly damaged - both grossly and the microstructure of the clay - to act as a conduit for the shielding. The more independent warding energies could act to the same end even if they didn't have the flexibility of the set systems.

Rit stepped out of the flitter first, Alicia close on his heels. The E'kalt Salin waited by the other flitter, her people ranked next to her. Three E'kalt, all of them green and white males, identical from that distance. One human female he hadn't seen earlier. Other crew jostled for a view at the wide doors in back of them, a mixture of species.

More open doors the way they had come in, the glowing surface of the world they orbited showed beyond a shimmer of blue. The space slowly filled in as hull tiles swarmed to connect with those already there. A clicking sound seemed to come from all around them.

The Salin waited until the outer hull was sealed before walking over to them, leaving the others behind. Alicia earned a tunnel stare framed by silver-gray scales, then the E'kat lifted her vision and the glowing red of her pupils were on him.

"Rooms nearby are being prepared," she said, using Xintan again.

Rit heard two levels of Net working, a simple translation he could reach from the domestic, and a deeper one, like a hum that darted away even as he realized it was there. It was encouraging they were even offered the domestic Net. He nodded. "And the flitter?" he asked. We will require..."

She interrupted him. "This part of the ship will be shielded separately, your access limited. You may remove belongings but the craft is not safe to be in unsupervised. You will have no access to the main part of the Scout ship at all."

Bolda hopped down from the hole in the side of the flitter. A piece of hull tile broke off in his hand. He handed it to Alicia. "Where is the jump being set for?" he asked in plain-tongue.

"I don't know you," Rilla said. Her Net link was buzzing.

Bolda shrugged then turned back to the wreck. "This is Kori, our pilot," he said, offering the Zimmer his hand down.

"Oathed to me," Rit said quickly. "She has no other attachments."

"With Clan a'Genn markings?"

"I find her service acceptable."

"As my Salin has stated," Ulanda said from the doorway, "no explanations are necessary." Niv was behind her.

Rilla's bow was careful, she didn't take her eyes off Ulanda. "As the Lady Priest says."

Ulanda nodded, then turned to each of them as she spoke. "My San, Garm. My tass'alt, Kalduka d'Nivkhs. Others of my Household: Eunni Tilic and Asam e'Bolda. You have met Kori, Lord Ritsiniti and Lady Alicia Strom. All of my Household."

Rilla bowed as each name was spoken. "Lady Priest, our records of Alisim Temple don't support the claims made by your Salin. I ask again: of what affiliation are you? Of what Temple? Of what world?"

Ulanda stepped forward and Rilla retreated the same distance. "And Temple Assuralla at Reema Station?" Ulanda asked. "What of its affiliation?"

Her scales writhed. "By oaths, the Office of Forms."

"The Office of Forms? On the border of Empire?"

"On the border of heresy." The Salin bowed again. "Lady Priest, what do I report?"

"Report that your unprovoked attack has destroyed my ship and endangered my person."

The Salin hesitated then bowed again. "I will serve as liaison until this is settled. As I said, access to this area and from this area will be limited, but if I may be of service within the bounds of my oaths and orders..."

The Xintan translation stopped, a grinding sound was suddenly all around them. Teeth again, Rit thought, looking around, expecting hull tiles to start falling. Niv was holding Ulanda around the waist, but she didn't seem to notice or need the comfort, watching the E'kalt woman as though nothing else was happening.

Any chance that it wasn't a Clan attack, Rit wondered. Would Gennady set a watch at the point he had left the diamond and could his people keep one for however long it had been against the slight possibility someone would be able to follow him through the diamond?

A white marble square, Bolda had said. It was from his latest vision of Cassa. He felt like he had dreamed the whole thing and was finally awake. He squeezed his eyes shut then opened them. The sound had stopped. "Will we still be able to jump?" he said then coughed.

A pause from the E'kalt Salin, then, "Yes." She motioned with her head to her people and left quickly, the three males following her.

The human woman came forward, stopping at a distance where she would be able to see all of them at once. A tall woman, in early middle age, Rit thought from the hint of lines around her gray eyes. She looked strange: shaved head, the eyebrows as well, accentuating the narrow skull, a little flattened on top but sloping to a pointed crown. Natural or shaped while she was an infant, before the

bones were set? And her clothes, molded to her form, the gray of the E'kalt Salin's scales, of her own eyes, but made of small beads strung and knit into cloth like Slicannin's uniform. The only bright color was in the shapes painted on the high riding sides of her head, stripes and diamonds raised slightly above the skin as though embroidered there.

"I am to show you to your rooms," she said in plain-tongue although her hands held a more formal greeting. She looked at each of them, longer at Kori then skipped Ulanda to settle on Garm. She swallowed hard. "Is this language satisfactory?"

"Perfectly fine," Garm said. Rit was relieved to have her attention on the Simic instead of him. "Do you have a name we can call you?"

She blinked rapidly. Nervous as much as actually frightened, he thought, although she hid both well. Fragments of feelings only, and he knew he shouldn't even be attempting to sense them.

"Your name?" Garm ordered.

"Sir..." She wet her lips. "Heana Ultic. Security Second under Salin a'Talla."

The ship shivered and she jumped. Nothing, a long time waiting, then the grinding started, building until the tiles were screaming. Much worse than before. And stopped in an instant, blue flaring above them.

"Is the attack continuing?" Rit asked. She nodded, looking back at him. Then her eyes went distant. Moments later the shielding eased. "We've jumped," she added, her attention still with her Net link.

"Tell us," Ulanda said quietly.

"Two Clan pods followed in a piggyback jump." Her eyes were focused at a point a foot above Ulanda's head. "The Zimmer are dead now, Reema Gate is heavily guarded." She snapped out of the Net link and the mental fog at the same time, started backing up, staring at Ulanda in horror.

"Heana Ultic," Ulanda said in the same even tone. "I'm not fond of being shot at by anyone. If necessary, I would have taken the Net to the level required and found the information myself. Would you have preferred that?"

She shook her head. "Lady Priest, no."

"I didn't think so."

Rit coughed. "You mentioned rooms?"

### - 3 -

The rooms had a just-deserted feel that said they had taken over quarters from the crew. The floor throughout was of tile, small irregular pieces arranged in

a simple geometric mosaic in muted colors. All the walls looked like they were made of hull tiles, smooth textured clay with an impressed design on the surface. Rings topped by lines, with squares over those seemingly at random. Amber colored, the walls glowed slightly. Could they disassemble and fit back together like the flitters? He could see the entire ship coming apart, something mutable, changing shape as needed. At the whim of the ship's Net? The flitters he had gotten used to using were small self-contained craft - and they hadn't been in space. And this last time when he had been? He would prefer bailing wire and nails, anything as long as it would take some effort to take to pieces.

Rit sat on the bed and watched as Bolda set their warding besides the ship's, for privacy if nothing else, leaving only one area clear for access to the domestic Net. The small things, bath water, temperature, lighting and such could be changed by hand, leaving a teasing sensation of having almost communicated with something alive.

"Can they get through this?" he asked as the last bead floated above a doorframe of smooth rounded wood.

"Yes."

"I meant the warding not the door."

"So did I." Bolda stretched. "If they do, we're in serious trouble. Rilla has some idea of what Ulanda could do if given even a moments warning. Hell, she might be more nervous of you when it comes to warnings." He shook his head in disgust. "Strom." As though he were spitting the word.

"Sorry I asked."

"Well, yeah. You've got your good points. How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure."

"You look like hell."

"That's probably what I feel like, then."

Bolda frowned again, looking around. "They're setting up for another jump. Guess we're not staying at Reema Gate Station."

"How can you tell?"

"How can you not?" He scratched his neck. "Custom job too, like the first one. If they were using a jump preset by the Gate, I wouldn't be able to tell until we went through the hole."

"Maybe they're expecting more trouble." Even through the woman's daze, he had heard a tight pleasure in Heana's voice when she spoke of the Zimmer crew as dead. The attack on the pods by the Gate ships must have been close to instantaneous.

Alicia came in, carrying Tika in the crook of one arm. Eyes narrowed, she looked at each of the warding spheres then nodded.

Bolda grunted. "A critic yet," he said on his way out.

Purring loudly, the cat drooled on Alicia's sleeve, her eyes closed to slits. "Niv said you'll need another blocker patch in an hour, not longer." She stroked the animal's head and neck as she spoke. Tika opened her golden eyes wide, blinked then stretched. Alicia almost lost her.

He began to unbutton his tunic, and immediately ran into trouble doing it one handed.

Alicia just watched. "Before then, I'll do some unpacking. Just the necessities, at least until we find out how long we'll be staying on board. Oh, this is our room."

The bed was half the room and stacked with bedding. "Ours?"

The cat jumped down, put her ears back, then her tail up, and waddled out the doorway. Alicia sat on the bed beside him. "Yes, ours. You can send me away all you like, I'm not going. Ulanda said that you started experiencing a residual pattern draw as soon as we left the diamond and you woke up. Altasimic and overpattern, she says. Rit, you can't ignore the effect on your body."

"And Ulanda?"

Her cheeks flushed with anger. "You can ask her." Then softer: "Rit, whatever happened at Istarom, whatever anyone thinks happened, this isn't going to go away."

He took her hand - her right, the one with the oath band - in the hand he could still use, but could hardly feel the soft skin and the shape of the bones under.

She put her other hand over. "Tell me just because for once, you trust me as your wife to be looking out for your best interests. You told me once that you loved me."

If he closed his eyes, her voice was a child's voice, light and a little breathless. But deep inside her, he felt an awareness - like a small animal - stir as though from hibernation. And was glad of the drugs that limited his senses.

"We both said a great many things." He let himself fall backwards onto the bed.

"Rit, there's no Ramsini like there was when Simitta died, only me."

And a child, long grown up and dead. If at all. Had their other lives existed?

"Tell me what happened." Her voice was lower again.

"You already know. I tried to kill myself."

"I want to know why. I want to know what lead up to it. What you thought you were accomplishing."

"I didn't."

"Didn't what?" Then she sighed. "Rit, the knife was still in your hand when Roland found you. He thought you were dead, he thought he was bringing me back a corpse. I could see it on his face. He thought he had failed at everything he had promised."

Seen that Roland had thought he had risked everything to gain everything? And with Rit's death, with Istrom under attack by Empire forces, had lost? Rit hadn't seen it then, but now he could and in more detail than that one faint sense of events he had felt while on the flitter and under attack. The images, the sensations, all condensed as memory often became. Instead of the stars, the sky was layers of black paper melting in the rain. Layers of paper and layers of eyes as black. All melting.

He blinked the images away. "I was climbing on the rocks with him. I must have fallen." And saw that too.

Alicia shook her head. "That didn't happen."

He had fallen, then stopped, wedged between boulder and tree trunk. Memory? Or recreation? He had been climbing, but when the flitter had stopped by the river, not during what was last night to him, not at Istarom.

Residual pattern draw?

"Rit, if you won't tell me what happened, just talk to me. Say what you want, but don't make up things that didn't happen."

The truth was a pathway in his mind. He took one step with a feeling of release. "She said to me that the night was very long."

Whispered: "Cassa?" And firmer: "That was from Quin'tat's story. From what Garm said in the diamond."

"I saw Camerat and Ri."

"We've all seen them in stories and Net pulls. We've all seen..."

"You wanted to know."

"I want to know the truth."

"This is as true as I know how to make it. I think I invent what I see of her... that a good part of it grows out of trying to make sense of the parts that are real. Like you do with your own mind... the things you believe aren't necessarily true or false, but they fit how you are now, how you feel now."

Sometime during the telling, the walls dimmed and the bed became a nest of blankets. He wasn't sure where the memories stopped and the stories began, or if it was all a story.

She was there when he woke up, struggling to breath. Tika was curled up on his chest but he had a cough as well. Sandwiches and tea were on the low table beside the bed, and Alicia was playing rings and sticks with Eunni.

Steam surrounded her, warm as fingers. Even the plank Poss a'Itic sat on was warm. Kascin stroked the soap across her back and splashed water to rinse. Her feet were already soaking; the black had gotten in around the toenails. She slipped into the water as he finished, turning as she did, floating backwards to see him, her braid ends trailing free. Soaked and ruined but they had been already.

Kascin watched her, a towel in his hand the same as he had held the cloak. He would be seeing the scars from the burning, she knew. The knife that had killed her had been left, caught on bone and no effort made to remove it. High Zimmer, the Net spin had said. Clan a'Genn by the shapes made by the flower markings on the blade. He might have known that as well. "Did you," she asked.

He frowned, deep set brown eyes shaded by his hair. "What?"

She shook her head at his question. The Clan worlds were far from where she had found him, the ideas might have surfaced there, a journey of thought alone, but not a knife. "Come in with me," she said. He swam awkwardly but was usually happy in the water, changing a ritual into fun.

He waded in slowly this time, forgetting the towel was in his hand until the ends were wet. "Doesn't it bother you?" he said, looking away.

The bathhouse was empty but for them. Sounding reeds dripped water in a chorus of tongues at one end. Hot water from the spring, steaming drop by drop as it joined the pool. A single reed for the bainta drum stone, a slow solemn sound like a heartbeat. Stone sides held the sound in, rising half way up between huge beams of fitted pine. Open to the daylight above the stone, a third the distance from floor to ceiling. The roof was thatch. A blue slipper had been lost under the bench by the screened entrance. A child's, you couldn't see it except from the water.

Besides her own guard, more from South Bay Temple were outside, a full compliment where usually two stood honor. Her morning walk hadn't gone unnoticed. The ranking Ri-priest of South Bay Temple wouldn't ask what she had been doing but his actions would beg the question of her. That she had chosen the lesser bath rather than the toubi cleansing would also not go unnoticed.

"I bathed for my Initiation here," she said, moving her fingers in the water, easy for floating fingers. Not quite here, a little further up, the toubi site. A more austere ritual. He came closer as she asked. His hair was curling in the steam.

The Poultat man in the pull had died differently than she had. Drowned in the waters there, but alive when she had already been dead. He had held her a long time; he had died holding her.



Would A'in have? Or Kascin? "I died in the spiral," she said, watching him closely. "All Priests do. What is another death, especially one I only dreamed?"

"You're not the same as any Priest I've seen." He gathered her hair back then let it go to float again. His fingers rubbed the back of her neck the way she liked.

"What I am that's of overpattern can't be of Ri or Simic. And what I am of that, you can't see at all. More human—and less."

His fingers touched where the knife had gone in and followed a rib. He didn't know what he felt but she did. "They weren't even surprised. Raswini and Cayse, I mean. I didn't know you could do that."

"You've had enough to learn." As clumsy with her as he was in the water, he felt along her back, holding her closer - his hands rough on her skin - as though to make sure she was whole and alive. She moved against the touching, laughing deep in her throat. "We shouldn't get too busy. I've called the others already." Naturally shy, he drew back slightly, then over compensated as though to show he didn't care.

Just Yian came, her face carefully free of any obvious expression but couldn't hide the twinkle in her eyes. "I've set up in the Willow porch," she said as she draped their wraps over a bench. "If you two are finished..."

Kascin splashed his way to the edge then stopped to help her up the steps as though it were an after thought.

The small room was screened, but not with willow. Lengths of embroidered white silk were suspended from the overhead beams, overlapped slightly and held to the floor by carved stone rods. Her mark, Ri crowned with Simic, was all around, shades of green in the silk thread and from the variable light. A brazier was set on the floor cloths, her braiding box next to it. Yian picked at the wet cords, her fingernails burnished red and perfect to the ruin of silk she removed. A'in's daughter, she looked much like Raswini at that age but had her father's temperament. A'in had simply brought her in one day, holding her hand, the young girl wearing a formal Temple robe but awkward in it past just being shy. His daughter, she wasn't very shy.

Yian held a soiled strand up then looked past it. "Joph d'Ulin, that's the Temple's Chief of Staff here, not the ranking Priest's San..." She dropped the silk into a coil on the floor cloth. "Well, when you called, she was just working up enough nerve to ask one of us how much longer you were going to be. She was trailing Department Heads like an aunty does children."

Cayse had a bundle in his arms. She nodded when he asked if she wanted it. An overrobe, warmed by a heating stone. Yian raised one eyebrow, but shrugged, her attention taken momentarily by a knot in the cord. "They'll manage no matter how long I take to dress," Poss a'ltic said quickly as her aide opened her mouth to continue the story. "Or do you think I should apologize for being a bother?"

"Not really a bother," Cayse said, tucking the robe in around her as though wrapping a teapot. "More like a difficult honor. One who doesn't stay in bed when she's expected to." He motioned Yian to start her other arm, removing the underbraid and the wrapping cloth himself. He had started on her staff as a personal aide - as Yian was now - and was middle-aged before she'd made him San of her Household when Raswini had asked to be retired from the position.

Through the Net, he called for Raas'lin, her weaver. "No," she said, stopping the call. "You do the braids."

"Then I suggest a simple winding in place of underbraids." He smoothed a thick layer of ukin cream on her arm. "The cut's not bad but..." He looked at her. "You're just starting with this aren't you?"

She shook her head, resisting the urge to run away that the smell of the cream always brought. "I was younger than Yian is now, when I first dreamed about this. The dreams stopped then, they might stop again."

The dreams had stopped once. And she had been young. Both things seemed equally impossible now.

Her Initiation had been rushed, South Bay Temple and their allies gambling that the mounting energies of Nexus Change would serve to push her development and not kill her. After Initiation, she had never fully stabilized, starting to access overpattern even as her access to the Ri world-pattern was still forming. They had put her in the pavilion on the way to Ri-altar when keeping her at South Bay had become too dangerous.

Lying beside her, Ti'win had woken up when she moved, the heavy tass'altin groggy with sleep as much as with pattern sickness. He didn't appear to realize what was happening, his eyes unfocused even as he managed to stand.

I can float away, she had thought, and tried to say so. The only sound she could make was a wild laugh. She felt like she was drunk. The medic was there a moment later, disbelief on his face. She should have floated as she walked slowly to the door of the pavilion; her feet were very far away. Neither of them tried to stop her or follow, the medic was helping Ti'win. She hadn't known where everybody else was.

Outside, the trees were motionless in the heat of the afternoon; only the stone was relatively cool against her bare feet. She walked down the steps to the path and the soil was warm. She wasn't floating anymore, she felt as though she could sink into the ground. She hadn't ever thought she'd leave this place alive, she knew those who looked after her certainly hadn't thought so.

Walking forward took all her attention, she almost fell when the warding pillars distracted her, moving before her by a body length. Net started at the foot of the steps, or had, dying back as the faint blue line pushed at it. A reaching touch from her and the warding faltered, it would fall so easily, she thought.

The twin watch fires were lit, a small fire in each, the smoke staying low and spreading, bringing the scent of pine to her. She stopped there, the limited warding wouldn't go any further and she wanted this clear space around her. The Emperor's Seal was scratched into the brushed soil in front of the stone steps that led to Ri-altar. Fresh pine needles had been placed to make an imperfect copy over the top and the whole thing scattered with ashes from the fires. She could hear the drums from the Temple not far away. Time, she thought. I need time first just to get used to being alive.

Ti'win was behind her. "The Emperor died an hour ago," he said heavily. "Nexus Change is over." His upper lip was beaded with sweat, his breath sour with vomit. He touched her face as though to make sure that she was real. "Hiller just told me, everybody else has gone to the Temple."

"I don't know what to do," she said, kneeling at the start of the lines that made up the Alba mark of the Emperor.

He knelt to one side, his hands automatically going to start to tidy, then giving up, looking as though he might be sick again. A light sleeveless tunic was all she wore, blood and sweat stained, and no braids, only wraps that were heavily wound with silver impregnated cords. There wasn't anything worth tidying.

She put her hand on his knee.

"Hiller told them you were dead." There was no strength left in his voice. He put his hand over hers; she liked him to be with her, for him to touch her, even when it hurt and it had so often. Soft fleshed, a generous man. A specialist from Tass'kin icci Holding at Palace, he had stayed his turn long past when he should have left for his own health.

"The word had just come about the Emperor. I think Hiller saw what he expected: that you were dead as well. He said he checked you, couldn't wake me, so... didn't do anything."

She had dreamed she was dead.

He looked up, squinting into sun between the tree branches overhead. "Did you call them?" he asked.

She shook her head but thought she might have in a way. A flitter was coming, the whine growing in the still air, the sound rolling down around them. Following the valley route out of the mountains. From Palace then, not South Bay Temple. "I have nothing to say to them," she said. "I don't want..."

They were face to face, his other hand on her cheek, then both hands cupping her face. "You fought so hard to live, there's just this small fight left. I won't let you die after all this."

His eyes were filmed with red and he kept blinking to clear them. "I wasn't thinking of dying. I'm alive because of you."

He smiled but shook his head at her words.

"I won't die," she insisted.

"If you won't be their Overpriest, how could they let you live? The Emperor Donotat is *dead*, the Office of the Third Concord open for Challenge. You are Three Crescents' best chance to add that Office to the Office of Form's alliance and head the High Council. How can they let you go to be a weapon in someone else's hand?"

Tears washed her vision and she closed her eyes, leaning into his arms now for comfort, for both of theirs.

"Just open yourself to the possibilities." His lips were pressed against her hair. "You'll know what to do. The Office of the Third Concord will provide any structure you need for the Challenge." She felt the sob in his throat; each breath he took was an effort. He was holding fire, she could feel him burning but still he didn't let her go.

Her awareness unfolded, petals without end, a flower without a center. The shaping was there, deeper in time and place than she could ever have imagined. The shape of a Challenge. The Office of the Third Concord, vacated by the Emperor's death. Ascension in the High Council came easily to that Office, well worn in time and custom. In time that seemed to her like no time at all, alliances formed and separated, reformed and changed, lives stripped from the growing patterns, screams that vanished to nothing. A meeting and challenge of minds and will.

Ri sang in her ears and she heard an echo from further away, Lillisim. They were the tears, what she felt, Ti'win beside her, the smoke and the smell of pine. But everywhere, over everything was the light of overpattern.

She opened her eyes. Ti'win was cold beside her, he had died sometime during the hours she had knelt there. The snow had melted and the earth dried in the warmth of the summer evening, but her body held the memory of the ice closer than it did the tass'altin's death.

Kascin was standing in front of the banners of silk. Dressed in a formal robe, the heavily textured cloth was the colors of the banners, but held the green in the shadowed depth of the weave instead of on the surface in stitching. She had already been looking at him, but was only seeing him now. He had a lavender reed tucked in his girdle, not the broken piece, but a flute wound around and decorated with braided cords. Then she saw that it was the same one. There was the bright scent from curls of shavings caught in the weave of his robe and his hands were roughened; he must have carved it while waiting for her. The inset mouthpiece looked to be ivory, the reed would dry around it, she thought, and crack - or the ivory would.

Cayse rubbed at her overbraids lightly, drawing her attention away from the boy. Poss a'Itic moved her head to look at him; her neck was stiff. Ca'mit, the Overpriest of Forms stood in back of him, more of his people than hers made up

the shadows behind the screens, rounded Poultat forms to her predominantly ti'Linn. She pushed her awareness out to see his tass'alt, Lanasi, sitting on the steps leading to the Temple grounds, more shavings from the reed around her. In her hand was a tiny knife; she was turning it over and over, idly watching the light on the shiny green blade. She looked bored, but then turned her head to look at Poss a'Itic - as though the silk of the banners between them was empty air - and winked.

Cayse grinned and his thin face dropped years as it rounded with the smile. He was pulling full Net placement in tandem with the two of her own people she had brought as guard attendants. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the High Priest. "The Willow-in-spring pattern," he said turning back to her and watching closely for all the lightness of his tone and the smile. "I took the liberty..." And Raas'lin's direction. She felt the residue of the Net pull that had guided Cayse's fingers.

Yian chuckled as she wrapped leftover green and white cord into loops around one hand. "Or we would have been here well past the Opening of the Blessing," she said. Direction and braiding pattern, Poss a'Itic understood.

Poss a'Itic looked at Kascin. He hadn't moved. "What do you know of a'Genn?"

He bit his lip then knelt in front of her, careless of his robe as it buckled, the cloth resisting the folds he forced on it. "They're High Clan Zimmer. Everybody knows that."

"And the Spann heresies?"

"The Wu'similini," he said, speaking in trade-Zimmer. She saw that he didn't know the word in any other language, or what else to say, in Zimmer or plain tongue.

Cayse coughed. "Possi..."

"And a Clan a'Genn honor blade with the sasi blooms on the blood line?"

He shook his head. "Just what I saw today." He had returned to speaking plain tongue. Frightened, she saw. And telling the truth, her seeing of him was like crystal, his heart open and bleeding under her gaze.

She nodded, making a form with her fingers such as a supplicant at an Altasimic Temple might make, a general apology for existing. Confusion was added to his fear, he hadn't understood - how could he, the shape was only half made with her braided hands too immobile. A Priest wouldn't have need of such a thing. His face was white, his fingers kept returning to the reed flute in his belt. "Kascin," she said gently. "Please go and tell them I'll be ready for the procession in a few minutes."

"And what was seen?" the Overpriest asked when Kascin had gone. Lanasi had come inside and stood beside him. "I'd like some return for standing here watching you."

"Such a difficult task?" she asked archly. And chuckled. "You have sore feet, reward enough, surely. Can Lanasi provide as entertaining a distraction?"

"My Empress, surely you jest - better than sore feet?" Lanasi sounded serious, appearing to have considered the comparison. And looked to Ca'mit, capturing the joke with her fingers in a Poultat based sign. He smiled at her. Despite his age, genuine feelings and expressions came easy to him. They were well matched. Except she liked A'in, whereas he didn't. Simply the result of a different focus in sympathy, Poss a'Itlic thought, more than any attraction between the two tass'alt.

She stood and Cayse took the warming robe from her, replacing it with the formal overrobe, similar to what Kascin wore. Yian set the ties and wrapping, her fingers light and quick. "I hadn't heard that you intended to be here for the Blessing," she said to the Overpriest with a coy sideways look, still flirting but with an exaggerated innocence. "Or are you being a bother as well?"

"Apparently very much of one." The laugh came in the same slow beat as his words.

Poss a'Itlic didn't share the other's laughter. "Did you dream last night?" she asked, watching the Overpriest as Cayse and Raswini had watched her. He had deeply set dark eyes without the silver tracing of Lanasi's. He wasn't the Poultat in her dream but she wasn't comfortable with the fact of his being here.

He shook his head to her question. "Of the Clan Zimmer and knives? No."

She looked away, seeing the white silk banners twist in the breeze. The drumming had started, small hand drums to time the gathering for the procession. From closer: the sound of a flute, thin and high, a watery piping sound. Kascin was in the baths, playing to the water drums. "Ca'mit, you're here now if not earlier - why?"

"What I don't have from staff whose job it is to keep me informed, I could easily pick up from the chatter of the Host around me."

At his words, Lanasi chuckled. Ca'mit sighed and shook his head but one arm moved to be around her shoulder. "I've been told that the Empress took an early morning walk in her bare feet and stared a long time at an ocean the Net can't reach. And talked with a Wa'tic gardener of questionable habits before being rescued by her tass'altin."

"Did you dream?" Cayse asked the Overpriest as though she already hadn't. Then, without waiting: "Lanasi? Did you?"

"Not of anything like this," Ca'mit answered first. "Old dreams as suit an old Priest."

Lanasi also shook her head. "I think I shared his dreams, I woke up old. The frost marks on my cheeks were real, not painted. Other than that, nothing." Then asked what Poss a'Itlic couldn't bare to: "Where's A'in?"

"Haltinport, with Gertin," Yian said without expression, even her stepmother's name was said plainly when she more usually chewed it in the pronunciation. "He's asked for Leave of his Service."

Poss a'Itic hadn't known that either. Cayse would have had to block the request, not Yian. He was the only one who could, probably hoping A'in's temper would run its course as it had in the past.

At Yian's answer, Lanasi nodded without evidence of surprise. She probably had known already, Poss a'Itic thought. Had A'in asked her to intervene? Or Yian? "My Empress, I'll talk to him if you like," she said.

Cayse shook his head and with another look motioned Yian to be still when she would have spoken. "Possi... the procession is about to start. A few minutes, you said. We can talk about A'in later."

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Ulanda turned to greet the E'kalt Salin. The braiding strung over the woman's shoulder had changed: Assuralla Temple colors as before, E'kalt line, but now with the knotting that showed her as Ranking Officer on this ship. Heana was with her but waited only a couple of steps into the room, standing with arms crossed and watching Niv at the brazier. Behind and surrounding the two women was Ji'Jin Gate Station. The tiles of the common room appeared transparent for all they were in the heart of the ship. The special Net feed was a courtesy.

Ships were leaving from the area of the Station rapidly growing before her, the vessels streaming from a narrow point and immediately spreading out like the unfolding of a flower. Translucent blue lines grew as the area cleared, skipping the few ships remaining. Veins in the flower petals. Shielding to encase the Station and them.

"Is attack any more likely here than at the next Station or world?" Ulanda asked. "You've neglected to mention any orders of a level that would allow you to keep us on this ship against my wishes. Or to try."

The Salin touched the orange braid closest to her throat, hooking it with a claw sheath. "Priest Ulanda, if we don't have orders, or have outrun them, we still have common sense. The Clan Zimmer ships used lethal force against this one. You can only be the target. And the Alliance hasn't stopped with the attack on Reema Gate Station. They must know where we've gone; each place, they have probably known almost as soon as we jumped. You are a guest of the Office of Forms and your safety is my responsibility."

Their ship had an escort: three Justice Cruisers had joined them several jumps back from a Station Ulanda hadn't heard the name of. Each was three times the size of the ship they were on and heavily armed. Had the Salin orders? There had been a lie in her words.

She looked towards Rit. Lounging on a floor cushion, legs stretched out, watching her, not the other two. Other than the formal greetings, he hadn't contributed a word.

On an impulse, suddenly, instead of the station surrounding them, a galaxy of stars turned slowly to his axis. Still Rit didn't look away from her. She could hold Empire in her mind, Ulanda thought, watching it spinning. Something to see as a whole, not as the worlds they had seen from orbit, of Stations glimpsed even as the Web energies for the next jump fragmented the exterior Net links. The last jumps had appeared to be whatever was immediately available, but their way had worked steadily inwards to Palace and the Empress. Orders? Lies?

She released the Net to show the Gate Station again. They were almost entirely engulfed with the escort ships blocking the way out. On their hulls, the colors of the Temple they had come from was crossed by that of the Empress, and with her mark at the Web eye. That too held a lie in it. They didn't have orders, she thought. At least not from Poss a'Itic.

The Cruiser directly behind them appeared to be over Niv's shoulder. It shimmered with a rainbow effect from the residue of their trail, adding a progression of colors to the reflections from her tass'alt's scales; he was incandescent, scales and crest. His head bowed over the brazier, the only movement was the flaring of his nostrils as he breathed slowly.

"We'll stay here," Ulanda said, just that second making the decision. The ship was completely inside the station now, the dock tiles quickly moving in to fill the entrance. "At a local Temple, I think. My people will make the arrangements for any other transportation we might require. Do whatever else you want, that's not my concern."

"Priest Ulanda, this is not an option."

Niv looked up from where he knelt. Lavender scented smoke from the sticks on the brazier softened the dark blue of his stare. In the now amber light from the dock, he was blue and gold. Ulanda took the few steps to kneel next to him in the warmth of the smoke. "Is it not an option?" she said softly. "Do you have the option of making me a prisoner then? Should I *ask* the Priests at this station who has options?"

At the words, the Salin's snake like hands emerged from under the claw sheaths to form a sign of negative, an instant later adding the shapes that turned it into a protest against deliberate misunderstanding. Ulanda simply looked at her without offering anything of her own. The woman's aggression constantly took



her past the limits of polite behavior. She would greatly prefer them as acknowledged prisoners.

Alicia came in, a small tray in her hands, a single cup on it. Heana let her through, moving about double what she had to. The Second's attention went from watching Niv to watching Alicia. The girl ignored her.

Rit's heavy cough hid a smile and he swung his legs clear and patted the cushion beside him. And when Alicia was settled, said to Rilla: "You say we're guests. If we aren't, the orders that say so will come from a rank higher than that of a new Commander on a Scout ship."

"Salin, Lady Priest, there is nothing here that will stop an Alliance attack fleet."

Rit took the steaming teal bowl Alicia offered him. "And what will stop them except a reason not to attack? Can you think of one?"

He took a mouthful and Ulanda laughed at the grimace on his face. From the smell, it was a simple for congestion and if it was anything like the one she remembered from her childhood, it tasted terrible.

At her laugh, Rilla tensed. "Yes, the Alliance can be shown reasons not to attack." In the Net: a list of areas that the Alliance would hesitate to enter in any force.

Rit looked at her through the steam as he lifted the bowl to his lips again. "We might keep them in mind for future reference."

Rilla's fingers signed an indulgence that she crossed with her selection of words in plain tongue. "Lady Priest, I must insist..."

Ulanda signed Closure as, at her touch, the Net feed died. "You will stay with us on the Station as Liaison of course."

Rilla answered, but without the Net, the translation had also disappeared. She couldn't hear in the vocal range of the E'kalt.

Rilla turned back to look at Heana, scales suddenly whipping with a rustling sound like sleet on glass. Niv hissed in her ear, tickling. "You should listen."

Rit looked to her, then to Niv, waited a moment and signed his own version of Closure. When the two had gone, he turned the bowl of barely touched medicine in his hands then put it on the tray. "If that was a joke, you might want to tell her so. I don't think she has a sense of humor."

"Why would it be a joke? The woman will stay regardless. She's only doing her job."

"What did she say?" Alicia asked as she passed the bowl back to Rit, holding it firmly in front of him until he took it.

"Words?" Niv said. "Not very much. A meeting with the Station Officers. But she will claim Ranking, Civil besides Temple. She didn't say the ultimate alliance of the Temples here, but for us to have come here at all, it must be to the Third Concord or the Office of Forms. And for her to judge the importance of this, she need only look at the Alliance actions. The trouble will start here."

"It started when we came from the diamond," Rit said.

Niv's crest rose as he signed disagreement then flattened. "For these people, it starts here. For us?" He shrugged. "It starts again. Nothing is finished yet."

Rit coughed again, spilling some of the bitter liquid over his hand and onto his pants. Alicia took the bowl back. "Will she manage to get ranking?" he asked roughly, still breathing heavily.

Niv looked from him to her. "Probably," she said. "She's competent and aggressive. And connected with us already. That last one especially will work in her favor with both the people and the Net."

"Prior claim," Rit said, nodding absently as he rubbed the spots into the dark cloth of his pant leg. "Or luck." His eyes were narrowed in thought - or the light hurt them. He glanced towards the doorway. There was no one there. "And she wants it."

"A Hunter with little to hunt for too long," Niv said.

"Which means she'll make things worse than they need to be regardless of other chances." Resignation sounded in Rit's tone as though the matter was sealed but he was hollow with looking and waiting.

She didn't follow, it made her dizzy to try.

"What about the outcome?" Alicia asked. "Why here? Is there something special about this Station that I missed?"

Ulanda looked at Rit. He hadn't asked why any more than she had of herself. "Because I want them to have to come to me."

"On your terms?" Rit asked.

Niv bent over her, one hand tracing the line of her throat, leaving a trail of scent behind. Terms? Did he think to impose some of his own? Again. She shrugged against Niv's motion more than the question. "We'll stay here," she repeated.

"And after?" Rit asked, and then repeated it when she didn't answer.

After? An image came to her, rising past the feel of Niv's hand on her throat, she would have brushed him away but the image was gone as fast as the thought to move. She caught Niv's hand in both of hers. "Altasimic."

Rit didn't blink. Had she actually said the word? A state of being, not a single world. And as lost to her here as it had been at the Opening.

Alicia offered her hand to Rit to help him up. "You said we could stay at a local Temple... do they rent rooms by the week?"

Niv's crest rose, his eyes wide.

"I was joking."

Ulanda laughed out loud. "You will find that there will be a Temple on the Station willing to have us as guests."

"By Rilla's orders?" Alicia asked.

"Somebody's orders."

"Should I ask around then? If I can have Bolda...?"

Ulanda nodded. "Take Kori with you as well. I want Temple Net access to our living quarters restricted from the start. Make it a condition of our staying with whomever is eager for us to be with them."

"I'll wear the Spann tops and see just how eager they are."

Rit cleared his throat. "You do that," he said dryly, one hand on his wife's shoulder. A smile was on his heavy face, but his eyes were puffy and he looked unsteady on his feet. "The ship has just openly meshed Nets with the local, Station and Temple both. I'll get as high a Temple Net access as I can wrangle and start on some spins. What little I could get on the ship's system had nothing very useful."

He stopped when Ulanda shook her head. "Garm will do that."

"Then the two of us can." He said the words evenly enough, but she felt his anger spill into pattern. Overpattern rose, wrapped in his words, scalding the air between them. He had little control.

They were as alone here as they could be anywhere, or likely ever would be again. In a ship, with, as he had said, limited Net. With an Ekalt Salin whose native talent was as limited - and as inherently so - but in her case by a tendency to reduce everything to terms of hunter and prey.

They were surrounded by plainness, a lack of subtlety that made her next action easier. She didn't block him, but instead complimented his access to overpattern with hers. Very little control. He followed. Unconsciously. Mindlessly. No control and no caution. She wondered at it even as she used it.

For all his near-instinctive skill at using the Net, he had never had experience with more than a rudimentary system, and at the last, in Istarom, had carefully - very carefully on the loom-master's part - been encouraged to treat that system as though it was more of the same. Consequently, when faced with a need for depth - as in Security matters - he approached the Net in a linear fashion, the remainder of the time only skimming the surface. As he did with pattern. As Garm said Cassa had. And his singular talent - and again Cassa's - was in not being seen when he didn't want to be.

Using her memory of Vivan's Altasimic-touched Net system as a model, she created a subtle pattern pull: the interface between the world-pattern and the Net, keeping the sense of the changed Altasimic, and for a wonder, the same feeling of stability and control she had had then. She could live there - for all it was a chimera in this reality - Rit couldn't.

His knees went first, his eyes open and staring at her as he fell, then they closed as he collapsed on his side.

He woke up in a garden to the sound of birds singing, a low drumming to a shrill peeping. Sunshine was around him but splashed in odd shapes, none on his

face. The far-reaching canopy of a tree blocked the sun, its leaves hanging like narrow green and bronze ribbons, motionless in the still air. In the branches, tiny birds were visible only when they flew. Brownish yellow, or flecked with the darker, and with bright yellow heads. From the level of the sun, it was late afternoon. Or early, although it felt like the former. Blue sky.

No Net, it was blocked again and as thoroughly as in his room on the ship. With some difficulty, he got up on one elbow. Lying on top of the small rug, he was encased in blankets, the rug spread out on a close growth of what looked more like moss than grass. Beside the rug was a wicker tray with an assortment of covered dishes. Garm was sitting against the trunk of the tree, a book in his lap. Bunched up on the ground next to him was Eunni's shawl, wrinkled as though it had been sat on.

"Where is this?"

Garm didn't look up. "Ji'jinlini Temple."

Rit sat, his head spinning. Deep breaths helped, the air was cool, very fresh and with a scent that tasted of lemon at the back of his throat. Ulanda had done something using Net and pattern. He didn't know what. Or even why. "I don't remember getting here."

"You slept through the move."

What he could see beyond the tree looked to be a walled garden. And behind him, a pavilion made of woven branches. "Asleep as planned?"

Garm hesitated then closed the book. "Your being awake and in your usual temper would have put us all at risk. Here, we can block access both in and out." He got to his feet. Grey and silver in the uneven light, the hem of his robe brushed the moss as he walked. Where the sun hit the robe, it sparkled.

The old man laughed as he knelt at the edge of the rug. "Eccli cloth." He draped one long sleeve over his thigh with a graceful motion. "Similar to what is used in Temple ship uniforms but these beads absorb light energy and release it randomly. The beads are small organisms, I believe distantly related to the glow globes. Very select and rare and a gift from the Temple here to the Priest Ulanda's San."

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but past Garm the long ribbon leaves started to spin. Rit closed his eyes to stop the sudden dizziness. Warm fingers touched his hand, easily turned it palm up and held a bowl in the cup of his palm until Rit opened his eyes.

A bowl, given as a tass'alt does to a Priest. Rit searched Garm's eyes and saw nothing more than a man offering water. Plain water. How long had he slept? He wasn't hungry or his bladder full but it seemed a very long time had passed.

He sat up straight to be closer to eye level and crossed his legs for balance. Emerald showed in the other man's eyes as though the green was streaked with it, or was a thin layer, a glass shell over the gem. But his look was calm; the pain

was muted or better under control. And the arrogance, he decided. "What do you hope for now?" he asked.

"Cassa said now or later, there was no difference."

"Yes, she did."

Garm looked past him to the nearest pavilion. And smiled. "You realize none of it really happened. This time or with Simitta."

"Something happened." He reached to the side and lifted the cover from the closest of the plates. Two slices of plain brown bread, with a red ant crawling on the top slice. He put the cover back over. "Besides, I don't intend it to be a contest of any kind."

"It isn't."

The annoyance that had led him to start this bantering had disappeared into the mental fog he couldn't seem to shake. Was there a balance he could reach in how strong the drugs had to be to keep his pattern sense damped down, yet not make him feel his mind was wrapped in wool? He took another sip of water then started coughing, spilling what was left as he put the bowl down, pushing the closest plate aside.

Ants were under the plate as well, crawling up and through the strands of wicker. A line of them on the rug scouted around a rose bud. And in the blankets? He felt itchy where he hadn't a moment ago. Under the other plate cover were grapes and one small apple, no insects.

Even thinking about eating made him tired. He pushed the fruit plate towards Garm and changed the topic to something safer than Cassa. "How much have you learned about..."

"You mean did you exist here?" Garm bit into the apple. "The histories I've been able to reach here are very complete..." he said with a full mouth, then swallowed. "And very limited. I think that this jump to Ji'Jin Station was planned even if many of the others weren't. There were records waiting here for Rilla, the request apparently sent from the Station where we picked up our escort." He looked up. "The Station wasn't the origin of the message that Rilla shared. Rigyant was."

"The Piltsimic loom-master Council."

Garm studied the apple. "Access to these records was too easy, there will be others we weren't told about. Obviously, Rilla wanted us to know that she has support and the magnitude of that support. I don't know what coding she used on her request for information but whoever she eventually reached had very high level authority and was very quick in their response."

"Would they have been waiting?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Very definitely so."

"But Rilla couldn't have known what kind of response her query would get."

"She was given Command Ranking at our arrival here. The loom-master Council would have been on the other end of the information she's gotten, so they must believe she can do the job. And that she doesn't have opposing orders from the Empress suggests an alliance."

"Any idea what family holds power on Rigyant? e'Anga? Or e'Bolda?" Garm shook his head and Rit continued. "The Zimmer pods were at our entry point within hours, but Rilla's ship was there first. Whoever is in power probably has reason to think Rilla was where she was because she was meant to be, same as I was at the Spine. Any chance of getting access to all the crystals that were sent?"

"If Ulanda asks, I don't think there is anyone on this Station who could say no to her. To do so, however, would be a very premature move."

"And the Temple here? What's our status?"

"Guests." Garm shook his head. "Priest Lo'li'lin, the ranking Priest on the Station and at this Temple, issued the invitation. We can assume it did so on orders. Lo'li'lin is ti'Linn by the way. This becomes a dance - much like with Sarkal't at the Mound. There are too many unknowns, Ulanda's degree of access to overpattern for one. Even her true allegiance... and why she's kept it hidden. Rilla isn't the only one who will have questions about her origins. A Select of her power doesn't just appear one day, totally unknown to any Temple records."

Rit ate a grape. Very sweet, the seeds were crunchy like crystals of sugar. "And me?"

Garm's laugh was harsh. "You have no understanding of what you are and where you are. Ulanda saved you from a serious mistake that would have forced the hand against us."

"Against me."

"Against all of us. Rit, we're a focus to a dance being played out to a scale we aren't capable of comprehending. An experiment, if you like although it's nothing of the kind. A theater of experience might be a better way of putting it. When it is over, Empire won't exist anymore. And it will have existed forever. At any point in overpattern, it will be there, we will be there."

"And you? You've talked about legends."

"Oh yes, legends. If you hold a glass lens to the sun, where it concentrates the light to a point..."

"And burns."

"And burns. I'm that for Cassa, I'm something really quite simple, I scarcely exist but for the effect of my existence."

"I'm seeing you plain enough now."

Garm laughed. "What do you think of when you remember something? Not from pattern, but just as a man."

Rit took another grape and warmed it in his hands. "An image usually." Thoughts less often, words even less than that.

The words were soft enough to have come from out of his own mind: "Give me one," he heard.

Responding to the man's will, he did, the first that came. "I remember Tennin talking with me, we were on the tail of Dog Mountain, overlooking the waste."

"There's more."

There was, but he had no intention of sharing them any more than he had intended to say anything at all. But the words came regardless: "I can see his tired gray eyes, he's holding a Bluestone Clan marker in one hand. I can see the stones of the Mother names at the cairn marker at the spring, I can feel his coming death. The cairns at the cliffs, the world-altar. His at the lake." Then the same vision he had had before: The valley far below him as though he was flying. Warding beams brushed his skin; a Temple ship was in the valley and two flitters. Caull. Then two cairns, one of them years away in the future of that moment.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back. Garm was standing at his back. "I am a series of images," the old man said. "So many that when you look at them you think I'm really here, that time is passing but it isn't, I'm only a stack of images about to fall, falling and lying scattered about you. I'm in the old books. I read about myself: images, just images frozen in words. That's all Empire is, just images."

The warmth was gone from his shoulder but Rit didn't turn to look. Boards creaked: the pavilion, he thought. He could feel that the Net started there.

"She sounds like Eunni when she laughs," Garm said, standing just inside of the hollow of silence. "What is there that we're capable of understanding if we can't understand the sound of her laughter?"

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It seemed to her that sunlight sought out the tall narrow windows at the front of her pavilion. Deliberate or not, Ulanda enjoyed the warmth in the same way she did the variety in the light returned by the walls and the scent as the flooring warmed. The straw mats were new, a monotone of pale cream, the walls much older and variable, aged to gold and bronze, darkest in streaks near the ceiling, evidence that the roof leaked. The ti'Linn aide served her tea and it seemed the sunlight sought that surface out too as the liquid sparked and flared.

She stood and the ti'Linn scampered back, and then darted in to rescue both the teapot and the brazier from being swept by her robe. Clicking from outside brought her to the window - two Wa'tic mended the fence separating her garden from the common, using vine-like lengths in a simple pattern between the posts.

The rustle of their words she let go without translation, matching it to the scent of the meadow as though they were insects in the grass. The smell of honey and cedar came on the light breeze, from the vines, she thought, and an earthy scent from the cooler, shaded areas.

What world, she wondered and the answer came back: Goei. Net lines stretched out from the name but threatened to crumble when she touched them. The recordings hadn't been brought up through the last Nexus Change and from the feel, not for many more before that. All that remained was an old memory and a recording of the pattern of how that world grew things. Plants to seeds to plants, the same over millions of years. Ji'jinlini Temple was in the oldest part of the Station, layers of communities having been built above. The gardens had never seen the real sun.

"Lady Priest? Your San."

The words made her turn, but the ti'Linn aide was already bowing, backing with the movement and was gone in a white robed blur. Ulanda signed thanks that the aide hadn't stayed to see.

One eyebrow lifted towards her in amusement, Garm poured a bowl of tea from the pot next to the brazier. His silver hair was loose around his shoulders to catch the sunlight and reflections from both his robe and hair flickered across the dark walls. She didn't know which was brighter. He must have come in by the back way or she would have seen him from the window.

"A rather abrupt departure," he said. "Not on my account, I hope."

She studied the sharp planes of his face. He was hard to look at, too bright - too beautiful - her eyes stung. He brought the scent of the ni'at tree with him, musk not unlike Niv's. "Do you mean to kill him?" she asked. "Do you hate me that much?"

Garm turned the tea bowl in his long fingers, his concern apparently restricted to the brown glazing of the rim. "You think too much of yourself. I was asked to watch for his waking and I did."

"*Eunni* was asked to watch him." Besides sore eyes, she had a headache from going over the security runs with Kori, adding Bolda and then Alicia and Eunni to the spins to get their feel for the system. Niv had declined to be involved, his 'no' given quite sharply when she asked a second time. "We've been over and over this. It's not your place to change my..."

He looked up. Amusement colored with irony, she thought. Gilding it, like the metal had the furniture in his rooms at Palace. He knew the scent of the tree; he had marked himself with it.

"Place?" he said over her voice.

Irony: the color of the gold of the paper he had been writing on in his study in Palace...



...the tiles of the outer shell of Palace was behind them, the open sky of Ri before. Green light on the pale surface washed back onto them, the walls and the colonnade illuminating them. Icy air, thin and very still. Metallic, the air sparked against her as though it might ignite.

From her, Garm turned to look around slowly. They were alone. Building and sky, each without a scale she could relate to. "Do you mean to ask me to fly with you?" he said coolly. He took a step and was at the edge of the colonnade where she hadn't seen any end of it before that moment.

She had lost the pattern threads if she'd ever had them. Was there a way back? His gaze had gone past her, towards Palace, she followed his look. Clay to granite - fracturing as it changed - rapidly coming towards them with puffs of stony breath rising in small clouds. The wall of Palace was falling apart with a whistling sound, brilliant yellow light shining through the deep fissures.

Then she had the sensation of strong arms holding her, then the stubble of a days beard rough against her face. She couldn't see anyone. "Come back," she heard. Rit's voice. Ambisit wood smell and a sour scent, sweat and medicine, a long time asleep without eating or drinking. Straw and dust from the mat. Birds and the rustle of the Wa'tic speaking.

The sound of Palace falling around her stopped. The air was warmer. Rit stood back from her, or she had stepped away, she wasn't sure who moved, but she could see him now. Behind him, the green sky was split with yellow light. Palace still fell.

"Stop this," he said.

"This?" Her voice rose on a laugh. "This is what Garm was telling you, not me."

Only then did he glance around, quickly, nervously, as though she were his anchor to sanity. "You must be doing it," he said as though the matter had been settled in as short a span of time.

Cassa. She couldn't see Garm at all. Had he finally jumped? Or flown? Pale stone flecked with black reached for her, spirals of lines reaching in towards her. So slow, she could see each advance, feel the molecules rearrange, clay to granite, an easy thing, hardly a change at all. How had Cassa felt watching the granite form around her? Had she been human at the end of it and afraid?

"Was she afraid?" she asked, finding a strange peace as she watched the granite advance. "Were you with her then too?"

With a knife sharp slice of pain, a hard finger pushed in between her teeth. Scales against her tongue and the taste of musk. She opened her mouth and screamed. The pull died.

Rit opened his eyes. He was lying on his stomach. On a bed. Indoors somewhere. Weighing down the edge of the mattress beside him was Alicia.

"The medic is here to see you," she said, her hand on his back. Automatically, he reached out to the Net for the time. Nothing again.

Feeling as though his bones were made of lead, he turned slowly, awkwardly. Even with that much movement, he was panting. His lungs felt on fire.

"Where...?" Then he remembered where. "What the hell did she do to me?"

"Which time?"

Then he realized what she had said. "Medic?" They hadn't dared let the ship's medic examine him.

"Is here." She gestured towards the doorway.

His eyes were full of grit and he rubbed them before trying to make out the light-haloed figure. En'talac, he thought for a crazy instant but it wasn't of course. A short slight person, he couldn't tell whether male or female, or it might not have been applicable. He started coughing as he sat up, a dry cough as before. Zimmer. The medic was Zimmer.

"Zimmer?" he whispered.

"Salin Strom," the man said, bowing deeply.

Was he speaking Xintan without a Net pull? Still confused, Rit looked again for the Net, stopping quickly when the room spun around. "Who?"

"This is Silassic. He has experience treating humans. Altasimic humans."

"Salin Strom," the Zimmer repeated. And bowed again.

Rit fumbled as he signed a greeting before falling back against the pillow. The Zimmer was speaking Xintan, but with a different accent than either Alicia or he had.

"Experience...?"

"I trained on Hillatrin where I was born, and then E'tin, at the Korinilla..." Silassic's voice choked and he stopped. "... Holding," he added a moment later, but with the strain showing in his voice. "Both are Altasimic worlds."

The Zimmer had come closer, facing into the light coming through the window above the bed. Greenish eyes, not really blue, Rit noticed. Less blue than Simitta's had been. A sensory disk was in one narrow white hand. Red lines were drawn on the palm but the overall shape was lost in the creases.

"It was the broken flutter tiles," Rit said. "The dust..." He felt the first scan as the man's hand passed over him.

A sasi rose. Six petals partly outlined in red, very similar to the Strom Noble House seal if the interrupted lines were joined. Or seen fully, Rit thought. To Zimmer eyes, the drawing might be complete.

"As you said, Lord. It was the dust." Warm hands were touching him. No spurs on the middle fingers. Rit looked away.

The red scanning disk was slipped into a pouch on a cord around the medic's neck, the man bowed again before speaking. "The problem is more than the cough." Fingers touched just below the base of his throat. "Your lungs were injured by the strong energy fields you have been subjected to, many blood capillaries were ruptured..." He paused. "Did you cough blood?"

"No."

"As you say, Lord. Besides the immediate physical damage, your body finds the dust to be an irritant. The lungs will heal in time. You need to rest."

"So I've been told."

"If you do not rest until you are well, with the degree of pattern that you are exposed to, the injury may become chronic. What can happen is a weakening of your lungs that will make you susceptible to repeated illness and which may eventually affect your heart."

"And the treatment besides resting?" Alicia said.

Silassic looked at Alicia first, then back to him. "I will leave medicine but you must also rest." He hesitated.

Alicia cleared her throat. "And...?"

"The Salin Strom needs nourishing food..."

Alicia sighed. "And he needs to loose weight."

The medic looked away from them both. "As the Lady Strom says."

Rit coughed when he tried to laugh then signed the thanks along with the Closure that the medic so obviously wished for. Alicia saw him out but returned several minutes later carrying a tray.

"You should have rehearsed him more," he said, getting up on his elbows to see what she had brought.

"He was nervous." She poured something dark from a carafe into a bowl then sat on the edge of the bed. "The problem is that all the icons have you as much heavier even than you are now. I think that confused him."

"The what?"

She smiled and held the bowl for him to take. "The icons. Really quite good likenesses considering the length of time involved and that Allykh was describing someone of a different species without any Net or crystal backup. I suppose to his eyes, compared to the way the Zimmer are built, you were huge, so it was easy for..."

"Alicia..." he interrupted. "Who are you talking about?"

"Drink this first," she said firmly.

He did. Mint flavored and very sweet, not bad compared to what she had been giving him earlier. "Allykh," he said, leaning back against the pillows. "From the Ladybug."

"And founder of the Lady Cult, an offshoot of the Spann Wu'similini religion. The legends say that Allykh escaped from the Clan Zimmer and brought the message to the freeborn about what happened on our Alisim and that there was a doorway between realities that... well, a more powerful manifestation – a permanent manifestation - of their god could pass through. There are variations on that, but you and Kori are both... saints, I suppose. Ulanda's coming here, her connection to Cassa... this reality, I mean, is to signal that the final battle between Empire and the Wu'loss cass is about to happen."

"Rilla didn't mention anything..." A coughing fit stopped him.

"The cult is not so widespread that she would have known at first. The escort Cruisers' Nets would be more extensive than this one and they've had a chance to get information at the Stations we've jumped from."

Had the E'kalt Salin changed towards them? He couldn't seem to make his memory of her behave. Too much time had been spent fighting to restrict the instinct-driven attempts at control on her part, and having to assume any of the reasons behind the fighting without really knowing them.

"What's this all about?"

"The cult is heresy as far as the Spann are concerned."

"I thought the entire Wu'similini religion was heresy."

"Well it is, but it's much more important because of the increased power of both the ti'Linn and the Spann in this reality. Garm says that divorced from the politics, the actual beliefs are generally tolerated. Or not even noticed. The Lady Cult is pretty much restricted to the freeborn Zimmer and mostly on the Altasimic worlds. And on the Clan and Alliance worlds if what Silassic said is accurate, the cult is found among the freeborn there, but it's punishable by death."

"Three generations," he whispered, remembering what she had said about the Clan Zimmer and the freeborn they took in service. "Which are we? The side of good or evil?"

Alicia took the bowl from his hand. "The side of good, of course."

The side of good? He wasn't as sure as she sounded, or it was that it hadn't any meaning stated that simply. "What happened on Alisim?" They hadn't dared expose their interest while on the ship. Now, apparently it didn't matter, it was too late to hide. "This Alisim, I mean. Have you found that out yet?"

"Nexus Change apparently weakened the warding enough that it had to be released. Garm says that a joining of human echo line Priests managed to handle everything quite peacefully."

"Then what Ulanda did transcended realities."

"That's what he says. And that the Ekinata judgment was decided by the High Temple Court as a religious matter and in favor not only of the ti'Linn Consortium but their way of looking at the Wu'loss cass..."

"How did you become an expert?"

"I'm not. Garm is. He's using a link with Ji'jinlini Temple Net for the analysis and with access to everything except the command functions. Kori says it's secure as far as she can tell and we didn't dare wait. And we've gone over the spins with Ulanda."

"The analysis done at the Holding is in the flitter's Net. With the Temple links, you have the means to... Did you correlate...?"

She shook her head. "Still no access. I think we're going to have to fight to even get the original crystals back regardless of what shape they are in. And with no hope at all that a copy hasn't already been made."

A copy would have been made days ago. The sweet mint flavor of the medicine was wearing thin, leaving something salty behind. "A copy of the crystal should be on its way to Palace by now. To an Empress with no reason to be fond of a'Genn." Poss a'Itic. Would she have dreamed any of it in the same way Quin'tat said Sarkalt and others had? He started drifting with the thought, almost missing what Alicia was saying.

"There is one reason to be fond of him. If he had taken her through the portal she set up and killed her anytime afterwards, she would have been dead both on Ri and on the ship. On Ri because she was alive on the ship when the portal sent them through and..." She left the last words off.

Part of a bargain between Poss a'Itic and Gennady? Or simply Zimmer temper? "Is that Garm's interpretation as well?"

A hand on his shoulder. "Get some rest. Maybe you'll be in a better mood next time you wake up."

"Am I supposed to be sleepy?"

"Guaranteed."

He was but was fighting it. "What does Kori have to say about being a saint?"

Alicia had the carafe to her nose; she looked up with a frown as though calculating how much longer he would be awake. "She doesn't."

"How did Kori and I manage sainthood?" He chuckled suddenly. "The Korinilli Holding?"

"Kori had to leave the room before Silassic would get up off the floor. He already knew who we all were... or were supposed to be."

"How..."

"I told you. Legends." A splash of the dark fluid went into the bowl and she passed it to him. "The Zimmer pray to her to intercede on their behalf with the Lady. A little different for you, a sort of sainthood. The Wu'lim."

A sip, the mint taste seemed stronger. "What is a Wu'lim?"

"You are. It means the maker of paradoxes. Or, according again to Garm, a better translation is *bearer* of paradoxes. These paradoxes, of course, arise from the limits in our perception of the whole." She looked at him steadily, as though searching for his meaning. "The Warrior who doesn't fight is one of your *aspects*."

The battle with Lord Gennady for the Lady Kori apparently took days, which for the most part you spent eating and drinking merrily while Gennady fought against you tooth and nail."

"It might have happened like that." One last swallow and he rested the bowl on his chest, looking at her over the rim. "What is it that you remember differently?"

For an answer, she took the bowl and then pulled the covers around him and tucked the side in.

"Happened just like that," he murmured, wishing he had the energy to laugh. Eunni had pulled Kori away, not him.

"The twins," he said, the idea coming out of nowhere. And he did laugh.

"A mystery." Alicia stood by the end of the bed, holding Tika in her arms. "The Wu'lim made into twins who were both his children and his parents."

"Not mine..."

She smiled at his feeble joke. "His children by the Lady and her parents as well. And who were also the two of them, separated five days after the birth, the length of time apparently being an important theological point that has generated more than one sub-sect."

He was confused and grasped the only part that he could make behave. "Five days? The portal? It would be seven days, not five. They wouldn't know about..."

She shrugged. "Go to sleep."

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Ulanda went the long way around as though she meant to try out all the paths through the garden - grass, stone, rounds of some kind of wood - they wove around the various pavilions but all eventually looped back to the central area with the na'it tree. Bare feet - the ti'Linn attending her had been too nervous to do more than lay sandals in her path, not to insist she wear them. The wood rounds were kindest to her feet, dry and slightly warm even in the shade. She remembered running barefoot as a child...very young and only in the summer... the memory hovered, there if she wished, but without the drawing that would come from pattern.

Niv was already waiting for her at the pavilion Bolda called Bramble for the sharp-spined vine growing along the roof of the porch. Alicia and Rit's. Rit was in the second room, his bed near the window where he could see the sky through the branches and watch the leaves of the na'it tree move in the light breeze, the first breeze in probably thousands of years.

His door had been left open, but a bubble of warding separated his room off, the air cooler again inside and richer to help him breath. The flooring was plain wood, the walls dressed stone without the straw mats overtop, all the surfaces scrubbed of any trace of dust. The air felt sterile.

Eunni had been with Rit but left the room after a quiet greeting. Ulanda waited at the doorway until she was gone, then sat on the edge of his raised bed near the end. He had been watching her. He should have been sleeping. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"They let you in so I must be feeling better." His voice sounded forced. "Or did you insist?"

"Silassic says you'll be fine."

Niv was in the doorway, Rit motioned him to leave but he stayed. Eunni came from behind and whispered something in his ear but he shook his head and she disappeared again.

"You must not have promised to behave yourself," he said, looking back at her, making the words into a joke with his smile.

"I think they're more worried about your behavior." Unable to meet his eyes, she looked down at her feet then tucked them to the side away from him. What happened had taken her by surprise, much as Rit had been taken by surprise on the ship. And what had trapped her in vision was as unfathomable to her as what she had done must have been to him. "Earlier..."

"I was trying to help. I could feel... it felt like the world..."

"You were reinforcing the pattern response, not breaking it."

"And what Garm reinforces?"

"That wasn't Garm's fault, at best he triggered the sequence. Tell me, was it in retaliation for what I did to you?"

"If it was, it still wasn't my doing."

She knew that and knew also that of course it had been his doing. Amused, she smiled to the sky. Clouds, it might rain later this afternoon. Bolda wouldn't tell anyone what he had planned for the weather. "If it wasn't your doing, it *wasn't* in the same way that it wasn't Garm's fault either. He'll be staying at the Temple Center, at the Library there. I won't have him here. He has agreed to help us try to figure out what the changes in this reality from the last one might prove key to understanding the whole."

His hand touched the braid ends that snaked dark on the light brown blanket. An innocent touch, she thought, he probably hadn't realized the braids were there. Cat hairs - gray and cream - had caught in the wool. Perhaps he had expected to find Tika curled up instead.

"And where do I get sent?" His words appeared as innocent of emotion as his touch on her braids had been. As he spoke, his eyes turned from her to the niat tree. With each breath of air, the long ribbon leaves twirled around and around,

shaking in place when at the limit of their turnings but prevented from unwinding until the breeze changed direction. The birds had left the na'it tree for the protection of the low bushes.

She didn't answer him. He knew the only answer she could give.

"Will it rain?" he asked after a while.

"I don't know. Bolda won't say. I hope so, I'd like some rain."

He smiled and she thought it was at the wistful tone of her voice. "This isn't what I thought a Station would be like."

Was the lack of challenge a tacit agreement? "I can tell them to make it different if you like."

He met her eyes and smiled gently. "This is fine."

She could feel her cheeks getting hot. He was humoring her. "I think this garden might have been part of the original Temple, it hasn't been lived in for a long time."

"But kept the same over millions of years? I was lying here thinking about it. The languages, the gestures, the Net, except for the shift in signatures, it's the same as at the Holding. Was South Bay Temple like this?"

"There were gardens, yes. And the... well, the feel is the same. It's like coming home in a way." She stopped again, wondering what she was saying.

"Why did you choose the portal over what the loom-master offered you?"

She could tell him that it was to save his life. She could tell him it was to save his people. And hers. Or the truth: she had wanted more than what was being offered. Would she find it here, and as undefined? Would she know it when she did find it? "I'm not sure. It was the choice of a moment."

"Like mine," he whispered.

"And like yours, the choice may be the end of it. There might not be anything more."

And his death belonged to her, not Cassa. She didn't add that and he might not even have heard the last of what she did say. He was back looking at the niat tree, but with one hand, he gathered her braid ends up, bunching the fine silken strands in his palm. She could feel his touch on her wrist as though the skin was bare. Who had taught him that, she wondered.

Niv moved towards them, his crest rising, eyes wide with concern. Rit had only glanced at him, the briefest flicker of awareness, his eyes never really left watching the leaves turn in the breeze. When he let the silk strands go, she wished he hadn't. His hand curled on the blanket as though he had no strength left.

Niv was at her shoulder. "We should go now." His voice was like the brambles on the roof. He was cobalt, he had flushed the darker color the instant Rit had started to handle her braids.



She stood, leaning into her tass'alt, feeling his fingers arrange the folds of her robe, his nails deliberately sharp in places that were still tender from earlier. His crest feathered against her face, tickles of hair that moved as though the wind had pushed to reach the inside of the room.

She hesitated at the doorway and looked back, but Rit was still looking at the ni'at tree, his eyes as distant as though he were already asleep.

The sun shone low under the layer of clouds, orange light between the long shadows, everything rain jeweled and glistening. Ulanda sat on the bench under the eaves, the dripping water from the roof splashed her outstretched ankles, the moss under her heels as wet as it was soft. Inside wasn't any dryer, as she had suspected, the roof leaked, shallow bowls were set here and there on the mats, a halo of wet straw surrounding each.

The air was cool, her breath was flame edged from the light in her eyes. Niv was in a meeting with people from the Station's Tass'kin Holdings, using one of the reception rooms they had set aside, a small suite in itself. It was a neutral area, still within their shielding but easily accessible to the rest of the Temple and as easily isolated from here.

The Scribe offered on loan to her had just left and she had intended to spend this time walking around the garden for exercise while reviewing the preliminary spins Garm had sent over from the library. Time frames of planned studies, indexes of topics with a request for prioritization. A single circuit of the garden and she had decided that sitting, even on damp moss, was what she wanted and had promptly dozed off to the sound of the rain, not waking until the sunset.

Bolda blocked the sun, his dark hair glowing orange. "You intend to stay out here all night?"

She squinted up at him. "I thought you were exploring."

"Someone has to make sure you eat." He nodded to the ti'Linn aide who had stopped by the garden entrance. It took a step closer and stopped again. He shrugged. "Alicia and Kori are still at it with the Temple Security Master and a couple of his people, checking for leaks."

She laughed as she got to her feet. "We have leaks."

He snorted and with the sound, a map unfolded in the Net. The image followed them into the pavilion. The nine main Temples in the Station showed in red, the docks in blue with the one where they had entered flashing. Ji'jinlini Temple grew as the rest of the Station fell away.

"We could put an army in the space Alicia claimed for you, even if most of it's in ruins. Her and Kori have planned layers of shielding with room to fall back in case it comes to a fight. They make a good team." A look of disgust contradicted the tone of his voice. "Naturally acquisitive and equally sneaky, the pair of them. Kori's teaching Alicia Zimmer battle strategy."

She gave the spin analysis he offered over top of the map a very brief look. "We'll have to contract out the placing of the inner lines. I don't want either Kori or Alicia distracted from their primary duties. Rilla's people can do it, and provide the safety valve of a link to the Station security forces."

"Might as well involve them honestly, they've been making bloody nuisances of themselves all day trying to figure out what we're doing in here. You think all this is necessary then?"

"Have you asked Rit if it's necessary?"

He puffed his cheeks out with a sigh. "Nope."

Her ti'Linn aide rose from a huddle in the corner and met another ti'Linn at the door, the one that had accompanied Bolda. Balanced on four limbs was a large covered tray.

"Lady Priest, your service," her aide said in plain-tongue. A scratch showed on the matte black surface of the upper left arm, near the last joint before the pincers. Zt'li, she remembered and signed the aide to serve them.

She sat on the cushion she had been using before; Bolda knelt opposite. A game of rings and stones was on a smooth stone playing field beside her. She teased one of the stones with a finger to make a more pleasing configuration. "Do you have any insight you haven't shared?"

Bolda pushed the stone back into place. "What are you talking about now?" He scowled at the playing piece. He had been losing badly to Niv.

Ulanda laughed and the scowl was turned her way. And a grudging wink as he pushed the Net map at her for the second time. "The central area, why isn't anything shown there?" she asked. Their suite extended to a blank space at the heart of the Station. His attention had been focused on it, had been the first time too.

He knelt and gestured to the aide to serve them. "The core of the Station."

"I don't feel it." The old Station Center. One of the primary power sources.

A cover rolled to land against Bolda's leg as Zt'li held a plate out to him, the ti'Linn's two lower hands signing apology. "Is this what I ordered?" Bolda stared at the food, his eyes as wide as the heavy flesh would allow.

"Master weaver, it is."

He looked at her. "You feel like eating it?"

The gray mess on the plate was twitching. "No, you go ahead though."

"Maybe not." Domestic Net grew over top of the maps. "We'll try again," he added, narrowing the kitchen choices down much the same as he had the image of the Station. "This looks promising."

It did. Baked fruit with cream. Biscuits.

Voices, then Alicia's high-pitched laugh came from outside. "You can't live on just that." Mixed marinated vegetables and poached white fish in spiced vinegar sauce were added to the order. "We'll have to get a kitchen going here," she

added as she unwound a scarf from her hair then ran grubby fingers through her damp curls. Kori was behind her, stopped in the doorway.

Zt'li scurried backwards until it was against the wall, still pushing with sharp tipped legs, the spurs catching on the straw matting. Kori had gone instantly stiff when it moved, her eyes darkened.

"Will you two join me for supper?" Ulanda asked.

Alicia laughed again as Kori made an addition through the Net to the food order. Steamed vilmet, the creature looked remarkably like a flattened ti'Linn. "Apparently," she said, then looked guilty as quickly as she had amused.

"I should have left the rain on," Bolda said. "Would have saved you two the trouble of taking a bath first.

"So we'll just hog the bathhouse instead," Alicia said over her shoulder as she went out the door. Kori hadn't ever made it all the way in.

From beside the brazier, Bolda picked up the sheet the Scribe had left. "This is nice."

"I gave him the option of bringing his family. Cion, he's Kallit-bred, I thought human, and not just because of Kori..." She glanced at Zt'li, trying to sense a reaction but couldn't. The aide was back hiding in the corner. "... I wanted the translations to be easier. The Masters were all ti'Linn, he's a Scribe First.

Bolda grunted as one broad finger brushed the Scribe's mark. "I can see that."

The copy mark incorporated the same design as the beauty marks around the Scribe's mouth, the purple ink a narrow line of color within each stroke of black. A bird of a man, she had thought, everything about him was narrow, long hands and feet, his head coming to a point at the crown as Heana's did but naturally so and with the hair grown to a thick brush and as yellow as the crest feathers of the birds in the garden. Straight narrow brows darted upwards to his temples like dashes of gold on his greenish brown skin, each hair distinct as though painted on.

A perpetually surprised look, she had thought, then watched him from another angle and thought he looked suspicious, then sly. Only his mouth held a real surprise, heavy lipped and rich with color, purple skin sharply defined at the edges with beaded scars shaped like crosses.

"What does the mark mean?" she asked Bolda. He was still studying it and not the text, which was a formal Warrant to get their flutter crystals back.

"Why the hell ask me?" He eyed Zt'li and Ulanda caught the tail end of his Net link to the aide.

Instead of words, the answer came as an echo on the same link and in ti'Linn native. "*The eye of the ocean. As are the ti'Linn, as are all created out of Empire.*"

She cut the link and Bolda winced. "There were ti'Linn at Ri-altar when Sarkalt had me there for my Initiation. Were you there?" He didn't answer and she continued. "I thought we were past these kinds of games between us."

He put the sheet down. "You know I was." His tone was non-committal.

And the ti'Linn home worlds in Bilo'pan Plain were allied to Rigyant and where they had both come from that meant the e'Anga line. "And you already knew what the mark meant."

"Sarkalt's security was mostly ti'Linn. His San was ti'Linn. Of course there were ti'Linn at Ri-altar."

Everything he was saying was true. And wasn't what he knew she was asking. "Why, even when you're not evading them entirely, are you always one answer behind my questions?"

He ordered the ti'Linn to leave them and waited until it was gone to add: "Because you know any of the answers that are important. It's not my answers that matter."

"This reality would be no more ready to stop any Challenge I make than Cassa's was. Or the last one. Vivan *assumed*..."

"Cassa had backers."

"Garm said she was a prisoner."

"For *her* protection, you can bet. Hell, with Vivan you would have had much the same kind of protection. Here? Especially without a world-pattern? You wouldn't reach Palace alive. Anything they had to do to stop you would..."

"Be a small price to pay?" What Vivan had said just before Ulanda had destroyed the loom-master's ship. "And if I had help?"

"You mean Cassa? She's been that route. And you had your chance and said no. Twice."

"What I wanted didn't exist in either place."

"Think you'll find it here?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"In a reality created by another..."

"Another Select with a different agenda? Poss a'Iitic created it on Gennady's orders. His shaping. Just look around you. The Spann Protectorate is, what..." She stopped with no idea how large it had been before and how large now." She shrugged at the smirk Bolda gave her. "Maybe it's a process of elimination."

"Like this morning?"

"Nothing happened this morning."

"A lot of ruckus for nothing."

"Were Cassa's backers the Spann?"

"If you looked back far enough."

"With Temple intermediaries? Why would any Temple..."

"Don't be stupid."

A valid expression of a people. The ti'Linn and Spann question. "Different eyes of the ocean." He didn't say anything. "As are the Altasimic," she added.

"Maybe."

"There are worlds of people and Priests to say so. Not one world and one boy."

- 9 -

A stone garden was to the rear of the bathhouse, looking as though it was a continuation of the structure, but unfinished. Shrubs grew out of stone from the half tumbled down walls, vines from the roof had spread in a riot along the tops, the dark green leaves sparkled in a net reflection of light from the water she couldn't see. Moss rimmed stones for the floor, covered now with straw mats against the damp and large flat cushions for comfort. Faint glow globes competed with three moons to provide the light.

Ulanda lay on her back, her head in Niv's lap, making patterns out of the arrangement of stars, joining them in time to the sound of the small water drum on the other side of the stone half wall. Small lizards sang in competition from the ni'at tree, a throaty chirping that was monotonous: two notes over and over. Niv had been braiding her hair for something to do while he ate, she probably had biscuits woven in, butter with the oily musk to provide the shine.

"He's sleeping," Alicia said, kneeling next to them. She had taken a plate of food to Rit and returned with Tika, not the dinner.

Eunni looked up from her plate of vilmets, her fingers dripping butter and juice. She was working on Kori's bowl of the spidery legs; the Zimmer had been called away to check one of the points in the security line. "Told you," she said, already back to prying the meat out with the long hooked skewer that had come with the dish.

Alicia frowned. "I knew he was, but it's not like him not to wake up when there's food."

Fish and sour vegetables? Ulanda didn't blame him for staying asleep. "Silassic says he needs to sleep as much as possible." She sat up and shook her head, the narrow strands of the braiding pulling at her scalp.

Niv leaned forwards and put her plate in her lap and the spoon standing up in the bowl. "Eat," he hissed again. "You are nothing but bones."

The baked fruit was cold now, sliced apple layered with dion berry, but she couldn't have said what it was from the bland taste and gummy texture. She hadn't been hungry after all. "My hair braids are a mess," she whispered back to him. He started picking them out with little tugs.

The cat was tucked under Alicia's chin, purring loudly. Could she feel the unborn kittens, Ulanda wondered, pushing at the silver spoon with her thumb. "How many staff so far? Bolda?"

"On loan? Thirty-two but half of those are Wa'tic and came with the place. Silassic is the only one on permanent."

"We could use a cook," Eunni said.

"You're eating Kori's joke," Bolda said.

"And a tasty one at that. I meant the mess you people got."

Ulanda managed to lift the spoon, using the wings of the bird. The pudding hadn't improved in taste for cooling. "Have you talked to Garm?" she asked Eunni.

The older woman put the skewer across the bowl and wiped her fingers on a napkin before answering. "He didn't have anything to say that I haven't heard from him before."

"It's not his fault," Alicia protested.

"I didn't say it was," Eunni said as evenly as she had spoken before. "And that still doesn't mean that I have to put up with him when he's like that."

Answering Alicia, but Eunni's eyes were on her. "It's not something he has much control over," Ulanda said quietly, looking down. The silver spoon in her bowl, the same one she had seen fly a long time ago. "The Eki decision, do you remember? What it had to say about ownership and responsibility?"

"In which reality?" Eunni asked dryly.

Bolda snorted. "Niv? Why don't you tell us."

Niv blinked, his crest flared upright to catch the moonlight, then dipped as suddenly. A buttered biscuit crumbled under his nails and his blue tinted fingers were butter scented as he touched her cheek and brushed braid crinkled hair from her face. "Child," he said. "What Sarkalt said to you at Ri-altar when you talked of 'fault' applies here as well. Would you blame fire for burning?"

And you're hers as well, she thought but only asked: "What was Cassa really like?"

"You saw her today if you would only think to look."

She shook her head.

Bolda clanked the dishes as he gathered them. "You finished?" She nodded and he took the bowl.

"I'll help," Eunni said, then got to her feet awkwardly, testing her movements before trying to walk. "It's the damp that gets to me."

"Suppose you want tea?" Bolda asked her.

Alicia stood, and then stretched as though stiff as well. Tika was on the cushion eating the biscuit crumbs that Niv had scattered. "I'm going to bed before anyone thinks of something else I should be doing. Plus, Net or no Net, I'd like to keep an eye on Rit."

Bolda waited until Alicia had gone before asking again. "Tea? Or is it bed for you too?"

"I'm going to have a long hot bath. I'll have my tea there."

"I'll get it," Eunni said. "A bath sounds like a good idea."

Bolda snorted. "All the tea things are already in there."

Signs passed between Eunni and Niv that she didn't catch except the agreement. Her tass'alt nodded before leaving by the side path around the bathhouse towards the common.

The bathhouse was only a few steps away along a path that could have led anywhere in the night. She followed the sound of the water drum. Steam was a mist over the warm water, the sound of the drum both closer and sharper, contained by the stone walls. A wooden bench was by the entrance, towels folded at the near end and a single glow globe stationed above. Along the tops of the walls, the vines looked to be freshly trimmed back. Used for weaving the garden gate probably, she thought, the scent was the same. A brazier was by the steps down into the water, a tea tray next to it, the small pot unwrapped, set to one side of the glowing coals. Eunni had followed her silently.

After pouring them both a bowl, Eunni supported hers until Ulanda nodded she could manage alone. Mead, not tea. Ulanda's second mouthful drained the bowl. "The Warrant that Cion penned should give us access to our flitter crystals. The spins Garm did today, the secondary..."

Eunni's hands interrupted her. "That can wait until morning." She started to undo the ties of Ulanda's girdle. She hadn't touched her drink. "I'm tired even if you're not."

"Where's Niv?"

The wide cords of the girdle were left in a tangle on top of the towels. "He'll be here in a moment." Eunni patted the bench. "Sit so I can do your mittens. Do you want some more mead?"

She nodded then sat where she had been told and gathered the soft folds of the heavy wool robe around her for warmth. She wanted to scratch where the girdle had pressed it against her skin. Niv was in their rooms, sending an amused feel to surround her query even before the words came. "Is there something wrong?" he asked. "That one is not so tired that she can not untie a few knots, or her hands so sore that she can not scratch."

She sat quietly as Eunni fitted the mittens, pulling Net to make sure the seal was done properly, working slowly.

A third bowl of mead and she started to yawn, welcoming the pleasant buzz.

Footsteps and she turned to look. Niv, she caught his scent first, the night was dark in contrast to the light in the bathhouse, the glimmer of his scales much the same as the moonlight reflecting from rain-wet leaves.

Her robe was loose around her as she stood. When she looked, Eunni had already left. "Should I have asked why instead of where you went?"

"You knew when you wanted to know." He stepped in from the entrance. "This is Mirwin. Tass'altin from the Tass' Holdings here."

Niv moved to hold her from behind, his crest feather soft as he bent his head over hers. "He is young and very nervous," he whispered in Ri-native. "You would be cruel to make this worse than it must be."

His breath was as warm as the mead had been. She leaned back against Niv for comfort and she felt him respond. Relief more than desire, she thought. She could have said no. He slipped her robe off and his at the same time, a puddle of soft lavender wool and thin white silk around their ankles.

His fingers were on her face, then her neck, the line of musk they left, both warm and cool on her skin. She could hardly breathe from the scent - so much more potent than the mead - she arched her back with a gasp when he reached her breasts, his fingers going lower almost immediately, hard against her ribs. He wouldn't go slow now, he would control the need and the timing, the rest was both a test and a trial of the new tass'altin.

He pulled her down, they were both kneeling, him behind. He spread her knees apart and lifted her onto him, holding her close against him with one hand spread on her lower belly, kneading then pressing. Mixed with hers, his pulse beat against his fingers; he could hold that level as long as he wanted. The pressure was close to being pain, she wasn't ready and she knew that timing was deliberate too. Her 'no' could include him and be much more than a word - he was gambling.

"Mirwin," he said, using his other hand to turn her head so she had to see. The boy was next to Niv, just back enough not to be easily seen.

"Ulanda," he said, moving to the front at a sign from Niv that she felt rather than saw the tass'alt make. "May I?"

She still wore the mittens; she touched his face with cloth between their flesh. As Niv had said, he was frightened, the feeling stronger than any desire. For a brief instant only, she saw what he saw.

"I would never have seen him," she whispered as she leaned back against Niv and closed her eyes as though it could stop her knowing Mirwin's perception of her.

Scented nails scrapped one side of her face, breaking the skin. The hormones in the musk were mixed with her blood. Instantly, her throat narrowed, she had to pant to get enough air. "I'm your eyes here," Niv said. The words were spoken into her hair.

She opened her eyes to find Mirwin's were a step ahead of what he would do - he imagined the feel of her skin against his lips, the taste of a nipple, salt and oil, her own and from the bath this morning. He was reacting to the musk without differentiating it from his native reaction to her and she felt how he was using both to overcome his fear.

As Niv had said, he was young and as different from Nisstlin or Rit as still being human could be. Pretty, he was pretty, only that, he hardly seemed to exist



without that definition. Was the choice deliberate, or had Niv been restrained by what was available locally as she had been with the Scribe? And everything they asked for, space, people, security, all of it had been given without question.

"Was it?" she whispered. She was heat; she couldn't feel Niv in her anymore, only the still growing pressure and the burning and the fast throb of her own pulse. Her head spun from the combination of musk and mead and pattern.

His crest brushed her face again, feathers of cobalt. His breath was the taste in her mouth. He ignored her words. With his free hand, he traced a path from her throat down along the curve of one breast to the erect nipple, slowed with a twisting motion of scales against skin that had the aurora tighten painfully, then let his hand drop to her lap. Ice melted in the burning that followed his touch and she looked, but he hadn't broken the skin. Within the larger burning, she felt the pricks that ice makes on drawing heat from the skin - like a cat flexing its claws and an image came to her of Pida then was gone as fast.

Slowly, using the edge of her hand, she followed the same path, wondering at the difference, but almost idly, the part of her mind capable of reason was distant. More clear than reason was the memory of how Rit's hand had felt this morning... clumsy, she had thought then and thought so again even as her throat closed, but with tears this time, not the musk scent.

Mirwin's hand rose, either to touch or to support hers, but he hesitated. Had he sensed the rise of pattern or did he think the moisture beading her skin was only sweat? Clearer than her own mind, she knew his - whatever vision he had first had of her was lost, he saw her hesitation as its own answer: she hadn't said no.

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The streamers swirled to a fan shape before drawing in, a fluid vortex of the darker sa-cloud and in the eye of the vortex, seen for an instant, the sasi-web. An instant later and the luminous veil covered web and cloud both.

Tu'pin wedged the butt of his spear at an angle into a deep slit he had cut into the clay and squatted, holding the shaft with both hands. He felt the moisture trail down further than the visible sasi-web had, the breath of the flowers was on his upturned face. Oimit was standing bait, her form fading in and out of the veil, her hair free to the wind that fell from the wing of the mirsasitin. She held his vision more than was healthy during a hunt, especially this one: they were hunting for luck.

At her sign, he took the leading banner from his pocket, dark side out and slipped the ring around the shaft of his spear. The mirsi-wind pulled it up faster

than he had thought possible; it took his entire weight to hold the angle of the spear into the clay. The pad he stood on started to crack, buckling from underneath, he felt the change against his bare feet. Then the ring stripped out at the blade and the veil above his head bloomed silver with the light of the banner reaching the sasi-web. He heard Oimit's whistle of a bet and answered just before the mirsasitin called.

A female, he had guessed right.

Oimit laughed as she sang the drawing of luck and on the last note, released the wind ends of her calling banner. The long narrow strips looked a reflection of her hair rising to the same wind but higher, a play of light and color to draw the mirsasitin to her. She whistled again, but only a final check on placements this time and Hqua and Chan'ka answered. He couldn't see them; they were motionless mounds of clay as they waited for the attack.

The female called again. And an answering call from higher still, and from the echo, tight against the dense ceiling layer. Another female, but not a sister; the complex melody showed her age. The two were a nursing pair out of the proper season.

Oimit screamed an oath as she threw her spear to land blade first into the clay. Then the calling banner was free over her head, released to the wind. She stood watching it rise, both arms raised as they had been to let it go and her face was to the falling sky. Her scream of rage had become a prayer. The breath stopped in his throat, he felt her words in his soul.

"Go," he whispered and she rolled as though thrown like her spear had been to the ground and was lost to his sight instantly. Sa-cloud fell around where she had been, or still was; he smelled the sweet moisture as the veil sparked, near blinding him before the yuin change gave him back his sight. In a darker world, violet sasi-web had followed the cloud, falling into a textured black; the spaces between the plates licked the violet with the paler tongue of memory. A call from very near - the old mother, not the young. Sa-cloud and web and clay dust, mud fell around his head. He heard claws strike ground and rip towards him. He twisted the spear opposite the mother's approach and tried to become a piece of clay.

"You look a sight," Oimit said, tossing a clod of dried mud at him. She was silver and violet in the dark of the yuin and the sky glowed behind her. When he had blinked the dark away, all her natural color had gone as well, with dirt smoothing out the red shading. Her right hand was bandaged, remains of the calling banner made a thick mitten. The veil was high around them and the air was still, a warm afternoon.

"A strange sleep, little brother," she said. "I couldn't waken you."

Tu'pin sat up - breaking a shell of mud - still blinking, but grit now. Oimit was cross-legged in the dust near him, a mirsasitin feather across her lap, the quill end bloody.

Fingernails of her left hand were red with clay and blood as she smoothed the barbules. "Hqua called your death as he and Chan'ka left." She looked at him without expression.

Her eyes followed a claw mark in the clay, not the feather her fingers stoked. The plates of clay had been shattered, the straight groove was man deep where the sides hadn't collapsed but no thicker than his wrist. The score of the mirsasitin's hooking blade-claw ran up to him, and past almost as far. He lay over top and except for Oimit's footprints to reach him, the layer of dry mud over the plates was undisturbed.

Suddenly she looked up, her lips moving silently, her eyes focused to a point more distant than the veil that hid the sun. A narrow band of black set off the purest crystal of the blue iris when she looked back down. The fingers that still caressed the feather shaped the sign of Asking.

He had nothing. Just clay, he was clay, he had tried to be clay - the last thing he had thought.

She hissed into his silence, her lips drawn back to show both points. Elder sister again. "If I didn't know better, I would say you had been indulging in a faint. Should I have thought to check if the old one had nipped your spurs off in her pass? Is any of that blood yours?"

He looked. The mud covering him had dried too dark to be anything other than moistened by blood. A touch to his tongue showed him it lacked the sweetness of mirsasitin blood.

Standing was like rising out of a drowning flood, he stood and the dirt on him fell away. He could have flown he was so light. He was untouched; he felt his wholeness like a skin of wonder.

Oimit stood, her injured hand held across her chest, she limped badly walking the few steps towards him, not wasting energy trying to hide it. The feather was left behind in the dust.

"Did Hqua call your death as well as mine?" he asked, touching her. Bruising darkened her chest, blood in a soft blister under the skin where there should only have been the hard cartilage plates. Heat along her back and one hip, his fingers came away sticky with fresh blood. She breathed slowly, her eyes closed, then opened when his fingers reached her face. "My sister, did you think to join me in the dark water?"

"I had planned for us to spend the night together," she said, returning his touch and look. "Death is only a different place, and as lonely for one." Sweet blood on her fingers from the feather, he breathed her scent and that of the old

mother both. "I see you still have your spurs," she added, after doing her own nibbling. "And explanations? Do you have any of those?"

The back of his ra-finger brushed her cheek, the a'Genn marks warmer than the rest of her skin. "I think we should go home before they start the rites and forget our names. Did Hqua and Chan'ka take all four packs?"

"Yes."

Three days out from the Holding at a quick pace. "How long ago?"

"Since yesterday."

A day and a half. And no memory of the time.

His tunic made a wrapping for her chest, the pressure would help slow the internal bleeding until she started to heal. The other damage was minor in comparison, a side claw had caught her hip, the toe scales, her back, stripping skin and flesh but missing bone. Her legs were unhurt, the limping was from the hip injury. Smooth flesh on her thighs until the ticti scars. He didn't look at the black petal design, only at that touch had pain finally reached her features. She hadn't protested his assessment of her injuries or the help offered so far, but he wasn't sure if she had decided to try to live.

The banner fragments peeled away from her hand to show deep parallel slices across her palm. "You grabbed the feather?" he asked incredulously.

"She had lots."

Air burned his points as he laughed. "Hqua and Chan'ka did a disservice to a'Genn to loose you for the Clan. They should have carried you. You and your feather."

"And if I told them no?"

She would have, the tone held all of the certainty of her right to command mixed with the pain of the ticti marks. Three children born alive, but each child set aside by the Senior Sister-wife as unworthy of the blood spent on them.

He started to untie his leather hunting bracelets, intending to double them around her hand over top the bandage to keep movement to a minimum, but she refused and he settled for rewinding the strips of banner cloth. "We can go home and tell them we're alive," he said evenly as though she would survive that journey without water or shelter in her condition. He searched her face for a hint of her frame of mind. She was very calm, too much so, distant despite the earlier teasing. The Sourrin freehold was closer than the Holding if she would agree to it. They could make the settlement by morning if she could keep the pace even that long or if she would let him carry her.

He took the first few steps then turned. "Aren't you coming?"

She had stiffened. "I'd rather die heading in the right direction."

"All directions are one, all paths lead to the same place," he quoted.

"I've heard it said better. Are you ready to tell me what happened here?"

"I don't know. My last memory is of hearing the old mother score the earth. I turned my spear to avoid harming her, and then you were throwing clay at me a few moments ago."

The few steps to join him were hard won. "How do you keep your mind from hearing your body?"

"Oimit, I don't know."

Her breaths were shallow and rapid, her Clan marks pale crosshatches under the layer of dirt. She must have started the last journey while she had sat watching him; there had been no pain then, not even of memory. "Tu'pin, you're being deliberately stupid. Your body can't forget. You sucked air, your hearts continued to beat, these things at least, even in a..." She took a deeper breath and managed to say the impossible. "Even during ertin'alli, a freeborn doesn't cease to exist. Think, damn it!"

He didn't have an answer but the one he had given: a mystery. "Come with me, Oimit." He touched the Clan marks again, and her eyes, the rich blue pure and seemingly bottomless, even now. "You might survive and if you don't I'll sit with you a while. As you said, death is a lonely place for one."

When she didn't answer, he left her. The Sourrin freehold, he thought, regardless. When she caught up, she had the feather in her good hand, trailing it behind her.

The veil was the color of dried blood - and still high - by the time they reached the start of the Mouth. The freehold was on the other side of the narrow line of peaks, a shelf settlement carved out an old stone blow, a jagged tooth broken off near the base. The small caves had water of marginal quality; he remembered that detail from a patrol survey he had checked while planning the hunt. They weren't a'Genn affiliated freeborn, not worth the bother, land or breeding.

A fresh blow filled the pass he had hoped to take and new teeth chewed the veil, moisture running in the seams from the heat of the stone piercing the sasi-web. The wet was temping, a trial of sense over the rise of instinct. Caustic, it would quench their thirst then kill slowly.

Oimit didn't mention his mistake; the new blow would have had to be in the survey. They circled the hot ground slowly, into the older Mouth, all her attention given to keeping one foot in front of the other. The only help she would allow was to let him walk ahead and break path. The surface was treacherous.

He heard her fall and went back.

She was breathing. "Let me carry you," he whispered into her ear.

In a faint hiss: "To the column, you're exposed here."

A long time between each breath as he held her, waiting for the next. There were shadows around them in the night; he raised yuin sight to watch the virmiti play around the stark peaks. They hunted in the lower reaches of the falling veil. And were hunted.

Morning brought mirsasitin weather, the sky barely higher than their heads while sitting. Oimit was still alive, resting back against his shoulder, both his arms around her as though he could hold the life inside by force.

It was a waiting calm, he felt void of emotion, something strange to him, much as when he had woken earlier, still lying over the mark of the claw.

"Sister?" he whispered but she didn't answer. I have no place to go without her, he thought, content to sit there.

A widely spaced webbing of darker lines formed deep within the shifting veil, he watched the portion closest to him sink very slowly as the day passed. He thought it might rise again or dissipate but the near side caught the spires around them. A sizzle as the deep red touched stone and drifts of white crystals fell, coating them. Would it reach the Sourrin freehold, he wondered. All who could would gather the crystals, risking the virmiti to bring it in before the woi swarmed to eat it. And a feast after the first handful was offered to the altar. Burning sugar, he could almost smell it. Bread, a sweet dough...

"Do you remember?" he said and then was silent again. His mind drifted through memories, he forgot almost at once which he had meant when the words had been spoken. Whatever it had been left only a taste in his mouth, a taste instead of words. A flicker at the edge of his eye, a woi pack in a whirling motion. They brushed him, feeling like gauze floating across his exposed skin. Most of what he saw was the wind they raised that drew the crystals into a funnel shape, a miniature of what the mirsasitin did. He sang the first words of the wosinki to the woi pack, a song from the Wind festival and Oimit stirred...

And then he did remember. The day he had first met Oimit. He was seven and she had been sent to the Holding for her gin'tala, and was perhaps twice his age. The old freeborn they all called Feather had been in the kitchen making the special pastries, small buns in the shape of the a'Genn mark. They were rolled in sugar before baking; the kitchen was sweet with the smell. After two days in the open air to dry, they would shatter into flakes when bitten. It had been the servant who had told him how the sasi spin was gathered by the freeborn as a gift from the Wu'cass and how tithing dues brought much of it to the Clan Holdings. For the gin'tala buns, only sasi spun sugar was used.

The servant's voice had risen and fallen to make the story a song as she kneaded the dough. A formidable woman, old enough to get away with scolding him when he tried to steal a bun still hot from the pans. Wind-of-the-Feather, they called her, from the path of an old bird. Even the senior sister-wife spoke to her as though she were human.

He reached with a cramped hand to gather a few of the crystals the woi had missed and touched them to Oimit's tongue where the tip parted her lips. She responded, her tongue narrowing to suck the sweetness.

"You amaze me," he said into her hair.

Without asking what she had refused before, he took the point of his honor blade and nicked the skin of his arm, pressing the blood to her lips. She sucked that as quickly, working her tongue at the cut. Then the points sank into his flesh and she drank.

He had stolen two ginibun, hiding one under his tunic as he gave the other back. He still had it when Oimit came to his bed that night.

"Not you," she said when he would have left. D'qu and Halli had been faster to leave the bed. And when he would have formed the motion of Welcoming, she put one hand over his and said, "You are Tu'pin." He nodded; he knew her name from the Presentation earlier when her flitter had arrived from the Port. "You're very pretty," she added, stretching out on her side next to him. Then her nostrils flared over a tight-lipped smile and she found the bun he had put under his pillow and tore it in half.

He took the other half she offered. Still very soft, he had intended to wait until morning, more to impress his bedmates with his patience than wanting it to dry. "Where are you from?" he asked, picking at the torn edge of the bun.

She had finished her half. "Baaltigen Holding in Wi'ti'lic Station. That's Spann. An Alliance Posting."

He passed his half to her, sugar littered the cover of the bed. "Are you scared?" he whispered.

"What about?" Cool gray eyes mirrored her tone; even in the dark without yuin sight he could see them plain, as though they were illuminated from within. No blue at all or even shadings in the iris, just an endless silver gray. Then as the door to the hall opened, he saw her Clan marks where he hadn't before, or not looked. Incomplete hatchings like an a'Genn freeborn but without the bonding marks.

Senior sister-wife Daca. Oimit froze in place. Daca didn't say a word as she sat on the edge of the bed. Fingers like embers took Oimit's face and turned it to the light. The girl's eyes remained open and level, she showed no submission, none at all. Tu'pin watched, fascinated, he knew he wasn't seen by either of them. The older woman spent a long time looking, he recognized Daca's expression now, the same as Oimit's had been as she waited to die on the flood plain.

Daca left without a word.

He counted to ten before daring to speak. "What...?" was all he got out. What are you? How could he ask that?

"Two more days." Oimit's words, he almost didn't hear them for the noise of his own thoughts. Then louder, speaking as before: "When I become paltin, I'll ask for you."

If she became breeding dominant, he thought. And she'd still be too junior to influence who he served under. Too junior and too strange. He almost told her his thoughts, but didn't. The second half of the bun he had passed her had fallen

from her hand to the covers, squeezed to a solid mass and spotted with blood. For the briefest moment he felt the burning of Daka's hand on his own face.

"Maybe I will too," he said, with a boasting tone, the best he could do as a match for the courage he knew he didn't have in him. "Become paltin, I mean." She had laughed.

"There's water," she whispered. Blood still bubbled in her mouth but she hadn't drawn any fresh for some time.

Rubbing the cuts under her nose, offered his arm again. "Stone water."

"First you forget yourself and now you can't smell good water." Her words were a sigh against his arm. "Little brother, you are quite hopeless."

Water meant people. He left Oimit with her honor blade fixed in her good hand, the point pressed against one side, the tip just under the skin to help hold it where her spine would be easily severed. A fall forward and she would be dead by her own hand.

There must have been the scent of water, but a passing thing only. The freeborn woman had none out that he could see or smell, the two children either. A stash, perhaps, and food as well. She was building a shelter, a patched cloth fastened to make a tent within a fissure in the spire. Stone piled at the front and stone dust rubbed into the weave to disguise the look. The children were inside and the flap tucked down before she left again.

Near to an hours search had shown nothing more then what he saw in front of him. The sugar was gone, only the tracks of the woi packs remained in the wind blown patterns of stone dust and clay. The veil had risen a little to show most of the teeth of the Mouth back the way he had come, the Sourrin freehold quite near.

He watched the woman as she gathered more stones. She blended well into the background, and away from the shelter, moved as a Warrior does when they wouldn't be seen in enemy territory.

The youngest child was a girl; she folded without a sound, the older boy as quietly. Standing in front of the shelter, he waited for the woman to return. The only sound from her was the stones she dropped. A weapon was in her tunic, one hand went towards it, but she turned the movement into a sign of submission as she knelt.

A simple work knife in one pocket, no markings on the blade. "A pouch of the water," he said to her. "Bring it here."

She brought the water from out of the tent, then eyes down, stood quietly as he drank. Relieved at finding the two alive, he wondered, or regretting it? She had left them alive after checking them. What did she hope?

The mirsasitin hunted that night. The old mother, he recognized the cry. Occasionally, she struck with the shrieking rip of her claws against stone and the



drum of the shattered pieces falling to earth. Be'ell knelt at one side of the tent, her two by her, her head bowed and she held theirs down. Each time the mother struck, she pulled them tighter, one under each arm.

"The old mother wants her feather back," he said to Oimit after a very close hit that came near morning. The tent had shaken with the impact of boulders landing near them. A shower of gravel hit the cloth. He had taken the bandage off her injured hand to clean the wound and with his words, she had taken the shaft of the feather to lay across the palm, a perfect match of cuts and spines.

Be'ell looked up, her eyes wide, then ducked as fast but not before he saw them clearly in the new light. Oimit had as well, he got a smile from her, a chuckle forming in her throat that didn't quite make it out. She had been watching the children when she didn't think he was looking. He didn't think Oimit had really noticed the woman beyond the few orders she'd given.

"Little brother, does Sourrin freehold have that breeding?" Oimit asked with the lilt of High Formal for all she continued to speak common Zimmer. He shook his head, showing points, as amused as she was without quite knowing why. He'd never seen red eyes in a Zimmer.

Oimit managed to sit up without help and to handle the water pouch on her own. She'd live, he thought. Or survive the wounds, rather. It might be a long way home yet. Not just a mirsasitin hunt now.

"Perhaps a'Vqui has an interest there," he said. "Are you something they're breeding?"

He repeated the question with the woman's face held in his hands. Spurs pressed her cheeks, his ra-fingers prominent. He could smell the l'blatin, she had to as well.

"Lord," she whispered, moving her lips as little as possible. "For fear of them, I came here. They raid our crops, for sport..."

Oimit laughed lightly, he heard the water in her throat from drinking. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Lady, please. Sourrin..."

"I meant what world. I like your accent as much as your eyes. And that you are still coherent. I find you interesting. Are you interesting, Be'ell?"

Tu'pin let her go. "Is our intelligence so poor that a'Genn doesn't know this?"

"Or my little brother isn't privy to it."

A possibility. "And you?"

Oimit shook her head, frowning. "What world are you from?" she asked Be'ell again but in a soft tone that had his breath freeze in his throat.

He thought the freeborn would collapse. Her strange eyes were open wide and staring at Oimit. By all he knew of freeborn, she should have collapsed, but instead whispered, "Alisim."

Oimit smiled lazily. "Very interesting. I do like you."

The veil remained low all day, and the old mother near; he saw her movement in the forms of the sa-cloud, glimpsed through the blazing of the disturbed veil as she circled. To keep them here?

He asked Oimit. "You're dreaming," she answered sharply. And laughed, signing an apology. Her strength was coming back in a flood of bad temper. "I think she likes you." She stretched and her attention turned inward for a moment. A sigh released it and she looked sideways to where Be'ell still knelt. The two children were sleeping lightly; their mother had stroked them into a trance to keep them quiet. Litti, the little one, not more than two years old, and with eyes like her mother's, and Fas'tilin, a few years older, his eyes a muddy washed blue.

Oimit looked back to him, not laughing now. "More than that," she said, speaking High formal. "Courtied and won." She looked away. "I had thought to try my next child with you. Daka likes you and your breeding almost as much as she doesn't like mine."

If the senior sister-wife liked him it was the first he'd heard of it. "You should go to one of the Alliance Postings, you must have contacts there. Search out one of the older paltin."

"Lord Ollti himself, no doubt. Or one of his los," she said dryly. "I can't leave Zimmer without permission, Daka would skin me if I tried anything of the sort. Besides, the Pa'ltinka would still insist I come back here to give birth regardless of who the father is."

He sat across from her, using the action to rein in his own temper. His discipline was slipping, the tent was very much too small and he didn't have enough to do. What special interest did the Breeding Council have in her? "I wouldn't know about that," he replied, using the excuse of the trans-language to sign a request for indulgence he didn't really feel. How could he know about any of that? He didn't even know why she wanted him. As a new paltin he should have had to bargain for her favor, he had felt her desire as a threat even as he responded to it.

His motion was returned more elegantly than given. And more gently. "I know you wouldn't, Tu'pin."

The feeling of threat had died on the flood plain as they hunted, leaving desire that was like sasi petals in his mouth. And the desire had died at the spire as he had held her and decided to follow her into death or life, either one. Right now he wanted to throttle her. "Maybe it's that the fathers you contracted with were all too young, too unproven," he said, thinking of himself and the likelihood she would want him. Should he go through the full cycle again, threat to desire to this strange suspension of reason? "She's just being careful for the Blood. Try for someone with live children already, even Daka has to play..."

"Tu'pin, this has gone outside the paltin game." She shook her head. "I chose the fathers for a reason - I had to show I was fertile, but why should I owe favors to senior paltin when Daga would have killed the babies anyway? You were my luck for the game, more than the mirsasitin we hunted. I had hopes... I had hopes of placating Daga with your child, but I can't compete with the dark one."

He made a warding sign. "Oimit, don't talk..."

In the tone she had used with Be'ell: "Show me your wrists."

He hadn't thought of that. Shock was like lighting through him, the air suddenly electric with yuin sight taking his eyes, the darkness taking his mind. Blood flowed in twin streams down his chin, he'd bitten his bottom lip.

With still numb fingers, he undid the laces slowly, buying time for his body to adjust to normal. A few red drops fell from his mouth onto the narrow strips before he thought to wipe his chin. Slippery, then sticky, the fresh blood scent was strong in his mouth. Not so normal yet. He looked up with a long breath to center himself. Oimit was leaning back against the stone side, watching the children again with a yearning look that softened her features. She didn't look at him as he slipped the hunting leathers from his wrists.

Marks on his skin from the leather, he was swollen with water, having drank as much as Oimit had. To encourage her, he hadn't needed it. Dark red shading formed distinct bands; he was more heavily colored on his points than was usual for a'Gen. A few scars from weapons training, the risk of permanent damage hadn't increased his speed enough to satisfy his instructors. Two well chewed punctures on one arm, close together. Nothing else.

Still Oimit didn't look. "Be'ell," she said, again in common Zimmer. "Someone ordinary would not have been sent here like this. That you are Lady Cult goes without saying... are you a Speaker?"

He didn't think Be'ell would have answered the damning question quickly but a nod came from the freeborn almost immediately.

"You would have Priests on Alisim. Does a Lady Cult Speaker have occasion to know any?"

Be'ell nodded again, she had turned her eyes to watch him with something new added, obvious even through the fear. A look of speculation.

Oimit motioned to the freeborn. "Come here, closer to me." Be'ell did, kneeling with her head bowed. Oimit touched the woman's neck at the back, and chuckled again as the bowed head turned to expose the shearing bones. "Look up," she said. "Tell me, what do you think of my brother?"

Red striped eyes darted to see him, then looked back to meet Oimit's clear blue gaze.

"Tell me."

"The lord is beautiful."

"I agree, he is. He's come back to Zimmer from almost as far away as you have. Part of a pod crew, a common assignment for a very junior Warrior without special skills or interests. The nearest point to Empire that particular Patrol runs is off Reema Gate Station. Do you know it?"

Be'ell shook her head, dropping her eyes again.

"He found a skill, only he came to it later than is usual for males who undergo rasa. Do you understand?" Oimit chuckled. "You find us strange. Have you met Clan before? Most freeborn don't ever, not close like this. To see us, the touch of us, the scent. Our servants, of course, but they become used to it. They know the limits they don't dare cross over. And they know the... risks, some even learn to enjoy those risks. Most often, just a potential of danger to entertain and stimulate." Her hand continued to stroke Be'ell, much as the woman had done to her children to calm them. "He is beautiful. The best that Zimmer produces, a very old line doubled back so often that there is nothing in him that isn't perfectly a'Genn. Pattern sensitivity runs strong in a'Genn, did you know that?"

"Oimit, this has gone far enough."

But Be'ell had nodded.

His sister smiled and let her hand drop to the feather that lay across her lap. "Of course you would."

Tu'pin stood, trying to blink away the black that threatened again. "Senior sister-wife Daga might have a point," he said coldly.

Oimit laughed but not as she had. A ringing sound came from her that was instantly answered from far above. "They won't kill him, you know," she said, speaking to Be'ell again, her voice hoarse with the aftermath of her laughter. "Not like you must think. That blood is honored in a'Genn. How could it not be? If he doesn't take the sharp edge of his honor blade first, he'll die screaming in a warded room, burning with Zimmer pattern."

Stone crashed around them; he hadn't even heard the mirsasitin strike. "Be'ell, you're a long way from your home," Oimit continued when the stone was finished. "A long way to bring death. Sourrin is dead, the entire settlement, unless you kill us. Who would know that we were ever here?" She shifted her weight. "Sourrin freehold would die even on suspicion of harboring you. Unless you kill us. Could you kill us?"

"How?"

All he had heard was disbelief but Oimit sighed. "Tu'pin, did you notice the element of curiosity? Be'ell, what do you do besides being a Speaker? And a breeder." The last added to sound as the afterthought it must have been anything but.

"A spy," he said when the woman didn't answer.

"No, more than that: a revolutionary," Oimit said. "Weapons training, of course. You wouldn't come all this way just to impart your heresy; you would

have more practical gifts to offer. But something more subtle as well; something to match the slowness of your revolution. Are you a Salin, perhaps? A very unusual ability for a Zimmer, but I think you might be unusual."

"I found nothing in here or on her," he said in protest.

"And what would you know to look for?" Oimit stretched again, another lazy smile touched her lips as she leaned back. And moved, pulling Be'ell up with her, one hand wrapped in the crest of the woman's hair, a fist that had the freeborn nose to nose with him. "Tell me what you see," his sister whispered.

Be'ell's eyes were rolling back. Oimit bit her through the ear. "Tell me," she hissed through the blood.

"Zimmer pattern, very weak, I wasn't sure..."

"When do you see it?"

"When the mirsasitin calls him."

Be'ell lay quietly, with only the odd tremor that Oimit soothed, stroking her head again. The children had woken but he put them back to sleep with the same motions his sister used on their mother.

"We could use you in the nursery," she said.

"Did any of that help us?"

"Knowledge always helps. Do you feel different?"

"Nothing." He looked away, then back. "Less than nothing, a numbing. I'm not usually this stupid."

"I said you were beautiful, not smart." Long fingers curled a strand of the freeborn's hair. "Think how frustrating this must be for her. Her military training would have been extensive, a match for yours at least..."

"You can't know that."

"... more than mine certainly, my interests have been focused on other things. Then one word from me and she's frozen." Oimit shook her head. "There's a biological imperative that says she has to obey me, even more than she would you. That I'm Clan and she's not, overrides anything her people taught her. And paltin... I wonder if they thought she could withstand this, or just hoped she wouldn't have to." The fingers stroked Be'ell's forehead now. "Can you tell me?" Oimit whispered, bending lower. Tu'pin jumped to hold the freeborn down, the tremors had become convulsions.

A few minutes later, they stopped. Oimit had a thoughtful look on her face as she resumed the stroking.

"You mentioned other interests?" he asked, sitting back on his heels.

"What do you know of me?"

What did he know except that he had held the memory of her since that first night and used her name for luck and courage. "A couple of years after you left," he said, "after your gin'tala, the paltin list came with your name written on it and

the old lord at the Holding, Falel, it was then, he called honor for you that night and said you were a worthy daughter of a'Genn."

"And you were gone with your Warrior cohort when I was sent back here with my first pregnancy. Did you really remember me? We'd only met, what, two times? I chose you to bed down with so that some of your luck could rub off on me. You were everything that I wasn't, and too polite besides to tell a guest to go away. And very young."

"Your eyes were a strange gray then, not blue. And you ate the bun I had stolen from the kitchen."

"So I did." She looked amused but her focus had gone distant, but distant only in time, he hoped, in a search for the memory. "I thought Daga was going cull me right then. That's why I was sent to Zimmer for my gin'tala, so she could do one final judgment on my fitness to be a'Genn. My breeding line, it's not one that's... well, usual. The parts of it are kept separate for generations, then brought together... for a testing if you like. In a Clan as large and old as a'Genn, much of the paltin game may look random but it's not, not over the long run."

"As I said, I wouldn't know about that."

"You will. The years between our ages make a greater difference now than they will later."

He grinned. "I don't think so." Then remembered and looked away. Her name, he'd used it as a prayer for courage, would he scream it as he died? "I've a different future," he said evenly as he looked back at her. His spurs itched with fear. Die like that? "What interests do you have?"

Her eyes were a cold crystal again and with a measuring look to them. "Intelligence. I'm an officer of the a'Genn Pa'cass."

"Oh."

"Spoken like a Warrior. We're not that bad."

"My sister, does it matter now?"

She didn't answer right away. Or it was just that words came late in her answer. Pulling her legs around under her, she knelt, letting the freeborn's head slide to the ground. Be'ell stirred, shaking her head as she tried to get up, becoming still again when Oimit touched her face. And very still when the under hook of one fingernail was pressed in such a way to slice the bonding marks into the woman's pale skin.

"The girl child," Oimit said. He brought her, barely awake, yet struggling to get up as her mother had. The boy woke then and called to his mother, the first time he had spoken. Tu'pin pushed him into the wall and he crouched there, hugging his knees, his eyes down.

The same marks on the girl and Oimit let her go to her mother, and sat back panting as though the effort had stolen all her strength. Her tongue was purple between her sharp teeth.

Be'ell had the girl in her arms but was watching the two of them, her eyes wide and staring. She had looked to her son only once, when he had called her name. Tu'pin couldn't tell how aware she was of what the marks signified. "The boy too?" he asked.

Oimit shook her head and in the reflection of her eyes, he saw Be'ell kneel, rocking Litti's small form, her face hidden in the child's hair. Her back was to the boy.

"The veil has risen," Oimit whispered. "I can smell the change." A weak smile. "The old mother won't harm you, I think, in any case. Go to Sourrin, there'll be some way to communicate, find it. Make the adjustments needed to access the Net. Have you been given the a'Genn paltin codes to get through the locks?" He nodded and she continued. "Use those. Go slow, whatever they have there almost certainly includes a trap. Call..." She gave him a very long list of words and numbers and worked his memory until he had them.

"At this distance from a'Genn territory, there's no way of keeping it quiet. As soon as I use the a'Genn codes, every Clan on Zimmer will know..."

"That can't be helped. Tell whoever you reach... no, just give them the message, they'll know what to do. Either that or nothing you tell them will do you any good. "

He nodded. "Should I tell the contact to come here?"

"No. You come here alone with a flitter so I know that you're not a hostage. What I've given you will allow you to command those who arrive. Kill the freeborn. All of them, and be careful that it is all of them. Don't leave any for others to find and use against us."

A sasi-spin harvest. Would they still be celebrating their luck? He looked to the boy. "Now?" he asked. Oimit nodded.

When he had finished, she called him to come to her side. Her hand was cool on his skin as she touched his face, trailing her fingers to his chest, stoking lightly, her breath very rapid. He stopped her hand in his, she rubbed her fingertips along the spurs, turning them to flame, he felt the crest on his back rise and bloom.

"I wish I had the strength now," she said when he had to let her go or not stop at all. "I prayed for luck, and when you died, I thought my blood had been about as lucky as usual. Except you were alive and I stayed alive to see what the Wu'cass had granted me. Little brother, I'm very content with what has been given. And if you don't come back for me, we can still make that one journey together."

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The ship intruded on her thoughts, shivers from the energy fields disturbed her, that and the knowledge that strangers were close. Oimit knelt in front of the altar and watched the green joss stick burn to ash gray, trying to concentrate on the pale line of smoke as it grew from the fire band. Patterns in the mirsi-wind, she had always thought, even as a child on a Station very far from Zimmer. When she should have been praying, she had dreamed herself a Warrior on a mirsasitin hunt, a near-hand to a paltin, and saving his life for the Clan. The surrender to death had been sweet in memory. Sweet as a ginibun and the paltin's hand on her as he gave her comfort in the last moments. Old mother, do you hunt me yet? Did you hunt me even then?

She sighed and looked away, flexing her right hand to feel the pain, needing something to steady her. She had never been very good at praying. The ship was still stripping energy residue from the Web jump, the changes were more irritating as they faded, not less. And the room was too hot, her mood foul.

"Be'ell," she said. "Some tea. Join me." The woman bowed and left.

Tu'pin had returned with the flitter well after the veil had darkened into night. A large night, the veil was very high, taking the airborne predators with it. She had sat outside of the tent while she waited, enjoying the cool dry air and the cold stone against her wounds as she leaned back. Inside, Be'ell sang the death of the boy in a soft, well-trained voice, with perfect control of the inflections. The common Wu'similini rites, not the Lady Cult variation. Apparently, her grief was as well controlled as her voice.

Oimit fought down the hollow she felt growing on hearing the words. Better now than later, she thought, now when death was so near all around them. Not later when hope had had time to grow. And you used the same words to yourself, she thought. Three times. The violence she felt at the memory was contained in a shell she couldn't allow to break. The girl might be allowed to live, a novelty with her eyes, and a hostage to hope for the woman. Be'ell must have brought the children with her to Zimmer as hostages to her commitment, to her future here.

"Are you in my future, Tu'pin?" she whispered into the dark, raising yuin sight as though she might see his Lady in a glide above the peaks. Or the stars. Why not? Would you open the sky for me to see the stars, old mother?

And in the ancient prayer tongue, in a whisper: "Fly said the silver bird, fly into night. White is black, back is white." She raised her voice up to the form she could almost see. "Fly said the dark bird, fly into light. Black is white, white is black." She might sing as well as Be'ell did after loving him, she thought. And she might see the stars through the veil. Always too much imagination.



When she looked, Be'ell was standing at the tent entrance. Better colored when seen with the dark sight, the woman's muddy shadings sparked sliver stars in the blending. "Do you know the words?" Oimit asked her.

"Some of them. From old-tongue, they're the same, or parts of them are. I know the language a little."

Be'ell's submission had faded as she talked - or she had just come from facing worse. "And the song?" Oimit asked. "Do you know it as well?"

"Yes, Lady."

"From the alter Altasimic Opening?" Be'ell looked confused. "No, of course not," Oimit said. A common Temple song for children - and she would be Temple trained, Oimit thought. There was no reason the woman would think anything more of it; all the records of the Opening were with a'Genn, not Temple, not the Empire freeborn. The Lady Cult had the luxury of stories and legends, and the obvious will to spawn more to fit their own purpose.

She closed her eyes a moment to help the yuin sight fade, it didn't want to go. "Bring the tent down, we won't need it any more. Use the stones for Fas'tlin's burial; leave the mirsasitin feather in the grave. With your Lady or her mother, his soul rides the dark flood."

Three cups with the tea service. Tu'pin came in with Be'ell. "They've spotted a ship in the shelter of the Jump point," he said. "The off-pilot was speculating that it was for us. Until he saw me and shut up."

She shrugged. Their passage on the merchant ship hadn't included access to crew level Net and she had been ordered to keep things to requests. "The report I made can't be more than a day or two ahead of us. I can't think of any particular urgency but then I can't think why we're even here."

"I can," Tu'pin said, looking at his hands. He would rub one wrist until he noticed the motion and stopped, startled at the lapse, only to start again.

"No," she said. "If anything, that would be a reason to keep you on Zimmer. I thought maybe a competency hearing, for me. Or worse: Dacca, finally with a good excuse to have me skinned. But, again Zimmer..."

He chuckled but was still looking at his hands, spreading his fingers over his knees as though to fix them in place. A quick glance at Be'ell, then eyes down again before he answered. "Remember, I've seen the report. Maybe that Pa'cass Commander decided to continue the madness. He looked..." The laughter faded. "He looked frightened."

Tu'pin had come alone as she had told him, but they picked up an escort by the time they cleared the Mouth. Alzi Port, not the Holding. And a Pa'cass High Commander she had never met, waiting for them. Frightened? The tension had been palatable. Anger, she had thought from the unvarying yuin lines ringing the man's eyes, but any words from him to her had been soft. And very few in

number. After her injuries had been looked after, most of the next two days had been spent with the four of them alone in a sealed suite in the Port complex. Then on a small Spann owned merchant ship, not a Pa'cass vessel or even an a'Genn military ship.

"Are we dead?" he said, looking up again but the focus was wrong. "Have the rites been said, our names forgotten?"

"Little brother," she said, taking his hand in hers. Burning hot, especially against the cuts, but not from her scent. All she felt for him was fear.

"What's happening?" she asked Be'ell. She wanted to hear it said.

Shivering fingers reached for a bitten ear as Be'ell looked away, her eyes down. She hadn't touched her tea. "He's cycling," she said hesitantly, signing submission. Then with a quicker, stronger voice. "Not like before, that was just a trace, it took the mirsasitin to call it out. It starts like this, his body is trying to match Zimmer pattern. A thought, a sequence of sounds, a scent, anything can trigger it."

Oimit touched her, drawing her eyes up. They were so strange, she couldn't be finished looking at them. "Is there anything you can do for him?"

"Oimit," Tu'pin whispered before the freeborn could reply. In his mouth, it hardly sounded like her name. "I fell, I was clay. A white marble room, I was floating."

She shook her head in wonder. Be'ell was shivering harder, close to collapse. His words more than the cycling or his distress, she thought. The Lady Cult legends talked of a white marble room. And she had seen it from what the Ladybug's data points had recorded.

The energy fields changed again, not stripping anymore, and the Net she hadn't used snapped close. She cleared the wall tiles by hand, found another room, and almost as fast, a form in the tile pattern that cleared the rest. A Spann, half unrobed, turned to look at her, but beyond it, an Alliance Command cruiser, not a'Genn, the Spann markings on the dark hull were unmistakable. They were about to be eaten.

"All of you are to come with me," the officer repeated to her, his face as unyielding as stone. Pinnet bred. She knew that was all she would get.

They had been taken to spacious quarters, a Zimmer medic waiting for them, a very old freeborn with a patient, unhurried way about him that to Be'ell was added a sympathy he didn't try to hide. "Little-mother," he said to her as he took the child. "Allow me." He used the polite form of a language Oimit had never heard spoken other than in Net records. Xintan.

She had a uniform again but left it untouched, putting her plain robe back on after the medic finished his examination. The ignored uniform showed a much higher rank than she held but not in the a'Genn Pa'cass. The style was wrong and

only Alliance markings showed in the crest. Tu'pin was sitting on the edge of the bed, one hand over the wrist of the other, holding a patch of blocker in place. He looked stunned.

The medic came with them, still carrying Litti, and apparently more certain than she that he was included in the orders.

The corridor opened to a flitter bay, the tiles scrambling to fill the hull opening. Oimit stepped in, signing the others to stay at the doorway, walking slowly as she looked around. Two flitters, one badly damaged. Temple markings on one, Reema Gate Station, she thought. Then was certain. And the style of the bay? A Temple ship. She should have seen that right away.

A Net record? But why? Two people were standing in front of the other flitter, but blurred, the recording wasn't of very good quality. They weren't Zimmer. She kept walking towards them, not sure what else to do. Over the people, on the torn hull, the marking suddenly came into focus. A sasi rose, strangely doubled, each part not exactly the same... Her hiss stopped her in her tracks, the violence of the sound numbing.

Footsteps behind. "Sister."

She bowed to her Clan Lord. "Lord Ollti."

"Come closer with me. Do you recognize the people now?"

The other flitter had cracked, several E'kalt and one human female, but it was the broken flitter they approached, the one with the tiles that showed the Lady mark crossed by Strom Noble House.

"Lord. I've seen the records. Not this one though." How could she have, this sequence of events had never occurred. Eight people in front of the flitter now, the recording much better, and she recognized each of them. A fiction? Again why?

"Yes, or no rather," Lord Ollti said, a laugh in his words. "Your specialty for the Pa'cass, after all, and to understand the Lady Cult, you would have studied everything brought to us by Lord Gennady. Well studied, I've heard. You've seen much more than I had bothered solely out of curiosity or a sense of history. Your choice of career was understandable given your breeding."

She sighed. She should be frightened but wasn't. "I don't look like her, I've always thought I should."

"The gin'tala makes a difference, and being paltin. And you're not a clone. I've seen the Breeding Council recordings of our Kori after her gin'tala that weren't available to you, curiosity again on my part. You look more like her than you might think, but very much more like her daughter by Chanko. The same clear gray eyes as a juvenile, Kori's were quite ordinary." He walked to one side of the group by the flitter. The E'kalt Hunter had joined them; the sound of talking was a distorted murmur.

"This recording was taken seven days ago. Six of our pods intercepted the Temple scout shortly after it had taken on the flitter. A coordinated hard scan picked this up... not too difficult a thing to do as it was being recorded with about everything the Temple ship's Net had to give. Two pods followed the ship to Reema Gate Station and the inevitable conclusion. Two more delay-jumped to the counter-point and remained undetected. The others brought this back."

"The patrol Tu'pin had been on before his rasa."

"Oh, yes. One of the pods that was destroyed as a distraction for the two at the counter-point. It might appear that luck has played a large part in this. We missed first pickup of the flitter by hours, lost them to the Web jump by moments."

"Bad luck." She grinned at him. His nostrils flared as though she had given scent. "My apologies, Elder Brother," she said, lowering her eyes momentarily.

"Don't," he hissed, and she heard the air whistle back over his points as he drew breath sharply. "We'll take the throw of the stones the dark one has given us, but don't..."

"We?" she said, interrupting him, appalled at herself but unable to stop. "The uniform given me had no a'Genn markings."

Black ringed his eyes but he laughed. "I must say that Dacca warned me." His ra-finger touched her face, drawing her eyes down. She felt the scrape of the spurs on her skin, his scent was exquisite: sasi rose and sugar. Smoke and warm silk. She could taste him on her tongue.

"We are a tool of the Spann Alliance," he said. "As the Pa'coss is a tool of a'Genn. A finely crafted tool, Oimit, and valuable. Does this offend you?"

From his eyes, she knew that he was aware of the effect of his touch. How couldn't he be aware - and quite certain. Her courage crumbled with the fall of her anger. "No, lord," she whispered, trying for the submission she had lacked earlier. Should she blame the Wu'lim for her outburst? Of all those actually here, she thought only Be'ell and herself would appreciate the reference. And only herself, the humor.

The Net pull had frozen in time. The human woman was standing in front of Lord Ritsiniti, the E'kalt Hunter gone. What had the Lady and her people thought, she wondered. Five thousand years and a very different reality later.

Lord Oilti stepped back from her and bowed his head towards the doorway. A Spann approached, Tu'pin and Be'ell following, backed by two more Spann, the last ones armed. The medic waited alone at the door, the child still held in his arms.

The lead Spann spoke Trade Basic with seemingly easy skill, not pulling a Net translation. "The political aspects of the freeborn variation of the Wu'similini is not the only part that concerns us," it said. Three arms made a complex form, almost

touching the image of the Lady but drawing back just before. Its four eyes started rotating again, a quick spinning that threw light back at them.

Oimit signed a formal greeting and was ignored by both the Spann and Lord Ollti. A Spann Councilor, the edging of the robe on the sleeves told her that much. It's name and family? The bone ridges separating the eyes were deeply carved with a repeating symbol. A Holder of Words or some lower rank? She wasn't sure. The Net was still blocked to her.

"She is part the Wu'loss cass," the Spann said. "I do not argue that. We are, so she must be. But what else she is..." Pincers hooked the cloth of its own garment.

The Spann let the fabric fall, gesturing again to the grouping showed in the Net pull. "Still the heresy flourishes, persists and spreads in Empire. And here, Lord Ollti, even here. An infestation even of Clan worlds."

Be'ell watched the Spann as it spoke, losing the frightened look she'd worn almost constantly, and as the challenge against her religion continued, stiffened. More than a political complication to her and that was the danger of the Lady Cult to the Spann and the focus of the game the Spann tried here. The woman gasped as Oimit's nails dug into her arm, pushing her down to her knees.

"Lord...?" Oimit said, letting the freeborn go, then making a sign of Allowance granted. High formal, Empire style. Her Lord hissed. A laugh? Hardly. She didn't look.

But he spoke, not attacked. "My I present Councilor Ti'omma," Lord Ollti said with the quiet that held the attack in the tone instead. "Holder of Words for the Ukinawallisnik Family. And granted Allowance by more than an a'Genn paltin of some youth. A High Servant of one of the Eight of the Spann Protectorate."

"Councilor," Oimit said, bowing deeply. "If I am not known to you, my apologies. As my Elder Brother has said, an a'Genn paltin. My name is Oimit, a servant apparently of an old bird. Allowance made me is currently unknown, but I am learning."

Her own Lord had stiffened audibly and his scent of rage had Be'ell shivering, her head pressed against Oimit's robe. How long until he moved, she wondered.

Tu'pin made to step closer, she signed him away, all her force focused for that instant on keeping him clear. A strange gentleness showed in his eyes. Confusion at least, but more, concern and knowing. Knowing what? What could he know when she knew nothing?

Oimit turned away from him - whatever he knew, she didn't want to see it. Not from him. Let him be a dream of luck to her for a while longer. Be'ell, she thought, feeling the trembling of the woman start to fade. She touched the bowed head, a caress she meant to be reassuring. The freeborn must be close to entering ertin'alli. This was too much, she wished to protest. The woman was her responsibility and there was no need to subject her to this just to prove a point.

Protest? She almost laughed again. Better to protest her own death. As likely, she thought. If Ollti moved, she wouldn't be able to counter fast enough, from strength or will. Then heard the Spann clicking, a riotous sound, echoes showing a much smaller room than the flitter bay she still saw.

"A bird or a chimera?" The Trade Basic held, surprising her through the numbness of fear and anger she felt. "Should this Voice be silenced by thinking thoughts that run in cycles as long as a Nexus? A bird!"

And to Lord Ollti: "I like her," it said. "I will not think those thoughts but let her do it for me. A bird!"

"And the action you wish taken?" Lord Ollti said very quietly still.

"A bird. Let her fly." The ticking had increased, the Spann's eyes were floating gems slowly swirling.

Its look had gone from her to the images, not to the Lady, but Lord Ritsiniti. Perhaps three of them would have understood a reference to the Wu'lim, Oimit thought. And speaking in the trade-Spann of her childhood, she said: "The knife is held. Who bleeds?"

And in Spann was answered, but the full form she understood poorly, hearing only: "Fly, I would. Bleed, blood. The white knife."

The Net pull died. A corridor. "Where does it lead?" she whispered.

Tu'pin touched her shoulder. "Oimit, it's over, they're gone."

She had watched them go. How could he think she didn't know they were gone? The medic stood too close, a scan disk in one hand. He was against the wall a moment later, sliding down. Tu'pin caught her arm, blood on the palm of her hand. Her blood. The hand that she had grabbed the feather with.

Litti was with her mother, the small child clutching the kneeling freeborn. "Be'ell." Oimit repeated the name several times until the woman looked up, her eyes still glazed with shock. "Who are you?" she asked, burning with pain, worse than the first time. "What are you doing here?" The aftermath of dying again, she thought. How many lives did she have?

The medic was back by her side, Tu'pin also. Oimit backed up, trying to see everything at once. Questions were repeated to her, but she didn't dare answer for fear she would stop seeing. Stop being. Is that what had that happened to Tu'pin on the flood plain? Had he been distracted for a moment from his death, and found himself alive?

The corridor led back to their rooms. "This is by the High Lord's order," the old medic said, holding the patch for her to see, to smell, before smoothing it on. The pain melted. "And this." A vial, the contents mixed in hot water to make a tea. The new bandages felt too tight as the sealant pulled at her skin.

She lay down on the bed and he sat on the edge, the empty tea bowl still in his hand. Age had burned his eyes out, the yuin sight gone, she thought. A creamy

blue for the iris, yellow haunted the shadings of his skin like wrinkles in the color. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Awillykh."

"You know the Xintan language. Alisim?" He nodded. "How did you come to be here?"

"I was a medic on an Empire merchant ship. A short time here, a long time there... the years passed too quickly."

"A ship with a Zimmer pilot?"

He nodded again, slower than before. "And?" she prompted.

"The ship I was on crossed a Wolf ship, and the Wolf ship, a Spann backed Patrol ship with some Zimmer crew."

"And you have no affiliation?"

"Freeborn crew, Lady. Only a few Zimmer to the number of Pinnet."

There were enough Pinnet at the Station where she had grown up that she knew they didn't care about the difference between Clan and freeborn. Or even notice, she thought, unless such a distinction was important to the outcome they wished. A tool of the Spann as well. "Do you follow the Lady Cult?"

"In my youth. Belief can sustain; I found it helpful. Perhaps it is my age, but I find it less so now. Or find the gods less needing worship than before."

"Or that there is no difference between the two beliefs?"

"The difference is what it is made to be... and to the freeborn the difference is profound. Freedom through the simple act of a gift."

"Kori." He nodded. "A gift that can be returned," she added, watching for his reaction.

"As the Lord has said, you will be allowed to fly."

"And who do you answer to here?" she asked.

"The Lady Oimit a'Genn d'Zimmer. A Commander in the Be'li'kini of the Alliance."

The Spann Intelligence Circle. She opened to the Net - allowed now - and her rank was there. Command Level ship's Net. Deliberately distancing herself, she let the orders from the Be'li'kini filter down in a slow trickle through her mind. Or did the very casualness of her actions make its own distraction? In parts, she recognized Councilor Ti'omma, the flavor of the way it spoke Trade Basic.

Then one more order, a different source and a different language, but no less binding. She distanced herself further. Could she hide forever, hidden in that distance? The thought made her laugh. Awillykh, little Allykh, the old freeborn medic, didn't draw away at the wildness of the sound she made.

"Are you past fear?" she whispered, shy of speaking words after shouting madness disguised as laughter.

"Not fear. Past a great many things, Lady, but not fear."

Very casually again - and very distantly, she tickled the Net. Privacy, a very private privacy. And a very interesting facility of her new ranking. She didn't think anyone could notice how thoroughly this room was blocked without making a great deal of noise and still not be sure. "Is Tu'pin past a great many things?" she asked.

Yellowed nails touched her hand, the one with the feather wounds across the palm. "I'm not so old I can't overhear Net that is pulled openly, or understand formal Zimmer when spoken plainly from a High Clan Lord to one of his paltin."

She let the palm lie open under his touch, the cuts had sealed again from when she had struck him. He had left the hand only lightly bandaged. "Is Tu'pin still fertile?"

"Yes, Lady." He sighed and looked around as though expecting the walls to fall in. Or High Clan Lords to appear. "The changes in his body won't peak until after his Initiation and..."

On Camerat. There would be a request from a Temple whose true allegiance was buried deep. Cam't Temple wouldn't know who... or what, until too late. She hadn't been distant enough not to have that order make her shiver. "If he survives it," she interrupted. "He's had none of the training Acolytes get. And he's already accessing pattern. Rightfully, they should kill him."

"Rightfully," the old man repeated, but only not to disagree with her, she thought. "If they ever know," he added.

She sighed. "Have him come to me. If the blocker interferes... do what you have to do, just do it quickly. And wrap his spurs, I can't be marked. Mittens..." She buried another laugh that threatened her mind. "Do you understand?"

He hesitated.

"Who do you serve?" she asked again. "Councilor Ti'omma?"

Net hissed, or ticked rather, she thought, letting the medic's call go through. Casually again - she liked this Net - he wouldn't have noticed. A recording from the Spann Lord on what he thought was a private loop, the old man didn't talk to anyone. Reassuring himself. In the Spann language, and not the lesser trade version. And his rank, she wondered but didn't ask.

"I serve you," he said.

A shallow altar dish was in the center of Lord Ollti's fore-room. Stones from the Isti on Zimmer, water rounded shapes. Oimit took a joss stick from the box open on a side table but toyed with it between her fingers instead of laying it on the



sticks already burning. The same scent she had tasted earlier. Dark and light green in the stick, a spiral of the two colors, a pole of twisting colors rising to infinity between her fingers. Zimmer-altar was in Isti. She had never been there, not the Mouth of the First-wife or the altar that formed the honor teeth.

Two of the guard triad had seen her actually in the room, and then retired. Near-hands to the Lord, they had bowed, signing honor. One of his los had been there, Lord Ersi. A bow from him after an appraising look and he left as well.

A short robe was over a stool by the table with the joss box. Shaded silk like the veil on Zimmer at dusk. Oimit didn't touch it. She wore the Spann uniform for the first time, her crest wiggled under too many constricting layers, fighting the heat and already under stress from her injuries.

She caught his scent before she saw him.

"Bring the robe," he said. She did.

The adjoining room was as plain as the fore-room. Unadorned tiles for the walls, a simple narrow pallet against one side and raised slightly in the Zimmer fashion to double as seating. Tall chests with drawers. A small woven rug with a writing table, meant for kneeling at. A few recording crystals on the tabletop and a tea set in white clay. Two bowls. Another altar was at the opposite wall to the bed, the curved plate ancient or made to look so - cracks ran like veins in marble along the white surface. She had seen a matching altar in Dacca's room at the Holding the one time she had been in it. In both rooms, they were the only adornment. She put the joss stick she still carried over top of the stones, but not touching the single stick already there.

Ollti rolled it over the smooth rounds until the two sticks touched, breaking the rise of gray smoke from the first. "You should ask for luck," he said. His tone was as plain as the room. "I was about to send Ersi to bring you here. Were you this stubborn in your gin'tala? However did old Falel manage?"

She ran a finger along the edge of the altar plate and didn't answer him. The smoke or the man? Her mouth watered, she couldn't answer. She couldn't look up.

He sighed. "I regret your injuries." A ra-finger caressed her along the side of her face. Blood followed the spurs. She was shaking. "Put the robe on."

She fumbled with the ties on the uniform; his fingers brushed hers aside. Three layers of robes, each fell to the floor. With the cloth off, her crest bloomed outwards in sweep of ripples, he ran a hand along the warm fibers, then pulled her to him. He was sugar, she couldn't help but taste. Even the pain as he touched her wounds was sweet, her neck arched back and she felt his teeth. She was molten with the effect of the l'blatin in her blood.

He pulled her hands away from him, holding her wrists still. "Put the robe on while I pour us some da'kasit," he said. A clinical look, his tone also, he was scarcely aroused.

The robe felt like the whisper of sa-cloud against her skin. The scent of Zimmer was in the cloth. Were the sasi falling? And the old bird? Did she still hunt? Oimit sat on the bed, her mouth open, breathing rapidly. He sat next to her.

"Not too quickly," he said, holding his hand over hers when she would have taken the bowl he offered. His own was on the floor next to the bed. He held the white porcelain to her lips, allowing no more than a touch of the sapphire contents against the skin. The liquid felt like the silk robe, burning cold, and the scent of it stung her eyes. "Have you had it before?"

She shook her head and he put her bowl beside his on the floor then rubbed his palms together, eyes on the movement, not her. He seemed very simply to be tired, she hadn't thought of that. Was this just a duty to the Clan that he believed necessary?

Eyes the liquid color of the da'kasit finally looked up at her. He wasn't beautiful like Tu'pin, not in the classic sense, but he spoke command in every motion.

"What is it supposed it do?"

"A mild stimulant," he said after a moment. "We don't have a great deal of time before you have to leave. I thought you might need something."

She didn't, quite honestly. Had Tu'pin simply been her duty as she was Ollti's? The thought made her head spin. Or was it the da'kasit? She held the memory of the young paltin behind her closed eyes. Tu'pin had lost the confused look by the time he had come to her - duty for him as well? They were commanded by the same thing.

"You underestimate yourself," she whispered to her Clan Lord. The fire had turned to ice in her veins. "There's nothing I need that you don't have."

He laughed freely, for the first time, she thought.

"I've never been guilty of that. You perhaps, you I've underestimated. Or I've been too long in the company of my usual paltin, too used to the familiar." As he turned towards her, she lay back on the bed as though an invitation were necessary, her robe falling open. Then brought her legs up and started to turn.

"Not yet," he said, still sounding amused. "We've a little more time than that. I almost think I know you, but we haven't met before today, have we?"

"No." She had seen him once but from a distance. She had been about four years old and in a crowd of others.

"The Net records, I suppose. I think that if I had, I wouldn't have had to ask."

His hands caressed her slowly; the cold fire of the drink was in his fingers. Then only heat.

The ticti marks burned but he didn't say anything or linger over them. She turned her head away just as he pressed down hard. A gasp didn't quite make it out, she had known he would check. "You've ovulated already. Perhaps I did underestimate myself." Very pleased, but even more amused than before. He sat

back as he untied the robe he still wore and let it drape over his shoulders. He was watching her closely as though to memorize her. "I do regret your injuries."

So did she. She put a hand on his thigh, shaping very old words with the shallow cutting of her nails. Apparently an invitation was going to be necessary. "A child for the Clan is worth the care," she said. "I suppose I'll be back on Zimmer for the birth."

A bowl was in his hand. His drink or hers? "Which Zimmer?" he said then took a swallow of the liquid. With a grimace, he looked away. "Our Zimmer? Lord Gennady's? Or something created totally new? I don't find the chance appealing." With an unsteady hand he held the bowl to her lips again, the blue fire spilling.

"They're all the same one," she said.

Fire on her fingertips, she stroked it onto his skin over the cuts she had made. His color bands flamed, razor sharp separations between them, the deepest almost shading to violet as though she were raising yuin. Silver sparkled in his eyes, quite strange. Would he taste like silver as well as be sasi sweet, all at the same time?

He lay beside her on the narrow bed, his mouth suddenly covering hers, sucking her breath. And then gave it back, whispering, "Are all worlds the same? Are all children?"

And lay back again, laughing softly as he stroked her face with his ra-finger but with the spurs away from the skin. "Ersi said you wouldn't have dared. I said you would dare anything."

She took his hand with hers and turned it, feeling the spurs with her tongue, the warmer capillary trails, the hormones, catching her teeth on the sharp edges. Had he bet with his los? And for what stakes?

"Why are we still talking?" she whispered.

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Garm capped his ink, leaned back against the wall, and rubbed between his shoulder blades, easing muscles cramped from bending over his work. He had chosen his spot carefully: a carved post separated the smooth tiled surfaces. The junior Scribe assisting him looked up but he shook his head and motioned for her to continue with what she was doing. A niece of Cion's and fortunately not the chatterbox the Scribe First was. She was transcribing and modifying Archive requests, routine things. Most of the kinds of recordings and books they were looking for didn't exist until the third or fourth asking and then, only bred more books to ask for.

"The Alliance doesn't exist either," he muttered.

"San Garm?"

"A fiction, a fantasy of the military, brought on by too many Web jumps."

She put her pen down. "As you say, San Garm. That must be so."

"What is so, is that it's lunch time." He found himself looking for Eunni from the Net placement.

A moment later, Eunni pushed the screen door aside. "Did you think I'd be late? Is he giving you a bad time, Cici?"

The young girl's wide mouth stretched into an open mouthed smile as she folded the paper into an envelope around the small transfer crystal. "Not as bad as yesterday."

Not the chatterbox her uncle was but occasionally flippant. He shouldn't encourage the behavior. Ignoring her, Garm picked up another crystal, a longer, slim dark green crystal from the wooden tray in front of him and slipped it inside a hollow tube.

"The summary of what I've been able to get about Clan Zimmer culture and any changes from..." He paused as he screwed the cap on and then sighed as he passed it to Eunni. "Conjecture. Most of it is conjecture. And the rest is based on military records of skirmishes between Clan Zimmer ships and various others, and thus less than reliable as we don't have the Zimmer version, other than their routine protests. If it's not Temple controlled Empire, it's ignored around here by the scholars. I'd like Kori to check it..."

Eunni's own smile was hidden too late by her slow fingers. From the idea of trying to pry an opinion out of Kori or at his ranting, he wasn't sure. "I'll pass it on, the request as well, but no promises."

He wasn't finished. "You know, there are insanely complete records of every Turning ceremony - and in a place that can have any season it wants - back for the last few hundred Nexus and links to records built into the fabric of the Station itself to show others if anyone was crazy enough to want..."

"She won't look at it."

"Ask anyway. Responding to her protests will at least give me other directions to explore. I've gone stale on the subject... among others." He stretched his fingers, wiggled them and sighed. "Over a hundred thousand freeborn Zimmer on Ji'jin Station alone, apparently most of them Lady Cult adherents if my contacts are accurate, and not a word in Temple records about their version of the Wu'similini religion and damn little about the Spann orthodoxy."

"If it's not to do with our security, Kori won't look at it and I don't blame her. Alicia might, though. For some reason, she likes you."

"Alicia's not a freeborn Zimmer with Clan training. Ask Kori anyway."

"Come to supper tonight in the suite and ask her yourself. I've got something special planned." She had the pleased look that said she did.

"You can give... whoever, my regrets, but I have other plans." He didn't and knew he wasn't fooling her. Then to make amends, added: "We can talk about how best to approach Kori over lunch. Cici, will you join... no, you'd best get that over to the Archives first. Geonita won't move on those requests unless he's got paper in hand, and then..."

"Then go home," Eunni said to the girl. "Anything needing to be sent can be sent to you there."

Cici looked to Eunni then to him as though he had anything to say about it. He shrugged. "Why?"

She slid the small tube through the waist tie of her girdle as a balance to her pouch purse. "Are you coming for lunch or not? And the dinner."

Other crystals made a clinking sound like wind chimes as he drew a finger over them. Ji'jinlini Temple colors: violet, light and dark, and an unpleasant shade of yellow. His own crystals were the color of Li-cassa seeds; he had chosen them for that reason. He hadn't wanted to depend on Temple Net. Cross-linked Valld'sit crystals. Nine levels on each for ordinary recording but the spins... he couldn't believe how quickly the crystals filled up.

A larger version of the carry tube was beside the tray and he put them in before getting up. Three small paper books and a larger one of leather that he wanted to take - the rest could go back, the Archive and Library crystals as well. "Is there some reason more special than a dinner?" he asked as he followed Eunni out of the chamber. "Is the invitation about to turn into an order?"

Two guards in the dark violet tunics of Ji'jinlini Temple security fell in behind them, she didn't seem to notice. Jalka he noticed, a human echo line, and not ti'Linn as most Ji'jinlini Temple security were, indeed most the people at the Temple were.

"It's just me asking you to come to dinner." She took his arm firmly as though he might wander off in the wrong direction. "And if it was more, Garm, there's lots of space. You could have been there all along if you hadn't worked so hard at alienating everyone."

She looked up at him as though waiting on an answer. Over the bridge of her nose and extending onto her cheeks, the freckles were a darker red-brown than on Alisim and there were more of them, like minute islands in the clear skin of her face. Something in the light here, he wondered, or time spent in the sun of the garden near the center of the Station.

She smiled at his scrutiny. "You do seem to belong here, surrounded by these people. Am I seeing the real you, or only someone you want me to see?"

"What I was, I think."

"Before Cassa."

"Everything was before Cassa." The past days had been a mirror to what his life had been before. Speeded up greatly, of course. He would have been content

to spend years doing what had been condensed into days. He wished Eunni had stayed with him in his quarters in the Library Center. A selfish wish, he knew. She needed the others as he needed the books around him and his old skills being used.

Lunch was muffins and tea in the Temple Library commons. They were several steps up a tiered arrangement above the larger public common that fronted the three interdependent services that the Temple offered openly: Library, Archives and Law.

Two pots of tea, his and hers, were small squat affairs with puffy domes over them rather than proper warming cloths. The ti'Linn server spoke Xintan from a Net link, but used the polite phrases in an apparent random fashion while enacting a one-sided version of a tea ceremony.

Eunni waited until it was through then signed thanks coupled with dismissal that had the ti'Linn retreat to the start of the tiny private balcony. Her chatter from the walk here had changed to an absorbed silence that he was reluctant to intrude upon. She warmed her hands more than drank the tea, content to roll the tall narrow bowl between her palms with only the occasional sip.

"What are the books?" she asked after a while.

He passed the leather one to her. She opened the cover, balancing the large volume against the side of the table, the sharp edge of the wood pressing into the padded surface. Old leather, well kept but fragile. The stasis envelope it had been sent from Archives in was forgotten under the worktable in the Library room he and Cici had been using. "Pictures," he said.

She looked at him over the top of the book. "I can see that."

"The people in the book are all Zimmer. Or proto-Zimmer might be more accurate. A mother species to what we have now." He moved the teapots and muffin plate to one side so she could lay the book flat. "I was trying cross references for anything I could get on the creation of the Zimmer species - not that I hoped for much, those particular records wouldn't be here. I thought if I could find where the division was, or the reason for splitting the line into what is now Clan and freeborn... I remembered something that Anga had said to me about the Clan Zimmer, and used a Piltsimic key - based on Bolda's signature by the way - and crossed with..."

He rubbed his forehead, wishing she wouldn't look at him like that. "Pictures," he muttered and she nodded, the look changing to one of indulgence that was more usual between them.

*The cover was tooled from Zimmer skin*, he almost added but thought better of it. The small analysis crystal that had been in the stasis envelope had dealt with the book as a work of art - the reason the book had been saved and which entirely ignored the contents - from what was only described as the Primrose Attribute Nexus. An ancient sign in High Formal, not a word that defined a specific

Nexus. Idiots were a constant factor, he thought. Proof against even Nexus Change.

Eunni was quiet again as she felt the textures in the page before her, leaving a trail of fingerprints on the surface. Hidden in the details was a language of sorts but she wouldn't know that; he hadn't until today and still hadn't found a translation. Taking a pair of cotton work gloves from his girdle, he placed them in the path of her searching finger. She frowned when she reached them.

He didn't say anything. He liked the silences with her, even this one, and the gentle games the silences often contained. Lunch had become a ritual, her visiting every day and some evenings, the later times less predictable but even more enjoyable. In those times together, he could almost see them as married a long time and content in the rhythms of their lives. A life in a moment, as though he were a Priest, all time and no time.

She looked up again when he chuckled but he shook his head, loosing both the moment and the humor in the instant that her soft brown eyes met his. Everything was 'before Cassa', he thought getting up, suddenly needing the distraction of moving.

Knee high, the balcony railing was designed to be looked over while sitting on the cushions, not while standing. All the privacy was knee high, heads bobbed everywhere, up and down, and the tiers of balconies were full. No one paid him any mind, he was just another head temporarily higher than most. He felt invisible, and happily so, the stuff of rumors nobody believed much less expected to see. A pebble in a stream, he had a small eddy of contacts, ripples of fellow researchers for the most part and most of those didn't know more than his name or care if they did. A nuisance or a sounding board, a source of complements to be gobbled up or challenges to be spat out.

On the lowest level, Cici's bright yellow hair attracted his eye. Another guard, a match to the ones that had arrived with Eunni, was with her but standing back discretely. Sitting on the edge of the fountain in the center, Cici was chatting with a couple of friends. One he recognized, a junior Temple Scribe he had seen with Cici but he didn't remember his name if he had ever known it. He leaned forward. A human echo line, that much was obvious, from memory and from now. The other was a Zimmer, dressed in the severely cut tunic and pants that the Station Zimmer preferred. Dark colors, usually black.

Eunni tugged on the hem of his robe. "Sit down. You're making me dizzy and the guards nervous." She pushed the plate towards him, shy of two muffins already. "Eat them before I do. Please."

The muffins were white cake but when split showed the ti'Linn cross through the center in a violet color with tiny seeds in a darker shade. Cinnamon flavored, he thought, then decided it wasn't, just the closest he could come to the taste. He broke the next muffin open to find the same design, and the next. When he

looked up, both Eunni and the server were watching him, the ti'Linn by the table again, two pairs of pincers poised to take the plate away.

"San," it said in formal Xintan. "Flowers bloom and die, alas."

Eunni's eyes crinkled with amusement. "The colored part is a separate cake. After baking, it's cut into shapes and then the other batter is poured around it and the whole thing baked again."

"I can't image why," he said to her laughter. The server retreated at the sound - without the muffins - its language gone but for a clicking sound from its mouthparts. It looked to one of their guards for directions then settled back down to wait.

"How are things going?" he asked. "Is Mirwin working out?"

Eunni looked up from brushing violet colored crumbs off the page. She was using the protective cotton gloves as a bookmark. "Mirwin? I suppose so, for Ulanda at least. She worries him like a dog does a bone."

Below them, Cici had stood up, her hands flying as she talked to the other Scribe. The Zimmer - a women, he thought but couldn't have said how he knew - had backed up away from the two. Cici's words vanished in the distance between them, eaten by the noise of the fountain and the buzzing sound of the hundreds of people. The Temple guard had moved in closer; their two were watching.

He took a sip of tea. "Mirwin's job is to be worried at."

The odd word made it to their level as the surrounding buzz died back as people noticed the argument. Eunni didn't take her eyes off him but he caught her Net link. Ji'jinlini Temple security and their own both. He tried to reach Cici but found himself blocked.

"And Niv?" he asked. "How is he?"

"Ulanda is fine. Or were you going to work your way through everybody else before asking?"

He might have. He put his tea bowl down.

Eunni motioned to the server for fresh water for his pot and waited until it had retreated before speaking. "You might want to accept the dinner invitation."

She closed the book, trapping the muffin crumbs inside. Handling three security links now, she had added Ji'jin Station. He didn't listen in - and wondered if he would be allowed to - but the hum for the last formed a distinctly different signature from the other two. A reluctant sounding signature and he doubted she had been allowed more than a passive link. He tried for Cici again. Nothing.

Reaching across the table, he took the old book from her, pulled the white cotton gloves out and tucked them back in his robe. "I might join you for dinner at that."

One of their guards stepped forward, an Opening barely signed with fingers before his words started. And stopped with a gesture from Eunni.



Garm quickly looked for Cici. She was still there but the argument was over. Armed guards had come in from three points, acting in unison to form a wedge to separate her and the two others. With their appearance, energy fields had flooded the commons, feeling like warm moist air pressing on him. Sparkling blue teased from the back of his eyes, he couldn't blink it away.

He tried a last time to reach the girl through the Net and still couldn't. Then made a request in the commons' domestic for a bag of the muffins to take with them. And got an instant response. So, he was allowed that much. "I could have warned her," he said to Eunni. Even from the angle and distance, Cici's confusion and fear were obvious.

"They'll hold the flitter for us," Eunni said as she stood. "We might as well all go together. Is there a crystal that goes with that book?"

He touched the carry case. "I've got it here."

The server came at a run, six legs down, holding the bag in the remaining two. Garm signed his thanks and put the bag on top of the books. Cici was already out of sight, towards the flitter bay, he supposed. Ji'Jin Station guards had appeared at the mouth of another corridor, the Temple guards were dragging the Zimmer girl that way. She looked unconscious. He hadn't seen what had happened to the boy.

Their guards circled as though to herd him out but he didn't move. Eunni came to stand next to him. "Let's go," she said softly, one hand on his shoulder.

"Why all this? It wasn't necessary."

"It was going to start somewhere. Tension on the Station has been building since we arrived. This wasn't planned but..." Eunni looked down at the scene for what he thought might be the first time, at least with her own eyes.

The Station guards had separated and were about to enclose the two Temple people holding the Zimmer girl. Suddenly, the Temple guards stopped a few feet short, then as abruptly turned, taking the girl with them. Three more Temple guards, all ti'Linn, crossed their path and stopped, weapons drawn to prevent the Station personnel from following. Shouts were being answered by rapid clicks. And barrier warding now, unmistakably bright blue light flared from under them and the more generalized field dissipated.

Eunni pulled at his arm. "Let's go."

"Who gave the order?" he asked. "Rit?"

"I think so. He would."

"It didn't have to be Cici."

"Garm, it could have been worse, much worse, and still could be. We've got what we weren't sure we'd get: active support from the Temple ti'Linn ti'ti'sinici Circles, and not just the ranking Priest. Maybe the Station Circles..." She frowned at him. "You have to know this."

"Any courtesy shown to us is only the result or even a continuation of the original orders that allowed us refuge here. Besides, the ti'Linn are only a fraction of the people on this Station."

"An important fraction if you remember who we are. And, in an ordinary way, they're important because the ti'Linn are pivotal in trade in this region. And orders or not, we're dealing with individuals and family groups. We've established a dialogue with them that goes beyond orders. Palace must have been the same."

He shook his head and earned another frown, her patience with him was apparently wearing thin. "I don't mean the ti'Linn in particular..." She sighed. "Our coming has acted as a catalyst in changing the balance, much like what happened back home. Even just counting Temple security, especially Ji'jinlini Temple, and the Ji'jin Station people... they've a professional rivalry that's not helped by most of the Temple security being Blackmouth caste ti'ti'sinici. Then add Temple military as a third factor, and the freeborn Zimmer Wu'similini religion, even not taking the Lady Cult into account..."

He rescued her before she started counting them off on her fingers. "You told me you found sociological analysis boring. Should I expect you back helping me?"

"Damn it, Garm. I found out this much just from ordering supplies." Her freckles had drowned in a blush of anger but she only closed her eyes a moment and sighed. "Let's go."

## - 14 -

The breeze on his face as he walked the last of the corridor told him the flitter was moments away. Stopping at the entrance arch, Rit motioned to his guards to go on without him. They didn't hesitate, and with the more open space of the flitter bay in front of them, the two spread out.

They couldn't be seeing what he was seeing. The room flickered at him, the designs in the wall tiles were there, then gone, then back again as quickly. His eyes wanted to follow the patterns deeper, his mind finding holes and falling in.

Before him, the flitter bay was a large sphere punctured by a round hole at the far end. The breeze came from there, the air pushed forward by the moving craft. Underfoot, the floor appeared to be a clear crystal surface splitting the sphere through the center. Either the round continued down exactly the same as up or what he saw was a reflection of the ceiling. The air was like dry wine on his tongue, slightly acid. A deep breath burned his throat with the feel of it. Not the musty smell of the corridors or the ni'at tree in the commons.

If he didn't think to look for it, the floor disappeared. The two men walked on air. A full sphere, not a half, he decided. Or the crystal didn't reflect people and clothes.

The flitter pulled shielding behind it to plug the tube. And between one blink and the next, the floor of the flitter bay became the same uneven opaque light gray as the corridor and as littered with debris. The ceiling was low, a minor curve to relieve the flatness that was all that was left of the dome shape. Plain smooth tiles at the far end had broken loose, tree roots were like a spider's nest of webbing joining ceiling cracks to other cracks in the floor. Water dripped slowly, a pocking sound, and the air was stale and warmer than in the commons. The roots continued down to the old Station Center.

Heana stepped out of the flitter first, Ji'jinlini Temple colors in braids over her gray ship uniform. Her lip curled as she looked around but it wouldn't have been her first time in here. Eunni next, she saw him and waved. A few words to someone inside and she walked over.

"That was too many stairs," Eunni said. "You shouldn't have come."

"I thought I might move down here. Pleasant place."

She laughed. "The lizards, the ones that sing all night...? Well, they nest in the roots during the day. There's always five or six that make it inside the flitter by morning. They'd be good company for you."

Tika had already brought him several, but from the common, he thought, not from down here. Close to term, she moved slowly now but the tiny lizards moved slower yet. White and black in stripes from neck to tail, and shiny patent leather skin. They had red eyes, or so Alicia had told him. Tika always ate the heads before leaving them on his blanket.

Cici and Garm were out of the flitter now, the Zimmer girl - Peeцит a'Quinta - stayed inside, and from the Net lead, was flanked on either side by the ti'Linn Temple guards. The same report that had given him the girl's name stated that the ti'Linn were part of a ti'ti'sinici, a young quintet breeding group. He already had a request to Ji'jinlini Temple for the other three to be assigned to them. Two offspring were on record, but one had been given to an older cross-caste ti'ti'sinici as an honor gift. A group outside Ji'jinlini Temple, a potentially useful complication.

"What do you see when you look at the floor?" he asked Eunni.

She looked around quite seriously then put a hand on his arm. "Walk with me back to the flitter and I might tell you."

The floor stayed worn marble. From the door of the flitter, he signed honor and a minor closure to the ti'Linn. They released their hold on the Zimmer girl as they bowed. He stepped back to let them leave. The girl didn't respond; she was hunched over in her seat, eyes hidden in her hands.

He turned to nod his thanks to Heana; her return nod was as stiff. The Zimmer girl was a needless entanglement she had argued through the security link, staying alone with her was an act of utter stupidity.

The flitter rocked as he rested his back against it. Even a Net link with Heana tired him, being physically close to her constant disapproval was exhausting.

When Heana was out of earshot - and her access to his immediate vicinity blocked - he turned to Cici. "If you had any rank worth stripping, you'd have lost it for that little exhibition back there." Already inching away from him, she would have run if he had dismissed her. She seemed to have forgotten the Zimmer.

"I'll go with her," Garm said. Cici looked sideways at the Simic, her dark blue eyes narrowed.

Her mottled dusky green skin seemed to absorb all the energy around her, the brilliant yellow hair the opposite. He was too tired to sort her out; all he was getting from her was the obvious. "Please, if you would," he replied to Garm in High formal.

"Not what you had in mind?" Eunni said when the two had gone.

What are you talking about?"

She rubbed at the grimy floor with the toe of her slipper, watching her foot but with the same look on her face as before. "Still floor," she asked. Her tone was a mirror to her expression.

He sighed. It was. "If you say so. Should I waste our time going through the Net searching for when this place looked different?"

"Less dirt?"

"That too."

"Was it you or Ulanda that pushed the order through?"

"Is that what you meant?"

She nodded towards Peecit. "If it was Ulanda's order, why are *you* here?"

Still no movement from Peecit, but her awareness was slowly expanding from a small core. Going into the flitter, he moved several books - and the bag of muffins - and sat in the seat next to her. The girl was a typical freeborn Zimmer in appearance. From Bolda - part of the growing feed from weaver - he had an image of her recorded not more than a year ago. Eyes of cerulean blue, the deep color unusual and highly prized among the freeborn. An unranked scribe, she worked in her family's business. A cross check had found her name in the listings for several Temple Scribe Hall courses; she might have met Cici then.

Eunni followed, settling herself on the other side of the girl. She took the muffin bag just as he opened it. The bag went on top of the books.

There was no crystal carry tube - Garm must have taken it with him. "What about the book? You asked Garm about a crystal to the book you were looking at."

"Just curious. The people in the pictures looked like Zimmer but there weren't any words I could see."

He slipped the book out from under the other two. Smooth leather, light in color, milk and cream, and with fine shadings between the two as though raw milk had been lightly shaken and was just starting to settle out. A dark ocean and stars and talking about the sasi flying. Putting the book back down, he wiped his hands on his pant legs.

"There were no Zimmer of any kind on this Station at the start of this Nexus," he said quietly, a bit surprised that his voice didn't break. "There are only three surnames among those here now and maybe a couple of dozen common first names. If genealogies are kept, their Speakers do it. I know who her parents are from the domestic Net records..." Eunni's eyebrows lifted. "From ten minutes ago," he added. "Garm's right about one thing, I don't think Archives have even noticed the Zimmer yet. They keep to themselves but everybody uses domestic Net. Kori had come up essentially blank with the more usual routes."

"Was it Ulanda who put the order through?"

"She had it in before we even knew the girl's full name."

Eunni puffed her lips out. "Any chance it was just a whim?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"No, I guess not." She motioned to Peecit again. "I think she's waking up."

"Peecit," he said softly, speaking in Zimmer. He repeated her name. "We brought you here to keep you out of Station Security's hands. For your safety."

The girl looked up then down again as quickly. No evidence of fight, but then he would have been very surprised to see any. "Your parents are the Speakers for the Downside Enclave."

He hadn't phrased it as a question, but she nodded, her eyes first shifting to glance at Eunni. "Station Command are detaining all the Speakers," he continued, "not only your parents, and giving security, not religion as the cause. The Station Temples are reserving action at this time. "

"They will Speak," she whispered to the floor. "The Lady gives them words. You cannot stop them, the Sasi'can is now and always."

"She can't know where she is," Eunni said.

He knew that, he just hadn't thought it. "Peecit, look at me." If anything she tucked her chin further down. "Your name is a play on words, isn't it? Wings of paper."

She didn't respond but he felt that a connection to her had been made. He went further into what gave him that feeling. "Peecit, look at me!" Command in his voice and she did look up, tremors wracking her body. Her eyes were an incredible color, the blue more brilliant than he would have expected from the scan image he'd seen. "I've seen the sasi fly into a sky the color of the blue in your eyes."

Her lips drew back as she gasped, her tongue between her teeth, the red tip showing. "No, that's not true." She started to shake her head wildly. "This false Lady is a lie sent here to divide us, weaken us. The Sasi'can is inside us..." Breathing was a hiss between the words, the sound thrown out by the snapping movement of her head. Then she stopped, her eyes rolled back and she collapsed against Eunni.

"You handled that really well."

He had. "From what she said, I'd have to say that she does know where she is." Bolda's constantly evolving analysis said the same. He shook his head. "I don't know what we're going to do with her."

Eunni looked up from stroking Peecit's hair. "Other than scaring her half to death? If it was Ulanda's call to bring her here, then let her decide."

Except that Ulanda had shown no further interest once the original order had gone out. "There's the immediate problem of security," he reminded Eunni. "Ulanda is either something very much approaching this woman's god, or..." He tried to remember what Peecit had said.

"A lie," Eunni said. Still cradling the girls' head, she gently smoothed Peecit's hair. "It's much easier for them to think she is a lie."

"Was what she said that simple?" he asked, startled. Surely something much more complex.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the marble outside. Bolda's link died just as Alicia poked her head in. She wasn't alone, Silassic was at her shoulder, two additional security - Rilla's people - further back.

Dressed in the pants and tunic she had favored since leaving Wilni, her Clan Zimmer rifle was in a harness attached to one leg, the knife she'd gotten from Gennady on the other. She wore both openly, even the Spann tops on occasion.

She moved to let Silassic get by then crossed her arms as though planning to wait exactly where she was. When the medic carried the Zimmer girl out, she followed, still blocking Rilla's two. Rit followed her, carrying the books, Eunni the muffins.

The two Blackmouth ti'Linn who had come in with Garm were waiting at Kori's pavilion and Alicia seemed content to trust them, politely dismissing the Temple Military guards to return to their posts.

Silassic and Eunni stayed with the girl, he and Alicia continued on through the commons towards the Brambles. Overhead, a warm breeze moved the ribbon leaves of the ni'at tree.

As they passed under the tree, he pulled one of the long leaves free and wrapped it around a finger. "Did Ulanda send you?"

Alicia stopped and looked up at him, squinting in the sunlight. "As you said, it's a matter of security. And security here isn't your problem."

He moved the large leather volume so that it was held against the sleeve of his tunic and not touching skin. "Did she send you?" he asked again.

"It was my job to be there. Don't put this on me. Ask her if you want answers."

"Is a simple yes or no, so difficult?"

"Why were you there?"

What had taken him to the flitter bay? Eunni's involvement? Or that Peecit was Zimmer? "It seemed the thing to do at the time," he said lamely.

She took his free hand in hers and they started walking again. Half a minute later they were at the porch of the Brambles.

## - 15 -

Ulanda leaned against the trunk of the ni'at, thoroughly bored. All the action was away from her, the small bag being well kicked after each break, just never breaking in her direction. Cici was up this time, slowly circling the break post as the bag spun upwards to the release point. The break was towards Mirwin again, he reached the bag just before Cici did and they almost collided then foot-fought to gain control. Cici got the bag away and started kicking it around the post, going wide and gambling on her speed advantage to gain points for herself - if she managed to keep control and bring it in without Mirwin getting it.

Twice around, Ulanda thought Cici might try one more time before going to the center, when Mirwin slid into her to knock the bag away, jumped to his feet and ran opposite, going around as he kicked the bag but already starting to cut inwards. The noise was deafening, everybody was screaming and jumping up and down.

She settled for yelling and rubbing her back against the tree at the same time. They were getting more used to each other, but Mirwin still couldn't find an itch if his life depended on it.

A tickle in the Net and she turned to see Eunni watching her from the front of the common's awning where the meals were usually taken. Lunchtime then. She continued to watch the game as the other woman came around. Mirwin had kicked over but missed the post; he and Cici were foot-to-foot again as they vied for control, trampling one of the flowerbeds on the far side.

Eunni took over the job of leaning against the tree. "He's still ahead," she said then winced as Ulanda screamed at Mirwin for being a fist-footed idiot.

Ulanda coughed. "Not by much," she said roughly.

The nine-tone spiral on the revolving break post had the white just ahead of the violet. A spur for Cici to have taken the gamble of circling around - and she had the bag again. Mirwin was down and slow about getting up. On his knees as Cici set up the kick, to his feet as she sent the bag flying. The striped bag hit the post hard, splitting a seam and showering sand before landing on the moss. Violet moved ahead of black. Ulanda's color didn't even show a third of the way above the base after four sets of ten to twenty breaks each, one set per day and stopped by lunch.

Mirwin picked the small bag up and slapped it against his thigh as he walked towards her, emptying the rest of the sand, much of it sticking to the sweat on his legs. No body hair and even that on his head was naturally short and curly, a blue-black except for the tips which he had bleached white. His skin was almost as smooth as a Zimmer's and only a little darker. He had a birthmark like a thumbprint at the base of his spine and he was ticklish there. Wearing just shorts, his shirt had been discarded after the first break. Proud of his muscles, he had the tendency to puff up if he thought himself watched. He was puffing now.

Rolling his black eyes, he grinned as Heana loudly challenged the validity of the scoring point with the ti'Linn referees. The Security Second's color was third on the post.

"It's not as though it's going to make a difference to her ranking," he said, but said it quietly as though imparting a confidence, and watching the woman out of the corner of his eye. Her protest had been disallowed but she was still arguing in a rapid-fire sequence of ticking sounds.

Eunni shook her head in amusement, but her hands were signing privacy to the couple of others who had started over to join them. "Garm has agreed to a meeting in half an hour," she said. "If you're absolutely starving, I'll bring something to you at the bath house."

"Absolutely starving," Mirwin said. Reaching up, he pulled a ribbon leaf from the tree and started wrapping it around one finger, releasing the musk scent to compete with whatever it was he'd been rolling in. The deflated bag was forgotten at his feet.

Important enough for a change in lunch plans, but not to interrupt a break-game? Ulanda checked - no flags waited for her, just Garm's tightly focused attention. She turned away at the same moment Mirwin released the curl of leaf to spring towards her face in a spiral.

"Who is the meeting with?" she said, as she walked towards the bathhouse. Mirwin followed close, pulling at the ties to her girdle with little tugs as though to guide her.

"Rilla," Eunni said.

Ulanda pulled away from Mirwin's playing to get a puzzled look when he saw the anger directed at him. His color was high from running, flushed to pink.



Bruises, scrapes - four day's worth - and freshly mashed plants mixed with sweat. He was a mess and he stank. She wanted to kick him.

"I want Rit to head the meeting," she said to Eunni. "Not Garm." She pushed the order into the Net and opened to any kind of response. There was only stony silence from Garm. And nothing at all from Rit.

Tea and seed rolls stuffed with slices of cheese were waiting in the bathhouse. Mirwin started eating, watching her while he chewed, working this out, she knew. He wasn't very bright about some things.

She closed her eyes a moment against the irrational surge of anger she felt. At him and at nobody. Everybody. She didn't know. "And the meeting with the Voice for the Second-six Circle ti'ti'sinici that's scheduled for this afternoon?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm. "Has that been rescheduled?"

Eunni was frowning at her. "I'm not sure."

It's just a mood, she wanted to say but rage was a bubble in her throat, it filled her chest. Turning away, Ulanda stood at the entrance and looked out at the small courtyard garden. The water drum was quiet, and she asked Eunni to turn the bamboo stem to catch the flow. The soft booming started behind her. Mirwin was saying something - to her, or Eunni? The sound of the water was all she wanted and she made it a shape as well, forming the mantra until it filled her mind.

Mirwin was in the steam filmed water when she reluctantly let the shape go, watching the after-image like a mirage, barely shimmering at the edge of her mind with each drum beat. He had left her a bun but the cheese had been picked at until none showed past the edges of the bread.

She wished Eunni had stayed instead but there was only a Net flag from her. They would wait the meeting until she was ready. They were waiting now.

Mirwin was silent as he changed her mittens to waterproof wraps, then undid her tunic ties and slipped the loose top off her. Pants next, both were dirt and moss stained. She had been lead at the break post only once today, a play that had been over almost before it started. She'd slipped, landed on her back, and before she'd gotten to her feet, Alicia had come out from her zone and made the single point.

"What did I do this time?" Mirwin asked as he bundled the clothes up and tossed them onto the bench.

She was in the water before she thought of what to answer. She had an apology all ready for Eunni but nothing for him. He was still standing where he had undressed her. Attractive, but there was nothing that especially drew her to him. He was very casual and mindless in what made him attractive, not vain, and even his showing off was thoughtless. He liked to be liked.

"It's nothing you've done," she said. Her body still hummed with the pattern of the mantra, the stroking of her arms against the surface of the water echoed the shapes. She let it take most of her weight, mind and body.

He sat cross-legged at the edge of the pool. "Could we talk? I mean really talk?" Leaning forward, he touched the water, brushing his fingers lightly to just break the surface and swirl the layer of fine mist.

The words had a second hand feel to them, she thought. Rehearsed? Just to himself, or with Niv?

A hard slap of the water with one palm. "It's just that I didn't expect..." he started again, sounding almost angry this time. He deflated when he glanced up at her before staring back down at the water. "I thought Niv would be doing most of this, that I'd be assisting, not..."

The shallow steps were close to where he was sitting; Ulanda stepped up the first two and sat next to him. The stone flagging was cool after the heat of the water and a veil of mist followed her. Her anger had vanished, but the bubble in her chest remained. She had no excuse to loose control like that.

He carried the scent of almond on his skin from this morning; with little effort she could feel his hands on her as he rubbed the oil on the both of them. "If you want to go back to the Tass' Holdings, go ahead."

He moved so he was kneeling, and then was gone. An answer, she wondered? No. Just a towel. He wrapped it around her and held her tightly until she stopped shivering.

Niv brought her clothes; she caught the end of a series of signs to Mirwin that were answered with a bow and his leaving.

Three thin underrobes layered in deepening shades of lavender touched gray, almost charcoal for the last and covered by a heavily textured white robe to only show the colors at her throat and sleeves. Ties off center, no girdle, the robe left loose but gently shaped to her upper body and waist. Black slippers to match her overbraids. Very formal. From Bolda - who had gotten them from Garm - she had the guest list and details about the meeting. It had been asked for by Rilla and asked in a manner that more than matched her robe in formality.

Silence from Niv as well - was that all she was going to get today? "I want you to deal with this," she said to him as he fixed her hair. "Mirwin's correct, he's been given too much for his level of experience."

"Something you have decided out of your own vast experience of tass'alt, no doubt." His fingers reached to touch her face in a caress. "He requires only the opportunity to learn." Niv's words were a sibilant whisper, spoken in time to the water drum. The shape of the start of her mantra. "Unschooling in many things, clumsy in others, over sensitive to criticism and he takes direction poorly. You are perfect together."

"You forgot to include sorely put upon by overbearing, know-it-all tass'alts."

He moved so they were facing, a length of her hair still held by his fingers and being braided. "Ulanda, except for Mirwin, you are isolated from anyone who might link you to this reality. And he will learn. And it wouldn't hurt you to unlearn some of what you were taught."

"So, we meet somewhere in the middle?"

"A little lower." He tugged on her hair as though by mistake and blinked in a show of distress.

She bit at her lip to keep from laughing out loud. He joked so seldom it was always a gift. "A little lower, he already knows. Did it take much effort to find someone so inept in everything else?"

The strand of braiding was looped and tied; he turned side to side to inspect his work. "I thought you would find him attractive. Should I be honored that you wished to spare my feelings by 'making do.'"

She crossed her arms. "But then I'm so thoughtful."

With a faint hiss, Niv tugged her arms loose again to arrange the sleeves properly. His colour had darkened. "He is very resistant to pattern sickness." He touched her face again. His scent was that of the ni'at tree, the leaves, he shone cobalt in the watery light. "You can work out your bad temper on him, find some common ground between you, and he'll be alive to fight back."

He held her against him then, rocking slightly, her face to his chest, one cheek pressed against smooth warm scales. "I didn't wish to have you watch again as someone you loved died slowly."

"I would have let Nisstin die before giving him up," she whispered. "How could I have been so cruel?"

"Your need was cruel, not you."

"And here? By expecting it, would you help create the same need? Or was Mirwin really meant solely as a distraction?"

"If he was, then I've failed."

She stood back from him. "And if he wasn't?"

"As a distraction or even as a focus to this reality, he just isn't that important. Child, you've brought your fate with you."

She knew he meant Rit. "My fate? I saw your choice and the result of it. Empire is still here because of it. I'm just waiting around for what you do next. *You* decide beginnings and endings." Her beginnings and endings at least.

"You mock me."

"Do I?"

The second eyelid flicked over his eyes, and his deep colour faded. "His need was as cruel."

- 16 -

Rit had kept the Hunter waiting and then, once there, had quickly run out of small talk. Only the first part had been deliberate. He had taken to hiding behind his tea bowl, he didn't know which would cause him to leave the room first - his evaporating patience at the plausibility of the excuses he was getting from Niv about how long Ulanda was taking or the need to empty his bladder.

Taking up much of the room was a low table, a thick slab of amber-gray wood with a raised grain as though worn over many years of exposure to the weather. The tea trays already brought had to be carefully placed so as not to wobble. Rugs patterned in the ti'Linn cross design were the only seating. In the now familiar Ji'jilini Temple colors, the yellow of the rugs took on a golden hue courtesy of the walls but the violet tended to float.

Rilla was at the far end of the table with two of those who had accompanied her. Neither was her usual escort: one, a cream colored male E'kalt without identifying cords, the other, a Zimmer man. No names were offered so he politely ignored them, but the two were on the guest list he had approved. Kl'lin a'Talla, a male of Rilla's family, and Councilor Quilta Denera of Hillatrin, a member of the freeborn Association. A sasi-rose showed on one narrow palm, that hand curled upwards so it was visible.

The soft gray of the Salin's mobile scales darkened unevenly from the muted gold of the tile walls around them. She had the look and motion of a storm cloud. Kl'lin was very quiet in comparison, his looking around seemed tentative, not the pointed searching of the Hunter. Two Ji'jinlini Temple aides knelt close. Kl'lin had accepted tea from one and until Rit's arrival had been exchanging pleasantries with her but guardedly, always taking moments too long in responding, as though he considered it a risk as well as a duty of politeness.

Cici came in, her face a mask of quiet competence. A bath and perfumed oil couldn't mask the chlorine smell of the yopi she had mashed underfoot and rolled in. Rit had watched the last of the game from the porch of the Brambles before coming here. Van'lic, one of the Wa'tic gardeners, had stopped pruning to give him a running commentary on the plants growing in the commons, the recovery rate of the ansillemina ground cover and especially of the yopi shrubs, the difficulty in germination and the slow maturation. It was the closest yet to a complaint that he had heard from any of the Wa'tic they had inherited with the garden.

Cici knelt beside her uncle. Cion was to Rit's right hand, away from the table, paper and ink in front of him, his brush poised in a sign that showed he was ready for direction.

With a feeling of relief, Rit stood to welcome Lo'li'lin. The ranking Priest returned his bow and then Rilla's with the stiff-necked gesture characteristic of ti'Linn Priests. Attending were two aides wearing the same House colors.

A fresh source of polite small talk for the Hunter. He made his escape.

He brought Ulanda back in when he returned, with only Niv attending her where he had expected Mirwin as well. Alicia and Kori followed, Kori kneeling by the door and Alicia by him.

The sound of water - the water drum from the bathhouse. Cion had brushed the first of the House marks on the sheet before him in time to the sound. Rit turned to find Ulanda's eyes on him. With her fingers, she made the shape for an Opening, using High formal. With a sigh, he picked his tea bowl up again. Cold and he motioned an aide to pour fresh.

Ulanda's fingers relaxed the form they had taken, if she seemed distant from what was happening here, Niv had followed her. "Shall we begin, then?" Rit said. "High Commander Rilla a'Talla..." His own sign of Opening, less formal, and the Hunter looked away from Ulanda, long scales tunneling her vision to him now. He changed the sign to one of allowance and she bowed, deeper than on greeting him. She requested an unrestricted Net link and he held onto the previous sign and nodded. To her Command vessel, he thought. One of their original escorts.

A Net of some kind but not ship's Net. The signature of the link was a shape at the side of his vision that wouldn't quite hold. "Salin Ritsiniti," the words from Rilla came from their domestic link, not the other. Her fingers moved out from the claw sheaths in a fluid motion. Two tiny bags were passed to her from the E'kalt male: silk and leather. Rings and stones made a pattern over that already present in the wood of the table. "The Zimmer Clan a'Genn has thrown a turn," she said in plain tongue.

Bolda's analysis came back over Rit's private link at the same time. "The signature is Rigyant," he said. "It's most likely a Net feed into the original crystals she was sent, or new ones. Not the ones we had access to at any rate."

New, Rit thought, at least some of it. Something new for Rilla to be here. Ulanda hadn't added to or questioned anything but she had gone paler if that was possible. The game was a common one but it meant something for Rilla to bring it out here. The portal opening to Lillisim? The recording of the game between Ulanda and Li-Fu had been from a data-point on the Zimmer pod, he'd seen it only once, part of a summary compiled by Garm. And probably in their flutter's Net. A shrug from the other end of his link. Probably, but not in what they had recovered from Rilla.

"And what was a'Genn's play?" he asked. Rilla looked to the ti'Linn Priest, then to Ulanda, third to him. The full Net lead was offered to him and the two Priests and Rit let it grow in his mind. The image was a ghost, and then a stage with actors on it, and then complete, he was there like the air was there, all around.

"Cam'lt Temple," he said, looking up from his tea. The bowl was half empty - cold again - and he put it down. The light from Grandfather stained the tile walls around them rust over the gold; he was bleeding into their active Net. Another image formed over the one that was just off his consciousness; he forced it away but not before Rilla was on her feet. Bleeding into her Net as well. Too bad. She obviously wasn't sharing with KI'lin - he was staring up at her, all his scales stiffly on end. Or the Zimmer, he was familiar with the puzzled look from seeing it on Kori.

From the ti'Linn Priest came a ticking noise. The translation function of domestic Net seemed to be somewhere they weren't, but Rit's fingers could and did shape an apology and a request for indulgence.

"Chaos has a shape," the ti'Linn Priest said in passable plain tongue. "A flower to bloom, to seed. What fruit?"

Rit just shook his head.

Rilla sat back down in a rustle of scales. "The breeding line of the male Zimmer is one you should recognize. The woman's line, perhaps not as easily recognized..." Her gaze went to Kori, rather pointedly. Kori looked back without comment. "They seek to renew arrangements, a continuation..."

She meant Gennady, but it was Simitta that Rit saw in the spiral of Cam'lt Temple. Translucent cuffs were being fitted on narrow wrists, the skin at first appearing licked by fire, then stark white under the reflected glow. Despite the changes, the image had a dead feel to it. A passive recording, he thought, the inner Temple closed to the Net. The a'Genn woman was flanked by Temple security. The drum rhythm was mounting as the Bearer danced away from the Camerat vass'lt.

His Net link with Bolda was back. "She's wearing the uniform of a Commander in the Spann Intelligence Circle. Paltin obviously, she's pregnant. Hell, I can't tell but the spin says for sure."

"Is Garm okay?" he asked, trying to keep the link tight.

"Still moping."

Alicia took the tea bowl from his hand and stayed that little bit closer to him. The tea had cooled again - or had he gotten fresh? "You wished our reactions," High Commander," he said. "Has this been adequate?"

"I wish an answer to the same question that has been asked and asked. Of alliances and oaths."

The light of the Grandfather was reduced to a faint mark high on the wall of the Temple. The vass'lt moved warily, Rit felt the marble under her feet, felt curved nails catch at the sharp cuts of the spiral. Red clay and rounded stones in the center mound, the red in the woman's scales was more from that than from Grandfather. A collar of colored scales around her neck, a mix of greens with

orange, he heard someone talking, then laughing, they were running together, wet streets and rain...

A passive recording? One of Alicia's hands was on his knee and he covered it with one of his. The E'kalt Hunter was staring at him. "We are at least as free of obligation to the Spann as Cam'It Temple and Empire are," he said. Her pupils were red points of light he couldn't blink away.

"Cam'It Temple had no reason to refuse a Candidate vetted by an affiliated Temple. They learned too late the species and that it was an Alliance..."

"What Cam'It Temple knows or doesn't know isn't any concern of ours. The Alliance has pulled back to the borders; Reema Gate Station is under Empire control again. We may be isolated here, but we are aware of these things, Commander."

"You study Clan Zimmer..."

In the Net image: elongated dark blue eyes above the Clan marks, a wide field of vision, and Rit closed his own eyes as though to compensate. And sank like a stone through the boy's mind to a sense of inevitability. No anticipation, nothing except the experience of the moment. The sasi-wind, sweet through the veil, a flood plain, clay beneath his feet. A memory that was more real to him than the Temple spiral? No, or not entirely. Around him, Zimmer-pattern was growing, looking like the sasi-spun web, like the cracks in the drying plain after the sasi fly.

Rit pulled out, hoping that it was the Net image triggering his reaction, but it didn't stop entirely. Cam'It Temple again. The young paltin had his mouth open, panting against the heat; he felt the heavy air over hollow point honor teeth and a strange scent, almost familiar. Not from the mound, the night air was full of scent, pepper and bitter silica, and then a sweet, very familiar musk.

Drums - like the water drum he thought he still heard. Movement and sound. Dancers in flowing silks, Niv moved like they did, they were a pale shadow of his dark blue. Would he feel the vass'It's death, Rit wondered? Would the Zimmer?

He felt strange in his own skin, the mind of the paltin had been clear crystal to his of muddy glass. Animals, Simitta had called humans. "What we study," he said to Rilla, "is no business of yours."

The ti'Linn Priest ticked, a rhythmic tune, no words. Its aides were standing, as was Kori. Ulanda made a sign he didn't catch - or couldn't see? His eyes were open, he realized - and Kori knelt again.

"High Commander. Ulanda said calmly, "you presume much."

One vision or the other, he decided and shook his head as though to clear it. Which? Which was more real? He had started to chuckle when there was a feather light touch on each of his wrists. Here, he wondered, expecting something quite different if the sensation was coming from the Zimmer.

Torchlight was still in his eyes, but it didn't flicker on the stone and the air was dead with a flat taste to it. He thought the drum had paused and the dancers only waiting for the next step, but they weren't just stopped but suspended. Everything was still. Only his mind required the time to see the change, Rit thought. He was like the air again, everywhere.

He took a breath and felt time start with a cruel snap, the air still being drawn in, it wouldn't stop, he was caught in a hurricane vortex.

A single sensation and he pushed his mind towards that. Moisture running in the hollows of the feathers, a feeling like standing face up to the rain, he shed rain with each stroke of his wings. The bird shook as though to dislodge his mind.

"Rit?" Alicia's voice, her hand again, she sounded worried.

He felt distant, or the conference room was. Did Rilla see it like that, he wondered, with her eye scales extended? "High Commander," he said, pushing the translation into native E'kalt, hearing his words go past his ability to hear. Another strange focus. "You might ask Oimit to take you hunting. For luck, I think."

Oimit? He hadn't been given the names of the two Zimmer. Dizzy, he closed his eyes. The mirsasitin screamed. "My apologies," he said, his voice shaking. Bleeding into their active Net again. Could he blame this on Ulanda? Would the ti'Linn Priest accept the explanation? The Ekalt Salin?

Alicia's grip on him had tightened, but her mind was in the Net link's security levels, Kori with her. Kori stayed in, a refuge, he thought, but Alicia came out with a wince and an embarrassed smile that promised he wouldn't be allowed to forget this easily. Ulanda appeared unaffected, looking at him calmly down her thin nose, her eyes like stones. Niv stood in back of her, his teeth bared.

"A novel addition to the Change phoenix myth." The words were spoken in plain tongue. The freeborn Zimmer next to Rilla. Thin white fingers were picking the rings off the table one at a time. The silk bag was open in his lap.

Narrow gray-blue eyes looked up from the task, looking to Cion first and Rit followed. Four House marks had been drawn along the left side of the paper in various colored inks, and in the center but in black, another drawing to form a curving line. The Scribe First regarded it calmly, his brush poised over where the tip had lifted to create the last of the spread fingers of the wing. Then he passed the used brush to Cici, accepting a clean one in return and assumed a waiting position with his hands.

The Zimmer's nostrils flared then pressed shut as though to a bad smell. "The High Commander limited my role here to that of an observer, although I'm hardly a disinterested spectator of these proceedings. I only speak now because I have some experience with Strom abilities and the creative manner in which they can be put to use. The Commander likely has none. A Priest of Bluestone Clan blood,



a Strom... something... and a fiction to be carried forward to suit their own purposes."

Ulanda dragged braid ends across her lap as she unfolded her arms. "An inconvenience of form," she said in Xintan, looking at him. And sighed as she turned to the Zimmer. "This isn't my concern, Councilor. I make no claims to be anything or anyone. And I care nothing for what you want or don't want, who you pray to or what you choose to believe. High Commander, you abuse Guest privilege to allow this." Her fingers began the shape of a formal Closure as she rose to her feet.

Priest Lo'li'lin reached and picked up one of the tea bowls in one hand, the pincers of two other hands were together in signing a request for a delay. Ulanda held the form half completed but she didn't kneel back down.

The bowl was full; the tea a courtesy only. Rit had never seen a ti'Linn actually drink tea. "Inconvenience," the Priest said in plain tongue and deliberately set the bowl to spill, the liquid flooding out then rapidly moving along the sunken grain of the wood. "Blood in the spiral is an inconvenience." The colors in Lo'li'lin's eyes rotated slowly. "Temple Ji'jinlini allows such an inconvenience, how could we not?" The bowl was left on its side. "I have not seen a vass'lt come back to life after the power blade, or a candidate walk out after the Warder's cut. The cup is empty; the tea is spilled. Councilor Quilta Denera, if I cannot see it differently, how could you? If I can not create this to be different, how could you change what has happened?"

The sac of rings clanked as the man placed it on the table over the spill. He stood up. "And the interest that the ti'Linn might have in perpetrating this sham? Do you think to use religious unrest among the freeborn Zimmer to create the will in Empire to take on the Alliance?"

"Creation?" the ti'Linn Priest asked.

A look to Rit from the Zimmer, not Ulanda, and he started to walk out. Then stopping at the door, he turned and spoke again. "This House holds one of my people."

Rit shook his head tiredly. "Peecit a'Quinta is here for her own safety."

"She is unmarried. Her parents have asked for her return as is their right."

Disinclined to argue, Rit made a sign of formal dismissal and turned his head away. Only after the Zimmer had left, did he speak again. "High Commander?"

The Hunter bowed. "My apologies to the House for the behavior of my guest and any insult that might have resulted."

He looked to Ulanda. She didn't move. He nodded to Rilla, allowing the apology.

The drums had stopped; the Lamentation had begun. Rit remembered the sound of Quin'tat singing, this was as sad. The Be'li'kini Commander stood in the promenade of Cam'lt Temple where she had before, the torchlight reflecting in

her eyes. A blue flame, he felt himself start to be consumed in the fire. He tuned his head from Rilla to see Kori watching him. Her Clan marks were bleached to silver; she was getting what he fed into their Net. I said I wouldn't leave you, he thought, lost in memories for a moment as stray images filtered out. A young Zimmer girl with pale gray eyes; a younger boy. A future that required a different past, the tea un-spilled. And Peecit? What were they doing to her future by keeping her here once the real need had passed and her parents had been released from Station detention?

Ulanda had completed the shape with her fingers; he couldn't reach her through a tight link, she didn't exist as far as the Net was concerned.

"Priest Li'lo'lin," he said. "I thank you again for all the allowances made by Ji'jilini Temple."

The ti'Linn clicked back, its words as predictable.

Cion placed the completed sheet in front of him. Besides the House marks and the black wing there was a single vertical line of writing. Old tongue, penned in purple ink and with a faint over-drawing of the Closure mark. He nodded and Cion took the paper back only to put his Scribe First seal on it.

Cici took a small crystal from her uncle's case, held it a moment as light sparked in a fast spiral, then made two tiny cuts across the one top corner of the thick paper and inserted the rod. A complex series of folds and she passed it to an aide.

The remains of the yopi plants had been removed and the bare dirt was rapidly becoming mud. What else he could see of the commons was deserted. Rit sat back in the lounge and listened to the sound of the rain on the vines that made a canopy over the porch. He was dry where he sat, a little of the overhang of the pavilion roof protected him.

Voices came from inside. Eunni talking with Alicia, he decided. She must have come in the back way. Anyone else? He didn't bother with placement and started to drift off before deciding whom. The blocker made his mind buzz. Too little, too late.

"You'll get a chill," Eunni said, sitting beside him. He had been almost asleep, and she only almost woke him up. The heavy blanket she tucked around him was the same color as her hair, and not from his and Alicia's bed. Bolda's work at any rate. Lately, half his weaving seemed to be for Eunni.

"I could come inside," he said but didn't move.

"It's nice out here." There was room on the lounge for two and he moved over, but she only sat further on, leaning her back against his bent legs and facing him sideways, working the blanket smooth. "The freeborn Zimmer are different in this reality," she said. "You were right."

"You owe me an extra desert."

That got him a pat on the belly. "Last time I bet with a Strom."

"You've said that before."

"Meant it too."

"I should have noticed before this..."

"Just you?" She laughed softly. "All that studying of Zimmer customs and it never occurred to us to compare the freeborn here with how Wiccin acted on Alisim, even if only one person hardly defines... Not Kori, she's always been around Clan and Peecit is still young and..."

"Out of her element," he finished for her. "I keep forgetting about her."

"She's helped that," Eunni said. "She keeps out of your way even if she doesn't believe half of what's she's heard. Damn those rumors."

"Kori was different as soon as we came through into this space. I wonder, are we the same?" His touch towards the Net was nudged aside by another chuckle from Eunni

"Checked already. Apparently not. You for one, used to be purple and liberally covered in pink spots." Her brown eyes seemed to be counting them; she was looking that closely at his face. "I'm not sure this is an improvement. And Kori hasn't changed, or our records are corrupted. Clan Zimmer breed certain of their freeborn with almost as much care as they do their own lines. With what we got from Rilla's material today, I'm not at all surprised that Gennady was willing to have Kori go through gin'tala. Or that this Oimit turns out to be so..."

"Pregnant?"

Eunni had obviously meant more, her searching look remained. But she only smiled. "This is getting too much like work and you're supposed to be resting. I'll sic Silassic on you, you can put to the test just how aggressive freeborn are capable of becoming."

The medics awe had died and left a tiresome bossiness, not aggression. "I'll take the risk. Were you able to get anything more from Rilla?"

"Not yet."

They had this much at least and an end to wondering if anything was going to happen. Time for Empire to make a move - were they playing the stones or the rings? And the freeborn Zimmer - why the relationship between Rilla and the Assembly? Were they going to use Peecit to get to them? "Damn Ulanda anyway, there was no need to bring that girl here."

One of the kittens jumped up and Eunni lifted her off the blanket, snaring a thread. "You're too hard on her," she said, the kitten on her lap. Long ash-gray fur, rumpled looking against the finely cut silk chenille of Eunni's brown robe; the kitten's golden eyes were closed with pleasure as she picked at the fabric with her forepaws. "You expect her to react to things like you do and then get angry when she does. Neither one of you touch ground very often. You would have done the same thing and probably for the same reasons."

But he hadn't. Rit reached over to stroke the cat, feeling the rumbling under the soft fur. "And you make too many excuses for her," he said, knowing he asked for and got the same from Eunni. "She doesn't need mothering from you, she's got Mirwin and Niv for that."

"Is that what you think they do?" She shook her head and continued before he could decide if it was a joke or not. "You get some rest. I'll read you a bedtime story tonight if you're very good."

He chuckled. Perhaps the first part had been a joke. "The spin analysis on the meeting will do."

Eunni's fingers were on his lips. "Shhh."

Rit took her hand and kissed the palm before letting it go. "Leave the kitten here," he said, her familiar taste in his mouth. He fell asleep to the sound of the rain, the kitten curled up on his stomach.

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Oimit preferred the cool of the erratic true mornings; the evenings carried the stink of the warmed city in the breeze. Cam'lt Temple, in most things, followed the local days, Son rise to Son set, a reasonable cycle that ignored the Grandfather.

The swollen red sun had just risen out of the remains of the day; she could look at it directly, a huge disk dripping with black across its surface. A couple of hours until Son-set on the opposite horizon and the day cooled what little it could with one sun still shining. A full double night was days away still. With the last one, the suns had set at the Opening of Tu'pin's Initiation.

She closed the reed shutters. "You have no jurisdiction in this matter," she said, turning to the man on the other side of the desk. A Cam'lt Temple Master Salin. Awillykh made his usual silent third to one side. "There is nothing here that negates my right to have taken her into my service." Kneeling at the desk, she pushed the Warrant back to him.

His hand didn't move to take the paper. "I have talked with the Salin Be'ell. She has asked for sanctuary."

"Can you give it? When I took her allegiance - as was my right by blood - there was no complication of any Temple oaths; her wrists were bare of marks. Are you suggesting that an Empire Temple was part of a conspiracy to put an agent on Zimmer in support of a religion banned even there?"

The man's thin inner eyelids slid over and stayed half covering the deep blue of his eyes. Not in distress, she rather thought he'd like to bite. Perhaps not seeing

her clearly helped control his temper. He hadn't paled but grown darker as she talked, a rich lavender color now, like the reeds in the window. And from the light coming between the reeds, banded with a faint red glow that became purple on his scales.

"Can you give her sanctuary?" she persisted, drawing her nails lightly over the polished wooden surface of the desk. More bands of dark red surrounded her reflection and the sheet of paper on the desk. Home, her body said, searching for the shifting colors of the veil in the all too quiet red and for the sweet scent of the sasi-wind instead of this rotting stink. How quickly Zimmer had become home instead of Baaltigen Holding or the various Postings where she had spent most of her life.

"Can you?" she asked the third time, but in a mildly distant tone, a form of dismissal this one would understand. Their own Temple Law said they couldn't.

The Camerat stood, signing Closure, the Asking - modified with a request for indulgence - was a secondary motion and obviously reluctant. "Commander Oimit. We can discuss this further at a later date."

She let him go without acknowledgment of either request or insult. And found herself watching his every movement, her muscles primed to propel her forward. Part of her waiting for the attack that the rest of her knew was impossible. She found it amusing and used the humor to force herself to calm.

"Awillykh, where is she?" she asked when the other man was gone. And looked down again, the easing hadn't worked and she didn't wish to push her anger at the old freeborn. They had access to only the simplest level of domestic Net here, not even allowed placement.

The old Zimmer peered lower to see her eyes. "The Priest House, I believe."

She let him find her gaze and sighed. "Believe?"

"Does it matter? What can she do?"

The paper the Warrant was written on was heavy and coated with something that resisted peeling back when she picked at it. Waterproof most likely. "Cause me to have visitors I don't want."

Awillykh took the paper from her and slipped it into the folder the Warder had brought it in. "Technically, we are guests of Y'sit'sin Temple, not Cam'lt. Custom affords us every courtesy, so tell them you won't see them. What can they do?"

"Do?" she hissed as she got up, suddenly needing to move again. What else did they have to do? This place was suffocating her already. She opened the door to the garden, making the room behind flare with red light. The garden wall was woven reed, the garden more reeds, the patch of open water stagnant and foul.

"Probably nothing effective," she said, turning to Awillykh. "But the rest...? This place is annoying enough without any additional effort on their part." She stretched then knelt again, her restlessness turning as suddenly to a deep

lassitude. "I'd forgotten this part of being pregnant," she added, blinking hard to keep her eyes working. Could she make it to her bed?

A red disk was in his hand but she didn't feel the scan, only his fingers on her skin. "The change in worlds has upset the rhythm of the wassilk periods." A gentle irony was in his voice. "We are all captives of our body's needs. I've seen this happen many times on the ships I've been on. There is no harm done to the child."

The desk would do, she thought, head down on her folded arms, stupidly seeking to find the proper scent in the cloth of her uniform.

Captives indeed, she thought. Tu'pin as much as she was. What scent did he seek, drugged until his only response to her presence was a slow flaring of his nostrils. Did he know she was pregnant? The difference in her scent would normally have told him, but now?

She was aware of Awillykh closing the door, the light going from a flood to a trickle, and then his hands were on her again. "Not paltin, but better than a desktop," he said as he pulled her head onto his lap. "I've done this many times as well. Even if the need isn't as instinctive with freeborn, it's still a comfort."

A hand moved on her crest, smoothing the heat bloom down to let it rise again, stirring the air. She thought she might feel the added coolness.

"An inconvenient time?" she heard asked in a different voice. And couldn't move, the wassilk stupor paralyzing her.

"Very inconvenient," Awillykh answered, alarm in his voice.

Their guards?

A trickle of domestic Net reached her, the response to Awillykh's call and consisting only of a disavowal of the need to act and feeling filtered as though coming from a much higher level. She pushed herself up, dizzy with the effort. An abortive attempt at yuin sight made the room flicker.

And as quickly resolved to a banded red haze from the light of Grandfather coming between the slits of the shutters. A juvenile Piltsimic stood across room, the black and white patches of his skin only briefly covered with shorts. More curly hair than shorts, like a pelt and all of it dark in color.

"Obviously Cam'It Temple has no objections to your presence here," she said, finding her balance by holding onto the edge of the desk. "But that does not..."

"Objections, hell. Cam'It Temple is damned relieved to have me here." Without waiting for her invitation, the Piltsimic sat cross-legged at the desk, his tiny dark eyes staring at her. In the striped red light, the hand's breadth patches of light and dark seen most clearly on his face combined to make her feel nauseous.

A hand was on her shoulder. Awillykh, standing behind her now, she felt the tension in him. A deep breath and she continued, "Will I need to push the limits of the Guest-right afforded me? In my present state, and finding myself quite

capable of feeling physically threatened... and I have checked precedence, my Ship's Net and Y'sit'sin Temple both, knowing myself not exactly welcome here."

The Piltsimic glanced up at Awillykh, then signed indulgence with stubby fingers, frowned at the form in an exaggerated fashion and started picking at one nail. "So I run the risk of getting my face chewed off?" he asked in a growl-like voice, but in perfect Zimmer, not the Trade Basic she had been using. "I don't think I'll bother worrying much about it while you're still talking."

Oimit shifted position. His first words had been in the same language she realized now. "Still a risk," she said, but not meaning it. Not only talking but talking overlong. The wassilk stupor was going as quickly as it had come, the alarm with it, but the rest of her mind lagged far behind.

He shrugged. "You won't kill me. You're too curious." The variant of the word meant a nosy form of curiosity. "Not a very usual Clan trait, but then your breeding isn't too usual. And the result even less so. I'm surprised you weren't culled."

"Really?"

"Of course, the records I've looked at listed your death just prior to when your gin'tala would have been."

Dacca, sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her face. All those years ago. Except she didn't remember being afraid at the time. A claw mark going deep into the red clay bed and Tu'pin rising whole from being cut in half; how she had felt then had become the nucleus of her being. And the child of it, a kind of fear, had colored her memory.

"Really?" she repeated, her voice cold with the rising feeling. "Did the record list my death?"

"Well, no." The Piltsimic scratched one big ear. "More like a distortion to the gin'tala listing. Not something that would normally have been noticed, or the listing even taken except for who you are. Hell, I'd seen it years ago and if I'd even noticed anything, I would have figured the crystal got scrambled in transit."

"And who am I?"

"Well, not you in particular. Mostly it's me, I suppose. I'm nosy as well and let's face it, the Wu'similini Lady Cult version of events is a hell of a lot more interesting than the official record. And the gin'tala and paltin lists might as well be public for how hard they are to get hold of - gives our spies something easy to feel good about doing."

"Considerate of us. Is anything else scrambled?"

"The Altasimic Opening for one. I was there and believe me, it was scrambled enough already from the energies being released. Except that now the records are scrambled in the same kind of way as the..."

She threw her head back and barked a laugh. The well-rooted fear had grown a flower and bloomed as laughter. "Loom-master Anga," she hissed over exposed points.

"Anga will do fine." A grin to show shovel shaped teeth. "I thought you'd catch on - saves us both the trouble of introductions and lies about how much either of us knows. Besides, what I'm suggesting is a trade of information. Public records, things like the gin'tala listings, I've seen. A little more, but very little. I want the a'Genn Net records to do with the Lady."

"And offer what in exchange?"

"My efforts, Empire's efforts, to maintain the status quo."

"Do you speak for the Empress?"

"Well, no." The grin widened. "Not exactly. Any more than you do for the Eight of the Spann Protectorate. Let's just say, we're on the spot and they're not."

"What in particular did you want to know? Did you have some parameters in mind? Or did you think to keep the limits to the amount of information we provide as open as your efforts on our behalf would undoubtedly be?"

"Boundless," he said. "I like that."

She liked him. "Did you know that the High Priest Sarkalt gave us everything they had, including their spins, in exchange for Lord Gennady's support during the Opening?" He hadn't, she saw that clearly in his sharpened look. "Add what was taken from the other Anga's flitter..."

The humor was gone instantly; the black eyes past being sharp, they were fueled with a wanting that chilled her. "How much did that Anga bring with him?"

She put one hand over Awillykh's, still resting lightly on her shoulder. What did he make of this? "In a flitter? Working notes, I suppose would be as good a description as any. And heavily, how shall I put it - protected. Probably no more than you brought with you this time, expecting some kind of Net support wherever you ended up. You would have expected it then."

His eyes were still measuring her. Protected? Scrambled, she could have said. The Ladybug records were more useful.

Probably scrambled, his eyes said. He blinked and relaxed. "Nobody expected the diamond."

"No, I suppose not. And now? Did you bring what you took off the Net from the Lady's flitter? You mentioned an exchange..."

"Didn't I also mention useless?"

"Not in conjunction with that. Tell me, how was the diamond when they left it?"

"Falling apart, but I think you knew that."

"As a possibility."

"Isn't it all?" He chuckled.



The red lines from the Grandfather had lowered as the old sun climbed in the sky, creating a line of shadow across Anga's face. Red fired the glossy dark curls that started on his chest. A few days on Alisim and a few hours in the diamond, they had everything else. And the Net being damaged, she believed him about that after seeing the condition of the Lady's flitter. Although not useless, there would be something. Their exchange of information had been guarded so far, almost casual. Did she wish to escalate the proceedings?

She asked Awillykh to come around and sit. He still played at being the perfect servant, a role he hadn't broken from once in the past weeks. Sometimes she would have preferred him acting the Be'li'kini agent she thought he was.

The red light was fading, the room darkening faster than the shadow from the rising would account for. Clouds probably, the air almost dripped moisture. The rain would start soon, she thought. "I've been told that Tu'pin is ready to leave here. That doesn't follow what I know of..."

Anga had been watching Awillykh, but without eye contact, the freeborn was studying the desktop, his scanning disk bright red against the dark blue wood. Still scanning but very lightly, the energy emanations faint and intermittent.

"They want you and him gone," Anga said, turning back to her. The light colored patches on his face were brighter in contrast. He had the same scent as the coming rain, overly ripe. "Which isn't a bad idea considering the possibilities..."

"Are they aware of the possibilities?"

"I am."

"And what is happening at Ji'Jin Gate Station? Are you aware of the possibilities inherent in that situation?"

"I'm here talking to you instead of them."

"You're more likely to find a welcome here than there. You were a prisoner, you know that from the Lady Cult dogma. Overpriest Sarkalt's prisoner, but only because he already had you. How do you think you would have fared on the Ladybug?"

"You're talking about someone else, not me."

She sighed. "You're the Voice for a Net system that goes back to the beginnings of Empire. What's a few thousand years to something like you? Or was the divergence before that?" She laughed again. "When were you scrambled?"

"You might as well ask an egg..." Anga started. And stopped abruptly. Awillykh had touched the disk, moving it slightly to one side, and capturing Anga's notice. And then more than notice: a countering field.

Oimit put her right hand over the disk, feeling the resistance her hand made to any sudden movements. "I won't have my child put at risk," she said, eyes to Anga. "My suite, my people. If you don't like it, leave."

Anga looked to her hand, a long moment that she felt as a tingle in her fingers then the scanning field died abruptly. "What happened to your hand?"

She passed the disk to Awillykh and motioned that he should put it away. "You are nosy."

At her words, Anga shrugged, as exaggerated a motion as his earlier ones had been. "An injury from a mirsasitin hunt," she said, amused at his posturing. "Why, was I listed as being dead from that as well?"

"The Borders are too tight right now, nothing much is getting out." Dark eyes crinkled at her in a heavy fleshed smile. "Except you and company, and you don't know what to do from here."

Do? She had been waiting for him, what else? "Do I have to know?"

The grin widened again. "You've got a point. We're not exactly playing on an even field." He appeared to be thinking, a posturing again, she was sure. Most, if not all, of her responses would have been anticipated, even calculated as to their probability of occurring.

"Did you know the Overpriest Sarkalt here?" she asked as a prompt.

"We'd met but not often. Different concerns and interests."

"And he died years before the Altasimic Opening. Altogether, an unlikely hero of the Lady Cult version of the Wu'similini."

A bare foot was being treated to a scratch now, and one toenail checked thoroughly before he looked back up. Would he start again with his ear and work down? Another kind of calculation, she wondered? If so, one judged likely to annoy her.

"The whole thing leads back to what the Change phoenix wants out of this," he said.

"She's affected that much of a change at least."

"What?"

"Now you believe she exists." She laughed. Awillykh covered his ears at the sound and Anga's eyes opened full, and swimming with the dark light they had earlier. "An old bird, loom-master. I like the scent of the wind she rides better than I do the stink of this place. She did as well, I think. She gave Clan a'Genn what it has. Do you have any reason to think she will cease to allow what we have?"

"Clan a'Genn went from little to nothing," Anga said. "Think - an entire reality without Clan Zimmer. I understand the Empress dreams about a'Genn..."

Dreams? And did scrambled bits from a flitter Net now reinforce the dreams? Opportunities. As part of her final briefing, she had seen the records of the other Poss a'ltic's last hours in the diamond. The images had been frozen into non-crossed high security Net. The arrangement made between Gennady and Poss a'ltic had been unspoken, neither of them had needed words in that last exchange. Two people left behind in the diamond as the points curved in towards

the mouth - and it was the tass'alt's face that Oimit saw most clearly as the ship's Net pulled back across the island to the portal where the Ladybug waited.

"Allowed, I said, loom-master. Bubbles of realities, one to create Ulanda, another to test the Opening, and provide a spur..." She laughed again, but kept better control. "... a spur to Lord Gennady while at the same time, giving him certain opportunities to create a future more to his taste." She shrugged, bringing her eyes down to look at the desk a moment then back to the man opposite her.

Anga smirked. "A gift between a Lord and his loska?" he said. "The 'opportunity', or wrapping of the gift as you could just as well call her, might not have the same..."

She saw him in the direction Anga looked, and then as a reflection in dark eyes. "Oimit?" Tu'pin said. "I hope I don't intrude, but I thought I heard you calling me."

Trailing two Camerat, he stood by the door to the garden that joined their suites. Rain - she hadn't noticed the door behind her opening and felt a turn of fear that died at Tu'pin's motion. He raised a hand as though to brush water from his face and hesitated, eyes on that same hand, bound by silken cords in a simple winding. He looked bemused; his words had much the same quality to them and not a trace of the weakness she had expected.

"I keep wanting a core of sisi-seed in the drops," he said, kneeling beside her with the controlled grace of a hunter, but with his color flushed as though he were aroused. "The taste is wrong besides, sour and hot with pem'ka algae."

As he settled, he crossed his hands loosely, hiding them within his sleeves. A lilac colored male Camerat aide stepped forward as though to offer assistance, but moved back to the door at a look from Tu'pin and stood nervously fingering his Temple oath band, the clicking of his nails faint over the patter of the rain on the reeds in the garden. The other attendant, a darker, older female, hadn't moved but Oimit felt the buzz of her outside Net link at a level much higher than plain domestic. Fisaldin, she recognized her by the feathered coloring of her scanty crest. A tass'altin, one of three, and all of them Camerat.

After Oimit made the introductions, Tu'pin nodded his head to Anga. "Loom-master," he said politely. In the narrow slash of his eyes, the blue had become very dark and was marked further with black, streaks and flecks of black, not yuin rings. She blinked and they were gone, leaving clear spaces where they had been, then were there again as quickly.

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Tu'pin watched smoke from the city curl lazily into the sky to make a lower and darker layer against the broken clouds. A staggered sunset but close to being doubled, the yellow sun was setting second to the other by only an hour, and throwing a purple light against the clouds and smoke both. The Temple drums had started for the evening service. There was an Initiation tonight and the terrace outside the Priest House was almost empty of people; he and Oimit were the only ones loitering.

He raised his face to the breeze and shook, letting the air work into his hair, enjoying the rush as his blood cooled. His robe of feathered ilistin cloth helped to wick the excess moisture in the air away from his skin, taking heat as well. Purple light in the strands of white fabric, they floated as he shook, mixing with his hair. He wore it longer than he ever had before and in a fall down his back, the stubby lower band along his spine mixing with the longer. The robe was draped to hang low at the back in a very old Zimmer style.

"You could show a little restraint," Oimit said, crossing her arms. She sat on the stone balustrade that bordered the terrace, her back to the city below them.

"Why?" he asked, intending to tease her out of her mood.

"You look like a bloody zilzi'misk," she said, crossing her legs at the ankles.

All tucked in, legs and arms. She would be hot in her Be'li'kini uniform; she wore it whenever she left her suite or received guests. Disapproval and not just annoyance from the heat, but was it real or an act? A shield, he decided.

"Was that supposed to be a compliment?" he asked. "Besides, how would you know?" The rare zilzi'misk were Clan Zimmer by blood, and for the females, by gin'tala as well, but caught half between Clan and freeborn in maturation. Sterile, but like the freeborn, sexual without being paltin. Anyone late in maturing might be taunted with the possibility by their age-mates. A deadly taunt. A'Genn like most High Clans, killed them.

He was rewarded with a smile. "I didn't lead as sheltered a life at the Alliance Postings as you did at the Holding." She laughed. "Other Clans might whisper about our unorthodox breeding lines, but never that we show a lack of propriety. Can you image Dacca with a zilzi?" She laughed for the both of them. He couldn't imagine, it seemed disrespectful to even try.

He went and sat next to her. Smoke in the air, algae and rot, a moist decay all around. Granite, they were sitting on cut stone. And her scent, he dreamed it every night and woke up wanting her in his arms. He found the Camerat women disgusting.

"You were the most exotic thing that ever happened to me while I was growing up," he said. "I never even left the Holding until my first Warrior assignment and

then was sent only to a'Genn Postings. I would have died in the pod at Reema Gate Station, never having talked with a person who wasn't of my own Clan."

She was looking directly at him, but her eyes were as distant to him as her soul. He was too simple to see her. "I am too simple," he said and saw that she understood. He was having to learn again how to live, the small things and the large, as though he had been blinded in eyes and body. He was leaving behind him all the things that weren't strictly necessary. "I've become the monster, the one thing hated above all others. An Empire Priest. Proof of Empire's power."

"You did what you were ordered to do."

"Ordered? This morning I woke up flying the sasi-web." He looked away from her to the sky. The wrong color and no veil. "Pulling deep Zimmer pattern, apparently. I don't remember very much except the flying. I thought I was a mirsasitin."

Scented fingers touched his face. "I'm not surprised. You are an offering to her."

He smiled against her hand, touching the skin with a quick movement of his tongue, but feeling Fisaldin's caution through the Net as plainly. "As long as she doesn't mind sharing," he said, but obediently moved away so the child wasn't disturbed. A lifetime spent obeying; even being paltin only brought different restrictions, not fewer. How could he explain to the Camerat tass'altin that the only freedom a Clan Zimmer had was the kind Oimit claimed.

And Priest?

A faster beat in the drums then doubled. They listened to the drumming as the light around them failed, the sound seeming to come through the stones they sat on. A Camerat rhythm and sounding complete even without the chanting and dancing that would accompany most of it. Clouds obscured the stars but turned back the cities glow to create a kind of twilight, a strange effect, he thought. He didn't need yuin sight to see Oimit next to him. If it was total dark, he didn't think he'd need it. Gradually, the world stilled around him to only the feel of the moist air on his skin, the taste of Oimit in his mouth, and the sound of the drums. All three, none of them were strange anymore.

A flurry of glow globes raced from the door of the Priest House, rising to outline the entrance, followed by several people, Fisaldin one of them. Her Net link to him buzzed but he let it pass over as he had been doing for some time. Not air, not drums.

"I don't feel like indulging them," Oimit said, standing up, stretching as though stiff. White light reflected from her hair. "Whatever this is about can wait until morning. Why don't we go for a walk?"

He didn't get up.

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This was a part of the Temple she hadn't been in. Close to the Temple Center, Oimit thought. Below ground for sure, the walls ran with water, the flooring was stone but the narrow spaces between were green with slime. She kept her nostrils flattened from the stink, but she couldn't stop breathing. Tu'pin walked beside Fisaldin, his eyes sweeping the walls as though there was something to see on them then focusing on her, or the Camerat, or the Ri, but all with the same distance in his expression.

Another Ri-born met them as the passage way began an upward climb. A man this time. "Lord Priest Tu'pin, Commander Oimit a'Genn," he said in plain tongue as he bowed deeply. "It's not much further and I can promise you drier ground then this at least."

She glanced at Fisaldin but the Camerat tass'altin didn't attempt any introductions. "And air I can breath?" Oimit growled. The middle-aged man chuckled and shook his head. Blinking back yuin sight, she laughed as well. Cayse, San of the Empress's House. She recognized him from one of her briefings, the marks of age giving her more clues as to his identity than she had gotten with the younger woman on the terrace. The tass'altin hadn't introduced her either, but had stood well back and with her attention on Tu'pin even as she requested an audience of Oimit.

They exited to a garden ringed by high walls made of stone blocks. Twin globes in the center made the night into day. The sky was black velvet above them, the shielding complete even through the visual range.

The high ground was dry as promised: white sand, rugs and cushions. On the far side was a flitter, but closer to their path, reeds bordered the dark water and fish swam, the layer of algae moving to catch the light. After the tunnel, the air felt fresh, almost cool.

Oimit didn't need clues of age to know who waited. I've never been very good at praying, she thought. And the short journey here had been notable mainly for the deliberate informality. But 'propriety', she had said to Tu'pin, speaking of a'Genn. She bowed honor to the Empress, the old forms held by her fingers, and waited.

Poss a'Itlic's feet sank into the disturbed sand as she circled the small clear area and she kicked her slippers off to better feel the texture of the grains against her skin. Not like Ri, the sand grains were sharper there and the sound when she walked on it was different. "Here will do," she said. Very much here, she thought, kneeling, letting her robes float down but nesting her legs into the sand as her feet had earlier.

Folding and tucking, Raswini attempted to make Poss a'Itlic's robes drape properly. A fine silk gauze overrobe, open in the front, only joined with a corded band around the waist, and deeply gathered at the back to balloon like a cloud around her. Under was thin sheath of printed silk that looked solid red to her eyes but wasn't.

"Shall I ask if you've thought this out?" Raswini said, abandoning the dress.

"Or thought at all?" she countered. "Must you fuss?" Raswini was smoothing the sand with her foot.

"Yes, I must." Raswini pulled a rug over. "If you'd wanted to sit here, you should have said so when we first arranged all this."

Simply keeping busy, Poss a'Itlic thought, wishing she had the same luxury. "I could wait on Ri, or do this."

Raswini gave the brazier one last jiggle to make sure it was level then sat quite unceremoniously, choosing rug over sand. "I guess we're not talking about the same thing."

"Are you worried about our safety then?" Her look said she was. "Rasi, it doesn't matter."

"To you maybe."

"They're coming," Cayse said from the flutter. All the Net leads passed through him. She nodded to him and he left through the side way to meet them.

Poss a'Itlic followed him and the other party on the restricted placement. The Zimmer-Priest she could barely see through the Net - a refinement of blood and now of spirit; he was like the stone he walked on, the water he walked through. As he had said to his sister: too simple. The woman moved as soundlessly but it wasn't from a failure of the Net as it was for Tu'pin. A different kind of perfection, but not simple, she bristled with possibilities. Safety in this place? She and Oimit wanted parts of the same thing - that was all the safety she could find.

And her life? Her life was as illusionary as the discipline she focused into existence in the palms of her cupped hands. A split awareness, she had decided on, both here and very lightly in overpattern. The awareness came like a rustle around her, like the silk gauze, but not white as the cloth was. A drift of snow in the green sunlight of Ri, an iridescent veil. And found the rest of her was

watching what little of the Zimmer-Priest that the Net provided. And coloring the image in like a child with a paint box, adding pattern to see him better.

A hand on her arm and Raswini chuckled. "And here I was worried about Yian."

Poss a'Itic blushed, making Rasi laugh out loud. Placement had Yian acting very circumspect, her eyes more on Commander Oimit than her brother. She had an instinct for caution when it really mattered.

A'in had taken Cayse's position outside the flitter, Kascin was still inside. Poss a'Itic leaned closer to whisper: "Yian can have him if she can get him. I've quite enough problems in that area."

"Problems." The old woman laughed again but softly and with a look at her eldest son. "You want things too easy. Can you remember love ever being easy?"

"Is that what it is?"

"Isn't it?" She didn't answer. "Possi, where you get confused is thinking it should be different for you than for other women."

"You left him."

Raswini closed her eyes a moment as an old pain crossed her face. "Could I refuse an order from my Lady?" The words were hard but her features quickly softened with concern. "I should have known it would come to that. A'in has you going in circles. Possi, I would have returned to my service regardless. I'm not any different than other women, either. I wanted everything. And Temple was as much my two sons heritage as Haltingport."

A thin finger ran along the pattern of braids that encased Poss a'Itic's palm. The discipline was gone, not that Rasi would have felt it. "I've an advantage over you," the old woman said, taking her hand to hold it. "Time blunts the pain. It was a very long time ago for me, the memories have faded, or I've changed them to suit myself. The man I remember... he never existed." She sighed. "Do you really want to talk about this now?"

Poss a'Itic shrugged. "Now? What's different about now?"

Raswini folded Poss a'Itic's fingers over an illusionary shape. "Did you feel guilty when you ordered me to come back? I never thought for a moment that you might." Knowing eyes were searching hers, but sparkling with amusement now. "You didn't, or not much, or for long. And don't bother saying that you did. This is the wrong end of my life for you to start lying to me."

Cayse was with the Zimmer now. She could smell the foul air of the corridor. "Why should I lie?" she asked. Raswini's nose wrinkled at the stink, she was following the Net as closely, and pulling in more of what Poss a'Itic added from the pattern link she hadn't dropped.

"Because you lie to yourself." Her eyes were on her son, but to Cayse through the Net, not A'in. "When I brought them both to Palace, I thought for sure that you'd want Cayse, which shows neither of us are anything other than fallible. Less of you around to fail perhaps, but... I've seen you blush before."



"Not often."

"Less perhaps than I should have."

She chuckled and in a moment they were both laughing. A'in started over but she motioned him away.

After the brief introduction, Poss a'Itic had Raswini serve the Zimmer pair first, then her and Cayse. The remainder of the form was the silence of the lesser fintil tea ritual, the very informal service taking a strange light from the surroundings and the guests. The Camerat tass'altin waited with Yian and Kascin by the flitter. A'in stood near but not with them, a black look on his face and a scowl to his daughter when she would have joined him.

Hot tea, the bowl Raswini held for her was of green Gus'tin porcelain and very thin, and at the rim, the color of the Ri sky at sunrise, deepening to a sea-green at the base. Raswini used a wrap of brocade cloth to protect her fingers; she had withdrawn her attentions to her own discipline of service, every motion perfect and soothing.

The tea was clear, only faintly scented with lemon. Poss a'Itic hadn't wanted anything to mask the color of the bowl. Her own tea set. Homesick, she always was.

Discipline after discipline formed and failed. Tu'pin caught the sense of one and frowned, not sure what he had seen, she thought. He sat too quietly, taking his cues in what was obviously an unfamiliar ritual from Commander Oimit, but not bothered by where he was or who was before him. Withdrawn as Rasi, but in a different way.

Finally, Poss a'Itic made a sign of Allowance and bowed. Informal? She had caught dignity from Commander Oimit as though it were contagious. "Do you recognize the garden?" she asked, deliberately using plain-tongue to regain something of what she had lost.

Oimit reshaped the request to speak in her hands and held it, her nostrils flattened. Disappointed in her god, Poss a'Itic wondered? And started laughing before realizing she was.

And had a tea bowl pushed under her nose. She frowned at Raswini's timely offer and shook her head sharply. Ice had formed a skin on the surface of the tea, barely seen before quickly melting from the heat of the liquid. The woman pressed her lips together, and withdrew, handing the bowl to her son. He held it, then poured it onto a bare patch of sand, his eyes holding hers.

"You think you have the luxury of hiding in courtesies," Poss a'Itic said, turning back to Oimit. "But where can you go?" And to the Zimmer-priest: "Where can she go? Can you tell me?"

She had been on worlds where the night sky was the color of his eyes. They spoke to her of a mix of hope and resignation, more words than the shake of his head offered. If she touched him, would he be real?

Finally, it was Oimit's words she heard, not his. "Empress, I'm not intending to hide. It's the island, from inside the diamond mouth." Plainly spoken, stripped of anything that might reveal how she felt at the challenge.

There was no balance to the Zimmer, no checks on what she was. The woman's perfection tore at her more than Tu'pin's did, upsetting her without granting recourse. "An island?" she said, letting the cold of her tone provide what solace it could.

Oimit responded as plainly as before. "Part of it. In the diamond, it repeats to make a full circle out of what is about a third here." She put her bowl down, empty.

"Yes. Our sources aren't as complete." Dreams and the remnants of the flitter Net, the island already shattered in both. In the days between now and when word had arrived from Rigyant, she had gone deeper for other dreams, other memories, and found she couldn't hold them more than she could hold time with her bare hands.

Fresh tea. A more complex tea ritual, with Cayse prompting her responses until she fell into the sequence. With it came the sound of Kascin's flute, a faint, simple melody that matched the exchanges, repeating over and over but seeming to grow with each passage of the sound around the stone garden. The reed had come home, Poss a'ltic thought. Camerat to Camerat. The boy sat cross-legged in the door of the flitter, playing as though to himself alone.

Sour, a stronger bite to the tea, she held the tiny bowl herself and let it cool. The reed garden was hot and very humid and the sound of the flute was putting her on edge. She didn't like this enclosed space and the music only defined it more clearly. A trap, a prison, her mind whispered. But for who? Another woman's life or simply too close to her own dreams?

"What we saw in the diamond was Camerat, quite obviously," she continued at last. The bowl fell, the tea wetting the sand; she had lost all sense of holding it. Cayse picked it up without comment. "And the legends besides, from the Lady Cult where there is only one god, ever... There aren't many places in Cam'lt Temple where they could have kept someone who had unstable access to overpattern."

She looked to where A'in waited by the flitter and nodded, he walked over heavily. No need for him to catch dignity, he wore his pride quite as openly as his anger and contempt. As he knelt beside her, she felt that the familiar tension of his body was heightened, he was drawn taunt. He didn't touch her.

"Just shaped glass and silver wire," she said, keeping her eyes on the girdle he placed on the tea splashed sand in front of her. "Temple made - a restricted

design, part of the 'Wind in the Branches' set of patterns and the same basic shape as the keying crystals for the Altasimic warding. Buried here where we are now, where it is now, and without the flitter Net, we wouldn't have thought anything of it other than it was a copy, perhaps a gift to Camerat as the Temple here was involved with the original setting of the wards."

Speaking plain tongue but she changed for one more word: "Ce'Itahm." The Net opened to allow translations but neither of the two Zimmer touched the lead. She did, but a different link, and the flute music stopped abruptly.

And Poss a'Itic ended up speaking first again, finding the sudden quiet too pregnant. "Mouth of Winter," she added, still staring at the thing. The glass shapes took color from the tea-dampened sand. "Mouth of Winter" was the most common translation, but only one of many possible depending on the context. Wind in the Branches. The words moved in a like dance of meanings. Lithm'celta, the fire-ice dance and a relative again of the Opening dance Ulanda had done on Alisim. The same word and the dance she had first seen as a child at the Turning Festival on Ri. Did Kascin know the tune, she wondered. She thought the music had begun to sound like a minor version of that just before she told him to stop.

"One of six springs that make up the outer margin of the world-altar on Lillisim," she said and looked up. "Have you seen it?"

"Lady, the Lord Gennady walked with the High Priest Sarkalt into the spiral from that spring," Oimit said. "There was a girdle of sunstones in the grass, green fire in the grass and in the Priest's eyes."

A narrow dark line had grown around the woman's own eyes. Poetry in plain-tongue? Yuin sight? Poss a'Itic threw her head back and smiled widely at her. Another challenge, and except for the growing black, was as ignored. "The Lady Ulanda danced the Opening in a robe woven in that pattern," Oimit said. "Woven from Simic green silk."

A'in spoke into the silence that followed. "Silk?" he said. His voice cut like a razor. There was more to what he was going to say but Poss a'Itic motioned him to silence.

The Zimmer sighed and shaped her narrow hands into a shape that offered peace. Crippling scars showed across one palm. "Silk and lives both, and both burned. What does the Empress want of us?" She used the hand with the feather mark to pick the girdle up. The long ties with the sea-foam flowers on the ends drew twin paths in the sand.

Held in the hand, Poss a'Itic knew, the glass showed a little more of the age of the thing. Filmed from absolute clarity, frosted when inspected even closer. Minute scratches on the surface, they would have left some of the girdle where they found it, part of the sand it had been buried in. If she was surprised, it was that the sand around it hadn't become glass first.

Held in both hands now, the long slender fingers working the shapes, the Zimmer's eyes were as glazed appearing as what they looked at. "I've seen some of the Opening," Oimit said absently. "On the Alisim side, they didn't have anything to record with, the ships couldn't land and besides, I don't think anything they had would have held. What I saw were memory pulls and those incomplete."

She looked up and Poss a'ltic thought she must have imagined that those black ringed eyes had ever been anything other than clear. "What do you want of us?" the woman repeated, looking to her and then A'in. The girdle fell half onto the rug, a shower of light accompanied by a faint tinkle. "Is glass supposed to become sunstone? Another dance?" Her hands couldn't leave it alone; there was another rustle of glass on glass. They would leave more fragments here. "The world-net whispers around him," Oimit said, her voice losing even more texture, becoming a monotone singsong. "He said he had become the black and the black, him. A very long time dancing - how couldn't it happen. Fly said the dark bird, fly into light..."

"Fly said the light bird...", Poss a'ltic started. She had heard that tune in Temple; she hadn't learned it in the farming community where she had grown up. The start of Kascin's playing had been the same tune, she realized. No wonder it had sounded familiar. "Fly into night," she ended, but using old-tongue.

The Zimmer woman stopped when Poss a'ltic spoke. Bent almost double, she panted heavily. And looked up again, her eyes full black and staring. "Old tongue was the language that was used to shape the first world-net. Before Temple; before Empire. How simple it must have been. Branches of decisions, as many dimensions as you wanted or needed, but perfectly linear. And now? If you want to understand the Change phoenix, do you need to look any further than the language you just spoke to me in?"

Poss a'ltic glanced towards Tu'pin before answering. The Zimmer Priest was in light pattern. "No," she said. "But 'seeing' might be more accurate than 'understanding' - or it might be more possible. Commander Oimit, the fullest extent of the Spann Protectorate and the greater Alliance, the principals and the sphere of influence both, constitute a tiny portion of Empire. Even the ideas, the Wu'similini heresies, are more a part of the natural ebb and flow of beliefs than an attack on Empire. The suppression of these beliefs is simply more of the same. The Wu'similini gives an illusion of freedom from Empire Law, nothing more, certainly no more than what the Lady Cult gives to the freeborn. Not while the world-patterns determine the very shape of our existence.

"All that happened is that the ti'Linn maneuvered a decision and those who sat in judgment were compelled by their nature to take sides. Shall they drink the tea or leave it? Eat the pastry or not? Habits of either doing something or not doing it." She laughed again but a gentler sound than before. She felt grounded again

for the first time since Kascin had started playing and used the opportunity the focusing offered. "Obedience, Commander. The High Temple Court choked on the word. How could you ask any court to insist they be disregarded, and disregarded even in that decision?"

"And the Emperor Donotat?"

"And the Empress?" Poss a'Iitic moved her hand to the flower tie of the girdle. Wet sand had packed into the curves that shaped the petals. Wet sand was in the open texture of the overbraid cords that she dragged across. A'in touched her hand, but he continued on to gather the braid ends and free them. Red and white in a flying bird design, Yian's doing and A'in's idea, her aide was half finished before Poss a'Iitic had noticed. The underrobe had been his choice as well, a pattern the Zimmer pair could see if she couldn't.

"I think the main benefit to Empire of having an Empress or an Emperor, is that they most often don't do anything. There was no imperative on my part to change what was happening. An ebb and flow, as I said. The conflict contributes to Empire, provides a dynamic element. Empire dies back and grows again, over and over."

"Besides, you didn't notice."

Poss a'Iitic looked up from the girdle tie. No, she hadn't, how could she have? She threw the woman's own response back at her: "Should I answer you in a language that has evolved into more than a simple yes or no?" Was there an answer even in that language, she asked herself. Would the records of the time she might have noticed show the same distortion as Angansit had found in the other things?

She looked up from the girdle... and realized she already had but had lost her attention. And lost time - Tu'pin had come out of pattern, he was standing with Cayse by the water's edge, talking with her San, the murmur of their words crossing the distance as though the sound came from crystal mouths instead of flesh.

A'in was still kneeling beside her but the familiar tension in him was overcast by an equally familiar inertia. He snuffled as he watched her, the pepper smell of the algae bothered his sinuses. Seeing her awake, he took the loose braid ends to smooth, adding little tugs as he judged the effect of his attention. Ignoring Oimit entirely.

"Enough," she said under her breath, tugging back. I dreamed I had died, she wanted to say. A stone pavilion and the summer heat of Ri. Ti'win dead beside her, the softness of his rounded form gone hard and stiff. His gentle and generous soul gone. And found she wanted to tell Oimit that he had died because she hadn't. Snow had fallen while the people from Three Crescents Temple at Palace waited beside the flitter. He had died because the Challenge was more important to them than any tass'altin.

"I dreamed I had died," Poss a'Itlic said very softly and explained how very long ago it was.

"We've all died," Oimit said, in Zimmer. "We're all hers."

The woman had used the inclusive, mutually possessive form of the words and Poss a'Itlic copied. "And she's ours," she said. "Overpattern has already bled into Empire. But slowly. We were able to accommodate and adapt to the changes. And we in turn, have created the phoenix."

With the girdle hooked over her hand, Poss a'Itlic stood and stretched, rolling her head, letting A'in support her under an elbow with one strong hand. She was stiff from tension, she shouldn't be - how could she be tense? Or had she caught it from A'in? She felt the laughter bubbling up - how could she be so impressionable? Raswini was wiping the tea bowls before placing them in the chest; busy with her own ritual but she felt her attention like water splashing her.

"Commander Oimit," she said, drawing the glass shapes up with her arm until the girdle hung waist level. And drawing the woman's eyes. "I don't have to do anything."

She walked to join Cayse and Tu'pin, Oimit followed. "The Priest Ulanda refuses to open a dialogue," Poss a'Itlic said to the young Zimmer. "Would you know why?"

"Empress, where is she now?"

"Ji'Jinlini Temple on Ji'Jin Gate Station," Oimit said before she could.

Her answer stolen, she did what the Zimmer wasn't allowed to. A touch of the Net and Empire spun against the mossy stonewall. The young Priest was surrounded by a corona of stars as though he wore them on his robe. He shook his crest out as he turned to see and the long strands of cloth in his robe shook as freely. His honor points showed as he sucked air in sharply.

Camerat and then half the galaxy away: Jillistnikalla. The intensely white star and the single station in high orbit over a singleton world, the icy surface marbled in sulfur tones, melted and colored by the volcanoes that erupted during each close swing, the world frozen and silent for the wider, distant arc. The station was a transfer and trading site where three sectors met.

Poss a'Itlic pulled the image closer until Jillistnikalla was to her hand, shining like a sunstone. The glass she held flamed white to the white light, Li-Cassa seeds and flowers, the flowers at least had much the same look in the sunlight of Ri.

Tu'pin had followed the star's journey to her and had watched her every movement since but Oimit's eyes were to Camerat. "It started here," the other woman said, her eyes on the red of Grandfather, the smaller Son eclipsed. "She should have come here instead."

Red light reflected from the glass as Poss a'Itlic let the image turn and grow. Six worlds, one of them inhabitable by their kind, another two were gas giants and settled long ago by the Hij before they had moved beyond Empire. If she

listened very carefully, she could hear their song, an evolving sound that survived them, and more distant, the new. Very much more distant, but it was a huge sound, and seductive. Black mixed with the greens that dripped from her braid ends to add more colors to the glass shapes. A'in killed the map pull as he took the girdle from her, having to force her hands to let go.

Oimit held the feather marked hand out and A'in passed the girdle to her. Then rubbed his nose and sneezed before moving to hold her from behind, his hands back on hers, both held waist level and more gentle this time. Starting to work his fingers against the overbraids very slowly, as though she could be distracted from this.

"Cassa brought it out of Cam'It Temple with her when she left," Oimit said, her nostrils flaring at the tass'alt's actions. Or at hers. A'in knew very well how to distract her.

"One sunstone only, the seed on the back..." Oimit's long fingers touched the shape but absently, her attention remained with A'in, not the girdle. Tu'pin stepped over to be next to her, one hand barely touching her arm. Red cord ends trailed from his wrist but if he felt the pain the motion must have caused, he didn't show it. Oimit turned to face him as she stepped back, her expression savage.

And the savagery was gone as rapidly as it had come. The absence of expression that was left only slowly filled. "Even with only one," she said quietly, still looking inwards, Poss a'ltic thought, not at A'in. "Even with only one, selling it gave her and Lord Gennady the claiming price for the Ladybug. She found it again on a Wolf ship, but changed. Only the ties were still glass. She was alone then, she left him every so often, they fought..." The yuin sight had faded with the rest but she appeared to be growing uneasy. "She was as wild as the thing that claimed her. Crazy as though she had no mind or reason. She traveled the best part of a year just to bury it in the center of the world-altar on Lillisim."

"Another reality or a fiction?" Poss a'ltic asked. "Did it ever exist?"

Oimit shrugged. "We're here talking as though it must have."

Tu'pin moved away from his sister, closer to her. "Empress, the loom-master made an offer," he said. "Did it come from you?"

"I allowed it," she said. Was the truth a formality to be dispensed with along with the guards? "Quite plainly said, the loom-master seeks to maintain Empire much as it is. The loom-master Archival Net systems dislike the idea of change. And like even less, the possibility that it might be inevitable." She sighed and gave more of her weight to A'in. "And the Alliance, Commander? Your being here under these circumstances and so much revealed... what kind of change is the Alliance working towards?"

"And the Empress?"

"What is the Priest Ulanda capable of?"

Oimit shook her head, but it wasn't a refusal to answer. Poss a'Itic felt her allowing possibilities to filter through her mind. Reason enough in the form of her mind, she thought. And something quite different added very recently. Wild? She talked of Cassa with a familiar tone as though she had known the woman personally. Did she feel a personal threat that her own reason might be compromised?

Poss a'Itic signed A'in to let her go, but his lack of a refusal took as slow a turn as Oimit's did. "Now," she said, looking to Cayse. He put a hand on his brother's arm until he stepped back. The exchange wasn't lost on Oimit - had that been A'in's intention? He didn't show any reluctance, or concern, as he walked with Cayse to the flitter. At a signal, Raswini joined them. Fisaldin, Tu'pin's tass'altin backed away.

Oimit was watching the others talk, but still without an answer of her own. "Do you really need to think it over?" Poss a'Itic asked while listening to the conversation from her Net link.

The Zimmer shook her head. "Empress, do you remember Ri-altar?"

"Yes."

"In the summer? Hot at any rate."

Tu'pin stirred behind the woman and Poss a'Itic felt Zimmer-pattern growing in him. "Oimit, don't..."

Oimit ignored him or didn't hear, the woman blazed with the intensity of her simple questions. Her thoughts had filtered through, leaving something quite clear. "Late summer?" she added.

"Yes." Ri-altar was around them. Late summer and it was very hot. A dry heat and even with the air motionless, the clean fragrance filled her mouth. There were the three of them there only, and she felt Kascin, not A'in, try to reach her, sounding like one of the flies that swarmed around her face. Part of her knew he was screaming her name over and over.

Tu'pin had bent his head and turned it, then looked up again as fast with a shuttering gasp. His crest flared red down as far down his back as she could see and red dripped from his braid ends. Zimmer-light or blood... Poss a'Itic thought one might spark as bright as the other. A different scent came from him now, and his eyes were red in the black lines in the blue. Then as quickly, simply dark blue again. He was pulled in as far as he could go, an instinctive move well past his level of training.

But Oimit just looked around, she looked at Tu'pin as calmly as she did the granite ledge or the green sky or Palace barely visible through the haze. "Can you hear Ri-song?" she asked.

She could. And Simic. "Should I?"

"Three people went through a portal, a bird in silver thread on Simic green back. From Palace to somewhere else in Palace."



"Did they?"

Oimit nodded. "You can find them, you had a glimpse of where they went."

Had she? Someone else had, she thought. Poss a'Itic closed her eyes, the glare of the sun from the light haze was already giving her a headache; the ocean was gone, the farms were gone, only a shimmering white and the sun straight above. But the day had been clear, she remembered. The ocean had been a line of silver-green and the shore blazed white before the dark of the farms, the order in the growing things after the wild...

Oimit didn't know that it had been different. Had she access to fragments of memory pulls only and those distorted by overpattern effect? Or, more likely, only words to make up a story of what had happened?

The ocean was green fire when she opened her eyes. She turned the other way. Ri-altar, the moss brown and dry under her feet, she raised spores and dust from the brittle plants. How many times had she been here, she wondered as she walked away from the edge. Over how many years, but with each day existing single and perfect? And as joined to a thousand years past as to the day before.

"Oimit?" she said, realizing she hadn't passed the two. "Tu'pin?" More flies swarmed, but quieter ones. One more step, but a quick one away from the ring of trees, and suddenly, the sky was a boiling gray mass held back by the rise of Ri-light from the center of the mound.

One of the dreams that she couldn't quite make behave. She had been here she remembered and remembered the consequence. Niv. Kalduka d'Nivhks. She felt his hands on her and almost laughed. Ulanda had some compensation. She hadn't laughed then, or cried except from the pain. She had killed him, she remembered and still hadn't cried and certainly hadn't laughed. Overpattern hadn't touched that Poss a'Itic, she felt the lack of it waiting for her, her other self was very close.

The hands pressed harder, she must be partly out of the pull for anyone to see her, to feel her. The vision was lingering. Or should she complete the pull? No. Green was merely a light and dark skin on the ocean; she didn't want to leave the deep water. Her home - she wondered when that had happened. Ti'win, he had wanted to know what overpattern was like. The gray fell around her now like clouds of flies. The hands on her were too clumsy now to be his or A'in's or Niv's: a fly's hands, a fly's buzz in her ears.

She looked at the dank walls. Stained, green tinged algae grew in the cracks. The air remained hot but stank, laden with water. Kascin's face pressed against the back of her neck, buried in the hair that had pulled loose. She felt his sobs of exhaustion even as his fingers dug into the flesh of her upper arms. The gauze overrobe was torn and stained.

The Clan marks on Oimit's face were pale to the flame of her skin. What color really? Red would do for that as well as for her underrobe, Poss a'Itic thought, as

she dropped out further, feeling the resistance as though she waded through water, then oil. The small garden within the walls of Cam'lt Temple, seen with her own eyes. A prison - she still heard the wings beating against the stone. How couldn't she? The same god, the same despite what the freeborn believe. The very same trap of flesh.

Poss a'ltic stole Oimit's notice before the woman realized what was happening. And found herself facing a hunter, the shift lightening fast. If her personal guard had been here, the Zimmer would have been dead a moment later.

She laughed and shook her head. The girdle was at her feet; she had thought Oimit had it still. "An interesting answer to my question. However, I would prefer a gradual evolution of the world-patterns, not overpattern added all at once."

Oimit appeared to relax each muscle by conscious effort, glancing to where Cayse and A'in stood and then back to her. And focused past her to Kascin. Her voice was a whisper over sharp teeth. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

"Something in you did."

"You asked me what the Priest Ulanda is capable of doing. That much at least: overpattern pulls. In what I've seen, she's used her own memory, or the memories of others who were close to her. I don't think there are real limits, though. The Opening was trans-reality and there were elements of the Zimmer pull on Alisim that... when the pull died, certain places and the people who had been there, didn't exist anymore, had never existed. Or rather, people remembered them as from a distance of time. I don't know how long even the memories would have lasted." Oimit was rubbing her feather marked hand against her uniform as though it itched. "Will you have her killed then?"

"Yes. A form of death."

"You can't..." The protest bubbled up in Kascin as he stepped forward so she could see him. The words died at Oimit's smile. He didn't have that in him, she knew, the will to kill someone. Or the belief that she did.

"She can," the Zimmer said softly. "And has. I have, and Tu'pin. Look at her - don't you see her at all?" There was no threat in her words but Kascin paled and his hand on her arm grasped harder. Then Oimit spoke to her: "Empress, there wasn't a way left into the diamond. The time waves would have distorted space too much within the first few days after Lord Gennady left, not the seven needed for the portal to cycle open again. And even if they did make it in, there shouldn't have been a way out. The phoenix had to have given them both an entrance and an exit and that suggests a dialogue."

"As our existence is a dialogue," Poss a'ltic said.

Oimit nodded. "Yes, and one that speaks towards a certain end. A bargain was reached, I think. I could have died, you could have, and Tu'pin. All that could have happened and they still could have come through if the only intent was for

them to live here. Empress, I've been given Command rights in this matter by the Spann Be'li'kini."

"Really?" Poss a'Itic asked. "Does that concern me? Do you still consider the Spann to be a threat to Empire?"

"No more than the Ladybug was."

She smiled. "A point well taken."

"In this, a single person..."

The clear blue eyes blinked when Poss a'Itic chuckled. "Yes, they can. Commander Oimit, I remember more than Ri-altar and more than a broken sea wall." She walked a few feet. "Why do they let you fly?" She asked it in trade-Spann and looked up to see a startled expression on the other woman's face. Whatever force had been driving her before had eased its hold at last. A young woman - and flawed after all beyond the wildness that had invaded her.

Could you kill? she wanted to ask but knew that the answer was yes. Breeding and training would ensure that she could, but the blood wouldn't drip as cleanly from her hand as it had for Tu'pin. There had been a child - Poss a'Itic saw him for a moment. A Zimmer boy, no more than five years old, his back against rough stone and the faint scent of sugar in the dry air. The Zimmer-priest had killed, hadn't liked having to, but didn't regret his actions and certainly didn't feel any guilt for performing his duty. A separation usually very clear in the Clan Zimmer mind. But not for Oimit.

Poss a'Itic repeated the words in Spann-native. "Fly from the hand, why, and the hand flies. Why?"

A purple tongue darted out to moisten Oimit's lips. "The Spann always accept the inevitable. Councilor Ti'omma was there, involved, that is by being with a'Genn, and through him, the Ukinawallisunik Family, the member of the Eight that the Spann Councilor serves. All involved. These things have already happened, so they should have happened. They simply don't know what else will prove to be inevitable."

"And we're the best gaming pieces?"

"We're the chosen agents for what is, was and will be. How couldn't they let me fly?"

Poss a'Itic nodded. A balance formed out of the same extremes that had them offer up a high Clan paltin to be a Priest simply to gain a link to Empire. Very Spann. And wondered what lengths Commander Oimit would go to in order to fly free. "Did I make a bargain with the Lord Gennady?"

"Of a kind."

Kascin's hand was still on her arm. Of a kind. "And the Zimmer boy? What bargain was made there?"

A ring of black answered her.

"You might ask me," Tu'pin said. "An offering of blood for luck, I think. We had no sticks to burn."

If it hadn't been true at the time, it was now. Poss a'Itic walked to him and raised her fingertips to his face. Dark and light - how was it that she didn't see this normally? His skin was smooth and hot to her touch.

"A very long night," she whispered. Could Oimit destroy this? Or find a haven as the phoenix had? "Was it simply to offer comfort? You didn't mean to." Phosphorus lit the ocean; she felt the pull of a moon in the movement of the water. A man's hand touched her, rough skinned and smelling of salt and blood.

She closed her eyes and let her hand fall.

## - 21 -

The early morning was as cool as promised by the night. The white walls of her room glowed like mother of pearl, reflecting what pre-dawn light came through the wide door to the garden. A'in woke at the same time she did, or earlier, his large brown eyes were heavy with sleep but he was lying on his side, watching her. She hadn't expected to find him still here.

"I'm glad you stayed," Pos a'Itic said, turning so that she faced him, earning a light smile from his wide mouth. As solid as he was, after the dreams, she wanted to touch him for reassurance.

He pulled the light cover off her slowly, following the curve of her body with his hand. His hands were broad across the back, hair growing thickly to the first joints of his fingers. Fine silken hair covered much of his body. Very straight, not curly, and the same warm brown as his eyes. He was strong with a mature strength, powerful, the muscles of his body well defined. The off-world blood back in his father's family surfaced mostly whole, not in shadings of the pure Ri.

"Should I be gratified?" he asked then glanced to where Kascin was sleeping. "Or weren't you speaking of me?"

He hadn't left her alone for a moment after the late meeting with the two Zimmer. Scans showed no ill effects from the pattern pull but he had stayed without being asked. And had called Kascin in - his right as tass'alt to have backup and she hadn't protested the need, afraid to disturb the fragile equilibrium between them. And had thought it was so he could leave after she'd fallen asleep.

She got up on one elbow, her fingers of both hands brought together to form a very familiar shape. "Of course I was speaking of you."

"Then I'm gratified." At the invitation, his smile had matched hers but the watchful look remained. "How are you feeling?" The same hand now pulled her

robe front loose and his mobile lips worked at a ready nipple before starting to suck gently, his other hand moving her so she lay on her back. Her other breast then, and as gentle. Beside them, Kascin stirred but didn't awaken.

"Just fine," she replied. Her lips were already hot and swollen although he hadn't touched them.

"How fine?" One hand had moved lower, rubbing her thighs.

"Very."

He drew back, studying her. A cold look and calculating, she knew. It hid nothing of his suspicions and that he didn't care her knowing how he felt about her. "That's a change. Or is it really for me? Shall I wake Kascin after all?"

She had trouble getting her breath to answer, her throat felt swollen. "No, let him sleep." She turned towards him again, to be closer, one hand lightly brushing him. Her underbraids were off, only simple windings remaining, and her arms were light, her fingers tingled with an unaccustomed freedom. Her exploring fingers found hair, more of it and as straight as on his arms and chest and legs, then the satin of his bare skin against her fingertips, and the stubborn resistance of his swollen penis against the weight of her hand.

He took her hand; it had been a game to make him do so. And pushed her back over again, he liked that as well, her being under him. A welcome pain flared as he put weight on both her wrists and he ran his tongue into her mouth as he leaned over to pin her down, his chest pressing against her breasts.

She shifted her hips to invite him but he kept over her, just barely touching in a teasing motion. They dueled with their mouths instead and she bit his lip, nibbling then ran her tongue along the sharp line that shaped his mouth. He tasted of salt and the scented oil he liked.

The morning was as cool as the night had promised...

A'in was awake, watching her, his eyes narrowed in anger, a stewing kind of anger, not the quick shouting matches that were more usual between them. The tail end of a medic scan tickled her.

"Are you back?" he asked coldly.

"Apparently." She felt sick, used up, aroused still and still asleep.

He touched the points along her face quickly, flicking at her skin; she shied away at the sharp picking. A last check at the back of her neck and she felt the spent blocker circle crumble as he rubbed. A non-sedative dis'ta circle, she could tell from the greasy feel of the residue. Pure blocker.

"I can't see that there's much difference," he said, touching two fingers to his nose and then to hers. He liked the scent of the drug. "Awake or asleep. You aren't trying very hard."

She brushed at his hand as though she could push it aside. And then relented. "I didn't set out to provoke you," she added in way of apology.

"Well?" he asked, wiping his fingers on the bed cover.

"Well what?"

"What would my Empress like?" His eyes raked her. "Or Kascin... perhaps he could keep you here when I so obviously bore you as much as you do me. Or would you simply want him to watch? Or I do the same?"

Really angry or simply trying to raise her anger? A lot of both, she decided. And failing at the second. "Just hold me a little while," she said. "Until I fall asleep."

He watched her a moment and she felt him paused, his thoughts on hold.

"I don't feel well. Please, until I fall asleep."

She felt the medic scan he called, and allowed it without comment. Deeper again than those while she had been in pattern, she caught the comparisons. When the analysis came, he reached for the book of blockers, opening the page at the red and yellow circles. She allowed that as well although she didn't like them, too sedating and they left her mouth dry.

"I suppose I could," he finally said as he pressed a half circle on the soft skin of her inner arm above each elbow. His voice was gentle at last. His anger wasn't gone but over it, as fragile as newly healed skin, was the force of training and habit. "Possi, I don't mean to provoke you either," he added as his hands continued to sooth her and where he had pinched earlier, he stroked. "Bad timing, that's all."

It was as much of an apology as she was going to get. He was warm and she fit in his arms just right, his heartbeat slowed as hers did, a matching of their years together. In moments, she was floating far above the hole that the shell of her body barely covered. Then hole and body, both were receding rapidly. No dreams, she thought with relief, her last thought. She wouldn't dream with a full circle of that blocker fresh in her. She fell asleep with A'in's breath in her hair.

Poss a'ltic slid her sleeping robe off as she rose from the bed and stood at the wide opening to her private garden, letting the air brush her skin into bumps. Hair fell long around her; she shook her head for the feel of the strands on her skin and how they played at the shorter hairs that the frost-bumps had raised on end.

Grandfather would rise behind the Temple building, she wouldn't see it directly here until afternoon, only the shadows hinted at the ambient red light, a reflection from the layer of cloud that wasn't thick enough to stop the brighter glow of the Son.

A'in had left an intermittent scan on her, she echoed it in place and stepped outside. Besste, her medic didn't notice. The tour took only a few minutes, she had seen it all yesterday even if her temper hadn't let her stay longer than was polite to indicate her pleasure with the accommodations.

Lavender colored grass and purple and green, cream striped and speckled, a variety of grasses. From some that appeared to be moss to tall reeds to grass with winding climbing stems and frills of seed heads that nodded in the fitful breeze. Every plant and stone had been placed just so to please, she thought. Cam'lt Temple's best. The ranking Priest had escorted her on the tour while they both trailed attendants behind them like ribbon-weeds in a stream.

She remembered waking and feeling A'in gone, he had only stayed a very little while longer. "I'm awake if anyone cares," she pushed into her domestic link. And sat on the damp grass by the doorway to wait, staring into the darker suite and feeling the coarse leaves bite the skin of her buttocks. Massive beams of a dark wood framed the opening, there had been a screen but she'd had it removed. Carved figures in the wood, about a third life size - did they tell a story, she wondered, wiggling closer rather than getting up and then squinting to make sense of the tangled mass of limbs. She laughed, recognizing the neck crest of a breeding male, that figure surrounded by some very accommodating others.

Raswini came in grumpy-mouthed and with a frown in answer to hearing her laugh. And a sharper look when she detected the medic scan echo. "You must have been born beside yourself," she said crossly as the loop died and a proper scan started. "Just one of you couldn't be that stupid."

Dishes rattled as Raswini set a tea tray down onto a low table by the bed. Poss a'ltic was surprised the woman had mind enough left over to notice tray or table - besides the results of the medic scan, she was pulling Net flags fast and furious.

Yian followed her grandmother, closing the door after her with a smile for someone in the corridor. Not one of their people, Poss a'ltic thought. The smile was too new for someone familiar and she had taken too much care with her clothes. Fully dressed where the older woman only wore a light wrap, something she might have slept in and certainly wrinkled enough. A new robe with a tight bodice-piece of pearls couched to completely cover the background. The pale blue of the sleeves and skirt glowed in the dim light; Yian's eyes sparkled as light with the color. She wore her hair in a crown of curls woven with fine cords in the same colour, more pearls in the cords that framed her face.

"You might as well of kept your sleeping robe on," Yian said with a tease in her voice, pointing her thumb at Kascin. "I don't think he's in any shape to notice."

Kascin was snoring. And twitching, holding the coverlet bunched under his chin with hands that were clenched into fists.

"Do you want a bath now or later?" Raswini asked. When she didn't answer, continued in the same cross tone. "You're still wrinkled from last night. Or it's the air."

Yian rolled her eyes as she pulled the braiding box open. The woman had a rich muskiness about her, Poss a'ltic caught the scent in the steam of the thick

air, felt a man's hands burning on her, the length of his body pressing, strangely light and wiry.

She coughed; she couldn't find the air. Far away, something sparkled and Yian looked up, fine white undercords in one hand. An appraising look on her face. A harder look to her when the surface of the walls cracked free, a shim of ice falling and immediately melting on the wooden floor. The Net links were gone.

No time that she noticed passing and Raswini had pulled her to standing and pushed at the same time. Carved figures dug into Poss a'Itic's skin. Someone's skin.

"Breath, damn it," Raswini screamed into her face. Something sparkled again, her eyes she thought, her vision was blurring. Raswini shook her hard again, and again.

And sank down with her. Carved wood scraped the skin on her back, she tried wiggling away. "Let it happen," she whispered, rolling into a ball, coarse grass and sandy dirt, sweat and loose hair.

Soft old skin over hard bones stroked her face, Raswini was saying something that she couldn't hear. Yian was kneeling behind, holding her shoulder, she felt the aide's thighs pressing against her back. Blood on the cloth of Yian's robe, Poss a'Itic felt the weave of the silk, a textured weave, heavy spirals looking as though they were carved in the cloth. A gift from the man. Had he been looking for favor, or simple pleasure... Footsteps pounded on the wood floor, people were running in the hallway. The door crashed open.

Was A'in coming? And for simple pleasure? Or favor? "Was he?" she said, forgetting who she was talking about. Yian's lover or her father? And tasting blood in her mouth, her bottom lip was split. Seeing blood in the spirals, blood and Poultat blue...

## - 22 -

Hotter again than the day before - and no wind. The fabric screens hung motionless and with Grandfather overhead, the room was a maze of red shadows. The quicker Son had just set.

Poss a'Itic didn't move when Cayse came and stood next to her. "I've been assured that the breeze will come up soon."

"It won't be too soon," Yian said from the other side of the screen where she sat with Koisen, playing a game of squares. Through the open spaces of the panel, Poss a'Itic could see her fan working furiously in a flicker of white cloth set with dark bones slats. The aide wore the gauze overrobe Poss a'Itic had met the



Zimmer in, the tears repaired with fine embroidery repeated at random over the surface to make a new design. And over very little else - a narrow cut sleeveless tunic in pale green.

Cayse smiled as he lifted her sweat moistened hair off the back of her neck then let it go as though at a loss of what to do with it. "Come and finish your dinner."

"Do you want your hair up?" Yian asked without taking her eyes off the game. The fan was again in one hand, closed.

"No," she said, meaning hair and dinner both, but followed Cayse back to the low table where A'in was sitting. Yian followed her to the table, settling her and wrapping the absorbent cotton shawl around her shoulders, using her hand instead of a scan to test for dampness where she might become chilled from the sweat drying. Then loosely braided Poss a'Itic's hair in a single rope down her back before returning to Kascin and their game. A'in had stared at his plate the whole time, as silent as his daughter.

Cayse held the small bowl of soup up for her but Poss a'Itic shook her head. "I am here," she said to him instead. "This is my decision to make."

Cayse sighed as he put the bowl down. He had been poking at his own dinner and hadn't eaten any more than she had. "You're here enough to have looked at the spins, or was it some other Empress who went over them three times? You need him and regardless of whether it's now or later, you won't let him go. You can't any more than you could Raswini."

"Cayse," A'in said quickly, "how many times must I tell you? I'm not staying." "You'll stay."

A'in took a quick look to Kascin but the boy had his eyes on the board game.

"She won't let you go," Cayse continued. "Regardless of what she's saying now, she won't let you go. Not without my allowing it. She can't keep that small a thought from one day to the next."

"I've thought of it," she said. A'in dropped his eyes at her words. Much of his anger had been put under control; he let it fester quite deliberately.

Cayse looked at her. A lifetime of accommodating and resisting, of serving and fighting. "Both of you, don't fight me on this," she added.

"Fight you?" A'in stood. "How long since we've done anything but fight? Oh, I'll stay until this is over. You'll need me again, same as you needed me this morning. And I know my duty, god knows. How couldn't I? The family honor." He shook his head. "I may suit you, but I'm sick to death of having to. I swear that some mornings, you wake up and you're not even sure who I am. I'm not a man when I'm with you, just a thing."

"A'in, that's quite enough," Cayse said.

"Is it? You're out of your territory, little brother. It's not you that she takes to her bed." A'in pulled her shawl and robe down at the shoulder, one finger tip

tracing the points down her neck and lower. Round purple marks where he had worked at her, keeping her body alive. Closing her eyes at the feel, there was a long moment when she wasn't sure if he still touched her or not. But he was at the door when he spoke next. "You should have died this morning, better you than her. You don't even remember that she's dead, do you?"

Who? Poss a'ttic wondered but he was out before she could ask and Cayse had started talking as soon as the door closed.

"Possi, talk sense," he said. A tuck had her robe closed again and the shawl rearranged. "You're cycling and Kascin can't handle you. He doesn't have the native ability much less the training and he's too sensitive to pattern residue. And, I don't think you'd let another tass'altin get near you, not when you're deep in pattern."

She could still feel A'in's fingers. "Kascin won't be alone, you and Rasi..."

"Possi, she's dead."

"I know that," she said in a hollow voice. Cayse had taken her and shown her, made her feel the flesh with her finger tips, smell the hand put to her nose. Sunken eyes, white lips, Raswini's hair was silver-gold, she hadn't noticed before then remembered she had.

"Kascin..." Cayse dug sharper with his voice. "Kascin!" And waited until the boy looked up. "Raswini was born in her suite, my grandparents before that. Our family has served the Empress in some capacity for over a hundred generations. A'in isn't the first tass'alt to her that's come from our bloodline and he won't be the last. And regardless of what he says now, he'll both stay and he'll bring his other children to Palace the same as he bought Yian."

"It doesn't matter..."

"No, Kascin. What matters is how utterly useless your being here is. Try and comprehend what she is and how long she's lived. You'll be the memory of a moment, she'll feel sorrow and loss, it'll be quite real and then nothing much until something makes her remember again."

"Remember?" she whispered. What should she remember?

Kascin stood up, his eyes moving around the room as though he searched for something. Rasping breaths, his throat was closed, she felt the tears that wanted to follow the anger, he had found grief if nothing else. Puzzled, she found herself signing Closure, the motion breaking the dried blood that caked the undercloths that wrapped each arm. With a swallowed cry, he ran out.

At a sign from Cayse, Yian followed him, two guards trailing them from those in the corridor. Two more started to come into the audience room and Poss a'ttic sealed the entrance with her signature over before pulling out of Net placement. Ge'on'ni, her Chief of Security, slammed against the wood of the door. She first heard and then felt the vibration as though she had been struck.

And dying - she remembered now. "I'll say the prayers for Raswini," she said after licking her lips. The split on the lower one where Raswini had struck her, stung.

Cayse nodded, he didn't comment on the locked door or Ge'on'ni's rare show of temper. "Ri would be better than here. Haltinport even. The local Priest from Gis can come over to do the actual ceremony. Give A'in a break. And our other people - everyone's on edge and that stunt yesterday of seeing the Zimmer without proper security didn't help. Ge'on'ni or one of the Security Seconds can arrange things at Ji'Jin Station just fine. And it shouldn't matter in the long run whether you're here or on Ri, you can give orders just the same."

"No. We're here, Cayse. Oimit, Tu'pin, you and Kascin, Yian, that freeborn Zimmer they brought, Bella - all of us. Kascin stays. Js'ki will do for me, he's competent and I do see him. And he's bored enough here not to mind the attention."

"He's lazy as hell and will so mind. Coaching Kascin is about his speed. If you insist on staying, A'in will be here. And I do mean here."

"Js'ki will do, I said. Or ask Yian, she might know someone here at the Tass' Holding..."

A grudging laugh, then more open. "Why not, we've been here more than two days. And your other plans - when you're not with Yian's leftovers? What about Ulanda?"

"I want to see Angansit. Tell him to cut out the act, remind him I've never been impressed by it. I want everything available on Ji'Jin Gate Station from the Rigyant Archives; he'll have brought the crystals. Use the House mark to pry them away if necessary. If the Net won't fold, tell me and I'll do it myself." She paused. "No, threaten him with it if you have too, but I'd rather not touch them directly."

"And Ulanda? Should I send a ship for her?"

"No."

Cayse sat back, pushing his plate away. "You intend a binding? Like in the legends? How, if she's not here? Or does Angansit go there? If the loom-master has something - and you must think he does if you're reluctant to force his Net personally..."

"He stays here. I don't trust him. And you're right about Gi'on'ni. That Salin that's there at Ji'Jin Station, the E'kalt Hunter, they can work together. I want Ulanda pushed inwards, both physically and into overpattern. Face her with an attack of some sort, a threat. I want her options so limited that she has no choice but to move in my direction. And Ritsiniti killed, I like even less the legends around him. He's too much of an unknown, but with her strict Temple training..."

"And if he's a rouge Priest with access to overpattern?"

"He is. Having the two of them together doesn't simply double the risk..." Her hand reached for his. "You ran the spins, you know what could happen. I don't know how else to stop her - or the two of them - if even half of the Lady Cult legends are true."

"Not legends now."

"No, and how many chances left, I wonder? The Altasimic Opening was one, but before that, Ri-altar with the Overpriest Sarkalt..."

"What?"

She told him of the curtain of Ri light and Sarkalt inside, how Niv had died. They didn't have that from the flitter Net, only a vague reference. Part of a spin analysis of what happened in the Holding on Alisim and that it was a reworking of another event. A woman's name on the spin: En'talac and her Temple Medic's signature over the Overpriest's House mark. Another reference to the High Temple judgment, but with a twist: Niv again.

And then, in her memory pull - and Niv yet again - had that been another reworking, another chance?

"Gennady must have had all the potentials contained in the diamond points pulled in to shape this one reality, or to exclude other possibilities," she said, replacing memory with memory. Another spin, but she didn't pull Net to see it, and she would not pull a deeper memory of her role in the shaping. Not now when she was so close to the edge.

"The immediate result was a very few lives changed, nothing more. If the world-patterns are inundated with overpattern, the reality of what we have, the structure of it, would fold in the same way the points of the diamond did."

Cayse nodded. "And what the phoenix has already done in this reality?"

"The same. A few lives only. Think of that on a larger scale - the stresses would tear apart what we've built, the worlds, the people. We're a fragile bubble about to burst. I don't want Empire to die like that, I just don't know if any thing I do will make a difference. Except that we're here, that has to mean something."

"I'm here. I'm never sure about you. You come and go."

"I'm here now so pay attention. I think Angansit does have something. The Lady Cult legends say that he attempted to bind the Lady during the Opening and paid for it with his life. There's a threat around him besides, and an ancient animosity. Power sits too comfortably in his lap."

"A personal threat?"

She nodded. "I told you that I don't trust him. That Archive isn't happy about any access to overpattern. Especially unrestricted access."

His hand ran along her arm, barely touching the cloth. Energy fields twisted but he couldn't see them. "Not unrestricted."

She smiled. "No, but not under the kinds of control the world-patterns are. Just flesh. It limits me - it's an uncomfortable union - but that's quite a different

thing again. Cayse, I could almost want some kind of control. Ri and Simic, they hardly hold me here at all anymore. You say I come and go, and that's what I do. I envy Ulanda her youth. It's like I remember the words of how to live but have forgotten how to speak them."

"Not all the words. You told Raswini to let you die."

Had she? "A captive god - the Spann don't have it wrong, not entirely. It's almost as though I might shed my body." And the converse: what Angansit would want. Would she really want to shed her will instead? To be an obedient puppet?

Cayse saw the fear; the countering gentleness in him showed her that. Years together, did he sometimes wish her more pliant?

"I'd rather see you die then helpless," he said.

She hadn't realized she'd spoken the other. "I am helpless in so much. Cayse, would you kill me if A'in weren't here to do it? If I fail?"

"And Ulanda? It's an option, Possi. Let her choose to die."

"We're here," she repeated. "All of us. She could have died already if that's what supposed to happen. Or what it was that brought her here through a diamond that should never have opened again, should never have released them if they had gained entrance. What drives this, I can feel it, but I can't explain what it is. I don't know those words. Or, rather I do, but I... I don't know why I try."

He smiled gently. "To have someone listen."

"I'll miss Raswini, I won't forget too. She always listened."

"Better than I do."

"A butterfly."

"I didn't say that."

"In a meadow. She loved him, you know. Your father. She would have been happy with him, living with him, I mean. Not stealing time. Did he know who she was?"

Cayse shook his head. "He didn't want to. He accepted things as they were. Just before he died, we talked and I tried to explain, but he stopped me. He said that Haltinport was Haltinport, that there was no Temple there, or people from Temple, or reason for anyone to think differently."

He copied the accent, or had remembered it from his childhood. "And now she's flown away."

"I was thinking about Kascin when I thought that."

A meadow, a high mountain meadow, sunlight and flowers. Poss a'ltic pulled herself back with a shudder. "A dark bird on the wing, Cayse. Oimit's felt the wind of her flight, and Tu'pin."

"And you."

"I'm a butterfly, Cayse." She couldn't stop saying his name.

He sidled over until he was against her and put his arm around her shoulders. "A very pretty one. All gold and cream."

"Funny, I remember being quite ordinary. I've a certain 'presence' now, how could I not? But not pretty."

"Are you fishing for complements?"

"Do I have to? Why should I do all the work?"

"And A'in?"

"He's not the first mistake I've ever made."

"No, Possi. He's part of what you need or you wouldn't have been together so long."

Not so long, she thought. "I know," she whispered. "Rasi said that I loved him."

"I'd say you two are a match. He's as cold in his own way for all he's louder about it. He'll stay."

"I made him that way, or let that part of his nature become dominant. He wasn't any older than Kascin, or better trained, when I first made him my lover. Did I care more then? I wanted him, that was all."

His gentle fingertips touched her face, gathering her attention. "He went to your bed very willingly."

"That's not the point."

"It was to him, then and now. Possi, just leave it alone. I wish you'd forget to worry about him and try..."

"Send Kascin away," she whispered, allowing the Net again. "Now. Far enough away that all this will be over before there is any possibility of his making it back. Please." He took her at her word, the orders went out through the Net in a fall of already made plans.

A flare of blue and Ge'on'ni came in, overriding her lock. A sharp foot kicked a tea tray aside.

Dressed in the dark green of her House colors, but not the usual uniform. A pleated kilt around the lower thorax and nothing else but for the Temple oath cord around the neck and one legging where the needle gun was fastened. Xilisti cast ti'Linn, ochre colored shell with bristles and the grasping edges of the serrated pincers, a dark red. Dour and uncommunicative.

"Review what we've been talking about," she said to the ti'Linn. "I want a workable plan before you leave."

After a very quick overview, Ge'on'ni answered in ti'Linn. "Spins and a swim?"

A prayer form colored the last word. "Spins only," she replied in plain tongue. "Anything done in overpattern that's specifically directed at her or Ji'jinlini Temple might call her too soon. Or at least alert her. Or Ritsiniti."

"Dreams?" Cayse asked.

Biting her lip, she shook her head. "Dreams." Seeing fleeting images from her own dreams. Warnings or simple worry? Or recalling a past that now existed only in her mind?

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The pace of work was accelerating, the kitchen warming with a final burst of preparation for dinner. Except for approving the service, her work here was just about done. Eunni asked Hic'lic to open the screens to the garden and at once, the gentle scent of sun warmed herbs blended with the cooking odors. Sunshine reached through the doorway almost to her feet where she stood at the work counter.

Hic'lic stopped with the wood frame of one screen held in the pincer with a single tip broken, the others scored and nicked. Staring out. The brown of his chitin was speckled with yellow, the facets of his eyes, usually dull, were like shining glass. Several facets were missing, and each hole looked like the mouth of a cave.

They shared something, Eunni thought. He craved the feel of the sun the same as she did, taking every opportunity to warm himself. A 'poverty', he had said to her the other day, the word coming out surrounded by others, and which like obedient sun dogs to the first, had proved as difficult to translate. That the sunlight wasn't real, she thought he might have meant. What she understood better was the list of names that followed. Worlds he had seen.

"Borrow the sunshine," she told him now, speaking in plain-tongue. "Just leave me some for later." He tic-ticed something as he turned back.

And skittered in place, his worn eyes darkening briefly. A very low bow towards the front of the kitchen and he signed a request for allowance to attend to his duties.

She gave it and then gave the same to Adela who was staring at Rit with the carrot shaving she had been nibbling on like a rabbit hanging motionless from her lip. Eunni clapped her hands: "Get to work!" she said when the signing didn't get the girl moving. And had to motion to Siodopolous that yes, she still wanted the tray she had asked for ten minutes ago.

Rit leaned against the counter and then had to move before Sio would put the tray of dishes down. "I was willing to share the sunshine."

She hadn't expected to see him until the mealtime. "Did you just come in here to be in the way?"

Just wanted company, she supposed when he didn't answer past a smile. The sun brought out the white in his dark hair, palm size streaks at his temples as though he had smoothed it down with both hands and stolen the dark away. But the same light made his brown eyes shine: cat's eyes, as golden as Tika's. Older and younger, softer looking. And tired, he had his arms crossed as though cold and the lines on his face were from fatigue rather than sun-creases from riding. She never saw him doing much of anything. A few meetings. Standing talking to the gardeners. Or, more often, staring into nothing.

She reached for a pinch of crumpled thyme and continued testing, alternately sprinkling and stirring-in herbs taken from an array of bowls into a pot of soup, a trial batch. The earthy, slightly sweet taste of squash filled her mouth. She had to close her eyes each time she tasted; the pastel pink color was too distracting.

Bland. "A shipload of squash came into Groundside Port and from the look of our storeroom, I think we got most of it." The entire bowl of minced hot pepper went into the soup. "I hate squash."

And tasted again. Was it too hot now? "Here, try this," she said to Rit, holding the wooden spoon out. "Too much pepper?"

His hand on hers was soft as well, they had both changed, but he had the most. She liked him being next to her, like old times, they didn't have a chance to see each other alone. Didn't *take* the chance, she corrected herself. The exchanges between them were very deliberately public.

"Perfect," he said and his eyes flirted with her. He'd held her hand over the spoon well past the tasting.

He was lying about both things, she decided but shrugged and called the Kitchen Master from what he was doing. When he arrived, Rit was looking out at the garden, his eyes shaded by a frown. Eunni let the bowl of the wooden spoon clunk back into the pot to capture his attention. He nodded to Pilli, but absently; she didn't think he heard a word of the introduction.

His kitchen but outranked. Damn Rit anyway, she'd never liked that treatment; she didn't expect Pilli to either. "More of this, then," she said evenly, trying not to make it worse by drawing attention to Rit's snub.

The cook sniffed. "The vegetable stock can be prepared tonight," he said in an officious tone as though talking of diplomacy rather than squash. And softened, the effort at control putting sweat on his already pink face. "A one-third reduction if you think that is adequate, and then finished in the morning. Your suggestion that the puree be cooked separately to maintain the fresh taste..."

He had a right to be miffed at being ignored on his own turf, but he still got on her nerves. He played favorites, but at least based his attentions on talent. The rest of his staff, like Adela, tolerated his outbursts. Towards her though, his bullying dripped with flattery.



"A sour cream garnish," she interrupted flatly. "And a sprig of fresh thyme in each bowl for presentation." The man nodded, adding the details in his Net link to his staff that handled the supplies.

And opened his mouth again. She took Rit's arm and pulled.

Her very own small space of sanity in the kitchen was a waist-height table in one corner and a couple of long-legged chairs with cushioned seats. Close to the testing area and a window to the same herb garden, the scrubbed wood of the table was washed with light. A blue flowering vine framed the window, each flower not much larger than a grain of wheat but massed in heavy clusters. They used them as garnishes. Sweet when fresh, they had a pleasing bitter taste when dried and were used for flavoring drinks. The glaze of the teapot and mugs already waiting for her on the table was the same blue.

Eunni sat down carefully, her feet hurt and her legs ached from standing. The chairs were old - re-glued and with new webbing on the seat and back - and the wood complained. Alicia had found them while exploring and brought them for her to use. Give her a chair over a cushion any day.

Moving her feet into a patch of sun on the slate floor, she felt the warmth reach through the padded leather soles of her shoes. Just a normal tiredness in the care, and some of it from old habit and from still not really believing she was better. Even her fingers were better. Her body needed time to find a new balance, Silassic had said, and even then, some small damage would remain. He was apologizing; she could have kissed him.

Hic'lic brought the samples tray not a moment after she sat, bits and pieces of food arranged carefully in rows on the white ceramic surface. The Wa'tic had to lift awkwardly to slide it onto the table without tipping but she knew better than to offer to help. Rit paid him the same attention as he had Pilli.

"Thank you," she said in plain tongue, adding the same in trade-Wa'tic. She still called Hic'lic and the other Wa'tic 'he' for who knows what reason, default probably. Ignoring Rit in turn, he clicked the response and left slowly. Reluctantly, she decided. His chair was the one nearest the window. They usually talked while she sampled the dishes and he could watch the gardeners while keeping his balance by hooking four legs to the seat cushion. She wasn't always sure what they talked about.

Rit had an easier balance, his elbows on the table as he inspected the contents of the tray, squinting at the reflected sunlight. She grabbed the puffy cracker he had his eye on. Commercially available, not their own, but it wasn't bad.

"You'll want soup with that," Rit said, grinning as he put a tiny fluted bowl of squash soup over to her side of the tray. A thread-thin white spiral floated on the pink surface, a single leaf of thyme in the center. He reached up and picked a flower from the nearest cluster, placing it in the soup over top of the thyme. Blue and pink and white.

"Don't let Pilli see your efforts or you'll be eating it tomorrow."

He lifted the dripping flower out and let it drop to the tray in a tiny splash of pink. The Master cook was fast, or he'd anticipated her decision. Or maybe she was getting too predictable. "What would it have cost you to have been more pleasant?" she added.

A shrug instead and she decided not to press the matter further. He'd talk about it or he wouldn't.

A mug full of tea for herself, Rit shook his head as she paused with the spout over another cup. "This is why I never eat," she said, putting the pot down. "And this is just lunch for tomorrow, I didn't take this kind of trouble for a banquet back home. Breakfast for me tomorrow is what everybody else is getting for dinner."

"Didn't you ever wonder why I took as many of my meals at your tavern as I could instead of at the barracks?"

"And here I thought it was..." He reached for a minute slice of pastry and she slapped his hand away. "Those are samples."

"I was going to," he said. And did, the slap had been a tap.

She chuckled, happy to see him relax at last. "Apple and nuts rolled in layers of pastry. I was going to serve it plain, but what do you think of caramel sauce?"

"Fine." He looked into each bowl on the tray that might have held some then ate the second and last bite of the pastry plain.

"Or with ice cream?"

"Both?"

She chuckled again. Another sample tray was brought, but this time she simply nodded, signing allowance. The Wa'tic left with it immediately. Squash again for one of the choices, but sliced and with a black speckled but otherwise clear sauce. The black specks moved, one almost to the rim of the small plate, dragging a thick slime after it.

One more tray appeared but held only a single dish and a small pitcher. Hic'lic signed apology before leaving, his pincers hidden from anyone in the kitchen seeing other than her. Apple pastry, a large oblong, the top dusted with a lace pattern of powdered white sugar. A sizable ball of ice cream was on one side of the cake, a bunch of fresh mint on the other.

Pilli again, she felt the Master Cook in the Net as soon as she thought to look for him, he was monitoring her. They had talked about caramel sauce; she hadn't known he had prepared some. Her push to sign privacy was sharper than intended and he backed off abruptly. She sighed. Damage control was going to be necessary, she just had to work herself into the mood for it.

Rit raised his eyebrows when the Net link died but otherwise was poking at the dark specks in the ice cream with his fork. The specks didn't move, they were a type of seed that tasted faintly of cinnamon. Did he think they were frozen eele

and about to crawl away as they thawed? Stifling a laugh, she poured the warm caramel sauce over both fork tines and ice cream.

"The other stuff was ti'Linn. I don't try the Wa'tic menu either, even though they only eat dead things." She leaned against the high back of the chair and rubbed to get the kinks out of her shoulders. "And I put my foot down with three separate menus; if anybody doesn't like it, they can cook for themselves."

Hic'lic approached with a tray again, two of his family standing just back, small bows from each in turn, first to Rit and then to her. On the tray were small patties of snow next to sculptured shapes and miniature platters made of ice. And bits of food arranged in elaborately beautiful patterns on each cold surface. Rit was studying the arrangements, fork stopped half way to his mouth. The small tray was offered solemnly, she took it briefly and bowed as it was taken back. A more complex sign was added to the approval held with her fingers, an allowance for the three to leave.

"That looked serious," he said as the Wa'tic left to join several more at the far end of the kitchen near the entrance to the storage areas.

"The small-meal and the..." She thought a moment then clicked the Wa'tic word. "For tomorrow. Hic'lic is the Holder of Words for the family here as well as a cook. The Wa'tic are very serious about their food. They'll make an offering of what is on the tray now." A sip, the tea was too hot. She was finished here if she wanted to be. Should she take a nap before supper? A walk might be better if she could talk Rit into one. "The Wa'tic think the ti'Linn are a degenerate line," she added as he started on the pastry after pouring the rest of the sauce over top. She had thought the combination would be too sweet. A walk, definitely. He looked as though he could use one. First he was withdrawn, then almost jumpy. She frowned, trying to figure what he was doing here.

He looked up. Just tired, she decided for the second time, then wasn't sure all over again. He had that hollow look to him; he was waiting for something to happen. Eunni felt her stomach tighten.

"Have they mentioned what they think of humans?" he asked, tapping his fork against the plate. She didn't think he knew he was.

"Not anywhere I've been able to overhear them." She shook her head after another sip of tea. "How did we get this many people?"

"Your cooking?" His mouth was full again; he mumbled the words.

"You're not getting any more, so don't bother with the flattery." Except it wasn't flattery in the tone, it had sounded more like desperation. Slowly, she looked around at the room and the people she had come to know. Rit's eyes never left her.

Standing, she took the plate from his hand and put it on the table. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Wherever."

Eunni walked quietly beside him, the warmth of her presence slowly wearing away the bad mood he had started out with. Exploring at last - he'd had neither time nor energy to do any before. Or taken any time from the press of other concerns. Every moment had seemed focused on something concrete as though to let his attention wander might cause the fragile structure of what he saw around him to tumble down.

They reached the boundary of their suite, passing from marble lined passages nearer the common, to corridors of interlocking tiles. Each looping pathway was like the petal of a flower, retreating to the solid wall of the Station Center, then going out again at a slightly different level and looping again. From the old maps, the full extent of the corridors had been much greater at one time, now shunts joined the longer sides, making smooth turns in the paths. All the exits from the suite except for the flitter bay were sealed, most of them long before they had come here.

The tiles had been rearranged, Rit thought. Like the hull tiles of the Station bay; like those of the Scout ship. On one passage near the inside, they passed through a short section lined with green marble. He put his hand on the smooth surface and could feel the same tiles under. Energy conduits and points. Most of it potential only, or residue from long ago. He wasn't sure, a deliberate shaping of the crystal structure of the clay in any case. It was different than what he had felt in the ship. Simply older or simply different makers?

Eunni waited for him with an indulgent smile, her hands on her hips. And a worried look to her eyes.

"There's too much," he said, shaking his head. "We're always just touching the surface." He laughed. The surface was all of her that he was capable of touching. "Seriously, under every little bit we know is an abyss where everything we don't know is abandoned for lack of time."

"So what's new about that?" She started along the corridor again. "When did you ever know very much?" The last came with a saucy look over her shoulder.

He followed without answering. Nothing was new about it at all. They walked several more short loops, choosing the inner shunts, ending up at the corridor that skirted the Station Center. Steam in the air, water dripped somewhere, from the roots likely. Several large ones snaked down the wall, secondary roots making a network against the pale tiles. They had tagged these large ones where they passed through the flitter bay so that they wouldn't be damaged in the spin-ball games that were played there.

They headed out again immediately, the corridor ahead cool and silent. Another loop and finally, Rit slowed. The nervous energy that had surrounded him earlier was finally gone. "You must be tired," he said to Eunni. Placement had

them at the tip of one foreshortened petal; at that scale the map looked like a crude line drawing of a shaggy daisy.

The glow globe bobbed as her attention changed. "Not really," she said, stopping to look at him. The bright light brought out the red highlights in her hair and the same color in her freckles. "It feels good to get away from everybody." Despite her words, she was breathing heavily. "And you?"

"I'll live." At his touch, the globe dimmed to about half and her hair darkened. And she smiled again, amused with him, he thought. The years on her face faded in the kinder light and the knowing grin. She knew the difference both made. He liked the natural light of the corridors, a greenish phosphorescence.

"You don't have to hide from me," he said lightly.

"And waste the years it took to grow this mask?" She leaned her back against the wall. An old habit of hers that went with the suddenly coy look.

One hand straight out against the stone and he leaned closer to her. An old habit of his, to fit hers. Her face was in his shadow; she had a halo of faint green stars from the colonies of algae.

"Cinnamon," she whispered after a long kiss. "And cream and caramel." Her hands moved from his face to where his waist should be and she laughed softly, ducking out of his reach but not before she'd tugged at his single long braid, pulling one of the warding beads off the end. "We'd better keep walking for a variety of reasons." And glanced at his stomach before tossing the bright red bead back to him. In the dim light, he missed the catch and the bead rolled a snake track in the dust closer to the wall.

A hairline crack in the surface of the bead. He put it in his tunic pocket then checked the others on the long braid. Three left and he adjusted the leather tong that should have kept all four in place. Eunni had gone ahead, pulling the globe with her and he hurried to catch up.

After a turn, the shunt abruptly widened into a high chamber before continuing, the exit a small darker hole. Reluctant to leave right away, Rit sent the glow globe into the right hand belly of the space, high above a dry fountain. Darkly colored tiles showed under gray dust. Only the center of the corridor was clear, cleaned by passing feet. Others used these passages for jogging, or training. Eunni came with him as he left the cleared area and walked over for a closer look.

With his handkerchief, he brushed the raised lip. A simple step pattern along the rim, but the glazing of the tiles was in shades of deep blue-green. Spider cracks marred the surface and some tiles were chipped. He leaned over and tried blowing dust from the fountain bed, raising a cloud that made him cough. His lungs were better but not entirely healed, he ran out of breath too fast and even a light cough made his chest burn. The effect of pattern energies on top of the allergic reaction. He lacked the natural outlet that a Priest had. Even the minor

degree of access he seemed consciously capable of since the diamond - or what the constant administration of drugs left - was enough to affect his health.

Using the handkerchief the second time, he carefully wiped a small area. Showing under the dust - and only when he squinted - was the ti-Linn cross, the design apparent in the how the different tiles had aged, not from a color variation that he was capable of seeing.

Eunni took the cloth from his hand and shook it well away from him, then brushed at his tunic. "You look a sight. Why don't you just roll around in the dirt, get it over with."

He sat on the edge of the fountain basin and pulled her onto his lap. "This is more fun than the meeting I'm missing."

"You're incorrigible." She wiggled until she slid off and then was apparently content to sit very close next to him. There hadn't really been enough lap in any case. "You're also on edge about something. Want to talk about it?"

He deliberately misunderstood her. "The meeting was a courtesy to Rilla. It's Garm's job. He can handle it. Then she's gone, along with the last of her team."

Eunni looked around. "And we're outside the first withdrawal line. Does that bother you?" She added Command Net to their domestic placement. He followed her, eyes and Net both.

Everyone was where they were generally supposed to be. Besides the E'kalt Hunter herself, all but two of Rilla's people had already left. One was with her, a ti'Linn aide he had met a couple of times. Then Heana. The human woman was with Kori, doing a final check on the security system but riding a secondary and heavily filtered strand of the Command Net Kori was using. She felt him in the Net. For a moment, her head turned away from watching the Zimmer. The color bands on the bare scalp of her elongated head flashed in the bright light, if he had been there, she would have been staring at him.

"There's nothing wrong here," he said, pulling back. "I've been over and over the work being done, looking for any sense that traps were being set... and it's clean. Kori even says that it's better than what she specified and completely separate from the Temple and Station systems." And portable, they could take the configuration with them by withdrawing key points. He didn't add that it was the Station Center that bothered him, not the outer loops, not the security grid. "What else, I don't know."

"Except you..." Eunni began, sounding worried.

"Except it seems I always come to you when I'm in trouble."

Her brown eyes searched his. "Maybe it's the timing that bothering you." She took one grimy hand in her much cleaner one. Small bumps at the joints remained from her arthritis but the swelling was gone. "We're just about all settled here, so, tomorrow, we'll probably get asked to go, that they need the space for some other party of legends." She had apparently decided that being

worried wasn't what she wanted to be. Standing, she made a play of pulling him to his feet and then of being too close when he obliged.

She still tasted of squash and tea and of that special scent that was all hers. She laughed huskily, her lips against his throat. "If we leave here now, we'll have time for a bath before dinner. I think we'll both need one."

"One?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you the penalty for adultery?"

"Yes, actually. Alicia did."

Eunni laughed again as she bent to pick his handkerchief up from the floor. She moved easily, and made a game of it, adding flourishes that only lacked the grace of the Temple people, not the exaggeration. "Then after dinner, we'd better pack."

He took Eunni's face in his hands, his thumbs gently rubbing the sides of her mouth. "That first night on Rilla's ship," he said softly. "Did you hear any of what Alicia and I talked about?"

"About Cassa? A life for a life. That's always been the going price, hasn't it?" She shook her head slowly. "Bolda says I shouldn't worry. That Cassa never once did anything that made sense. That probably she's meant something quite different. Or has forgotten the whole thing."

His hands fell to her shoulders. "Or I made it up."

"Maybe." She bit her lip. "You would. I mean, if you had to add things, to make it real enough that it made sense, then you could have added that too, it'd be like you." She turned away, somehow her hand in his. He followed.

There was another shunt further in the same loop towards the Center, he hadn't noticed them passing the opening the first time. And more: from the Command Net he was pulling as a map instead of the domestic, he saw the points in the Security grid just installed. Eunni had practically been leaning on one when she kissed him the first time.

Ulanda turned the page and continued reading.

"... the next wave rolled the shell half way back to the sea. And the next wave, halfway again, and when the third wave had come and gone over the sand, the shell was gone. Leassa drew a circle in the wet sand with her big toe. Three waves came and went before the sand was smooth again.

Histil ran up to her. 'You let the ball float away,' she said angrily.

'I can draw another one,' Leassa said..."

She was interrupted by giggles. Mirwin had Wessli laughing, tickling the boy as they both rolled around. Similar attentions spans, Ulanda thought. Neither of them could keep still for ten minutes. Wessli's sister, Cealsi had a pained look on

her small face and had been listening so pointedly that she most likely hadn't heard a word.

Alicia waved to her from the porch of the Brambles before starting over. She was with Tallomal, both in the dark tunic and pants that had become their uniforms. And armed, rifles and knives at least were obvious.

The book in her lap closed just by her letting it go. "I'll read some more of it tomorrow."

Without a word, Cealsi ran to her mother.

"Lady Priest," Tallomal nodded. Her look was wary despite having seen her every day for weeks. Ulanda ignored her, bored with the other woman's reserve.

Alicia picked Wessli off Mirwin and swung the small child around before settling him to straddle her hip just above the rifle guard. "Looks like we arrived just in time."

His mother shook her head as she retrieved the squirming boy and sent him off with a pat on his bottom. "Both of you, go bother your father," she said, adding Cealsi to the retreat with a look. And to Alicia as she left to follow behind the two children, "I'd better go and make sure that they're not too much of a bother." Her hands had made the appropriate form, but she didn't look at Ulanda again.

"I didn't expect to see you until supper," Ulanda said to Alicia.

"The outside work crew is finished with the grid installation. I'll be glad when things settle down. I promised to check in later. Kori's been stuck with Heana since Rit canceled the meeting - she's finally just left." She rubbed her forehead then frowned when she noticed the book. "Is that the latest version?"

"Such as it is. Garm says he can't remember the rest of the story and can't find any references to it in the Temple archives." Alicia picked the book up and leafed through it.

One of the kittens had followed Alicia and Ulanda dangled her braid ends to entice it onto her lap with the cat escalating the mock attack to bite and kick against her overbraids. Tictic, a bluecream like her mother and at the gangly stage, a little older than Tika had been when Alicia brought her to the world-altar.

Mirwin crawled over on his knees and sat to the other side of her, unfastening the kitten's claws from the braided cords. Pulled threads wouldn't smooth under his fingers. There were snags in the fabric of her long tunic besides.

Alicia looked up, one finger just finishing a trace of the illuminated capital that began the page. Repeating shapes of seashells and waves, all enclosed in a complex spiral of ink. There were three versions of the capital on the same page, the alternatives done in the wide margin. "Peecit did a nice job with the drawings."

The Scribe work was barely adequate, even for plain-tongue. The nuances were ill thought out, with only the most obvious and trite images used. And flashy



colors - or they would be when finished. Only the chromatic references next to each major capital had been completed. The Zimmer Scribe was poorly trained and tended to dream rather than work.

Ulanda motioned Mirwin to stop trying to even the pulls in the weave of the cotton tunic. He had turned it into a feeling session, and was perfectly aware that he had an audience. "Cici's going to give Peecit some tips on the designs. I don't see the use. I think Garm has lost interest and there won't be a finish to the story."

Alicia glanced down at the book again then turned the last page. On the inner cover were more drawings, but only loosely thrown together images taken from the writing. More of Peecit's dreaming. Alicia looked at the picture thoughtfully then closed the book before putting it on the ground. She looked distracted.

Mirwin got to his feet, pulling braid ends that he'd forgotten to let go. "There's a break-ball game being set up in the flitter bay." He held the Net flag open: Cici had called him. "Both of you, come on, why not try it?"

Alicia was monitoring from Command level Net, triggered by Cici's call through the domestic system, but she had added a security link to Kori. The Zimmer had two of their own people with her, but just general aides, not trained security. Ulanda checked the rest herself. All the main points were covered and Kori had added a low level alert to the system. Most likely to keep those on duty from joining the game, she thought.

"Anything wrong?" Mirwin asked when Alicia didn't answer. He had followed the two of them into the Net.

But Alicia hadn't been with her the whole time. Checking on Rit instead. Ulanda tasted dust on her lips. But Rit was in the flitter bay with Eunni, Garm and Rilla circling towards them.

*It's not important.* What she had told Alicia when faced before with the girl's question of whether Rit was sleeping with Eunni. When her own questions had been of oaths and obedience.

Neither of which were questions now. "We've had this conversation before," Ulanda said.

Alicia got up and brushed the seat of her pants off. "I don't call this a conversation. If there's nothing else, I'll see you later." Her cheeks were red.

"You haven't said if you'll come with us," Mirwin asked.

"Us?" Ulanda said. "I haven't said I would either."

"Would you?" he asked again.

"If we don't play we can still watch the game." Her fingers punctuated the inclusive in High formal. Her and Alicia. "At least for a little while."

At her words, Mirwin looked pleased and Ulanda was suddenly glad of that and she surprised him further with a kiss, his skin cool against hers. A quite different taste and feel, not the sandpaper of the new bristle growth on Rit's chin.

"We could have dinner there," he said, holding her against him, running his fingers into her hair in a soon-abandoned attempt to braid it.

"We could." She might play at that, except she would have to get changed. Mirwin would be tired tonight, a sore but lazy exhaustion of body that she wouldn't mind matching.

"Is there anything else?" Alicia asked.

"No."

When she had gone, Mirwin tried Ulanda's hair again but with more success this time. "Should she worry? "

I don't care. She took a deep breath to quell her frustration. She did care.

"Why mention it?"

"Should I mention it further by answering your question?"

"No."

Mirwin bent over to pick up her shawl and tied the length of cloth around her waist, tucking the ends in smoothly then squatted to fix the hang of the tassels. As he moved the twisted silk cords, Ulanda listened for the tiny bells in the tassels. The shawl was a gift from him and he was pleased with his choice and that she wore it often. He eyes were on what his hands were doing. "Will you play, then?"

"I might."

His and Eunni's shortcut had led them to the flitter bay, dripping water and the echoing sound of chittering and shouts. Roots hung from the ni'at tree in the center of the common above, water was allowed to drip unimpeded to the Station Center. In the middle of this, the ti'Linn version of team break-ball was just starting to group, individuals still warming up. One of the balls was being fought over by several still unassigned players, the action well away from the post. The games down here were significantly rougher and faster than the ones set up in the common. The entire flitter bay became the playing field and the players used an odd shaped ball that bounced and rolled erratically.

"It's Rilla," Eunni whispered into his ear. "Do you want to go around the other way?"

"Too late." Rilla had already spotted him and was walking over. Under the shadow of her claw sheaths, fingers made a shape that Rit didn't pull Net to see more clearly. Garm followed close behind the E'kalt.

Heana was already in the game, stationed in the dripping roots, a black scarf tied around her right upper arm. And she was in her uniform where she more usually wore a plain tunic or robe while working on the security grid. The wet beads glistened in the cold white light. She looked at him again, as he thought she had in the Net.

Behind her in the roots, the lizards were waking up, disturbed by the light and noise and scurrying to find safety. They would sing early tonight and tomorrow Tika - or any of the kittens - would have several headless bodies waiting for him. No matter how many the cats killed, there always seemed to be about the same number singing.

Besides Heana, three ti-Linn wore the black around their necks. And Cici, but tied on her arm like Heana's was. Red was the other color.

"Will you play, Salin Strom?" Rilla asked, the translation coming clearly over the rising noise. "At odds to my play, a partnering. One time."

"No, he won't," Eunni said before he could.

"I do my best to keep my battles to words alone," he replied, signing his thanks along with a qualified negative, both of them formal to counter the small joke that she wouldn't understand. Each of their infrequent encounters had been a battle.

The Hunter's eye scales tunneled out towards him, framing the searing red pupils, but then she bowed with a sweep of her scales around her, the motion sounding like fine rain on a metal roof. The allusion came to him with the scent of heated copper and dust, both newly wet. A hot day, a summer storm. Until, he thought. The barrack mess there was a small rattle-shop affair, the roof made of plates of hammered copper salvaged from somewhere else. The same scent and he looked around, puzzled. There was more metal in that roof than in their entire suite, he thought, perhaps even in Ji'jinlini Temple.

"Salin? An answer?" Rilla's words rang through his mind; he was deep into the linking functions of the Net, almost lost in a vague expansion of his awareness. Plain-tongue and then Xintan, and with a tumble of others about to follow. Her fingers held a sign of Opening.

"My apologies," he said. Copper. And then it was gone.

Garm coughed and the E'kalt Hunter looked towards him. "Salin Rilla has given us the honor of her presence for dinner tonight in my suite," he said with a strange look to Rit. "And allowed that of her people. Heana you know, and her aide, Ge'on'ni."

"We've met briefly," he said and bowed in the ti'Linn's direction. Its chitin was the color of yellow clay, pale to the dark colors he'd seen more often, black or dark gray and the occasional brown.

"Are you playing then?" he asked the Hunter.

"Arrangements," she said in High formal using the inflection that meant future tense.

Garm smiled tightly. "There are still a few things to go over. Will you..."

Rit quickly signed a negative before the sentence could be completed. Join us, he thought Garm was going to say. From Rilla's reaction - her scales flared out

and then flattened as quickly - she had thought the same and was insulted. He didn't elaborate, not seeing that he owed her any explanations.

"Both our regrets," Eunni said, digging him in the side with her elbow. "I'm afraid I made him promise me his company and then dragged him through the dust of the interior corridors. We'll join you after we've had a chance to clean up. At the very least, by dinner time."

When the two had gone, Eunni shook her head at him solemnly. "When you poke a stick at a cat, don't complain when you get scratched."

"Is that your homily for the day?"

There was a pause where her expression didn't change then she laughed, sounding as she always did.

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Rit leaned against the wall, tired after the long walk but reluctant to leave without Eunni. She was talking with the Wa'tic who had led the procession of people carrying trays of refreshments. From the broken pincer, he thought it must be the same one as had brought the trays of samples to her in the kitchen. A bit late, he pulled its name from the Net and then remembered that she'd told him already: Hic'lic. A Voice for the Wa'tic in their suite, the memory clued from what they were talking about. Over the yells from the players, he had lost Eunni's voice almost immediately, but the tic-tic and garbled words of the cook registered longer. A mix of plain-tongue and trade-Wa'tic with neither of them pulling translations, apparently content to muddle through. Something about pastry and prayers, or the proper forms to be cut on the surfaces before baking and whether an egg glaze was more or less appropriate than a cream one.

More patient than he was, he couldn't believe she actually cared about the difference as much as the small creature did. In a few more minutes, they were out of his hearing range entirely and looking as though they might circle the large area before returning. He knew less of her life here than he had in Endica before the Opening. She came to the Brambles occasionally for a visit, or he saw her at meals and both times, almost always, either people or their other concerns intruded on the time together.

Anxious to leave, he started around to meet her. The ti'Linn warming up closest to the entrance kicked at the ball and missed, its fore-pincers busy making an honor sign. Rilla's aide, the light color as unmistakable as the action. The sign wasn't for him - the aide was looking towards the entrance - and a

moment later, Ulanda and Mirwin arrived. The remainder of the players ignored her from long practice but the aide had only been in their suite a few other times.

The ball hit the wall half way to him; a bad kick by someone else brought it to roll within feet of where he had stopped. The ti'Linn was already running to get it and Rit made a toss in its direction, not trusting the accuracy of any kick that he might attempt. With the ball, Rit let his awareness follow to touch the ti'Linn and met resistance as solid as the outer shell of the creature. Then... he was through and saw only the aide's attention on the start of the game. Alien but recognizable. The ball and the players, the floor, dimensions of the playing field, those things gave structure to what the ti'Linn was thinking. There didn't appear to be much else, or Rit wasn't able to reach it.

A hand on his arm brought him back with a start. "I didn't think to find you here," Ulanda said, dropping her hand as soon as he turned.

The effort of reaching out to the ti'Linn had him feeling queasy. "I was about to leave."

"Eunni...?"

He nodded, ignoring what else was spoken with the single word. He had an idea that she had been quite aware that he was there. "Have you asked Tass' Holdings for a temporary replacement?" he asked, gesturing towards Mirwin. The game was only now about to start; the previous one-on-one sessions had all been practice, some of it rough. A nephew of Cion's was sidelined already with a twisted ankle, an icepack on the joint, and his red scarf passed around with no takers until it reached Mirwin. The boy was tying the scarf around his arm as he walked towards the spin-ball post. Only two colored spirals showed at the bottom of the post: red and black.

"I thought I'd play as well," Ulanda said, "so that we could end up in a similar state."

"I admire your loyalty," he said dryly, bowing and glad to hear her chuckle. She was wearing a tunic so narrow in the body that it slowed her walking much less allowed for running. A lacy shawl was tied around her hips, and had floor length tasseled ends that made a second skirt. She was dressed for watching - or being watched. The style and the dark blue color suited her.

But she gave him a sideways look, a flirting look more open than any she had before. Her lips were slightly parted and her gaze lingered on his mouth before dropping. What was she picking up from him, he wondered. That bit of harmless fun with Eunni?

"Alicia is bringing me a change of clothes when she comes." She found something on the floor worth staring at. One foot kicked out and he heard high-pitched ringing from the tassels on the shawl. "We can both go in as replacements."

"Then you both will deserve whatever thumping you get."

Most of the players were either ti'Linn or Kallit-bred humans, relatives of Cion. Bright yellow hair over dusky green skin. And all of them lean with smoothly defined muscle, strong and fast, a match to the ti'Linn players. To Rit's eyes, each of the Kallit had a surprised expression on their face - eyebrows like yellow dashes from nose to temples and hollow cheeked, with the mouths their only substantial feature and usually open to a round when they weren't talking. He had to know them - or look with more than his eyes - before he could distinguish if they were male or female.

The first play spun up the post to cheers and yells. Many of their people had managed to make it; at least two dozen watched the players.

Ulanda turned and spoke into his ear. "Come in with me. A pairing, as Rilla had wanted. I've been told we're well matched. How about my... disability against yours?"

"I lack one necessary qualification."

"What?"

"A lack of common sense." And was sorry the moment he said it. Usually, the power around her was so great that trying to see past the exterior image was like looking through a curtain of smoke. With the flirting expression banished to where ever it had come from, she looked tired. Soft darker skin showed under her eyes and her mouth had lost all trace of the smile as though she didn't have sufficient energy to maintain it.

"Common sense has never served me very well." She crossed her arms and looked away again. Small lines framed the corners of her mouth.

He was at a loss of what to say. "Perhaps another time. Or one of the games in the common." He wasn't sure she could hear him. Mirwin and Gi'on'ni had taken postposition for the first play, and after a slow start, the ball had spun off the top in a blur. The noise was deafening.

The break was towards black, towards Heana and the ni'at tree roots. Mirwin's play and Gi'on'ni stayed at the post position. Running fast, the boy deliberately kicked it further into the dangling roots, then grabbed one no thicker than his wrist in both hands and swung around, Heana in the center of his arc. A rain of debris fell to the floor, the sound masked by the noise of the crowd. Shriveled root segments and fragments of tile and a small billowing of dust that settled before reaching the walls where most of the people were. Tiny lizards scurried along the floor in all directions, knocked loose from where they were hiding.

Letting go, Mirwin landed with a roll and connected with the ball almost immediately. And was down the next moment, blocked when Heana came in from the side. She kicked the ball to the post, managing an almost impossible straight line, and made a clean goal. Rit let his breath out. The entire play had taken at most thirty seconds.

As was her option, Heana claimed post position and Gi'on'ni took her place by the roots. The spot opposite was near them, the ti'Linn guard that Mirwin had replaced walked to the post to wait for the decision of the spin.

Mirwin grinned at Ulanda as he shook debris out of his hair, using his fingers to comb the thick curling mass. A timed chant began from those watching and the boy turned back to the post. The ball was rising up the spiral for the second break. The humans were clapping along with the chant.

The break was towards black again but the entrance area this time and Mirwin kicked air in frustration. He came back over, rubbing his palms on the side of his short tunic. He smelled of musk. Although not as strong as the bark and leaves, the roots had the same scent. "That was a lucky shot she got," he complained, but the grin stayed.

Ulanda laughed and Rit heard genuine enjoyment in her voice. "You have a friend," she shouted, gesturing for Mirwin to turn. A black and white striped lizard was clinging to the back of his tunic.

Rit picked the lizard off, cupping it in his palms. When he opened his hand, the small creature crawled along one finger to the end, and stayed there, its sides heaving. He held it for Ulanda to see and the lizard's head swung from side to side, looking at her as she made tisking motions with her tongue against her teeth.

A scream and shattering pottery and she turned away. Instantly, Mirwin moved between her and the noise, his body tensed.

A rapid-fire tic-tic filled the sudden silence and the boy relaxed. Heana and the Kallit player with the red armband had gone right through the refreshments, spilling juices and mashing cakes and pastries. The Wa'tic with Eunni was shouting at them, all four upper arms waving, and was ignored as the ball bounced towards the opposite side of the bay where the flitter tube was. The two players were matched in speed and the play was settling down into a real contest.

The small Wa'tic was picking up pieces of a jug when Eunni squatted to talk with it. And was still holding one piece when they walked over. The lizard bobbed up and down as they approached.

Eunni's brown eyes met his with a smile in them. He held the lizard up higher. "We've another guest, do you think there will be enough food?"

"Hic'lic?" she asked. "What do you think?"

The Wa'tic answered in plain tongue. "Eat what losers here eat." Its neck swiveled smoothly for a better look at the players. Heana had the ball but the Kallit was close, neither of the women had completed a clean circle of the post. "Eat winner here," Hic'lic added to better effect, definitely watching Heana as she pulled away from the other.

"A mouthful," Rit said, laughing along with the others. The lizard was still bobbing, apparently not bothered by the noise or the people.

Eunni shook her head. "He's bowing." She put her hand next to Rit's and waited until the lizard moved over, then stoked it with the tip of her finger.

Ulanda took a turn at the stroking. One tiny red eye looked down to stare at the movement of her braid ends. "He only looked at me... or is it Hic'lic that he's impressed with?"

She turned her head to nod towards the Wa'tic and that's when the lizard made his move, jumping into her braid ends. Ulanda shrieked and flung her arm out. The lizard let go, flying with legs spread out and landed on Rit's nose. Gently, he picked it off and it ran back out along the length of one finger, regarding the others one at a time. Then it yawned, showing a mouthful of needle sharp teeth as transparent as glass.

Mirwin was laughing so hard he had trouble staying upright.

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Ulanda checked the Net for Alicia and found her just arriving. The second play finally ended with Heana scoring again. Black moved up six points for the single play. Everyone's attention was on the post.

"Filthy things," Alicia said with a sour look at the lizard and without looking towards her husband or Eunni at all. She was dressed for playing and had remembered to bring Ulanda's baggy pants and short robe as promised.

The third play had been as short as the first and the fourth was setting up already. Heana allowed her position to Ge'on'ni and stepped out. The woman's beaded uniform was glazed with sweat and when she reached the wall, she bent over, her hands on her knees, breathing heavily. No one approached her.

Ulanda looked around a moment, waiting to see who the replacement would be. One of the Ji'jinlini Temple aides had filled Ge'on'ni's spot and Ulanda decided that she could wait another play.

But Cici was waving at her, already coming over. "You can take my place." Her opposite, a Blackmouth caste ti'Linn wearing red, approached them as well. Op'ki'na, one of the guards they had acquired after the trouble in the Library common. It watched Eunni for directions, not her. That ti'ti'sinici had close contacts with a Station breeding group, a merchant contact that Eunni had cultivated by using their services for supplies.

Ulanda nodded to Cici. "Black. How not?" She had intended it as a joke but it hadn't come out as one.



Cici tied the scarf on. "Stay out of the roots if you can," she whispered. "It's hard to keep your balance in there, you practically have to use your hands." Her nose wrinkled. "And there's squashed lizards everywhere underfoot."

Ulanda looked around as she walked to the break-post. The noise level had dropped to almost nothing. Ge'on'ni dipped in a bow as she took her place next to him. Without having had a play yet, the aide had taken the option of changing to red rather than giving up the break-post position. Four round eyes showed predominantly red as well, the lights rotating slowly; she felt a sense of menace from the ti'Linn and then... nothing.

The ball started rising and she looked to find Rit one more time. He and Eunni were almost to the entrance and being followed by Hic'lic. The clapping was starting up, and the chanting as well, growing like a wave as more people joined in.

Her name, over and over again.

Rit stopped at the top of the stairs to get his breath. He could hear the chanting in a distorted echo through the corridor and up the steep passageway. The ball would be near the top and speeding up. In the ti'Linn version, it took almost five minutes for the ball to reach break point in a deliberate building of tension.

"I thought you'd stay and watch," Eunni said, frowning as she stared down the stairs before looking back to him. Hic'lic had stopped half way and appeared to be listening as well.

The chanting stopped abruptly. Command level Net opened almost before he reached for it and the flitter bay spread out before him. He felt Kori and offered a touch that meant a smile and felt one in return. Ulanda was walking away from the post. Ge'on'ni was playing against one of Op'ki'na's mates.

With the Net came a feel of the grid and the closest to a human laugh he had ever felt from Kori. The grid was fully operational with the last of the Ji'jinlini Temple system gone. At a query from him, she did a mock-up run with the flitter bay as the focus. Warding lines bloomed and the break ball flattened with a pop.

"I could wish," he said, feeling the pleasure she was taking in the work.

Eunni had followed him into the Net and started laughing. With the pop of the ball had come a cracking sound as from a shell and the smell of butter. The dish Kori had ordered their first night there and that Eunni had eaten. He had been asleep, but Alicia had told him later.

"You'll be at dinner, then?" he asked Kori.

The laugh rippled though the Net, more alien this time but the pleasure was still very recognizable. Then, one last check and the fail-safe subsystems began snapping up around her one by one, sounding and feeling like they were doors slamming in his face.

Catching the same, Eunni actually ducked and then quickly backed out of the Net. "Ouch," she said, wincing.

"Cream glaze," Hic'lic said in plain-tongue and scurried up the remaining stairs. "A celebration. Do it, do it."

"You do just that," Eunni said. Then added more in trade-Wa'tic. "Three lines."

It stopped as though frozen and turned to look at her. Then it bobbed once and was gone.

Rit rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, smelling the lizard he still held, a scent not unlike the bark of the ni'at tree. "That meant something, I hope."

"Kori deserves it," she said cryptically. "The Zimmer burn their prayers but the Wa'tic eat them." He didn't bother asking the Net when she didn't offer more, content to be ignorant of some things.

She took his arm with hers and started walking. The Net pull came with them. "What do we do with ours?" she added when they had reached the commons.

"Hmm?" He was running down a side shoot in the security grid. Bolda. He was outside of their suite.

An answer came from Kori to the question he hadn't asked. "He's in Downside Port, a pub next to the Third Petal Speakerhouse. There's no problem."

"Rit?" Eunni asked.

No problem except that Bolda was currently being pinned down by an out-of-uniform Station security agent. Three beer down so far and Rit would put his money on Bolda. "What?" he asked, suddenly realizing that Eunni had asked him a question.

"Prayers."

He had to backtrack. "Here or back home?" he asked to stall her.

She smiled. "Back home, we swallowed them whole, making them totally indigestible. Out they'd plop, much the same as when they started."

"That's revolting." He released the tiny lizard onto the main trunk of the ni'at tree.

Eunni watched. "I know," she said, sounding pleased with herself. "And don't worry about Bolda. He's probably just sightseeing."

The lizard moved about a foot up the tree then stopped. He tapped close behind to scare it, and it darted upwards and was lost in the foliage a moment later. "I had no intention of worrying about him."

"Glad to hear it."

Niv was in the bathhouse when they got there, sitting cross-legged at the edge of the pool and wearing a terry wrap around his waist. Rit hadn't thought to check if anyone else was using the bath.

"You worry needlessly," Niv said as he got to his feet. For a moment, Rit thought that he was referring to Bolda as well, but he continued, "She will be as bored with this game as she is with the one in the common."

Ulanda then. "I wasn't worried." Rit looked up from bending to get a couple of towels from the stack left in the corner. "Are the games fixed?"

"No, but these games are a disease you have to catch early and she was an Acolyte before being of an age to play. She plays now because she is pleased to be bored." Niv shrugged as he began to help Eunni undress. She slapped his hand away when he pulled the first tie on the girdle of her robe but the action was as light as when she'd done the same to him in the kitchen over a piece of pastry.

Practice had helped him know where to look to give others privacy. A third person made the difference - he knew exactly where he intended to look if Niv would only leave. Or more than look, he knew that now from the degree of his frustration at the Camerat. The realization was a shock, he had managed to convince himself that what had happened in the corridor was simply the play of old friends.

When Niv did leave, both he and Eunni were in the water and then, he was back before they were finished soaping up, carrying fresh clothes for the both of them.

"Did you plan this?" he whispered to Eunni, trying to blunt his annoyance with humor.

"Who me? I thought you had." She looked at him, all innocence and then stepped out to be enfolded in a thick white towel held for her by Niv. The Camerat blinked slowly at him as he rubbed Eunni's hair dry with another towel.

Rit stroked the warm water just enough to stay upright, watching back. Eunni had given herself over to the sensation of the moment, enjoying the Camerat's hands on her. Rit pulled his awareness back sharply, ashamed, feeling as though he had been caught invading her privacy. He had, he supposed, and in more than one meaning of the word. He wasn't reaching Eunni any more than he had been able to earlier, but Niv, feeling her through the Camerat's finely trained senses.

He had forgotten the cracked warding bead and only noticed it was missing when he untied his wet braid. Gone with the dirty clothes, he supposed, and took a detour to the maintenance area instead of going straight to Garm's quarters where the meeting with Rilla persisted. His tunic was on the floor of the laundry where Niv must have left it - any one who might have picked it up was at the game - but the bead wasn't there either. A crosscheck in the Net came up inconclusive with reference to any danger associated with it. Probably not, but he didn't want to lose it regardless. It was one of the few originals from Gennady's ship.

"Kori?" he asked into the Net as he gave the details and his concern. "Can you tell where it is?" She asked him to wait, and then surprised him when he heard her answer instead of receive it through the Net.

"I wouldn't rely on it," she said after tossing the bead to him. This time he managed to catch it. "But there's no danger, any power release is dependent on the correct triggering configuration. They were designed to be used under less than optimum conditions."

"Like being thrown?"

She looked serious. "It should not have cracked. I've checked the impact area and it's a major point in the defense grid, but the incompatibility of the two systems shouldn't have had that effect. Besides, the grid didn't attempt to link and the tiles around the point show nothing out of the ordinary. If there's need, match the cracked one with an intact bead for extra power... follow the lines that offer themselves and you shouldn't have any trouble."

"Where was it?"

One narrow white hand fingered the binding of her rifle harness. She was still in her uniform. "High in the branches of the ni'at tree." Her Clan marks were pale but from being over tired, he thought.

He put the bead in his pocket. "In the ni'at tree? The lizards?"

She turned her head to look out the door towards the common then shrugged. And walked beside him as he left, protesting any need for celebrating the completion of the grid. Or her participation more likely, although she wouldn't admit it.

"A token appearance," he suggested, his final offer before ordering her to appear. Too many people had put a great deal into getting it done and the work had to be seen to be rewarded, despite Kori's lack of enthusiasm at a public display.

"A company of reluctance?" she asked in plain-tongue, mangling the language where she usually spoke it perfectly. Her arms were folded in front and he caught the particular odor that said she wasn't happy. "They look at me," she added softly.

And that was at the core of the matter, Rit thought. "And see Commander Oimit?" She didn't answer. "You're around Heana, even Rilla, all the time," he continued, "and the aide, the ti'Linn..."

"Ge'on'ni." The name had been spat out. She barely tolerated even their own ti'Linn.

He sighed. "There are only three of them to all of us. And it won't be for very much longer, so let them look." Putting a hand on her arm, he stopped. He could feel the heat of her body through the cloth. They were almost to Garm's suite and this had to be said in private. "Are you sorry?"

He knew it hadn't been necessary to elaborate. "When I stayed behind, I knew Gennady would do that in the reality he chose, that it would be part of what he asked for. Myself, another self. He doesn't care for failure of any kind; it was rage speaking when he gave me to you."

Spoken as though Gennady were still alive and with some of the yearning she had shown in the anteroom. How often had she looked at what little they had on the paltin and seen what she had missed? Mixed feelings then - and she still had them as mixed. "Kori, we've been as selfish as Gennady in our need of your abilities. There is no need for you to be alone, or to think that you should be. If you like, I can make the arrangements here. Any place else we go, well, there may not be as many Zimmer there."

She bowed her head in a classic Zimmer stance of submission. "Who did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of being an intermediary to your choice." He wondered if she had ever been given a part in this kind of decision. From what he had learned about affiliated freeborn, most likely had never entertained the idea of freedom in the matter. Direction would have come from her family elders if not from the Clan.

Disturbing memories threatened to invade as he turned her head so that their eyes met. Smooth skin - Simitta and then, worse again, the feel of the leather book.

"The Councilor from the Freeborn Assembly challenged us on Peecit being here. When the formal Warrant came, I personally checked the customs again, but..." He hesitated, thoroughly uncomfortable even as he knew he was doing what she would see as his duty. And probably long overdue. "From what I understood... As I said, I can make the arrangements for you, and with San Garm's allowance, for Silassic as well, whoever is part of the Household." Even for Peecit if she stayed long enough, oaths or no oaths. Willing or not willing. He took a deep breath. "What about Silassic? Have you two talked?"

Did she feel any relief at what he had tried to keep to only a suggestion? He was trying to read her without adding anything of his own. He was tired enough to resent that there was always something more to worry about. And tired enough to hope that he could take the easy way out and not look further.

"Our genetic lines are compatible," she said.

After watching her a moment longer, he nodded. "I'll talk to him. You'd better hurry and get changed." Then he remembered that Heana had her uniform on and would probably keep it on. The beads used to make that kind of cloth rinsed clean and didn't absorb water.

"No, you're fine as you are," he added before Kori could escape.

Garm's suite opened off the common, not one of the garden pavilions, but a series of rooms that fit into one another as though nesting, and at the core, a small patio. Stairs from there lead down to the herb garden off the kitchen and the two shared the same quality of sunlight and air. When Rit had first seen the suite, it was similar to most of the unused areas that surrounded the common

with standard locking tiles and marble sheeting here and there in patches where it hadn't been taken to be used elsewhere. Now, it had something of what he had seen of Lillisim from the recordings. The walls were slightly translucent, glowing as though illuminated from behind by a desert sun. Pink tinged, shell-like, but with blue in the depths, a sky blue and changeable as to time of day. The air was dry inside the rooms, and on rainy days in the garden, had a noticeable interface from suite to common. In his rooms, the old Simic was different than he was at the meals taken in the tent with the others.

The meeting was in the inner room but the wide doors of each were pulled back making the space into one long room from the common to the patio. Kori would have stayed with the Honor guard at the entrance but he signed her to keep with him.

Rilla got to her feet, then bowed formally, and waited on his returning the gesture. The ti'Linn Priest Lo'li'lin was present along with the usual complement of attendants. Garm followed their bow with the same, turning this into what Rit had been hoping it wouldn't. He gave in and exchanged the greetings with everybody as though he didn't live in the same suite with most of them and see the others on a regular basis. He could feel the misery from Kori as the formalities dragged on.

No surprise that Eunni and Niv had beaten him there, but he hadn't expected Ulanda and Alicia. His wife had a graze across one cheek that should bruise and the eye on that side was partly closed. In the peculiar light of the room, she was pale, waifish, almost a child again. But she was still capable of giving him a look that said he shouldn't bother with either jokes or I-told-you-so's.

"I had no intention of mentioning it," he said as he knelt beside her and received another message but in her smile. A blend of satiety from physical effort and arousal in her success, she was feeding off her feelings in a positive loop. Cocky, he thought. Smug.

"You took your time," she said as she moved over slightly and then back with a wiggle until they were thigh to thigh. A clean robe and she'd obviously bathed, but a sponge bath, he thought. Ulanda as well, the two of them had the same smug look.

Eunni had her lips pressed together as though she might burst out laughing otherwise, then leaned over and whispered something to Niv from behind a sheltering hand.

"Did you score a point?" Rit asked, turning his attention and leaving it open as to which he was speaking to, Alicia or Ulanda. Rilla had stopped what she had been saying and was listening.

Alicia answered as she passed him a bowl of tea that an aide had poured from the service to one side of her. "It was in the ninth play, the ball broke towards..."

"I made the point," Ulanda said, interrupting her. "Weren't you watching from the Net?"

He shook his head. A pairing, he wondered? And had it confirmed in the game synopsis that he pulled. Black was still ahead with a dozen plays completed and no limit yet set on the duration of the game.

He made a point of encouraging a blow-by-blow description of the play, prompting either Alicia or Ulanda whenever other conversation ebbed. Otherwise, the meeting was exactly the tiresome rehashing of events that he had expected, with the E'kalt Hunter taking bows at each point where additional thanks could be prompted. Eunni left for a short time, then returned with the start of the dinner service.

Ge'on'ni and Heana arrived just before the first course, neither of them looking the worse for wear. Mirwin following more stiffly, his hair in tight ringlets from the bath. His toilette had been hurried; he wasn't wearing any of the makeup he preferred on formal occasions. He served Ulanda, Niv stayed with Eunni.

With the sunset, the sky had clouded. White masses were edged with mother of pearl, slowly darkening to gray. By the end of the meal, a light rain was falling. Rit stood in the moist air coming in the open door, a tea bowl in his hand, watching and listening. On either side of the path, two honor guard were motionless at attention, standing in the rain. One of them was Op'ki'na, still wearing the red scarf, soaked now and appearing more as a texture against the dark of his chitin than a color. Black had won but the ti'Linn had scored a play.

He had left Rilla apparently content to listen to music and drink wine and with Ulanda maintaining what small talk seemed necessary. Alicia, Mirwin and the ti'Linn Priest were verbally replaying the break-ball game, point by point. Kori had disappeared somewhere, perhaps following Ge'on'ni and Heana. He didn't know where they were, but their departure had been tracked by security. Tallomal, he thought from the bit of the Net he caught off Alicia.

He took a sip of his tea, quietly savoring the taste. Like Alicia had earlier, he felt sated by effort, but unlike her, he didn't know from what. And not as comfortable with the feeling, either, or aroused as she had been. That part had faded and he had trouble remembering the urgency he had felt in the bathhouse or even what lay underneath the simpler play from the walk with Eunni.

Coming from across the common, the water drum in the bathhouse sounded and behind him, third layer into the suite, a flute and ci-ci drum were being played in concert. Garm had followed him. "The light's changed since we've come, hasn't it." Changed like your suite has changed, he almost said. Did the Simic realize how much he had impressed onto his living space? Had any of it past the obvious decorating been deliberate?

"I haven't noticed a change," Garm said coldly.

Rit sighed as he turned away from the view. The dinner was essentially over but no formal Closure had been given by Ulanda, leaving this open time as people left gradually. A pleasant end to an occasion when the guests were welcome, but he hadn't thought Rilla and her two counted as such.

"Am I missing a point of protocol?"

"We need to keep that dialogue open. And, she's due the respect of her ranking, especially from one with the same rank."

Rilla? And now, or in the flitter bay when she had asked for a match? He made a motion of reconciliation.

Garm shrugged. "Was that towards her or me? I'm less inclined to believe it than she will."

"Then I'll give her the same and hope for better." And hopefully not see her again. He didn't have Garm's belief in her gullibility, but from her actions tonight, she did want appearances kept up and probably for the same reason as Garm.

He followed the Simic's lead, not straight through but around the nesting rooms and inwards again through a side door to a gold and green space. The floor was covered with the same cream mats that Ulanda's pavilion had, but little of them showed between the melody of rugs. A desk and several chairs were against one wall, he thought Garm must use those when on his own, low tables and cushions were center of the room, with space enough for several people to work at.

Garm probably spent most of his time here, he thought. It had even more of the stamp of the Simic in the mix of order and chaos. And books - his father would have approved. As they walked in, Peecit looked up from what she was reading. Close by, Cici snored loudly, a half full bowl of wine on the floor beside her. Kori stood by the inner door, apparently listening to the plaintive music as he had been to the rain. She looked once to them, nodded and turned her attention again to the music.

"San Garm," Peecit said, half rising when she saw them. "Salin Strom. Cici asked me here..." The heavy book slid off her lap and bumped the work tray in front of her, and in turn, the brazier. Scrambling, the girl tried to pick up the book and at the same time, steady the wine bowl that was on a warming disk over the coals. Some of the wine spilled and scented steam rose with a hiss.

"Then it's quite alright," Garm said, gesturing to the girl. "Sit, sit. She'll expect you to be here when she wakes up."

The book that Peecit held had arrived the same time as she had. "Have you come up with anything yet?" he asked Garm. At his voice the girl recoiled and dropped the book again.

The Simic had a gentle look as he reassured her again, but he took the book. The scholar this time, Rit thought. Perhaps it was this room that brought the quality out or it quenched the wildness that took him at other times.



Garm brushed flecks of ash from the smooth cover. "Nothing worth mentioning. Cici's been working with me on a third level removed translation. That's what we were doing most of this morning until interrupted by the break-ball game and Rilla respectively. We're not having a great deal of success. She did say Peecit was coming over this afternoon to help her, I'd forgotten. As soon as the game started, she probably did too." After a moment's hesitation, he passed the book back to Peecit. "When you handle it, please use the gloves."

And to him, "I don't know why I bother. Muffin crumbs, tea stains, ashes - I even saw traces of pigment..." He looked at Peecit again, a speculative look in his eyes. The girl's hair rose in a crest and fell in rapid succession and she didn't meet his gaze. "Let's see what you've done," he added as he knelt and pulled the work tray closer.

Rollled sheets of draft paper littered the surface, many with finger smudges of various colors. At the bottom, a small ink box held paste inks in a row and a tiny brush. The lid was open but the box had been hidden under layers of papers, with thicker markings of color on the bottom sheet. Garm carefully laid that one out on the rug by itself to dry. After a quick look at each painting, he selected several and used the corner stones to hold them flat. Curious, Rit knelt to see. The girl must have been working on them most of the afternoon, probably while Cici had been at the break-ball game.

He recognized some of the drawings, almost exact copies from the embossed pictures in the book, but colored in with bright pigments. There weren't any obvious gaps in the coloring either, the paint set must be based on the human visual range. Kallit perhaps.

Garm examined those first and moved them to one side, then pulled two others in for closer study. "They're not representational. What did you use as your source?"

Without a word, Peecit opened the book and turned it around so that the old man would have a clear view. Garm turned it further and then put one of the paintings next to it. "What do you think?" he asked Rit as he stood up.

"Is it supposed to mean something?"

Peecit leaned forward to draw a finger along one dark spiraling line on a red ground. "The vortex of the...Wu'lim."

The last word came with a quick peek up at him and then to Kori before dropping her eyes. With the Warrant had come the official papers from her parents that transferred her to the graces of the freeborn Assembly for what was essentially decontamination. Ulanda had refused to release her.

The Zimmer girl pointed at a slash in blue that shaded into black. "The journey of the soul. Water, a wave." Her voice faded.

The picture in the book was of a Zimmer sewing on a piece of cloth. Rit held it to the light to get a better look at the details but the surface was always either

too close or too far away. A Net lead offered itself, the feel of the old Simic in the pulling, and the indexed translation notes opened.

Rit pointed to a small green circle in the upper left corner of her painting. Lines in black were drawn across the green and then scratched at a right angle to show the white paper. The size of a finger print and he thought it might actually be one. Green showed under the nail of Peecit's index finger. "And this?" he asked her.

"The net of the progenitor."

He nodded. Each of these, he had heard of as well as seen the images used to represent them. Not dissimilar to what she'd done here, and he felt foolish for not making the connection. "Where are these things in the original?"

She frowned. "Here..." Touching the needle and behind him, Garm chuckled. "...and here." Her hand moved to the border of the cloth. Rit needed the enhancement of the Net images to see what she was pointing to. "And the net is here." The last was a band fastened around the Zimmer's forehead; the two ties hanging loose and with the ends lost in the folds of the cloth being embroidered. A braided cord in the Wind in the Branches pattern as was the embroidery. Li-cassa seeds and flowers in the last. He needed the Net image for that as well.

"When I saw that particular pattern I realized the book might mean more than was apparent at first," Garm said. "Zimmer were created by Piltsimic loom-masters, that's why I used Bolda's signature to search for more books." The old man sighed. "All the searching that we did for meaning, I think led us to this one book."

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Bolda shifted his weight from one cheek onto the other, searching for that elusive soft spot on the bench. Coming in here late last night, he had kneed the wooden bench further against the railing that overlooked the common and staked his territory with an assortment of garbage and empty mugs. The place was a dump.

He yawned and scratched. "Your turn," he grunted to the tall, thin man playing rings and stones with him. An accountant slumming from Yellow Ring Band, or so his story went. Station Security was Bolda's guess.

A whiff of smoke from an incense stick came his way. That was new and he sneaked a look while the man was occupied. Sitting sideways with one elbow hooked onto the railing, it was an easy matter to watch what was going on just down from him. More people had gathered around the door to the Speakerhouse

and a woman was holding a child up to light a second stick off the first. On each side of the door was an alter, about waist level to a Zimmer.

He wasn't overlooking much of a space, just an open round where several corridors met, plain mud colored building tile, nothing fancy. Or one try: a small fountain in the center, but no water and from the dirt, there hadn't been for a long time, probably as long as this area had been predominantly Zimmer. The only color was in the shop doors, shiny lacquer with each one different. The Speakerhouse was between a greengrocer and a tiny Scribe shop with an ancient sign tacked above the sky green door. Contracts and trade agreements written and witnessed. A Zimmer sat on the stone stoop of the Scribe shop, legs tucked up, a pastry balanced on his knees. His back reflected in the glossy paint, white skin floating, the black tunic eaten by the rich green of the door.

The narrow corridors that radiated outwards were much darker than the commons; the only light came from the odd glow globe tagging people around and a few more in doorways. This area of the Station kept to DownPort time. He had been hoping to use the pre-morning dark for a private moment with Peecit's parents on their way to the Speakerhouse but he didn't think so now, not with this crowd. In his jacket pocket was the note Peecit had given him. It was the last of the three versions that he'd seen and there had probably been more that hadn't made it that far.

He pushed one of his playing stones forward. "Match that."

The man chose three of the rings thrown previously, stopping after each selection as though thinking long and hard. And dropped them carelessly from his broad hand. A Tillerwa male, the Family color lines on his hands were green and yellow, an off-Station group, he'd said. His fringe of hair was dyed to match. Pleasant fellow of few words but he had clung like a vine all night.

You can do better than that, Bolda thought but kept up his end of the game of two drunks playing rings and stones. And let his sleeve drag through the pieces as he reached for one on the far side of the board. "Oh, damn," he said, then knocked the other man's beer over. The rings were wood, several floated onto his lap, followed by a crest of greenish foam.

The Tillerwa stood, jostling the table. "Default," he hissed in High formal, forgetting to slur the word. Then added a few more in Trade basic as the cold beer soaked in, the words still not slurred and definitely not formal.

"Oh hell." Bolda rustled into a pocket for loose change. "Here, then. Don't get riled. I'll buy you another."

"Game costs!" he snarled then seemed to recall himself and downgraded his bluster by degrees. "Points to me, I win. No fault, accident."

Bolda tossed several coins onto the table, enough for the beer and the game both. He'd had enough. Dawn was soon, or what passed for it here, and the

morning rites at the Speakerhouse. Maybe he could catch Peecit's parents as they left their apartment. He flashed a Closure sign and added, "Beat it."

The appeasing continued even with Bolda getting progressively ruder. Then half into a remark he'd saved up for just such an occasion, the other man's face went blank and he left in a rush. Bolda took another sip of his beer while thinking about dropping the pretense and diving into the Net systems. And immediately wished he hadn't taken the sip. The stuff was pitiful.

The barkeep came over to clean up now there was money on the table instead of just beer. His eye was on the common as well. An instinct for trouble, Bolda figured.

Bolda gestured to the commons. "Always this crowded?"

The money disappeared into the man's apron. "If the Master Weaver says so."

Shit. With a sigh, Bolda opened his money pouch. First a green bead along with a small coin. He put both on the table, making a furtive sign that meant privacy as he withdrew his hand. And dropped two more coin that he'd palmed. Temple marks were pressed deep into their surface.

From the look on the man's face he knew what the bead was. Spann technology, one of those that they'd brought with them. Bolda grunted on general principle. Why wouldn't a barkeep in the middle of nowhere near the Alliance, be familiar with something that Clan Zimmer would use.

Avoiding the bead, the barkeep picked up the small coin as he palmed the other two even more expertly than Bolda had. To anyone watching from outside the subtle field the bead cast, it and the two Temple coin didn't exist.

"That one was Station security, never seen him before but I've seen his friends." The man was scrubbing the table top, bending over to put his back into the effort. "Checked with my friends. He's got an up-uppity ranking. Too fancy to stay around Groundside."

"Then why's he here?"

"Zimmer are supposed to blow."

"Helped?"

He got a shrug.

Bolda wrapped his palm around another Temple coin. The barkeep's fingers twitched. More money than he'd see from a busy night and all profit. Except the sweat running down the man's face wasn't from scrubbing the table.

"I wanted to talk with one of the Zimmer Speakers." Bolda let the light catch the pale surface of the coin and adjusted the field to compensate. "Any idea how I could do that?"

"No." The man coughed. "Other strangers have been coming around lately and the Zimmer are spooked."

"What strangers?"

"Never seen them before. Nobody has." He shrugged again even as his hands started to reach towards the money, not able to separate his actions from words despite the need.

Two coins were in Bolda's palm now with two more - smaller ones without the distinctive marks - being held openly. "Who have these strangers been talking too?"

The man's eyes blinked from the sweat running into them and he'd forgotten to keep scrubbing. But he answered. "Sasi-hand man, old Zimmer. Crest end braided with the Lady's colors. Says it's all their fault. Those Speakers, both him and his mate. Their fault that strangers are coming around, butting into other people's business." He rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead and looked at Bolda uncertainly. "Got themselves a daughter that's run off."

Bolda let all four coins fall to the tabletop. "So they do."

After the man had collected his money and gone back to the bar, Bolda got up and stretched. He might as well watch openly, he wasn't fooling anyone.

He saw Eunni before she did him. Dressed like she belonged there, she had a shopping basket over one arm and was easing through the crowd with just the right touch of resignation and pushiness.

"Not that I really needed you to worry about," Bolda said as he lifted his bowl in salute. He had met her in the street, trading the pub for a tearoom while he could still walk. The tearoom was street level to enter, same as the Speakerhouse, but up a few steps once you came in. A window-side seat gave him a view of the entrance. The small place was filling up but mainly Zimmer waiting in line to get something to eat and then taking it outside. Most of the tables were empty.

Eunni matched his salute with her own. "You? Worry about me? Why would you worry about..."

"Well, I wasn't worrying at all until you showed up." He blew bubbles with his words and nodded towards the doorway. The Tillerwa had appeared, obviously not caring that he was seen. And still in his wet clothes. Whatever had pulled him away hadn't given him time to change. Eunni's showing up probably.

"Place was perfectly safe," Bolda added. "You're trouble, woman."

Eunni turned and looked at the tall man then back to him. "Flattery won't get you anywhere."

He snorted. "Well, that wasn't any place I was headed."

"This shouldn't have been either. Kori warned you off hours ago."

"Just went for a morning's walk."

"Bolda, it's bedtime."

At the grocer next to the Speakerhouse, a big W'slier had rolled the awning up, but that's as far as she'd gotten. The blue door was still closed and there weren't

any bins outside yet. Leaning forward against the broad sill, stacked fruit baskets pushed to one side, she watched the Zimmer with narrowed eyes. "Tell tall and skinny that," he said, nodding to the Tillerwa. "Or was it an offer?"

"Best one you're likely to get." Smiling but still distracted. Then she smiled for sure. "Peecit asked you to. You are such a softy."

"She's worried about her parents."

"Bolda, she's got a right to be, but that doesn't excuse your butting in."

"And just whose authority would I need?" he said sourly. He took the note out and unfolded it before passing it to Eunni. It didn't say much, just: Hi and don't worry. You'd think she was on vacation. Reading it took only seconds and then Eunni pushed it back to him. Written in Zimmer-native, and even as far out of the Net systems as he was keeping himself, he caught a whiff of her link as she translated it.

"Well?" he asked.

"They've disowned her, you know that. I don't know what they would say in private, but in public, I don't think either one of them would have taken the letter. You'd have been lucky not to get torn apart."

"I wasn't figuring on this many people. Station domestic doesn't show any disturbances." And he hadn't wanted to tip his hand by going deeper in the system.

Suddenly, Eunni looked back over her shoulder again. In the street, the Zimmer were moving forward. The Speakerhouse doors had opened. Smoke from the joss sticks set in the altars on either side swirled, clouding the first push of people. Then the crush forward stopped and from down the opposite end of the corridor came chanting and thumping. Half a dozen Zimmer with banners set on long poles were marching, banging the poles against the floor with each step. In their center were a man and a woman, dressed in red and white striped robes. He couldn't get a clear look at them for all the bodies in between, but then the man turned his head. In a flash of an image, Bolda saw Peecit's eyes in an older face, the deep blue very clear in the reflected gray light. The surrounding Zimmer cleared a path for the two, taking up the chanting until the corridor rang with the sound. They were past in a minute.

Then through the sound, a counter chant, broken and shouted more than sang. Bolda stood to get a better look. A Zimmer, surrounded by his own supporters, was by the doorway, blocking the entrance. Fine braids started just above his nose, in the short hairs and went back in a single stripe of black and opal intertwined with the white of his hair. The barkeep's old Zimmer. A foam-at-the-mouth raver was Bolda's estimation.

The procession stopped in chaos of yelling, all in Zimmer-native. The confrontation radiated outwards from the old man, heated arguments flaring here and there as though reaching ready fuel. Shouting people pressing forward, arms

waving, others trying to withdraw. The two Speakers stood quietly, an island of calm, their escort backed in to protect them and being bumped and jostled. They used their poles as bars, then weapons to keep the others away.

From near the entrance of the tearoom, the Tillerwa started towards him, a rolled up paper in one hand and the simpering look wiped off his face.

Outside, the Station Guard had started to move in from the side corridors and doorways, at least a double ten-count, and several others leaned over the railing of the pub that Bolda had just left. Blue flares of warding popped at random in the crowd, but just pushing bursts, nothing lethal. At the grocers, the awning was down. Bolda sat.

He felt the next bit of Net. A sizzle like lightening had struck close by and Eunni turned to look at the Tillerwa - the man had stopped in his tracks - then back to him. "We just upped the ante," she said tightly. "Are you following this?"

He was now. Armed ti'Linn were suddenly in the corridors as well, forcing the Zimmer to go forward, filling up the open space, trapping by force of bodies any of the Station guard who had advanced inwards. Shouts were followed by shrill screams. A woman had fallen. He lost sight of the old Zimmer behind a triad of ti'Linn but he thought they'd all pushed into the Speakerhouse. The chanting faltered, died a moment, and then started again, louder than before. An invocation to the Wu'lim, he had heard Peecit chant it while kneeling at the altar in her room as she lit the joss sticks. The letter she'd given him was still faintly scented with the smoke.

The ti'Linn were wearing Blackmouth Clan along with their individual ti'ti'sinici markings and little else but for the weapons, certainly not Temple colors. "Maybe we should go," he said.

Three more ti'Linn had filed into the tearoom and the Tillerwa found himself staring down the end of a tube-gun and being backed up, away from them.

"I haven't finished my tea," Eunni said. There was a start of a smile around her lips, but it died. "Station Net just stopped taking my linkup."

"All the way up," he said, feeling raw fear burn out some of the beer he'd drunk. "Only Rilla could have ordered that." And she couldn't have ordered blanking out the Temple nodes in the system. He could have forced them, but that said too much that he didn't want said. "Is she out of our suite then?"

Eunni nodded, already getting up. Taking her arm, he guided her out, two of the ti'Linn going with them, one ahead and one back.

Rit let the night continue - his first instinct had been for daylight. He rolled the broken bead between his fingers and listened to the music as he reviewed the Net flags. If he concentrated, he could feel the crack in the bead going all the way around but the music stole his thoughts after only a few moments of trying. The drums were silent; the player was on Tallomal's security team, leaving only the

flutist. The Wa'tic wove the lizard's two note cheeping into an unending melody, warp to the rain's weft. Closing his eyes, Rit felt that he could be very far away from here; he could almost see another world in the sound.

Alicia came over and slipped her arm into his. "Apparently it's a diversion."

Repeating the obvious from the spins, but he supposed she felt the need to say something. There was little else that it could be - it was too well planned over too long a period of time to be dependent on Bolda and Eunni being there as targets.

"The question is, a diversion to what?" he said as obviously and covered her hand with his. At the first news of the trouble at the Third Petal Speakerhouse, Rilla and her two had gone. Moments after their flutter left the suite, the filtered linkup to the Station Net was back, her signature as Ranking Commander of the Station on the apology.

The ti'Linn Priest pulled away from its attendants, pincers scraping on chitin and a murmuring made up of low clicking sounds. A sudden loud trill sent Rit's hair on end but the sound cut off before he could react further. Alicia had tensed and he felt her mind deepen, leaving a blank of potential.

"That one and that one, a strange partnering," the Priest said to him in plain tongue, its people watching from across the room.

Ulanda and the E'kalt Hunter? Or him? "In what way?" he asked. And suddenly realized that the Priest meant the Empress and the Hunter.

"What is." The Priest chittered something else. "Creation," the domestic Net offered. "No," Lo'li'lin said, and again, but in old-tongue the second time. "The Office of Forms moves, green on a field of black. How can this one not join? How can this one?"

"What will you do?" Alicia asked evenly, the potential in her slightly more defined than before. Rit wished he could hold it like he did her hand in his. Stop it.

"Let's not leave it so black and white," he said, speaking to both her and the Priest. "Does anything have to be done right now? This could die back in the same way as the Library incident did."

"This is a continuation of that," Alicia answered. "The trouble with the freeborn started there, or rather, first peaked there, and Rilla has orchestrated this, using the disturbance as a base from which to work. If it hadn't happened, she would have created something much the same. Is there any doubt that she's acting for the Empress?"

And Li'lo'lin? Did the ti'Linn sit on fences any more than they drank tea? "We can't act," he said. "At least no more than we have already. So, we wait again." He bowed to the Priest. "The thanks of the Priest Ulanda's House is once again due yours."

The ti'Linn looked at him, its mouthparts working but without making a sound. Its eyes were hypnotic; Rit wanted to look away, feeling dizzy as his own eyes



tried to follow the moving lights. But the Priest clicked again, starting a series of sounds that didn't translate any more than the trill had, and turned its body to look around slowly as though searching.

"Walls," it said finally in plain tongue.

"Could we have built a wall that only kept people out and not ourselves in?"

But he had misunderstood. "A blink is the wall," the Priest said, touching the end of the oath cord around its neck. "This one blinks, the mind scrolls forward. Walls." A trill capped with a buzz came from one of the attendants. The ti'Linn Priest was speaking of dying. "With no walls, where is the house?"

The floors here were covered in mats, the serrated edge on the ti'Linn's feet made a quick pic-pic sound against the closely woven dry grass as it walked to the door leading to the small inner patio. Rit followed, Alicia with him. The Priest bowed, but didn't rise from it, keeping in the tucked position, all eight legs folded close. From the cushion by the brazier in the center of the patio, Ulanda looked up, her eyes as unreadable to him as the ti'Linn's had been. Mirwin was with her, the boy looking drugged, his mouth slack, but Rit felt him in the Net, quite sober.

At the far door were two guards, both Blackmouth Caste ti'Linn. They hadn't moved when the Priest approached the entrance, or when it crouched. In the Net as well, but a tight focused link.

The ti'Linn Priest ignored the guards, looking only at Ulanda. Then it blinked all four eyes at once and the slowly rotating lights began to dim. "This one is a sacrifice to the knowing," it said. The faceted colors flared after the brief dimming, then slowed, dulling again as they appeared to sink. Ulanda watched without reaction.

Rit felt slow, it was as though his mind couldn't make connections fast enough to make his body act. "Do something," he said to the attendant who had inched forward from the huddle. Adding a sign of favor followed by a formal Opening, not sure what he was doing. Not sure of what he was thinking.

The ti'Linn stopped where it was. "The People play the long game," it said in High formal, making a song out of words and so perfect that it had to be a translation. "My Priest is a door to Empire's actions. A door that closes."

"Taking any blame, you mean?"

The aide bowed deeply.

Moving stiffly, Rit walked to the Priest, but watched the aide closely at the same time. Sorrow? He wasn't sure. Fear? Would he have to make up the emotions he expected in the same way as he had his conversations with Cassa? He felt disorientated. Lights on the ocean, his eyes burned. He saw the movement of the four living eyes and the dying at the same time.

"Rit!" Alicia said, pulling on his arm. He had half fallen against the ti'Linn Priest.

He shook his head to clear it. "And the other ti'Linn?" he asked, gesturing to the guards without taking his eyes off the aide.

"Rit," Alicia said. "The reports are coming in. The ranking members of the ti'ti'sinici who have contact with us are dead."

The aide bowed again and stayed down. The other aides did the same. "Those in the Priest Ulanda's service live in a house without walls," the first said, its fore-pincers making a sign of formal Closure. Under it, barely shaped by the lower hands, was one of prayer. Its eyes were dimming rapidly. "All is service to that one."

Service. He felt the question rising in Alicia. The surviving ti'Linn. "Let them in," he said.

"It's security decision," she said before he could say more. "There's no way to be sure we wouldn't be letting spies in."

The Station linkup was still there, nothing seemed to be happening. At the Third Petal Speakerhouse, Peecit's mother was leading a prayer, each brief reading followed by the ritualized response from the gathering. Drifts of red paper were scattered on the floor around the large altar in the main room and incense smoke clouded the ceiling. Two ti'Linn guard were stationed at the door, unchallenged. Except for the few ti'Linn dead in their own suites, everywhere they could check, nothing was happening.

The stray ti'Linn were dead either way, Rit thought but didn't say. His understanding of what Lo'li'in had said was too fragile to support words. "Make an offering of Service to each," he said and put his words in the Net as an order, waited a moment for the challenge from Ulanda or Garm that didn't come. "Not by default. Get individual answers before letting them through the defenses."

Alicia looked like she still wanted to argue the point. "As you said, a security matter," he whispered for her benefit only. "Don't you have duties to attend to?" She glanced at Ulanda, gave him a tight nod, then left.

He knelt at the side of the first aide; the creature's eyes were like dark velvet, not black but a deep violet. In the eye closest to him, a faint image showed, a ghost of the jewels that had been there minutes earlier. A cross shape. The eye of the ocean, he remembered. The same shape was in the cord pattern of its neck braid. Yellow on purple, Ji'jilini Temple colors. "Was it to force this to happen, that the Empress's people acted now?" he asked.

Three times he repeated it, but he was talking to himself.

Getting to his feet, his knees creaked, he felt stiff, he felt old. And heavy, his flesh out of step with his mind. The flagged paving of the patio tried to trip him, he was watching his feet like a drunk does, not too sure of where they were.

Ulanda was like ice. Moving a hand in front of her face didn't get a reaction. He took her hands in his, having to warn Mirwin off. That had brought him back to

his senses where Ulanda's need hadn't. The boy shook himself like a wet dog as he dropped out of the Net.

"Walls or not, I don't feel like putting my immortality to the test," he said, speaking close to her ear. Spiced wine and bath oil, musky and sweet at the same time, different from Niv's scent. "Ulanda, snap out of it." He waited and tried again, louder. He pushed a call for Niv into the Net. The tass'alt appeared moments later.

Rit helped get the blanket over her, but otherwise ignored Niv's comments to Mirwin, or the boy's defense. He was trying everything he had ever learned to feel out any fields that might have been set to cause this. Too many possibilities existed that he'd heard of, or came readily when he asked for a Net spin, but more weren't touched, left as being less likely. Kori arrived, he first knew from the extra wards being set around the patio, and looked up once to see the Zimmer woman standing very still, watching them. Peecit was near her, a hand over her mouth, staring.

He woke up in his own bed, not having remembered falling asleep. Morning. Sun streamed through the window, warming him. Tika was curled into his side, fast asleep. Leaving the cat to sleep, he slipped out of bed and pulled his bathrobe on. It had been across the end of his bed; someone had undressed him. I'm alive, he thought, feeling disjointed, as though he'd slept too long, or too deeply. Looking out the window, he saw only the ni'at tree, its leaves hanging motionless, in green and bronze ribbons. No people, no movement. The rest of the garden that he should have been able to see was lost in streaks of light. Within his focus, colors were strangely bright, and the air thin and cold as on a mountaintop. Undressed, put to bed, and given something strong to keep him asleep, he thought. A sedative blocker. He missed the door handle the first time.

Fish stink and steam. The hot air was thick with moisture. Where the front room of the pavilion should have been, wasn't. He looked out onto sand and purple reeds, a wall of stone beyond that. Slime. He looked back. His bedroom. On the bed was a black and white lizard, cat sized. No head, the neck chewed looking.

The sand was warm under his bare feet. She was at the center of what he now saw was a circular space, bounded by the walls. Above, a sliver of red sun showed, an arc that covered a full third of the opening. The sky was purple and red. When he looked back, the doorway to his bedroom was gone.

"I thought I was trying to bring you back. It appears that I joined you instead. You did warn me it wasn't a good idea."

Ulanda looked up at him. "I didn't think you were going to come." He heard the loss in her voice, the fear that he wouldn't. That he would.

She was dressed as she had been at the dinner. A cutaway opal lace overrobe, little more than a long vest and with a narrow underrobe in lavender, the same

style as the blue one she'd been wearing before the break-ball game. Her hair was braided, but loosely, with several strands joined near the end with lavender cords. Something quickly done, Alicia probably, right after they had changed. Her feet were wet and the bottom edges of the robes, stained with purple slime.

"Is it Camerat? Like in the center of the diamond?" She nodded. "Do you have any idea of what's going on?" he added, sitting next to her.

With one hand, she scooped sand and let it run through her fingers. No braids, no power mark. Her hands and wrists were smooth and fleshed out. If he'd seen before, the change hadn't registered. "It's in the sand. The girdle. Bits of it that is, hardly more than a memory."

He held a hand out and she put one of hers in his. If it was an illusion, it was a solid one. And warm. "Is this a pattern pull?"

"I don't know."

But she could feel the girdle. He smiled regardless. "Not as bad as the last one, at any rate."

At his words, she laughed, and then got to her knees in a smooth motion, all grace, and it caught at his breath, it always did, that anyone could move like that. Both her hands were in his now, sand as well, handfuls of sand in drifts over them. He couldn't think who had started it, the holding and touching. She kissed him hard, tasting of sand and spiced wine. Laughing, she pulled the tie on his bathrobe and fell onto him, her grace deliberately abandoned.

"It wouldn't matter here," she whispered.

He held her off and watched her eyes change from passion to the same loss he had heard in her voice. Then anger. "Are you really her?"

She shook herself out of his grip. "Do I have to keep saying it? I'm not Cassa." Strands of dark hair had come loose from the braid to form a damp frizzle around her face. Using her arm, she brushed them away from her face. Not a hand or fingers. A habit learned of pain and disability. "Did you think you made me up? A convenient invention? I wanted to make love to you, not be part of your wet dream."

Standing, she brushed sand from her clothes, actions as angry as her tone. Using her arms as before, then stopped, staring at her hands and clenched them into fists. Sweat darkened the lavender silk under her arms, between her breasts, the thin cloth stuck to her skin and the sand stuck to the cloth. The lace overrobe was abandoned on the sand.

He felt like a fool. "I didn't mean Cassa."

She looked around, breathing as though the air wasn't what she needed. There was a wildness in her eyes he hadn't seen before. As though she had read his thoughts, she said, "You say she's mad, I'm not surprised. This place, staying trapped here, I'd go mad. There's no air... the walls..." She swallowed then narrowed her eyes and blinked rapidly as though they stung. "She must have

found the girdle here. Palace would have been at Camerat when the copy was made." A couple of steps away and she almost fell in the loose sand.

Getting her balance, she took the hem of her underrobe, bending to work a tooth through the heavier woven band, and then tore a slit reaching half way up one thigh. She spat out the taste of the slime, her nose wrinkled.

"What do you remember from just before finding yourself here?"

"I was listening to Rilla." She rubbed at her fingers then flexed them. "This might be preferable."

"Did she do anything to you?"

A shake of her head. Impatient with him. Then she scratched her nose with one long fingernail, going cross-eyed to see the finger. "That was the worst. Having to always rely on others. I wanted to touch..." Her cheeks had gone red in a pink face. "You. I wanted to touch you. From the first time I saw you, there at the world-altar. You watched me and Garm, you couldn't keep your eyes off us."

He gathered his dignity with the ends of his skimpy bathrobe and knotted the tie. "Is it the wine speaking?"

"Rit, I didn't understand, I hated what they did and I hated more that I needed it. That I let them. But you and me, we're fire and fire, Niv said. As though..."

She shook her head. "Niv said that we're parts of the same soul, but it can't matter anymore. We're dead, how can dead people matter?"

He got up, his balance wasn't any better than hers. That hadn't been Ulanda. "Are we dead?"

"Dead and in hell."

He walked to stand closer to her. "What do you mean by hell?" He searched her face as the Priest Lo'li'lin had searched the limits of the patio.

She turned away and walked to the edge of the water. "I had to invent you. You didn't exist. You probably thought it was the other way around."

"Apparently, I should have meant Cassa."

Her face darkened and she bit her bottom lip but didn't answer. Squatting, she hugged her knees tight against her chest and stared at the water. Bubbles floated on the top layer of the purple slime, dark rimmed with white froth, speckled with more purple. Stone and stone and stone, the walls and the sky slid restlessly as they were reflected large to small to minute.

He could feel the warm damp under the sand as he knelt behind her. "I made you a promise," he said as he smoothed her hair back, following the curve of one small ear with his fingertip. "Is this it? If this is my death, I don't mind you being yourself."

He half expected a change, person if not location. But the woman he touched was still Ulanda. "I've lost the practice of it," she whispered. "But I can't seem to shake it. Living, that is. I want it to stop, can you understand?"

"Empire?"

"Empire."

"Garm said that you would destroy it." She didn't answer. "He also said that time didn't exist in overpattern, that Empire would always be there, whole. All of it, all at once."

"So?"

"Destruction of Empire... Cassa, is it really this difficult?" When she didn't answer, he turned her head, her shoulder, she moved easily in his hands. Her eyes were crystal, the color of the reeds, a translucent purple. Becoming almond shaped from round, then stretching further, elongating as they changed to blue, wrapping to the sides of her face. And the skin he touched: smooth, poreless. He was holding a living flame in his hands and a familiar sweet scent filled his mouth.

"Or creation," she said. "You speak as though there is a difference."

Oimit? He didn't think so; the eyes were a different color. The other possibility bothered him more, that she was what Kori would have become. "Did the Zimmer exist?" he asked, using all his willpower not to let go of her. A crest of feathered silk brushed his face. "Did you have to invent them too?"

She moved again, twisting. Instinctively, he closed his eyes and turned - and stayed in that position even as he wondered: what instinct? Whose instinct? Or was it similar to what he had experienced when faced with Gennady for the first time at the Spine of the Mountain. His will frozen by the other.

But a warm tongue ran along his eyes. Her breath was like wildflower honey, he heard the sound of air rushing over her honor teeth. Pin pricks, then a scraping sensation along his cheek, as though he had snagged his razor or the blade was nicked. Her quick tongue worked the cuts and she gave a throaty laugh. "Is it that you don't know how? Is this kind of creation so foreign to you?"

He opened his mouth to her tongue and the taste of his own blood, sharp teeth racked his lips and he bit back, expecting a different result. Then forgetting what to expect, being surprised equally at each similarity and difference. He ran his hands along her body as he would on a smooth sun-warmed stone, marveling at the texture. The bones were wrong, the shapes. Not rounded curves, nothing soft - angles, and those were different as well. No breasts, not even nipples. Or a belly button. Tiger stripes, red and silver. He saw them as heat, more by touch than sight, but that too, flickering as though the change was on him as well, but couldn't hold or was let come and go by Cassa as a tease. He could read her Clan marks with his eyes closed even as he risked getting his fingers bitten.

Each time he hesitated, she guided his hands. They lay side by side, using his robe as a mat. "I think... I might not know how," he said, at a loss of what to do next. Instead of more familiar, the touching made her less.

Resting her head in the crook of her arm, she watched him without answering, her other hand moving like a quick animal through the hair on his chest. He got

up on one arm, feeling the need of the advantage. Height, his only advantage, he had become frightened watching her back. Alien, his mind gibbered at him. The Zimmer or the god? In the moist heat, he was chilled and sweating.

Smiling, she walked her fingers to his lips. Instead of flesh, he hit his teeth on metal and tasted silver.

"Don't," he whispered.

There wasn't a transformation. He remembered touching her, her nails scratching his face to draw blood, the taste of her skin, how the sand stuck to hers as well as his, sandpaper where they rubbed together. He remembered the feel of the knot of bones that ran the length of her spine and ended with a short tail that wagged under his fingers. Breasts like summer-ripe apples. The brush of her short hair in his hands as he held her head while kissing. The feel of the metal rings against his skin, like sparks.

And he remembered her dead, her face a pulp of exploded flesh. And burying her. When he sat up, she wiggled closer to him.

"Why all this?" he asked, still not looking at her, but at the water instead. Stone walls and reeds, lavender colored tufts of grass. Crystal rings on some of the reeds, like her rings were of silver. En'talac's brown eyes - had they always been her eyes? Cassa's? "The first time I saw you, you didn't even know who I was."

"You didn't know how to ask."

He shook his head. "You did the asking."

Cassa ran her hand along his arm until they were skin to skin along the length. His eyes were to the water, but he couldn't help but see, drawn by the movement and the feel. There was no difference in how the two arms looked, or they were a mirror rather. Left to right. Olive skin lightly covered with brown hair, short and fine, lacking the curl of the mat on his chest. He closed his eyes and bowed his head to his knees but didn't draw away. The feel of his own flesh was more alien than anything he had ever experienced. He lost any shift of the memories to a loud buzzing between his ears.

But he heard her voice as though from his own throat. "You want too much," she said. "You always ask for too much."

Rit woke up in his own bed, Tika curled up against the back of his knees. He was lying on his side. When he picked her up, the cat was limp with sleep and then she stretched, digging claws into the blanket and his arm before curling up

again, but this time inside the cradle of his arms. Old blocker patches flaked off his wrists, littering her fur. She purred as he absently stroked her, relying on touch to find the spots she liked. Head back on the pillow, he stared at the white beams of the ceiling, the underside of the thatch like coarse brass colored fabric stretched between. Rain, a slow heavy rain, made a plocking against the thick layer of straw.

With a sense of relief, he felt the medic scan run over him, breaking the Net silence. Alicia followed it by moments, and sat on the bathrobe at the end of his bed. In uniform and fully armed. Above the bruise on one cheek, her eye was bloodshot and swollen. She kept blinking. "I thought you'd call when you woke up."

"I wasn't sure I had."

She smiled gently and reached to stroke Tika then brushed white flakes from the soft gray and cream fur. "You've got a fair amount of sedative blocker in you. Silassic said you'd be disorientated when you came to."

"So you asked how you could tell the difference?"

The smile became a grin. "He doesn't have much of a sense of humor, or I would have."

Silassic did have a sense of humor. Rit felt icy cat feet run up his spine and shivered. Kori, Peecit, Silassic. Gennady and Simitta. His memories of them were changed: not simply glimpses, he understood them. A cold spot in his chest swelled, he hiccupped his next breath. This change felt permanent, not that transient now-he-was-Zimmer, now he wasn't.

"And Ulanda?" he asked. "How is she?"

Watching him, Alicia's grin had faded. "She woke up about an hour ago. Rit, it came to nothing again. The ti'Linn, those whose ranking members died, we got a few, I've got them separated for now until Kori..." She rubbed her forehead. "I interpreted your order as I thought the circumstances warranted. If you want differently, try staying awake to say so. We definitely weren't their first choice for refuge, anyway. Also, we lost a few staff. It's probably just as well we did. Everybody's confused. Eunni's been talking all morning and most of the night, keeping things from getting out of hand."

"And outside here?"

"There's been no reprisals against the ti'Linn, no real disturbances of any kind." A grin attempted to settle out on her face but failed. "The local Freeborn Council is howling, Station brass officially backing them for a change... not Rilla's level, this is still local to Downside, and I think it's all noise to keep their own people happy. And we still don't know what happened with you and Ulanda. You both responded favorably to blocker, so Silassic used it. Is it starting all over again?"



"I don't know." From stroking the cat, her hand moved to his arm. He flinched and she drew back. "I'm sorry," he said and with an effort, touched her hand with his. "Disorientated about describes me. How's your eye?"

She shrugged. "Are you going to try to get up?" He nodded and she moved to let him swing his legs out, then handed him his bathrobe. Tika went back to sleep in the warm hollow his body left in the mattress. Sand on his pillow? He felt his braid and found more sand in the twists of hair. The broken bead? In the pocket of the bathrobe.

Alicia waited at the door, watching him. He let her open it and go through first. Eunni was at the table by the window overlooking the common, one of the kittens in her lap. She was feeding him bits of scrambled egg.

A covered bowl of tea rested in the ashes of the brazier beside the table. Eunni blew the ash from the bottom of the bowl and held it out until he took it, then pushed a plate of toast his way. "Breakfast, if you're interested. I've ordered fresh tea."

He knelt in front of the toast, across from her. "Thanks, this is fine." The tea was bitter and he put it down, barely touched. "I thought you were busy talking."

Still stroking the kitten, she looked up and smiled. "You're my next project. I've been successful at keeping cooks and gardeners from disappearing - how could I fail with you."

"I feel like I didn't so much disappear as fell off a cliff. Or was pushed." He toyed with a slice of cold toast just to be seen doing something. "Was it an attack?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," Alicia said. She hadn't joined them at the table, but was standing by the tall brazier by the window. Made of dark shell - the spiral ribs carved in the ti'Linn Temple design of crosses - the brazier was to her waist. One finger traced the rim, but her eyes didn't leave him. She was staring at him as though he had three heads.

Beside the brazier was the wooden tea chest from Bolda, the rug from Garm's Suite in Palace. The Clan knife from Gennady, she wore always and kept it under her pillow when they slept, but the Spann tops were in the tea chest along with a very few other things carefully wrapped in silk. The boxed strand of pearls he had given her. The stuffed bear that had belonged to her youngest cousin.

Rit hadn't noticed exactly when it was that the ti'Linn brazier had become an altar, or when Alicia had begun to keep a box of joss sticks on top of the tea chest.

"I don't know how much I can tell you that you wouldn't already know," he said. "First the attack on the Zimmer. Then our ti'Linn moving in. Then the ti'Linn response to what they saw as the Empress's involvement. And then Ulanda dropping into..." And himself following. Or had he? At a touch, the Net restraints crumbled. The toast was a mound of crumbs before he finished reviewing Bolda's

analyses. He picked the plate up and put it on the service tray, then added an order in the domestic link for breakfast to be brought to him. Eunni was back to feeding the kitten. A fresh tea service was on the floor just inside the door, he hadn't noticed it being delivered. Neither Alicia or Eunni had retrieved it.

Placement had Ulanda in the bathhouse. "I'll join her there," he said as he got up. Then to Alicia, "You look as though you could use a break. Why don't you come?" His wife shared a look with Eunni. "Am I missing something here?" he asked.

"Apparently not," Eunni said dryly.

"You were explaining what happened," Alicia said.

Explain? He shook his head. "I don't know."

"So you said before." She took a step closer. "Just describe what happened then."

The memories were too close, as though tissue paper was all that separated him from where he had been and he had to resist the urge to look through the bedroom door. Without answering, he walked past her to the window. The rain had stopped. He wished it would keep on, that the sun wouldn't come out.

From the window, he could see shrubs and a little further, one corner of another pavilion. Eunni's. Then the wall of the common, vines climbing the sides until the tiles became sky and the plants lost their grip, as fooled as his eyes were at the illusion. Birds flickered among the vines, seen only by the leaves moving and flashes of yellow in the distance. Birds in the design of the rug - he looked at the rug a while, then knelt, facing the altar, chest level to the shallow bowl formed where the shell flared out in a last spiral.

The box of joss sticks was of heavy reed corded around with black silk, the opening at one end. Rit shook a single stick out. Lavender scented, black in color. At the scent, the image came to him of a garden in the snow, and he saw it first as though from very close, the pale gray-green leaves of the lavender plants filling his vision, each narrow leaf with a cap of white and on the winter blasted flower stalks, an irregular frosting of snow. Snow still fell, tiny dry flakes. He must have stepped back - now he could see an oval raised bed of lavender plants with a walkway around.

He placed the new stick upright into the sand next to the burnt-out stubs. In private, Alicia mustn't follow the Zimmer custom of laying the sticks out, and he found himself grateful of that, not wanting to see any pattern that might have been formed by ash and stick.

From the brazier by the breakfast table, Alicia brought a coal - holding it with tongs - to light the stick. She didn't say anything.

Gray smoke coiled then rose steadily. No breeze, there should have been, the window was open and there was enough of a wind to move the leaves of the vines. He checked: barrier-style warding surrounded the pavilion.

He held his hand out and Alicia took it, then after putting the coal and tongs on the side of the altar, knelt next to him. Ash fell from the ember, showing the red heart underneath.

"What is the design of the rug?" he asked. Alicia frowned and looked, going backwards a bit, still on her knees. She ran one hand across the wool and silk surface, fanning the soft fibers.

"Flowers," she said. "Roses. For the Zimmer, I suppose. Birds. For Cassa. Or the soul, the passage from life to death. I'm not sure... Li-cassa flowers on the border, maybe they're for her and not the birds. The tree, from what you had said from your vision in the diamond, are the branches of probability. Or the different realities."

Her sentences were choppy, she must be thinking hard in between. He hadn't asked for the meanings. "A vine, not a tree," he said. "A rose vine."

Alicia drew her hand back from the rug as quickly as she had from him when he had flinched at her touch. She licked her lips.

Eunni came over. "Is the symbolism different? Vine to tree? Alicia? It's always been a tree, hasn't it?"

His wife shook her head, still frowning. "I'm not sure. When I said it, there wasn't any doubt in my mind that it was, but now, I just don't know."

Rit looked again, feeling the pile of the rug with his fingers. The vine was still there, coiled around the tree, even thorns if you searched for the shading of color. But where the vine lay over the tree, further down on the tuft of wool, the color changed from greenish-brown to the dark ochre bark of the ni'at and below that, cool yellow shot with purple. The wood the pavilion in the garden had been made of. The heart of the tree.

As though the tree was rising to existence, coming up out of the rug. He thought of what was below them: the flitter bay, and under that, the Station Center. Did the images mean anything specific? Or were they universal? Or were they like what he saw when he was with Cassa - images formed from his own mind, wrapping the incomprehensible with a cloth more familiar to him.

Too familiar and for a moment, silk and wool of the rug was skin and he drew back into himself, squeezing his eyes tightly shut as though he were a child afraid of the dark.

"It ties in with what I sensed yesterday," he said when he could, and got to his feet, accepting Alicia's hand for support. "The tree for one and leading to the Station Center, I think. I talked with Cassa again..." He told them a little of what had happened.

"Then, last night really was an attack on us, not just the Zimmer," Alicia said.

"The start of one," he agreed. "The action has effectively isolated us. It also explains why Rilla was so cooperative about the security system. The threats are to keep us in and the grid defines the space. Garm said that Empire would dance

carefully, that they're aware of the risks. Keeping us confined here is one way of reducing them."

Eunni swore softly. "With only filtered Temple Net getting in, then Ulanda couldn't mount even a local Challenge for ranking without compromising the grid, could she?"

"Alicia?" he asked and got only part of her attention in return, the greater portion was with Kori in the Net.

"The filtering is built into the crystalline structure of the key points," she said to him. "That way, the filter won't fail unless the entire structure does. Any part of the grid could take over for any other part. A reasonable fail-safe system, we thought at the time." Her voice fell. "I don't know whose idea it was."

The technical analysis from Kori came back in a fall of data that he didn't understand, but accompanied by words that he did. "The effect on Temple Net is greater than I would have expected from the testing runs of the system. Our leads are very clear, all the way to Command Levels, but there is no depth to them."

He sent his thanks to the Zimmer, blending with it an allowance of inevitability. The woman was blaming herself for not having foreseen the difficulty; he couldn't take the blame away from her, but the other, that this was fated, that he could give.

An alien response to an alien emotion. He rubbed his face - he needed a shave - and that familiar need steadied him. Alicia was deep into the analysis, with the distraction, she hadn't noticed anything unusual in his exchange with Kori, but Eunni had. "A hangover of my dream," he said to her, willing her to understand and accept without asking him questions. "So, there's a wall here, despite what Li'lo'lin said."

Zt'li had arrived with his breakfast tray; the ti'Linn aide bowed then went outside to wait. Rit sat and started to sort through the dishes. More than he had ordered, there usually was, he waged a war of self-restraint that was constantly being sabotaged by others wanting to please him. Or to comfort him. Eunni pushed the plate with the buns back towards him when he'd put it to one side.

"You don't have to pretend that you don't want them. Have them for luck. You ate enough of them last night, maybe that's why you're still here."

"Maybe," he said, smiling. Hic'lic's buns, with the cream glaze and the prayers in the top cuts.

Alicia sat down beside him, and picked up the second bun with a sigh. "You shouldn't be eating these."

Rit took his tea to the bathhouse with him. Ulanda was finished by the time he arrived and was sitting in the small garden, having her underbraids done by a

yawning Bolda. Mirwin was on her other side, untangling used cords and winding butterflies out of the silk.

Pecit made a fourth and was unexpected, the Zimmer girl sitting on a rock, a sheet of paper spread on her lap and for all intents and purposes, doodling. Sunlight coming through a crack in the wall caught her crest, and then the color of her eyes as she looked up momentarily. Red and silver and blue in the sun, her markings as exquisite as her eyes. The sky was a veil of red and he opened his mouth to breath the woman in. The scent of the sasi-wind.

"Took your sweet time," Bolda grunted, breaking into his thoughts.

He dragged his sight away from Pecit. "Sorry, I overslept."

He got a grunt in return. "Well, that seems to be the way around here."

"I'll try not to make a habit of it." Rit squatted next to Ulanda, trying to quiet the heavy beating of his heart. He had Pecit to his back now, only the scent telling him she was there.

"Kori says that we can break the grid," he said to Ulanda. "The whole thing and all at once. You can make a Challenge for ranking the moment it's down. Local first, but enough to get a ship. Or you can stay here and wait for the next step."

"And what does the San of my House recommend?" she asked, turning dark eyes on him. All surface, she was skimming her existence like a stone on water.

"I haven't asked him."

Bolda snorted. "Don't waste your time."

"Regardless of Garm, I suggest we talk about options." At his words, her free hand shaped a minor Closure, he thought he hardly existed to her right then. Not in pattern, this kind of hiding was quite human. And disciplined. He might find it humorous in other circumstances.

He looked first to Bolda and found no support there. To Mirwin next. Despite the distraction of the elaborate design painted on each cheek, the tass'altin looked subdued. The same pattern as decorated the brazier Alicia used for an altar: the eye of the ocean. Ji'jinlini Temple's Seal-sign. Was it in honor of the dead Priest?

A touch to the larger Temple Net through the link and he dropped it quickly. He had seen enough of Temple death ceremonies; the ti'Linn version wasn't a novelty he wished to watch.

Mirwin gestured to catch Rit's attention. "Will there be an opportunity for me to attend the Giving rites," he started, continuing the gesture to make a formal request with his hands. The silk cords were forgotten in his lap.

Rit shook his head. "I wouldn't think so. Ulanda? We still have to talk about this. All of us do."

"Rit," Alicia called from the bathhouse door, a towel in one hand. "Come and have your bath."

Gently, Bolda eased the sodden padding off Ulanda's other arm. It came cleanly, no fresh power breaks, only old scars that looked like stretch marks. But there was no muscle to speak of over the bones much less fat, the skin was transparent, he could see veins and arteries, her pulse was regular. Over the present reality, he saw how her arms had looked in the garden on Camerat - whole and strong - and how she had fought against the habit of protecting her wrists. That had been her, he was almost sure.

Without prompting, Mirwin held a small blue jar out and the weaver smoothed white cream over the skin and wrapped a fresh pad in place. Besides the designs, the boy smelled of incense, he must have spoken prayers for the ti'Linn Priest, or for Ulanda while she slept. Or not prayers, he kept confusing the Zimmer customs with Temple. A ceremony of some sort... or it might have been prayers after all. He suspected the distinction between the Temple rites and the common were more in the words, not the intent.

Rit picked up one of the opal colored strands of the used underbraid cords. Primary braid size, silver in the silk, the core, he thought. The feel put his teeth on edge, he tasted silver again, a taste that would always be a sad one to him. Would all his regrets be that he hadn't loved enough when given the chance? And Ulanda? Her regrets or only his?

"We should talk about it," he said to her again to no more response that he had gotten before.

He stood up and let the cord drop. Even if she wouldn't talk, the rest of them would have to. He tried one more time. "We didn't fight last night," he said softly. Instantly, the skimming rock sank out of sight, she was lost to him. It had been her then, at least for the first part. Did she remember, or had the retreat been instinctive? He shook his head to Bolda's unspoken question then risked another look at Peecit. Just Peecit as he'd seen her dozens of times.

Alicia took his arm. "Come on. Bath time."

A short bath. He would have liked to stay longer in the warm water, taking the peaceful moment as a gift. Flower petals floated on the water's surface, bruised white petals and fragrant with their own scent and that of an oil that gave an added shine. Something mossy with an undertone of apples. His hair was heavy with the oil, the soap wouldn't lather and he was too lazy to make the effort to do it separately.

Too soon, Alicia had his clothes ready, plain heavy cotton tunic and pants, his Zimmer knife and extra warding beads. "Stand still," she said, combing out then braiding his single long tail of hair, adding the beads as she went. He moved the cracked bead from his bathrobe pocket to the tunic, his wife watching that as she had watched so much this morning - without saying a word.

She had obviously made up her mind they were leaving. "Alicia," he said, putting both hands on her shoulders. "I love you, I want you to know that."

"Don't be kind," she whispered, tears in her eyes. Then she hugged him. "I'm glad it was you. And I do love you too." She hiccupped. "Garm says I do, he says I'm too picky about the definition."

"Then that's something I can thank him for."

"Rit..."

He stopped the words with a kiss.

"... just don't say good-bye, please."

He should have kissed her longer. "I won't," he said, wiping the tears from her eyes with his finger. She winced when he pressed too hard above the bruise. "Did you have Silassic look at it?" He ran his finger along the edge of the darkened area. Blue shading to yellow. She had run into Ulanda's elbow.

"He said I had played well enough to be worthy of a reminder of the game," she said with a wry mix of emotions that turned to a deliberate pout when he laughed.

Eunni and Garm were the first to arrive, followed closely by Hic'lic. Eunni had changed her clothing, wearing pants and tunic as Alicia was, the first time he had seen her dressed in other than a robe. Black and opal, Ulanda's colors. Armed as well with a Zimmer knife, he knew she had one, but hadn't seen that before either. A second who had made a decision. Garm wore the robe of Eccli cloth, the Simic moving with a courtly grace.

"Hic'lic is here as Voice for the Wa'tic in the Household," Eunni said. Rit bowed formally to the small creature and received a bow in return.

"Analysis," it said in plain tongue but pulling the command level codes of the spin he had seen earlier. "Center, journey. One sun, real sun." Touching the oath braid around its neck, the Wa'tic bowed to Ulanda. "This one goes."

Were they going? And to where? Or what?

"All I can say," Bolda grunted, "is that we'd better pack first. None of this just leaving."

"He's never forgiven me for that," Garm said. "Are we leaving?" He looked at Rit, his eyes emerald in the sunlight. "Is even that decision outside my interests?"

"Do we have a place to go?"

Niv arrived before Garm could answer. The tass'alt was dressed as usual in a snake-pleat skirt but with a knife sheath attached to one leg. Something new there as well, Rit hadn't thought the Camerat needed a knife. A third who had made up their mind.

At the sight of the tass'alt, Mirwin straightened, gave a short bow and worked the silk cord faster, his head down. Niv knelt on the other side of Ulanda from him.

Then Rit saw that Kori had come with the tass'alt. She had stopped at the door of the bathhouse as though reluctant to be included. Silassic was with her, waiting another step behind, but he was scarcely aware of the man. Kori was a

woman to Peecit's child. Rit suddenly understood the loss that Gennady had felt, the pride as well, that he owned the responsibility for that bloodline. That he owned her.

"Everything points to the Station Center," he said without taking his eyes off her. Everything was too new, his perception of the Zimmer too raw. Duty and pride and family. Although he sought it, he could find no shame in the possession. His thoughts were like clear glass. Then Alicia came and stood beside him, breaking into his vision of Kori. He took her hand, grateful again for her intervention. I'm human, he thought. I need closed areas in my mind.

"The Empress is attempting a binding," Ulanda said.

Garm looked at her coldly then went to sit on a rock close to Eunni and Hic'lic. The Eccli cloth of his robe brought the sunlight into the shadow, the bursts reflecting from the facets of Wa'tic's eyes. "Most likely getting rid of the ti'Linn support and our isolation was all that was intended." His tone was distant from any concern for her. "Camerat would have been premature - a mistake on their part, or a risk they couldn't entirely avoid. And if they're getting anything from here at all, then they have to know that both of you went into overpattern."

Would the timing be stepped up, Rit wondered. "How would that affect their plans?"

Ulanda shook her head as she turned from the Simic. "They mustn't know, or they wouldn't be waiting. And they can't know about the ni'at tree."

So, she had been listening. "Or there's another factor we don't know about that's holding them back."

"Bug-eaters die," Hic'lic said in plain-tongue, then in Wa'tic native, added: "One eye blinks and that focus is lost, they wait to see how blind with fear we grow."

"Planning that my isolation be more than physical," Ulanda said.

"You and you," Hic'lic said. "Crystal glass and sun."

"Do you mean more than Ulanda as the target?" Rit asked.

Garm made an exaggerated negative sign with his hands, setting his robe flashing. "Is there a difference between the two of you?"

With effort, Rit avoided looking to see what Hic'lic understood of the exchange. "Of course, there is."

Garm shook his head. "There is nothing between you but skin, flesh and bone."

Eunni reached over and shook Garm's knee. "Stop being obnoxious. Last time I looked, skin and all that was plenty. At least you never complained. And you'd better change before we leave. I refuse to be blinded by that robe."

Garm covered her hand with his, his expression softening. "Goie was one of the suns that was used to form the sunstones that made up the girdle for keying the form of Altasimic pattern. The girdle used at the Opening. The death of that sun was the start of the birth of your people."



The garden they sat in, the ni'at tree that was appearing in the rug. "How long have you known that?" Rit asked him when asking the Net drew a blank.

"Hic'lic just said so."

He looked at the Wa'tic. 'Crystal glass and sun.' And suddenly remembered that Hic'lic had been pulling command level Net. When had that happened? Or been allowed, and by whom?

He asked. "I gave him access," Bolda said. "Now, is either of you going to tell us what else happened last night?"

Quietly, he told them the rest of it, sparing nothing of what he had seen and done. He saw the pain in Ulanda's face before she tried to hide it. And still saw it as the emotion spread under the careful surface like a drop of ink in water. What had last night been to her?

"Cassa creates what she wants," Garm said, sounding worn. Listening to Rit, his amber skin had grayed; he looked again the old man he sometimes was. "She creates who she wants. You could have been anyone, you're only a part of what she shows of herself."

Rit shrugged. And was Garm more? "I don't even know what I make of her - how much is dream and how much is vision."

The old man's head lifted. "That doesn't matter. You don't matter." The cold in his tone, in his look, was back.

Kori stepped forward. "As the Priest Ulanda has said, the Empress intends a binding the same as at the Opening, tying it into the form of the patterns both here and there. We don't have the diamond to shape reality, but we do have two Priests who can touch the Wu'loss cass and who are not bound by the chains of Empire."

From watching Kori, Ulanda turned to look at Garm, pulling the hand free that Bolda was still working on. "The play has been set in motion. And we're been given directions. My interests certainly don't lie with Rigyant, not this Rigyant, so I'll take the other." Her voice lowered.

Bolda took her hand back and started to untangle the braiding loops. "Until you can make it your own."

"Do you see any other choice?" Rit asked him. The Piltsimic didn't respond. "We'd better make some decisions first. Like just who it is that's going with us. Mirwin?"

The tass'altin looked to Niv first. "Yes, I am."

Niv looked at the boy. "It's not his decision to make."

"You knew it could come to this when you brought him to me," Ulanda said quietly, making a sign of allowance granted with her free hand. Bolda snorted loudly but continued braiding.

The Camerat nodded slowly, his color paled to lavender.

The next was going to be more difficult. "Peecit?" Rit asked. And got the response, he'd expected.

"She has nowhere else to go but with us," Ulanda said quickly. With the words, the girl had looked up, but at him, not Ulanda. The brush in her hand dropped to the stones and rolled to where Niv was kneeling, leaving a wobbly trail of black ink and splatters.

"Silassic and I will stand as parents for her," Kori said. There was no question in her tone allowing the possibility that Silassic wouldn't agree and Rit didn't think he'd find any in her thoughts either. Or that Ulanda didn't have the right to insist. Or that it mattered at all if Silassic might or might not want their marriage.

"Peecit?" he asked again. She wanted to, he realized, startled by the perception. When had that changed - or why hadn't he noticed?

"Do I have a family?" she asked in him Zimmer-native using the inflection that she would to an Elder of her people. Then to Ulanda, she bowed and stayed down, her hands held out in front of her to make a form of supplication.

Kori took a step forward, a fine line of black rimming the pupils of her gray-blue eyes. "As my daughter, she has a family." As Peecit had, she spoke in her native tongue.

Rit bowed, spreading his hands in a motion of allowance that Peecit wouldn't see, then said it in words, pulling the appropriate ones from the Net. Then to Bolda: "Didn't you mention something about packing?"

The short man looked up from the braids but his fingers didn't stop. "Like I've got time." Then to Ulanda, adding, "Cornmeal? How about it, think we've got any?"

Her nose wrinkled and Rit felt her relax a little at Bolda's familiar joke. "Probably that's all we've got. In the whole kitchen, nothing but cornmeal."

Hic'lic protested in a rapid tic-tic. Rit escaped, Alicia with him, before the explanations started. Kori and Silassic followed, Peecit trailing along behind.

"Lord Ritsiniti," Kori asked before they'd gone far. He felt her reticence, a hangover from earlier. "San Garm directed me to ask you. The others here - who is needed?" With the question came her analysis. He looked at Alicia, she nodded, her continuing anger a scent he could taste at the back of his mouth.

Just those at the meeting and a brief list of those who would be welcome and might volunteer. A few more as a guard to their retreat. "If they agree," he said. The rest would be released by pulling the gird inwards.

The five Blackmouth ti'Linn guards were already waiting at his pavilion, Op'ki'na still wore the red scarf from the break-ball game. "This one has watched the world die," it said after the formal greetings. "No life, no death." Pincers made the cross sign then added one of inclusion. "We will guard the leaving as asked."

More incense. The death rites, they would have been mourning their Priest and their people. Rit bowed honor even as what the ti'Linn felt threatened to invade his mind. A house without walls. There was a child, he remembered. No, two, one given to a cross-clan breeding group, he thought the other must have been given as well before the five had taken service here. The future remained to them.

"Your service is valued by this House," he said. "But if there is a chance for you to live, take it. The necessary price to Temple, to this Station, has already been paid by the ranking members of your people. As for us, one way or another, we'll be beyond their reach."

Op'ki'na inched forward away from the others of it's breeding group, eye colors shifted to primarily red, and rapidly blinking dark to bright. "This one has died with the world. This one would go." And knelt, all limbs tucked, head bowed.

Rit turned to Kori, then Alicia. His wife had a far away look on her face, emotions damped by the depth of her Net link. "Kori?" he asked. The ti'Linn hadn't been on her first list. She nodded and he bowed to the ti'Linn and put the authorization into the Net.

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Glow globes followed the workers around, leaving most of the flitter bay in darkness. Ulanda listened to their quiet talk - the clicking of ti'Linn-native for the most part - keeping it separate from the chanting of the ceremony closer to her, using it to steady herself. Sporadically, warding flared in test runs, blue and purple, each time throwing a net of shadows out from the niat tree roots, and a burst of chittering as the resulting spin analysis were discussed.

Rit insisted they had time for Kori and Silassic's marriage before they left, and they had - just. Simple compared to what was usual among Empire freeborn, it was Peecit as the daughter of Zimmer Speakers who had suggested the form the ritual should take. A record would be left here, the union would have existed somewhere even if they all died or everything was changed again. And Peecit would have her family.

Rit sang the base portion of the marriage ceremony, an atonal drone. With her much higher voice, Peecit wove around and through his words like a needle sewing cloth.

Mirwin put a hand on her thigh; she sensed his worry. "How does he know what to say without a Net link?" he asked with his fingers. Ulanda covered his hand with one of hers, tangling the question in silk cords from her braids.

With the motion, Rit raised his head, looking at her through the smoke. At the start of the ceremony, Kori and Silassic had each thrown a hand of joss sticks, Rit adding a single burning stick to cross the pattern made by the fall of the others. The Zimmer chant came as easily to his lips as it did for Peecit and each time Ulanda let herself listen too closely, she saw him as a Zimmer, saw the red shadings on his skin, the blue eyes, making her wonder if her memory hid a similar transformation to what he had experienced in the dream. Had she held him - her, not Cassa - and had he become Zimmer to her human? Or was it that his reality could overwhelm hers so easily?

From the rigid form of the medic as he knelt beside Kori, Ulanda could sense the glow of quiet pride, and an almost human sense of disbelief, but from Kori, only a quiet certainty. Or it was all she could understand of what the freeborn woman felt. Regardless of what her memory might hide, she hadn't taken the same widening of perception back from the dream that Rit had. Regardless of what Garm said, they weren't the same.

The chanting died in a final harmony as Cici brushed the last Seals on the document of marriage. Ulanda glanced to where Garm watched from the narrow slit opening to the looping corridors that worked a long way to the Station Center. Eunni was with him; not just to keep him company but to keep him from being a distraction. Op'ki'na was just outside the exit.

"May this marriage exist in all the ways the universe can form," Ulanda said in the prayer form of Zimmer-native Rit had been speaking, but with Net translations into all the languages of those present in the flitter bay. Silassic bowed and stayed down, a prayer sign partly hid by his actions. Kori didn't bow; her eyes were glacial.

Scroll in hand, Cici stood, then handed it to her uncle. "Uncle, wish me luck." Outside of the intimate scale of the ceremony, her voice was small.

Ceon touched the scarified tattoo at the side of his mouth before speaking. "Your courage does our family proud." Then to Ulanda, "Lady Ulanda, may her intent alone be considered acceptable?"

"Acceptable certainly, but her service is also accepted as intended," Ulanda said and bowed honor to him. He looked again to his niece, then back to her and bowed in return.

The long braid securing the marriage scroll danced in the warmer air flowing from the higher level. For the garden above them, time had stopped in the middle of a hot afternoon. Ceon kept his eyes to the lavender cords trailing from the scroll in his hand, his manner as still as when he had first met her. "Lady Priest, if you please, the girl is impetuous, unthinking, a poor servant for..."

Ulanda signed Closure and put the same into her voice. "You had better go quickly."

Ceon bowed again, already starting to back up. Tallomal waited for him at the foot of the stairs leading back to the common, standing with the only two Kallit who would be staying in the flitter bay to work the security points for the final retreat. The remainder were ti'Linn, from Op'ki'na's group.

"Papa," Ceon's youngest called from further up the stairs. He turned and ran.

Alicia almost bumped him on her way in. "He's the last," she said. Ulanda followed her attention into the security Net links: a tiny Ceon was to the top of the stairs, his son in his arms, his wife beside him. Sunshine in yellow hair. Surrounding them as they ran, like flowers opening to the sunlight of their hair, were security flags. Ulanda blinked the image away, her attention chased out by Alicia.

"Now," Alicia said and waved to the two Kallit still by the entrance. Seconds later, the bay rumbled. Dust shook upwards from the floor, meeting the debris falling from around the roots. Warding flared, but in sheets this time, giving the flitter bay the same look as the Net link, the scale diminished by clarity.

Rit got heavily to his feet, coughing from the dust as he walked to his wife's side and put an arm around her. "Do we have what we want?"

Ducking out of his embrace, Alicia turned around slowly, a scanner held at arm's length. "The energy patterns have been transferred to key tiles surrounding us here and extending to the Center." She stopped a moment, the scanner pointing towards Eunni and Garm at the exit. "It worked." She sounded surprised then gave a smile along with a thumbs-up to Kori, then to the two Kallit.

"Let them be safe," Cici whispered, her eyes where the entrance had been. The almost palpable aura of excitement surrounding her had vanished along with the corridor and stairs.

Ulanda nudged Mirwin with her elbow and motioned him to go to Cici. Half to his feet, still in a crouch, he shaped query with fingers still against her arm. "A kindness, that's all," she whispered even as Niv hissed his own answer to the tass'altin along with the gesture that made it an order.

"You might try some kindness as well," she said to Niv. "There wasn't anything he could have done last night."

"He showed poor judgment to let his attention leave you."

"Where I went, he couldn't have followed."

"I don't mean to break up a promising fight" Alicia said, "but could we get started here? I don't trust how long any of this will stop Rilla."

The joss sticks for Kori and Silassic would still be burning here when they pulled into their retreat, leaving the ti'Linn guards and two Kallit behind.

Bolda squatted beside her. "You sure you two can pull this off?"

Ulanda shrugged. Without the control Vivan's altered Altasimic pattern had given her? The intention was to tie the exit to the pattern pull, sealing it deep in time and space from the real Ji'Jin Station, but if she failed, leaving those waiting

in the corridors alive and within the warded area. If successful, she could drop the pull once they were all together. A probability bubble, linked to the power of the Station Center. "Should I ask Garm for a doorway instead? Do you see any silver birds around? Or try to recreate the diamond? Do you think I could?"

"Hell no. To all of them." Bolda's eyes went to Garm, a bright shape near the way to the corridor and he sighed as he shook his head. "Don't worry, I'll keep a lid on him, someone's got to, besides Eunni. That woman has no taste in men." He scratched his nose, wrinkling the loose skin. His next question was a gesture and a sour look towards Alicia that said she was as crazy for allowing her to stay as Alicia was for insisting.

Alicia must have seen because she laughed. "Would you live my life for me?"

"Couldn't do a worse job of it."

"I'll stay instead," Mirwin said. "Cici and I both, if you want." The Kallit girl nodded.

"No," Ulanda said, but softened the word with a sign to him. She stood. "Alicia is my Security Second and I need Kori at the far points." And I can trust her with my life and with Rit's, she thought, but those words she didn't think should need saying to either of them. The words she didn't dare say, was that Alicia was also a reminder of other promises made. Another marriage that existed... somewhere, anywhere Alicia and Rit were.

Rit had been walking towards the center of the flitter bay but looked back at her words. "Alicia's right about there not being much time," he said evenly, the words carrying in the quiet.

Alicia hugged Kori, then Silassic and was hugged back by the medic. Ulanda felt how strong her loyalties were and from how narrow a point they radiated out.

Silassic bowed to her. "Lady, please accept..."

Kori put a hand on his shoulder. "Husband, thanks have already been given in all the ways that *we* exist." She motioned to Peecit, then to Mirwin and Cici. "You have duties." She waited until they had started towards the exit then followed.

In moments, besides those staying here when she started the pattern-pull, there was only her and Niv, Rit and Alicia. And red paper around the altar. She pushed it with the toe of her shoe.

A kind of energy brushed her; she thought she might have imagined it. Fear or simple nerves from waiting or a slight breeze, it was that faint on her skin, but it moved the dust around them. "They're doing something," she said. Much more dust fell than could be accounted for by the resetting of the tiles; she hadn't noticed it getting worse instead of better until just then.

The waiting was almost over. She signed the watchers away from the exit, that close they might be trapped outside when she went into the pull. Op'ki'na was the last in.

"So soon?" Niv asked.

"Not too soon," Alicia said. "This fast and Rilla might be committed to an attack here and not be prepared to follow us." Only an hour from the meeting by the bathhouse, there hadn't been time for much planning and less for considering alternatives.

Niv blinked at her. "Ulanda, can you tell what they're doing?" Coming closer, he squatted at the altar, hugging his knees as he stared at the smoke. With one long nail, he pushed one of the joss sticks aside. The smell of burning dust rose with the incense.

"Just that I feel like something is pressing in all around us."

He looked up at her then held his hand out. She knelt next to him, a hand on his shoulder much as Kori had done with Silassic. Gray filmed the brilliance of his eyes, caking at the start of the transparent eyelid. "Pressing around all of us?" he asked.

The growing energies yes, but not the possibilities, and she thought Niv meant the last. "You should ask Rit, not me. I've never been good at seeing the future."

Rit had the hem of his tunic over his nose as he jogged back towards them, coughing. Two of the ti'Linn who should be checking residual settings, started towards him, clicking noisily. Rit waved them away and turned back to her without waiting to see if he was obeyed. He wasn't.

Alicia had her Zimmer rifle in her hands. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her tunic, spreading dirt in a smear. She motioned to the ti'Linn guard and they fanned back out. "Hold the arranged points." Then to the Kallit, "Wisop, you take the far end, N'sim, stay where you are. Open the residual points to the Net as soon as we're gone. Make it a delaying action if possible but don't resist anything overt. We'll be in a pattern pull, they won't be able to reach us four and the exit here won't exist anymore."

The two Kallit nodded as one, yellow hair flashing, the green of their skin lost in the growing murk. The glow globes that had followed them everywhere were dying.

Sparks made the available light suddenly dark, the fire coming from the tree roots. As they fell, they flamed brighter, the popping sound deafening. Wisop was a dark shape moving across the field of fire.

Suddenly, Alicia screamed and dropped the scanner. Rit grabbed her. "Now," he said, the word lost in the surrounding noise, but Ulanda heard.

Rit thought it might happen in the same way the Zimmer pull on Alisim had, with a distinct transition from one thing into another. Instead, the change was instant; and like the dream of En'talac who may or may not have been Ulanda, he could remember that the flitter bay had always been this way. And that it had been different.

No dust. No ti'Linn or Kallit. Crystal surrounded them, rising to a high dome both above and below. They stood on nothing. "It's the same as I remember it," he said.

Niv still stared at where the altar had been. Keeping one hand on Niv's shoulder, Ulanda straightened. Niv's eyes followed her. "Kori set the points," she said. "I could feel them as we went in. Nothing now, I don't know, the pull might stop me from..." She waited a moment, her face blank with thought. "The Station Center, I could feel it... I can feel it. It must be through her."

Alicia laughed sharply, relief in the sound. "Anything about what Rilla was doing? Is this a pull or a different reality? You never said it was beautiful."

Ulanda looked at Niv, not him or Alicia. "It's as real as I could make it." Niv stood. His eyes never left Ulanda's, his gaze intense.

Rit forced down a tide of jealousy, far stronger than any he had felt since Nisstin. More even than physical intimacy, the look spoke of lives and experiences he hadn't shared in, and Ulanda's tone, more that of a lover than a woman making decisions that would affect many people's lives. She picked the damndest times to start playing that game.

Alicia picked up the sensor disk and brushed it against a pant leg. The tight knot of her dark hair was gray with dust; they had brought what had gotten onto their clothes and persons here with them. "Rit? Anything?"

He shook his head. "How many versions does it take to make something real? I don't know either."

Alicia took his hand. "Was that my question?"

He kissed the back of her hand but knew she wasn't fooled. "We should be safe here for as long as it takes to filter the possibilities out. Just don't look at the wall patterns and you should be fine."

Alicia turned a puzzled look to him, and then the walls. "Why not?"

As they had the first time Rit had seen this place, shapes moved within the patterns of black and white that made up the walls. He had thought the effect would be local, even solely visual. Gingerly, he pushed his awareness outwards. Crystal. Tiles after all, but not clay. Traps? The movement tried to draw him into the shapes. He felt them in Ulanda's mind as well, she was searching in the same way he was, Niv forgotten for the moment.

Then the shapes had a focus - opposite them. Rit pointed, but Ulanda had already seen it. "Can you make out what's happening?" he asked. Ulanda shook her head.

Alicia had her rifle at the ready, her cue from Rit's tone, the sensor disk back on her belt. "What now?"

"I don't know, it might be normal for this place."

Alicia looked to where the exit should have been. "Why don't we just leave and decide both things later on? If the exit is still there, we can get through and seal



it, then it won't matter what happens in here." A measuring look had replaced the wonder.

Avoiding looking at any one spot too long, Rit tried to sort out what he could of the shapes. Almost to the focus of the disturbance, he found a slit-like area, not so different in appearance, but holding different kinds of potential past the surface than he sensed with the rest. The much larger size of the bay had moved it further away. To Ulanda he said, "Can you tell if that's it?"

She shook her head. "I can't feel the exit at all."

"It's our best bet then." He set one bead and rolled it out a few yards in front of them, then two more to make a triangle, and linked them. They rose to float at waist level. "Stay out from the walls as long as possible, and keep the warding fields between us and the..." His eyes followed the lead of Alicia's rifle. The shapes in the wall were more solid. More real if Alicia was seeing them.

Alicia fell to one knee and almost instantly, Rit felt the buzz as their warding synchronized with the rifle setting, and saw the flare of blue erupt across the flitter bay. The shapes split apart and in the afterglow, took form. The gray had to be Rilla. Then Heana. A ti'Linn, but pale in color. Ge'on'ni, then. The three didn't fire back but a pushing field hit their warding like a storm wind.

Rit strengthened their field, cutting the sound if not the light: the interface where the systems fought crackled like sheet lightening. Standard Temple warding, and their own, Zimmer based.

"Try to take us back out of here," he said to Ulanda from over his shoulder, most of his attention on the warding.

"Would the flitter bay be safer?" Alicia asked, sounding icily calm as she set a different color bar into the rifle. "Can't we do something here?" She looked at Ulanda. "Can you change the pull?"

"I told you I couldn't."

Their plan had been all or nothing; there hadn't been time for more. This could fall through their fingers like dry sand, leaving them where they started. "Then we'll do what we can to reach the others," Rit said.

He tried one more time to "see" the exit more clearly, and suddenly, was standing at the edge of a drop, the wall patterns below him. Solid crystal was still under his feet, but black and white showed under that and still twisting out of his focus.

He backed away from the edge, and tried to see the dome as it had been. The slick surface under his shoes, how the leather soles couldn't grip. The texture of cloth rubbing on his skin as he crossed his arms. Air in his lungs, the lingering taste of acrid dust in his throat.

He was on the floor, Alicia standing over him, firing burst points through their warding. The flitter bay was back as it was but inevitability swelled all around

him, displacing what hope was left. Ge'on'ni was almost to where the exit had shifted, the other two equidistant.

Alicia helped him to his feet and kept one arm through his. "If you can walk, start towards the walls," she yelled into his ear. "Niv... get Ulanda going, please."

Three almost clear beams shot out, one each from Rilla, Heana and Ge'on'ni, joining at the center of the dome, floor level. The combined force flared straight up and down, reaching top and bottom. Slowly the light spread out, following the curve of the walls downwards. From clear, the light had become a translucent green, then darker as it flowed along the walls. Their warding might not have existed for any effect it had.

Suddenly, the bay shook violently. He was on the floor again, Alicia pinned under him. He was trying to hold onto smooth crystal with his fingernails. At eye level, starting from the center of the pillar of energy, cracks grew in the crystal floor straight towards him, startlingly fast and then practically to his nose before branching out like a tree limb. He held Alicia as the bay shook again. The cracks would have reached the walls. He looked back. Niv and Ulanda were much further away than the few feet they had taken. The perspective was confused. Flashes of yellow light rose out of the cracks with a popping sound. Reacting to this where it hadn't with the other, their warding flared. Ash shot out in bursts, a storm of ash whipped into a blizzard by the competing fields, the smell of burning as it fell like black snow against the clarity of the floor.

"Ulanda!" Rit shouted over the noise. They were further away again than before, as though the floor was expanding. The two were half lost through the fall of ash.

"I can't stop it," she screamed. She and Niv were on their knees, backing towards the wall.

The protective warding fields were becoming erratic, absorbing the energy pouring from the cracks and then flinging it outwards wherever a weak spot occurred. Under them, the space glowed, there was lightening under the crystal as though their fields were there as well. The growing layer of ash and dust on the surface separated, forming curving bands, the yellow light shot upwards between, illuminating the underside of the flakes still falling. Yellow below, green above.

Alicia was clawing at him. He rolled over, letting her go. Ash in her hair, smudged on her face, she was crying, but he knew it was from frustration and anger. "I'm sorry," he said.

Wiping her face with a sleeve, she laughed shakily. "Don't ever blank out again when you're on top of me." Getting to her feet, she looked around. "We're not going to get out of here are we?" Hazel eyes looked into his as though the lighting above and below them didn't exist. Stripes on her face like a Xintan death mask. Ash on the crystal, more stripes. Like those on a large cat, he suddenly thought

and saw Gennady, a tapestry behind him. Black stripes on a huge white cat. And a tree in the cloth - the same tree as had appeared in the rug Bolda had woven and given to him and Alicia. Flowers. Birds. A window with the green sky of Ri was on the far wall...

Alicia was kneeling, his head cradled in her arms. "Don't," she whispered, rocking him with her body. "Please don't go."

Time must have passed; the fall of ash had slowed to almost nothing. Instead of irregular cracks, there was a spiral of ash on the floor. Light flickered, their warding barely responding where it crossed the shapes. The green tower of light was fading. There was no sign of Ulanda or Niv.

He got to his knees, still disorientated. Alicia sat back on her heels, the rifle across her lap. "Do I need to do anything?" she asked.

Rilla moved before he could answer. A beam sheared off the layer of warding closest to them and hit the wall, tearing into the pattern of light and dark. A wave of sound but no rebound, the wall absorbed the rest of the energy with a sound like doors being slammed one at a time in a quick progression down a long corridor. Alicia didn't move to return the fire.

"Do you even see me?" she asked.

Ash had caked in the corners of her eyes; he had a stronger urge to wipe them than he did to answer. He felt displaced.

He did try to wipe her cheek, stopping only when she turned her head. He was making it worse. "I saw Ri," he said. "I think it was in Palace, Cassa's Suite, but after it had become stone. And Gennady. I don't know what it means."

She swallowed, then choked and spat ash. "Go try and find them. I'll do what I can here."

"Alicia..."

"Consider it a security matter." Eyes down, she had a bead in her hand, adjusting the setting. And looked up. "I'd rather die trying something I understand. Please, just go."

He watched her, still without words to make a difference. The ti'Linn was closest, but backed away from the push of the warding field Alicia set, not offering any countering fields.

"No," he whispered, wanting reasons that weren't wishful thinking. Wanting to run to her and hold her. Too many possibilities existed about her small form. Too many of them spoke of death. None of them he could find, spoke of the two of them together.

He stood in a black cavern now instead of crystal and except for the faint sizzle of the warding, very still. Breaks in the floor remained, long jagged dark tunnels, and other cracks sheared the crystal, heaving one side higher than the other. The dome, where the green fire had flowed, looked seared.

Rilla, Heana and Ge'on'ni were back together where they had appeared. When he could have used the distraction of noise, it was gone, leaving him alone with his thoughts, half of which didn't belong to him, and most the rest, ones he would as soon disavow.

Alicia turned. "They've left something here," she yelled, her high voice very loud. The ash muffled any echo. She was spinning in place, looking around, the tip of her rifle following every direction. "Whatever you can do, do it now."

Nothing happened: the flare from the three points where the Empress's people had been didn't happen. Nothing, an image of nothing. Where they joined was nothing. Utterly silent, he could hear his own breathing, and from behind, where he knew they hadn't been when he had looked earlier, Ulanda's breath and the sound of air over Niv's sharp teeth.

Alicia cursed and dropped the Zimmer rifle. Their warding died all at once.

"Rit?" Ulanda whispered and he turned towards her... and staggered forward, feeling as though he'd been kicked. Or shot. From somewhere far away, he heard Alicia scream of rage.

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He had turned towards her, took a step and then fell, landing face down, a stick poking out of his back. Alicia screamed again, like a hurt animal.

Then another scream, but it wasn't anything alive. Air like a fist slammed into her. The nothing in the center of the dome had exploded. The scream rose, and then faded to a muffled whine; she felt the sound through her bones and felt the wall come out to hit her. Niv had his arms around her hard enough to stop her breath. Then he was torn away, she saw him, his face, his mouth open. She still couldn't breath, she still couldn't hear.

Ulanda woke up lying on reeds, half in the water, her body numb. The red sun covered half the sky above the walls, more than in the vision she had shared with Rit. Was she alone? The tall reeds kept her from seeing the remainder of the garden. The red light darkened the stems to purple from the lavender she had known on the island in the center of the diamond, or the even paler version of the blinds in Garm's study. The same crystal mouths though, they bit and held, tearing the cloth of her tunic as she struggled to get up, drawing blood where they reached bare skin. She still couldn't feel any pain ... or hear.

Hands touched her and she twisted to see a face inches from hers. She bit. And reached for pattern ... and found the absence as though blinded.

"I won't hurt you," he shouted from where he stood back, one hand pressed over his arm. She got the meaning more from the movement of his lips, but sound was starting to return in a whine. Not Ri-bred, she decided as she tried to get her thoughts together. A dark haired man with a powerful build, middle aged. But speaking Ri-native.

She nodded and let him untangle the braid ends and her clothes. Tass'altin at least from the way he handled them – and her – as he helped her to stand and then straightened her tunic. "If you'll let me, I'll help you out of here."

She shook her head no and no again when he would have started on the hair that had pulled out of the coil. At a sign from her, he stepped back. "Who are you?"

"My name's A'in. I'm the Empress' tass'alt. She wants to talk to you..."

"No." The word was out before she realized.

"... and you might save everybody and yourself some trouble and listen."

"Am I here? Is this really Camerat?"

He didn't answer immediately, his eyes flickered away towards where the center of the garden would be. "Yes and no," he finally said. "A pull interface between you and her." He looked tired and more than a little worried. "Priest Ulanda, she's just hanging onto this. If she lets go, where will you be?" His voice was low; the sound wouldn't leave this small area. "You're here, what more will talking with her cost you?"

Cost? In her mind, she heard Rit fall, the sound of the shaft hitting his body. She saw his eyes again. There was no surprise in them and no fear. She closed her own eyes tight and crossed her arms under her breasts. And saw Heana with the bow still in her hands, watching without moving, then slowly lowering it as Rit fell, her narrow face raised in triumph. Sweat had washed the flat sides of her head clean of ash and the colors of the tattoo glowed as she turned to Rilla, her mouth open...

When Ulanda opened her eyes, A'in hadn't gone and the garden hadn't changed. "I would have talked," she said in High formal, adding the slant that put it firmly in the past tense. Why did you kill him, she wanted to ask but didn't. Would saying he was dead, make him so? Had Cassa finally claimed her price?

The sympathy she thought had been in his face vanished. "And what will *not* talking with her cost you?" he said, speaking more quietly still.

From the center of the garden, Poss a'Itlic watched as A'in half carried the woman out of the growth of taller reeds. A'in's introduction was as careful as though this was an Audience.

"I said I would listen to what you had to say," Ulanda said rudely in plain-tongue. Her anger was a shell around her, everything bounced off it.

"Will you?" Poss a'Itlic asked. The garden was gone, replaced by another. A late summer morning in the herb garden, the planting beds bordered with lavender and a willow fence at the far end that hid the way to the ocean. Two pairs of footsteps had brushed a green track in the frosting of dew on the wet grass. The best she could do from a very old memory, making it a pull within a pull, and for all her practice, quite fragile. At her sign, A'in walked a little away to give them some privacy.

"Do you remember this?" she continued, taking a few steps, feeling the wet grass with the toes of her slippers and knocking the drops off the green leaves. The silk cloth was meant for indoors and wouldn't keep the water out. Frost bumps skittered across her skin with a shiver at the change in temperature - her pale green robe was meant for the heat of Camerat.

If she had thought to impress, she had failed. "It's different," Ulanda said, frowning as she looked around, sliding her eyes quickly over where A'in was then stopping when she faced the crèche. She didn't seem to notice the cold.

"Of course it is. A different reality. A different purpose." Sun glinted off the glass in the windows of the Acolyte House. Poss a'Itlic nodded towards the stone building. "Are you there? Were you there even in my reality? Did you live and die here, Priest or not? You could be sleeping in one of the rooms here, or just waking. A life, simply that. A life without the Opening, without the diamond. A life where the glass girdle remained just that - glass."

While she spoke, a window opened, sunlight again, a different sparkle as the angle of glass to sun changed. A girl leaned out and waved.

How fragile indeed, Poss a'Itlic thought, as she tried to strengthen the pattern threads she had been pulling. Something had changed just then. The wrong time now, or a part of it was wrong. At least the two tracks in the wet grass remained.

"Qalt'ici," Ulanda mouthed. The girl in the window waved again then disappeared. "Why?" The one word came out with a wild sound, the shell around her starting to crumble. "What do you expect to get out of this?" That last was more in a whisper as she stared down at her hands, turning them over and back repeatedly. No braids, no wrappings.

But the Priest's arms weren't totally unmarked. A tiny dark smudge was on the soft flesh of each inner wrist, the start of overpattern. The braids had been there

at the beginning of the pull. "Me?" Poss a'Itic asked. "Are you sure I'm doing this?"

Ulanda wet her lips, and with a deep breath looked at her hands again, moving the fingers. "You've taken me back to the beginning. Should I start over? What would you have then?"

A'in motioned her to look towards the crèche, Ulanda following his direction even as she did. The girl held her sleeping tunic bunched up in one hand to free her feet as she ran towards them through the wet grass.

From the fresh morning air of South Bay Temple to the stink of the garden on Camerat. She had expected the binding weave to be as visible as a heat shimmer by now but it wasn't. An embryo of the binding only, faint changes in the crystal of the granite that made the walls. South Bay had been meant as a distraction.

Cayse brought tea in as Ulanda sat in the warm sand, sifting the grains through her fingers, idly weighting handfuls as though to compare, before pouring each out to add to the pyramid of sand growing beside her. Sand caked the weave of the dark braids.

"What happened to the pull?" he asked her as he set the tray down.

Poss a'Itic didn't take her eyes off Ulanda. "There's an interface still, but allowing more in now than before." And out. Ulanda could walk out of here into Camerat if she cared to, or if the energy fields - their action similar to neural blockers - would let her put so many thoughts together at once. But to what? The real spiral instead of the one they planned? Pattern pulls were a fraction of reality, overpattern more so and more solid, but only because of the power of the Priest that could access overpattern was usually proportionally greater. Almost always a memory of what happened, very occasionally something out of a dream such as she had done on Ri to recreate the diamond. But the ability to profoundly change reality so casually?

Poss a'Itic dug her bare feet into the warm sand, welcoming at least that after getting her shoes soaked. She had a cotton wrap over her robe now, she had brought the chill back with her. Cycling still, she thought she wanted the comfort as much as the warmth.

The same bowl for her tea as when she met with Oimit and Tu'pin. The Ri-green porcelain. Poss a'Itic smiled into the hot liquid before drinking. "It allows you in," she said to Cayse. "An improvement in that at least."

"Your improvement?"

She shook her head. "Ulanda's, but she doesn't control it, we haven't left her the capacity for control. Her power, though... I wish I knew what has already happened to her, I can't touch her at all, not really. It's an interesting ride we're on."

"And..."

Poss a'Itlic stopped him with a quick movement. The thought alone was dangerous enough much less the word. Angansit. All the reassurances in the universe didn't make her trust him. Or all the precautions including the Net filters that were similar to what was done on Ji'Jin Station. A stop on the loom-master as much as on Ulanda.

Allowing the binding to take shape while she held the interface put her at risk of being bound in the same thing but they had run out of options when Ulanda and her people had moved unexpectedly. Would she have company in her prison? The chances of that had increased as soon as she had lost the momentum of the Priest's capture. When she had felt the depth of the change centered in Ji'Jin Station, Poss a'Itlic had tried to follow enough to push Ge'on'ni and the others in. They had set the three points that made a stable field that she could use or she wouldn't be here like this, but what else had happened? Very briefly, she'd had a glimpse of a crystal room then a flare of power had pushed her out.

Letting Cayse take the empty bowl, Poss a'Itlic got to her feet. "Ulanda," she said in Ri-native, using the country accent she had learned as a child on the farm, not the cultured one of the Temples. "The only thing I want is to prevent the destruction of Empire. It makes us enemies only if you intend to destroy it."

Small black eyes looked over at her. "What I intend? I don't know that I intend anything." And back to studying the sand. "The phoenix allowed the Opening. Cassa created a whole reality just to allow that to happen. Altasimic would have been destroyed, torn apart otherwise."

"And the other?"

"What?"

"Overpattern bleeding in." She willed Ulanda to look at her. "How many times does it have to 'almost' happen?"

"Does 'almost' count? Rit says..."

"I'm more interested in what you say."

The goading was deliberate, but instead of answering, Ulanda watched Cayse as he served the tea.

"We're brothers," Cayse said, bringing the girl a bowl. He introduced himself. "For the most part, my Lady keeps a closed Household."

"You move the same," Ulanda said, signing thanks for the tea with her free hand, a small motion. "I wondered."

Outwardly polite and calm now, her manners regained even with the dull, drugged look in her eyes. Enough Net reached the pull interface for Cayse to ask Yian to bring fresh clothes. From his quiet study of the reeds at the water's edge, A'in looked back at his brother. Surprise and contempt showed on his face.

A small concern in the light of what they were planning, but Poss a'Itlic gave her allowance. There was no need for Ulanda to sit in wet and stinking clothes.



Ga'si'ti came with Yian, unarmed but bristling with threat. It stopped at the entrance, waiting for orders where it hadn't in coming that far. Poss a'Itic let it stay, but not to come any further in.

With the ti'Linn's entrance Ulanda had stood. "From Ge'on'ni's ti'ti'sinici," Cayse said, moving between the girl and the pale colored ti'Linn. "The chief part of my Lady's personal security, but Ga'si'ti is a Master Salin as well as a Security First. As I said, a closed Household." He picked up the tea bowl she had dropped and passed it to Yian, taking the fresh robe instead. "Things can remain the same, year to year, century to century. You know the benefits for a Priest, the reason behind the routine."

Changes in the crystals in the stone were growing outwards again. Building blocks, Lord Gennady had called them, the words spun from the spiral at the first diamond point and records that the Overpriest of Forms had given him from the world-altar on Lillisim just before they went through the overpattern tear. Anga's building blocks, his records for the second part. From Oimit, they had what they needed: forms that Ulanda would respond to, ones she wouldn't. And her, Poss a'Itic wondered - what she would respond to? Those records had been discretely withheld.

Would they all be trapped in what the loom-master built, Poss a'Itic wondered again, almost idly as Cayse helped the woman out of her wet clothes. Ulanda appeared comforted with Cayse helping her. And from what they knew of her tastes, the robe should please. And distract. Of quilted silk, the transparent layers were sewn together with silver in the thread. A moiré pattern grew out of the crossing of the fabrics. A delicate choice, with pearl buttons down the front and where the sleeves gathered at the wrist, another long row of pearl buttons, usually left open for the overbraids to show. Cayse carefully looped all the sleeve buttons, one at a time, covering most of the braids. Should she order silk cord to match the white robe, Poss a'Itic wondered. The braiding would occupy time she wanted filled.

She walked over. The two of them stood eye to eye. "Would you be what I am?" she asked her.

"Do you mean be Empress?"

She could be, but of what kind of Empire? "An Empire Priest," she corrected.

"I was. You're missing five days from my life. Is this more real than that was?" The woman's arms were folded; the dark braid ends stark against the white silk.

"But you're still here."

"I'm wherever I need to be. The girl we saw... we grew up together in the Acolyte House. After the Opening, I dreamed about her. W'til flowers, the yellow ones, you must know them..."

Poss a'Itic nodded. They grew wild around the farm; she had picked them for bouquets. And scattered them over her mother's grave, the autumn brittle stems

breaking as she handled them. A trail of tiny yellow flowers had been left behind her leading from altar to grave. In the garden where they walked, a tamed version grew, but it had been too early in the year for the blooms to be out.

"... and the allipalli stems," Ulanda continued. "Lemon scented. On Alisim..."

Memories, Poss a'Itic thought, almost taken over by them. She turned to A'in, her throat tight but she didn't find a release there. Another memory. Raswini. "Is Qalt'ici tied into this?" Poss a'Itic managed to say, scarcely aware that she interrupted her.

"How?" Ulanda shrugged. "What I see must be from Cassa. I knew her, so Cassa can hang a cloth of what I need onto my memory of her. Last night, I was here. In a dream."

"Last night?" Poss a'Itic asked. The binding patterns had been seeded into the stone yesterday.

Ulanda shrugged again, appearing unconcerned but the heel of one hand smoothed the silk of her skirt and she watched the play of the light on the weave. "We took the dream as a warning. We weren't wrong. You could have left me alone. If nothing had happened, the news of the Lady's return would have died, been discredited. The Zimmer don't want me to be who I am, Clan or freeborn."

Cayse looked up from pouring fresh tea. "You could have created a universe where we would have."

"I went from the diamond to a reality already created. And not by me."

He smiled at the formal tone, sparing Poss a'Itic a glance before replying.

"Excuse my presumption, Lady Priest."

Ulanda colored, spots on her cheeks flaring to purple in the ruddy light. She looked down then back to Cayse as she caught the skirt of the robe with one arm. Red sunlight showed in the quilting lines, brightest where the silver was exposed. "Am I dressed in white for Examination?" she asked stiffly. "Are you dressed for the same thing?" She looked to Poss a'Itic then back to Cayse, a new look growing in her eyes. "I had thought that I was merely to be bound in order to save Empire from what I can do."

Cayse smiled again, gently this time. "I'm dressed in white because it seems cooler. An illusion that doesn't work, I'm afraid."

But the haunted look in the small dark eyes was growing. "White is for death."

Not her death Poss a'Itic realized suddenly as Ulanda's shell of reserve continued to break. Then Ge'on'ni had been successful in that as well.

But Cayse wouldn't be able to see the shapes of the memories that were very close to being out of control. "Or for purification," he said. "Not always..."

They were in the middle of a circle of stone on a hilltop, a single row of rounded boulders with the sky the dark green of dusk above them. The warm breeze was fragrant with the summer. Half grown skvill grain ringed the hill almost the whole way around, showing the planting rows still and under the

nodding heads, the broken and browned stubble of last years crop. But inside the barrier, the grass was deep green and wild, bending as the wind pushed it down then released it as the direction shifted. W'til flowers, a bright gold, were stiff among the pliant grasses. Mid summer but the air had the scent of a coming storm.

The two of them were alone.

"Is this you?" Ulanda said, looking around her, her face drawn with misery, but with the change, the shell of her control was back. Her arms were folded tightly under her breasts but there were no braid ends trailing down the front of her robe.

In the distance, mountains ran horizon to horizon. On two sides was the ocean, but too far to see. Otherwise the land was flat, a broad river valley clothed in a mix of forest and farm. A narrow dirt road approached the hill, and a path led here.

"The place, yes," Poss a'Itic said. She looked to the center where the way-altar was. Rounded stones had been placed to make a cairn, then sticks laid butt against the ground to meet above the top stone, their lengths wedged into the shape of the cairn. Flags of paper were attached to the wood, remnants of prayers for the Summer Turning. Her mother was buried here, wrapped in cloth that she had spun the thread for and woven with her own hands, and left to become part of the earth. Only by following the line of the altar and the tallest mountain could Poss a'Itic tell where her body would be. Her father would have been buried here. Will be. Was. This could be any time at all, nothing would have changed. Was the farmhouse different? Or was it the trick of distance to think so? Would her memory of her childhood home have changed with the years?

More water rounded stones made the walls of both the house and that of the half barn. Timbers were from the mountain forests, too large to be cut out of the local woodlots. The sheep pens were among the groves of fruit trees - hidden from sight by the green leaves - and on the other side of the house was the kitchen garden she'd weeded from the time she could tell plant from stone. She listened for the sound of the bells that the lead sheep would wear but only heard the wind in the grasses.

She walked to the altar, watching where she put her bare feet. On the paper, the lettering was in two shades of faded green ink, the Ri color prominent. Carefully, she released her awareness. Ri song and Simic both, but Ri first, the melody like the scent of ripe summer fruit, strawberries and pin berry. She stopped with the net of overpattern about to be cast as from a fishing boat. And looked up to see Ulanda watching her. "My mother was buried here," she said. Her mother's bones would dust and long mixed with others. And her father, the hard man she'd fought against and loved and who had lived to see her as Empress. Very long dead. Soil now and the plants that grew here. The animals.

They would both be part of Ri in a different way than she was. "Do you know where you are?"

"Ri."

"Of course." Poss a'Itlic pulled the wrap closer over her shoulders against the wind, then found Ulanda helping her, tucking the edges so her arms could hold the front closed. She could feel that the air was hot, with the peculiar heat of a storm before it breaks, but the moving air rasped at her as though it might draw blood. "The village is hidden by the trees along the stream," she continued when Ulanda had stepped away, her eyes down. "Skali on the Possillitska creek. I was named for the watercourse, for luck, I suppose. The A'poss River is further still - half a day at least - the road runs along the other side of stream from the village until they join. A market town is there, and several more strung along the main channel. Then the ocean and South Bay." The same range of mountains curved to meet the ocean there. Palace was at most a faint star in the light of the rising sun, and only after a storm when the air was clearest. Nothing had changed - why would it?

At the border of stones Poss a'Itlic turned back to Ulanda. She hadn't moved more than three feet from where she had started. "Did Lord Ritsiniti die?" There were more forms of control than those found in pattern. How far was it to Ri-altar from here? Any distance at all?

Ulanda was snapping blooms off a spay of w'til, rubbing the flowers between her palms, releasing the minute comma shaped seeds, leaving only fragments of the short branched stems in her hands. The wind molded the silk to her body. The woman had listened to her memories, her whole body tense with listening, but the last question hit her like a slap. "If you say so." She stared at the stems a moment then threw them on the altar. Most hit sticks and fell clear, or blew away, but a few reached the stone cairn.

"Do you intend to say the death rites for him?"

"If I wished... I wouldn't here."

"You weren't raised a peasant like me." Poss a'Itlic laughed as she sat against the altar, that side of the cairn sheltered from the wind. The sky was darkening rapidly, thick clouds building, coming in from the ocean. Local Net started just outside the ring of stones, she could feel it now, questing for a way into here, confused at the barrier, if such a word could apply. The forms of the patterns were sorting themselves out. Angansit's and Ulanda's. The feel of the world, her own - both too familiar to be easy and too affected by the changes in her body from the cycling.

She hugged her knees, braid ends trailing over her legs. "Does Temple ritual make more sense for anyone not a Priest? We pray to a unity, something we can feel, but most people can no more sense it directly than they can fly. So they pray to the Empress, or a stone. Or fire. Or to you. Does it matter? A local Priest,

low level ones, they're not much different than those they serve. They have visible privileges of their station, of course: longer lives, the ability to access pattern and make judgments based on Empire Law. But an Empress... is the stone so different? You might be better off praying to stone. At least it's there, it can be held in the hand. And the charms the country people use - fragments of the same thing. Is there so much difference between those things and Temple ceremonies?"

Ulanda sat next to her. "You're cycling," she said. "I didn't think of that."

She wouldn't have been the only one sorting out patterns. "As soon as you came from the diamond, it started. I wasn't bred for this, or given special training to survive this kind of overpattern linking and I've had no need to learn it. You've opened a hole that I'm falling through, that Empire's falling through."

"And Anga is supposed to patch it?" Ulanda gathered up the hem of her robe and tucked the ends around her feet. She moved her fingers stiffly, as though having to remind herself that they would actually work. "It is Anga isn't it?"

"Yes." The air was electric as the pressure fell; the hair on her arms was standing on end. A summer storm. Was it for them? "It seemed as reasonable to be trying that as anything else."

"And now?"

"Reason might not be the best word as this might not have been the best course of action." She chuckled through a tremor of shivers. "What would you have done?"

Ulanda stiffened. "She said that."

"Who did?"

"Cassa. To Rit. He talks to her. I don't know if he's dead. Did you order him killed?"

"Yes, I did. Another reasonable course of action."

"And you don't know what he is." Her fingers picked at the cloth, working the threads out of alignment.

"If he's dead and this is happening, then it doesn't matter any more." Poss a'ltic moved a hand to touch her. The woman was trembling.

Ulanda stood suddenly, stepped away then turned to look at her. "Don't you understand yet?" Violence was born in her voice and died as quickly. Holding her hands up, her arms shone white and round in the dusk, smooth, a different texture than the robe. "Haven't you listened to the Zimmer?"

Poss a'ltic got up again, but moved less in distance than through the remains of her humanity. Ulanda stood still and let her touch her. "And don't you understand?" she whispered. "The Zimmer supplied the pieces that let us take you."

Ulanda pulled away with a shrug. "By his own beliefs, Gennady was damned."

The binding patterns in the stones shifted as though nudged by the anger. Could she feel them? "What do I care for the Wu'similini?" Poss a'Itic began to laugh.

The stink of the marsh surrounded them again. Cayse still held the tea bowl, steam rising from the surface. Yian was folding the tunic and pants that Ulanda had been wearing. Moments here where an hour must have passed on Ri. Had they been there? She thought so, more than they were actually here.

Ulanda sat down awkwardly, as though her legs were numb. Yellow pollen from the flower heads smeared the front of her robe and barbed ends of the immature w'tic seeds were caught in the weave. "Am I still doing it?" she asked unsteadily, looking around. Slowly, probably unnoticed, her body was rocking back and forth. The binding had grown an hours worth in the same moments.

"And the pull this time?" Cayse asked as he watched Ulanda.

"Ri. A couple of weeks after the Summer Turning." Poss a'Itic took the bowl of tea, cupping it between her hands. Her braids had yellow pollen on them. The time frame was right and other than the barrier of stones and the patterns growing there, she hadn't been able to sense that it was a pull. "We were there, I think, or as good as. A storm was building, coming from the ocean."

Without being asked, A'in brought Ulanda tea, holding her hands around the bowl until she had it. Braids again, the same ones as before. She held the bowl balanced on her knees, her face blank as she stared at the rising steam. For an instant, Poss a'Itic saw the shape of the steam change. A non-linear mantra.

A'in was back at the waters edge. "Attend to her," Poss a'Itic said to him.

"Other than tea?" At his words, Ulanda looked up, first to him and then to her.

Fingertips burning against the surface of the porcelain, Poss a'Itic made the small forms that gave him what she wanted done. Other than tea.

"I don't think so," Ulanda said, her eyes back to A'in.

Poss a'Itic shrugged. The mantra was broken.

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The shimmer of the warding surrounded him and then he was through. Not a moment too soon, Garm thought, almost dropping the full load of the heavy man onto Eunni. Rit groaned but didn't move. Silassic had the scan going as soon as he was down, his knife out almost as fast and cutting away the cloth from around the wound and the wooden shaft that still stuck out of Rit's back. A moment later, he passed the arrow to Eunni. Carefully, Garm took it from her hand.

Scales, gray scales smeared with blood, tipped the end of the shaft, the ends set into the body of the wood. Rilla's. Along the spine of each scale were carvings, little more than nicks in the smooth surface to touch, but strung together they likely made words from a language he wasn't familiar with. An E'kalt prayer, he thought. The cutting point was fired-hardened - with probably more prayers in the burning. He didn't smell anything but suspected poison, there was no reason they'd risk only injuring him when they could be more certain so easily. Garm dropped the arrow and wiped his fingers on his robe. Following the first attack, Op'ki'na had knocked three of Heana's arrows out of the air one at a time with a flick of a cloth like swatting a fly. No more had followed. Any of them had been as easy a target for the first shot.

Eunni looked at him, frowned, then turned her attention back to helping Silassic. The Zimmer medic murmured instructions in Xintan, chanting the words. Hic'lic picked the arrow up next and wrapped it in a cloth before skittering over towards the packs.

The warding flared and then steadied as Alicia came through. "Mirwin can't get close enough to Niv to knock him out. Silassic? Can you...?"

"Choices," the Zimmer said, never taking his eyes off what he was doing to Rit.

Alicia hesitated and then nodded. "The Empress's three have retreated to the far end. We've got a few minutes breathing space." She slipped another crystal into her rifle. A different configuration, she'd tried others without any working very well. Kori had found a ward bead setting that reacted to the clear beam to make something like a smoke screen, hiding them and affording some protection from attack but offering a danger in that they couldn't see what was happening on the other side. Help or false security, the effect lasted only minutes, leaving the bead dead.

"They'll be waiting to get pulled back," he said, taking the crystal that Alicia had thrown back in the box. Murky red, blood-like. Kori blinked at him, her hand out.

Taking it, she ran another crystal over the surface, pulling some kind of field that hissed and sparkled between her white fingers. The crystal still looked the same when she was finished, but she put it in her own rifle and snapped the cover over. Bolda watched from the exit, maybe a hundred feet away.

"They're moving out again," Bolda shouted. In back of him, the shielding bloomed, a gray cloud with forks of lightening. Then another layer of gray and another. Not their beads he realized, the Empress's three were setting up a screen of their own.

Had they tired of waiting? Or did they think they'd been left here? If Poss a'Itic had Ulanda, she'd likely have other concerns right now. Or something had changed their minds.

Alicia turned to leave and he stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Stay here," he said, and repeated it to Kori when she would have gone in Alicia's place. She obeyed him where she hadn't when he asked her to help them with Niv. "Tell everyone to get in here," he shouted to Bolda. "Now!"

He counted seconds. Nothing. Bolda was out of sight. "Please stay here," he said to Alicia. "If any place is safe..." She nodded and he thought saw sympathy in how she looked at him, was certain when she gave him a quick hug.

As soon as he was out, the gray surrounded him. It looked like smoke but it wasn't; the air was breathable. Shapes grew more distinct, the other's wards didn't work any better than their own had. Then more popped just a little ways out and the gray became black in spots, blooming purple and green with sheets of light ripping across the surface as it moved towards where they were.

Op'ki'na stood to one side of the exit, doing something with a bead. A moment later, the ti'Linn threw it. Nothing happened. He couldn't see the others but he heard Mirwin talking, pleading. The ti'Linn threw another bead. Still nothing. Another and the gray fell back suddenly in a flash of green light and he could see Mirwin and Niv. The tass'altin was holding an open tear on one arm closed with his other hand. Blood welled between his fingers. Niv's scales were cracked, blood oozing from under them. He had tears of blood.

Cici edged closer, never taking her eyes off the wall of gray. "Can we get it back further?"

The ti'Linn had followed. And Bolda. "Op'ki'na?" Garm asked. "Can we clear it back to where their pull-in point would be?" And hope the Zimmer rifles were more effective than they had been so far?

One pincer shaped a fluid possibility of negative, three pincers working another bead. "Those others are there now," it said in plain-tongue. The bead nodded towards where the near beam started. Coming in along the wall, then.

Garm's hand was on his knife. To do what, he wondered? "We'll have to leave Niv, there's no time, we can't fight..."

"One black, two," Op'ki'na interrupted in ti'Linn native, or as best as Garm could translate from the words he knew in the trade version. The lights in its eyes were the dull red of the crystal Kori had put in her rifle. Moving with agonizing care, the guard inched towards Niv. Mirwin stepped back, bumping Bolda. Something was happening; the ti'Linn's chitin was being frosted with gray. Fine cracks grew out from the pincer on the arm that held the bead - in the grey coating or the chitin, he couldn't tell. The field reached Niv, surrounding him with light and instantly drying the blood on his scales to powder.

The bead cracked in half then shattered as it fell. "The ocean," Op'ki'na said in his native language and collapsed.

Bolda pushed past Mirwin to reach Niv first. "You said something about leaving?"



"Hmm?" Garm said. How could you tell if a ti'Linn was breathing? The cracks were in the chitin. At a touch, the hard surface of the outer part of the arm flaked leaving a spongy looking under-layer.

Suddenly, he landed hard against the wall, Cici on top on him. Op'ki'na's pincer was in his hand, torn off. In the wall near the level his head had been was an arrow. He felt more than saw the girl throw her knife. Then the sound of a Zimmer rifle and the air flared red.

When he looked up, Alicia stood over Heana's body, still firing into the mass of gray that shielded the others. The energy field from the rifle didn't appear to penetrate far, lightening flared in the gray mass making a whirlpool of strikes, hitting the crystal with a pitting sound

"Get Op'ki'na," Alicia said to Bolda without looking at him. "No one gets left."

"Dead meat," Bolda growled but did as she asked.

Garm shook himself out of Mirwin's grip as the tass'altin helped him up. The firing had stopped. Working quickly, Alicia put another crystal in her rifle. Nothing happened when she fired it. The lightening show against the gray cloud was flickering. With the quiet, he heard a low groaning sound coming through the floor; he could feel it in his feet.

Searching the remains of Heana's clothing took moments. A leather pouch was tied to a cord around her waist, the tie burnt into her flesh. He pulled it loose, taking skin with it. The Security Second's bow was blackened in parts but intact, but the arrows hadn't fared as well, the gray scales burnt off the ones in her quiver.

"Garm, now," Alicia said evenly, still working at the rifle. "Inside, please."

Mirwin took the bow and quiver from him. "Mirwin," she said, looking over for the first time. "Now. Both of you. That's an order. Cici..." Her head turned briefly and the Kallit stopped dead. "You too."

The flitter bay shivered and she stepped back, raising the useless rifle as though to fire again. The shivering grew as the gray barrier thinned to not much more than a haze. From the groaning sound to the floor shivering - a difference in strength, not form, Garm thought. As Mirwin pushed him towards the corridor, Garm saw Rilla and the pale ti'Linn through the dying veil of gray. Both of them were backing into the wall, watching something happening towards the center, not what they were doing here.

"Damn," Alicia whispered, lowering her rifle. "What's that?"

Garm held onto the edge of the exit with one hand but he needn't have bothered. Mirwin was frozen, watching as well, his wound forgotten.

Sprouting from the cracks in the crystal floor were leaves, long curling leaves of bronze and green. And where the center of the flitter bay was, a tree trunk grew, the bark dark ochre. Below, what he could see through the soot, roots

mirrored the upward growth. Through the sickening stench of burned flesh, he caught the scent of the musk of the ni'at tree.

Then Alicia turned. "Get inside," she hissed, stepping at them as though her small form could force them in. They moved, Mirwin starting as though he'd just woken up. "Set beads just inside to explode, direct the force outwards to seal the hole, not blow us up," she added to Cici. "I want rubble, not an energy barrier." She grabbed the bead the girl had taken out, her small face smooth with concentration as she adjusted the settings.

They were behind the intact warding barrier when it exploded. Alicia made it by seconds. "Move further in," she said, already starting the adjustments on another bead, the last of those she'd worn in her hair. "Whatever that is out there - the beam, not the tree - it adapts to any energy pattern we try. Nothing seems to work very well more than once." Kori moved beside her, they discussed the settings in a quiet exchange as they worked.

Wall tiles and broken marble filled the narrow corridor. No fragments of crystal, they must be inside the real station, Garm thought, not the pull. He hadn't been sure; there wasn't a difference in how it felt. He almost fell when the corridor shivered. Dust pushed against the warding line in a moiré pattern then slowly settled as Alicia placed the first bead and backed up.

With the injured gone and the packs taken further in, Alicia put the last of three beads down and pulled the field after herself. At the turn of the corridor, the girl turned, waiting. The new wall of their warding was inches in front of her nose. Garm stood next to her, stopping what she was going to say to him with a sign of privilege. She nodded and took his hand in hers. A tree branch had punched through the wall of rubble at the end of the corridor. Two flares happened at almost the same time, one from the new hole at the end. Rilla or Ge'on'ni. Then the corridor before them collapsed and the warding was a wall of dust again.

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"We'll rest here," Alicia said, slipping the strap of the carry pack from her shoulder. She had a liking for narrow enclosures, Garm thought sourly as he dropped his own bundles. Hot, airless tunnels. He felt trapped here; it couldn't be safe. Anyone could come down the stairs they just had and with far less noise. Just nerves, he decided but found himself starting back up the shallow steps, listening for the sound of other footsteps.

"Should we seal it again?" Mirwin asked as he watched him, panting between words. He looked as worried as Garm felt. The boy was leaning against the tile

wall as he bent over, his hands on his knees. Niv was by his feet, still unconscious. He and Cici had carried him.

One of Alicia's hands automatically went to the long braid of hair and came up empty of beads, but she shook her head. "There's been no sign that Rilla or Ge'on'ni made it past the first cave-in. If they can, they'll come around, use a different corridor rather than try to clear the rubble. All the ways eventually lead inwards. They'll have maps same as we do." Three times the corridor had been sealed behind them and he thought her words were to share her fears that it wouldn't be enough. "Kori, put a couple of beads set to blow up in front of the warding field but we'll retrieve them if we don't have to use them."

The Zimmer set the first at the base of the stairs, calling Op'ki'na to help her with the second, closer in. The ti'Linn managed to hold the bead in a lower pincer but Garm wasn't sure anything was being done. Alicia went to stand on the guard's other side, the two women watched silently until the ti'Linn placed the bead and moved back with an unsteady gait. One upper arm was tucked against its side and wrapped down, a third of the length missing.

After a few clicking words in ti'Linn-native, Alicia left them to complete the warding. She deferred to Kori on technical matters, but nothing else. He couldn't pin point the exact time when she had taken over command, perhaps when she had killed Heana. Or earlier, when his orders had failed. So... who are you, he thought? A Law Clerk who used to be the San of an Empress? He had no relevance here.

Slowly, Eunni got off the pack she'd half fallen on as soon as they had stopped. The lines on her face were sunken into the skin. "We should eat as well as rest." She fumbled as she untied the top of the bundle. Hic'lic started with another, ticticing the whole time, not bothering with the plain-tongue it knew quite well. Without the Net to translate, its words were gibberish but Eunni seemed to understand.

"Lunch, I suppose," Alicia said, sounding less than enthused with the prospect.

"Lunch, definitely," Bolda said, giving her a dirty look before going over to help Eunni. Peecit trailed after him and stood there, apparently waiting to be invited to help. After getting a bottle of water, Cici went to help Mirwin with Niv, the young tass'alтин was working the man's g'ta points at every chance he got.

Garm started over to Eunni, to be close really, his assistance wasn't needed. A small wet hand fit into his. "Kori can handle things here," Alicia said. "Come scout ahead with me." She still had the strap of her Zimmer rifle over one shoulder, water bottle in her other hand. Sweat darkened blood stained her tunic and pants, ash and blood the rest of her, except for a patch of almost white skin around her mouth and a matching, if less clean patch, on the back of one hand.

"I thought that you'd want to stay."

Alicia passed him the bottle, the sides smeared with grime but she didn't let go of his hand. "And do what?" She hadn't looked to where Silassic was working on Rit.

Comfort and support, he had thought, but Rit likely wouldn't be aware of either. And him? He had a small cold hand in his. Bolda whispered something to Eunni as he and Alicia left, he heard his name. Then a snort. The three had enough food spread out to feed twice their number.

The corridor was almost a dead end. A narrow slit led to another, wider space, then another corridor. No doors led in. The single glow globe floated ahead making the shadows jump. Then one more opening.

"I didn't think we were that close," Garm said. The Station Center. The one time he'd been here, roots from the ni'at tree had encased parts of the wall like a net and looked as though they had pressed their shapes into the tiles. Nothing now, the tiles were unmarked except for the raised design on the surface and the darker patches where algae grew. Without the glow globe, they would shine a dull green.

"We camped as close as I wanted to before checking this out," Alicia said. She motioned him to stay where he was. Her eyes were to the ceiling as she walked forward, a sensor disk in her hand. The glow globe rose directly above her, drawing her shadow into a small point under her feet. The far wall curved in, they must be about half way down the sphere. Like in a mirror, Garm thought. The same would be under them. Like in the flitter bay, or rather, the one that Ulanda and Rit had created.

He could hear the hum of the power now, and through the tile wall as he leaned backwards, a vibration. "Was the tree really there?" he asked, speaking over the hum and finding that his voice echoed, his words much louder than he had intended.

"What?" She glanced back towards him.

"In the flitter bay."

"No, not really. At least nothing that showed on the sensor. Of course, it really wasn't the flitter bay either" She walked back to stand close, her eyes to the tiled wall of the Center. "The branch, the one that poked through, it didn't register. It might be the effect of the beam, nothing much was working the way it was supposed to, but..." She looked at him then nodded towards the Center. "I think it was an image of what's happening inside there."

"And that would be an image as well."

"Which? The branch or the flitter bay?" She sighed. "I suppose both." Then gave him a grin that hid none of what she'd just been through. "An image of an image of... what? I'll leave that kind of problem for you. Even thinking about it gives me a headache."

From his pocket, he took the four beads he had found in Heana's pouch and tied them into her braid. These didn't have holes but instead, a narrowing at the middle that a thong could wrap around. "If not an image, then still part of the pull that Ulanda and Rit managed."

"Or Cassa."

"*And Cassa,*" he said softly with the last bead, surprised to find the word didn't hurt as much as he thought he would. "The shape, the form it took. Is taking." He remembered the tapestry that Gennady had given her. A tree and a black and white striped cat under it. There were roses as well, he thought. The tree rising to the surface of the rug from his room at Palace. Were there really roots and branches and leaves inside the Station Center? As likely a tree there as glass could become sunstones and a girdle of them could be danced into twisted grass and seeds. Flowers. Or an island could exist in the center of a white diamond. Was he close? Had it always been this close?

"Can you use these?" he asked simply to change the subject, flicking the tail of hair to her front.

She laughed, the sound strange as it rolled against the shape of the corridor. "I might manage." As she fingered the beads, he felt more than heard a faint buzz. "If you'd bother paying attention to such things, you would have noticed that we ran out of our Zimmer beads long ago. These are ti'Linn and not much different really. Just don't tell Kori I said that."

"Not me."

She only smiled at his imitation of Slicannin. The laughter hadn't stayed. "They've only got the basic warding functions preset, Heana must have left them open to be added to fast. Just bits of clay – what does it matter where or who they come from? It's how you modify them with a crystal that..." She shrugged but the distant look said that she'd lost track of what she'd been saying. "I'd better check the key points that Kori set in the tiles," she added, already walking away.

He followed. The limits of their world, he thought. A small section of the whole and set very close to the rest. Past the key points in each direction and they'd walk out into the regular Station.

"If what they're trying with Ulanda works," Alicia said, staring at one of the tiles, "will all this just go?"

The raised surface of the tile she looked at appears the same as the others around it. A triangle atop a triple helix - would that have been the world-pattern of the Emperor when this part of the Station was constructed? Garm had no idea. "It might break what she set, or it might set the limits permanently." Could they be trapped there, always one shade off what the others in the Station were experiencing? Ghosts. Images caught at the corner of your eye. Voices in the water fall of a fountain or a murmur in the sound of distant footsteps.

"Maybe I'll leave that for you to worry about as well." Her voice held as much of a smile as it did concern about what he had just said. She ran a very dirty finger over the tile surface making a line in the growth of algae. "Can you feel her at all?"

"No." No more than he had been able to on Alisim before the Opening.

Alicia nodded slowly. "Then we'll have to get Rit conscious, at least for a while. Or..." She rubbed her face. "Or we'll have to push him into pattern, either way, he's got to make us a link to either Ulanda or Cassa."

"And if it kills him?"

"He's dying, Garm. You know that." Another rub of her face left smears under her fingers. "He's dead already, it's just that Silassic keeps his heart going and his lungs..."

Garm held her a moment. She fit against him easily, her head tucked under his chin. "I kept telling him that I didn't love him, that I couldn't, that I was..."

"You loved him."

"Is he dead because I didn't deserve him?" Small hands pushed him away and she turned, her head down. When she looked back again, her face was clear of tears, and half ways clean. "We'd better join the others. We'll set up here after we've eaten and rested." As she spoke, she was studying the tiles at the entrance to the rounded corridor. "These will move. We can block this off." With one hand running against the tiles on the wall, she walked a little ways along the curve. "All these will move. There are other doorways here that aren't in the maps we've got of the Station. I hadn't checked before."

He didn't feel anything. Then she put a hand over his over the tile and he felt something but didn't know what to make of it. "Kori showed me what to look for. They're the same as the hull tiles on ships, especially these older kinds. Some move easily, others can, but won't unless you make a substantial effort. And they have to recognize your authority."

"And the other wall?" he asked, looking at the Center. Moisture dripped along the surface, the air was thick and bitter in his mouth.

She tried that the same way, grimacing at the feel, then wiped her hand carefully on the seat of her pants. "Same thing." Neither the look nor her tone of voice was happy.

"I'll go in first," he said.

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Alicia, I might as well go first, I've nothing to lose. Sooner or later I'll go to Cassa. I can take the risk, then you can follow if it's safe."

Her lips were tight. "You're welcome to her."

He was, and she to him, but he could never have explained to Alicia why. "Rit helped make the old flitter bay into something different," he said. "Separate but livable. He can do the same here. With a link, he won't be able to help it; his

mind will provide the form of what happens. If he's conscious at all, he might be able to control even more. At the very least, he'll provide the focus and a route to Cassa that we might be able to use. And from there..."

"And you?"

Garm touched the wall of the Center. Blood warm, even the trails of moisture on the surface felt as thick as blood. He was simply an old man again, tired and with, as he had said, nothing to lose. "How could I do anything except what I'm supposed to? Alicia, you know what she's told me, you've seen the spins. Ulanda and Poss a'ltic are two parts of the same thing - a bridge. Rit might have access to Cassa but his understanding is limited. All this was meant to happen, it had to happen."

Her jaw clenched. "All? Rit's death?"

How many had already died and Cassa hadn't cared? "To Cassa, he can't die, not really, not anymore than Ulanda can." Any more than he could. "To her, everything is all at once, not strung out..."

"That's not good enough."

"Alicia, it doesn't matter what you think about it. She touches us, just brief touches from the part of her that was human. What she gives shape to what happens, the same way that Rit gives shape to her, but beyond that, beyond the human..." Beyond the living. Chaos. He swallowed, suddenly terrified, but at the same time reassured that he still could be. "We're giving a different shape to the death of Empire, that's all. We help to create what we get - in all the versions of reality. None of this would have mattered to her without those things, these things, as a focus."

She stepped a little further along the wall. Her movements were jerky, as though she might break. "I've prayed to her." The words were as brittle. Almost in slow motion, the side of her fist hit the nearest tile. She barely touched the surface. She turned staring eyes to him. "What else should I do to make it matter to her? What good does any of this do?"

A step towards her and he stopped. She'd drawn back. "This is our lives," he said gently. "We live it a moment at a time, all of us do. I don't really know what's going to happen any more than you do. Even Rit only gets glimpses of possible futures."

"I know what you are to her, you must know." He shook his head at her words but she wouldn't stop. "I asked what I should do to make it matter to her."

"I don't know anything, I just am." He was almost to her but he couldn't remember getting there. "I'm burning you up, you're standing too close to the fire."

"Stop it," Eunni said as she stepped between him and Alicia. She carried the scent of lavender with her. "Garm..." A threat was carried in her tone. He backed up.

Alicia repositioned the strap of her rifle. "There's no problem," she said, her voice even. "Is everybody finished eating?" Eunni nodded. "Then let's go."

The tiles snapped into place with a clicking sound. Garm watched as Kori checked them, both with a scanner and by running her palm over the surface. Except it was the only space against the wall where the packs hadn't been stacked he wouldn't have been able to tell where the entrance had been. And from the other side? Most of the tiles had been moved from blocking a corridor at right angles to the old exit. The newly opened corridor looked just the same, although dustier than most and without a central clearing from feet. It might link up with one they had used before or be a dead end.

Alicia knelt by Rit, taking his hand in hers. The ends of his fingers were white, the flesh shrunken around the nails. "Silassic?" she asked. "Any chance of bringing him around?" The medic looked at her without answering. His eyes were silver over the green.

Garm took the scanner readout. Best as they could tell, Rit wasn't linking with overpattern, he was dying like anyone else might. "It's a chance for him as well," he said. The girl looked at him. She didn't have to ask again, her earlier question of him was still in her eyes. "This is what is, Alicia. It will have to do."

Finally, she nodded and stood, her small face set and hard. From her bag she took two long crystals, then added the blood red one from the rifle. "What you said, Kori. About what you did with Poss a'tic on the Ladybug. Anything close..."

The Zimmer took one of the crystals, feeling the length of it with her narrow fingers. "Nothing very similar is possible with these. A hint at most." She looked at the tiles, her mouth open and her breath rapid to help cool her. Her tunic was off to let the crest of short hairs along her back bloom red and shunt the heat away. "For this, for him being here, a hint might be enough. For the Wu'lim."

"Do what you can," Alicia said. Garm thought that she ignored the last words with some effort. "At any rate, I want to check the settings before you activate them." Kori nodded. "Anybody else have any ideas?" No one did. She told Op'ki'na to help Kori. The ti'Linn didn't look any better for the rest, it's four eyes still darkened from the usual brilliance, the cross shape showing under the dull red lights.

Better something to do than nothing, Garm supposed, agreeing with her strategy. And took it without waiting for someone else to hand him a job. He was helping Mirwin to wash Niv when Bolda brought him a cheese sandwich.

"You haven't eaten," the weaver said, taking the damp cloth from his hand. "All we need is you collapsing as well. We've got enough to pack around."

"I don't think we'll be going very much further." The bread was dried at the edges and there were finger-sized patches of dirt on the white slices. Someone



else hadn't been hungry. He looked up from picking the dirt off to see Bolda watching him.

"Just eat the bloody thing."

Niv's breath came with a whistle deep in his throat. The warmth and the humidity might be a comfort that his body would appreciate as much as the three Zimmer didn't, Garm thought as he ate the slice of white cheese from the sandwich first. Bolda was wiping the blue scales then squeezing the cloth to let water trickle around the edges. Their drinking water but he didn't mention it.

"He's breathing on his own now," Mirwin said, turning the tass'alt over then sitting back on his heels, wiping sweat from his face with his arm. He looked exhausted; he wouldn't have gotten any sleep the night before, worrying about Ulanda.

Where they overlapped, the edges of Niv's larger scales were curled up slightly and cracked. Garm took the medic scan again only to have Bolda growl at him.

"Go bother someone else, why don't you. Try Eunni."

Bolda's words had carried to her and she looked up. "Shall I?" he asked her. "Or may I?"

The rug had been unrolled. Eunni was sitting at the base of the tree. The background colors were darker, he thought, or it was the light, and he couldn't find the burn mark from when the brazier had spilled coals over it in the flitter. The roses glowed in the green foliage of the vines that clothed the branches, competing with the long twisting bronze leaves. Eunni patted the spot next to her, letting her fingers linger on the wool, fanning the pile. "If you promise to eat that," she said, nodding to his sandwich.

"Am I being picked on?"

She smiled. "We all need something to do, so you're it."

"Glad I could help." He tore a piece of the bread off. Dry in his hand and in his mouth. He wasn't hungry. Sitting as close to her as he dared, he leaned back against the wall and contemplated the remains of his sandwich. Alicia's? Had she eaten? "Some lemon tea, perhaps." Putting the food on his knee, he made a sign of allowance and privilege with the motion that made it an order. And got a ticking sound, Hic'lic was watching them. "It was a joke," he said.

Despite the haunted look that was a constant in her eyes, Eunni was trying hard not to laugh. "In a way, so was what he said."

Something about swimming, that was all he had gotten from the words. A possibility, not a joke, he thought. He wished she had laughed. He'd like to take that sound into the Station Center with him. Alicia was inspecting the tiles again, avoiding where Silassic and Rit were. Near to the medic, Peecit had set a bowl filled with sand, joss sticks on end, the bowl too small to lay them flat. Lavender smoke tinted the air around the two Zimmer, making their white skin look faintly blue; she was pushing the smoke towards Rit with her hands.

"I'll do what I can about Rit," Garm said to Eunni. If he remembered. If he was himself once he walked through that wall.

Eunni pulled his hair back; her touch on his face was as soft as her voice.

"Garm, you won't be anywhere to do anything. This is Rit's show."

He thought that the vibration against his back might have increased, he felt long rolling shivers of movement. Peecit's soft chanting had the same beat, she might be copying it, or he might be imaging things. A prayer to the Dark Lady, he decided, trying to put a meaning to the Zimmer words. "Won't I?" he asked, thinking of all those prayers spoken in Risent Common in Palace while he'd carried the talisman.

"No. We'll do it the way we planned."

And when had Alicia turned down his offer to go in first? Had these others made plans while he'd been bathing Niv? "Won't I be there?" Eunni's hand was in his long hair still, making the touch a caress.

"Not a chance of it," Alicia said, turning to look at him. One hand remained against the wall.

The sandwich fell to the rug as he stood. A few feet brought him to Alicia's side. He put his hand over hers on the tile, feeling the pattern of the clay come through her flesh. A small form but plainer than when he'd tried to feel it on the outer wall of the corridor. "Isn't there a chance?" he whispered. Her eyes were round and staring into his. What did she see other than an old man?

The smoke from the altar was different. Burning paper, he thought. The scorched smell of colored inks being eaten by flame. He felt Kori move, from the corner of his eye, he saw the light reflect from the bared blade in her hand. But she was slowing to the beat of Peecit's chant. The song was stretching out, reaching for eternity between the words. "Open it," he said to Alicia, his free hand touching her face. There was nothing slowing him.

She didn't move, she didn't have to.

The door was, then wasn't. He knew it from the echo of the space around him without particularly noticing it as something important. The air sang to his touch, cool and dark. A single stroke of his wings and he caught a rising current and held it. Far below, the phosphorus of the ocean made the world glow in an unbroken expanse of water. There were no stars overhead.

A white marble square, he cast two purple shadows, identical ones. The spice of the pemka algae; the sound of the wind over the mouths of the reeds. He looked for wings and felt foolish. Just his robe of Eccli cloth, he hadn't changed to please Eunni. Then remembered that he had. Eccli cloth. He was as blinding as the marble square; he walked with halos of sunlight riding his twin shadows.

"I saw you in the girdle all that time ago," Cassa said. "Only you and as hard to see then as you are now."

Sitting cross-legged beside the water, she toyed with a reed in her lap, the crystal mouth blinking in the light. She wasn't hard to see at all. Kneeling beside, he took the reed from her hand and kissed her palm. Her wrist braid ends floated in the wind, he saw the sparks at the ends, black to the light of his robe.

"You said when it was over..." She tasted the same. "Is it?" he asked, speaking against her palm. Then said the same against her lips.

At his touch, she had lain back, his hair a fall of lavender touched silver over her, but she turned her face away when he would have kissed her again.

Her skin was smooth against his fingers. Amber to cream. "Have I done something wrong? Are you my conscience instead of my Lady? I hoped not to be creating this."

"Did you? You created me a long time ago. What would I be without you?"

He looked into her brown eyes to see himself as he had before. Creating this or recreating - the old man was gone. "You'd be free of Empire, for one."

She shrugged and turned further away from him. "Free?" The one word held all the despair he remembered so well.

He let her go and she rolled to sit up, watching the water again, her hands in her lap. "Or would you be free instead of your promise to me?" he asked. "You've always kept to your word, as best you could."

"Someone did," she said, looking up at him.

"Who if not you?"

"You forget how many times this has happened. Or if not this happening..." One hand motioned out. Dark water stretched to the horizon. "... then me. Too many times."

Sitting next to her, he put his arm over her shoulder. "Is happening. Will happen. Cassa..."

"Don't play word games with me, Garm."

Her scent filled his mouth. Lavender with a bloom of sweat. The moist cotton of her tunic, warmed by her body. "What is it that you want me to do?"

She let her head rest against his shoulder. "Tell me a story. Let me know how this ends."

A story. He thought a very long time. Time. There was no sense of it passing, or of urgency. So many books and stories, but he didn't need them here.

Three were possibilities. One he was tempted partly by the resemblance of the paper used to the colors of the ni'at tree bark and wood and partly by the tidy ending, all the loose ends tucked in. Another was a strange story, and strangely happy as hardly any of them were. Was it too small a story, he wondered, too simple? Or was his reluctance that at the last, it had no place in it for him?

"There's one from the Issolinsi Nexus," he finally said, watching the water as she was. The third story. Would the fate of the universe be determined by an old man's vanity that he not be left out? "The word means 'White Rose' in the language it is written in. An old native tongue, the people long dead. Not a trans-language for all that it is similar in some respects to the older forms of trade-basic. The translation was difficult, the Palace Net stubborn in insisting that the words belonged to another language. The book is a scroll actually, but with the long edges folded in to meet in the middle. Very little of the book is in old tongue, only the pictographs used as illustrations along the margins, both the inner margins with the book unfolded, and the outer surface with the leaves turned in. Even that was different in subtle ways, confusingly so. Together, the combined forms of the drawings give a different meaning than when looked at separately."

"And the book itself?" Her voice was soft, dreamy.

"Parchment scraped very fine and with a stark white glaze that kept the ink on the surface to dry. I could feel the individual brush strokes, the impressions from the few woodblocks, the ink slightly raised. Even the different pigments I could tell by touch. How thick the ink was, how fine the suspension..." No urgency at all and she rested against him, listening as he described how the Scribe Master had combined the two forms of writing and the different languages to make a unified whole. "As I said, the book is a single sheet with the edges folded in to meet in the middle. The actual story is on the inside and very short, a parable, Ena called it. At the bottom and top edges are stems of white stone, very narrow and carved on the handle, and when rolled, the whole thing fits into a tube binding of white leather with clasps of beaten silver and inlaid silver on the surface. The inlay describes a flower, a rose, the grain making the design as much as the silver. For the name, I suppose, although the translation could mean other things..."

"The sasi rose."

The book had been kept in stasis inside another binder and that in stasis and the whole thing archived with change resistant crystals giving a recording of what was inside. The book was much older than the Zimmer people, older than the other white book. But the memory, he wondered? The same one but filtered through a different mind. "The sasi rose," he whispered, his lips against her hair. Six petals like the sasi rose. Had it? Or had his memory changed to suit her wishes? She had the a'Genn Clan marks on her cheeks where she didn't have to have kept them. And the braids, for him perhaps. She was as he'd known her, loved her. She needn't have kept those either but they were a symbol of what he was to her.

"The sasi rose," he repeated but only to himself. Five petals - one had fallen, white on the snow and on the leather both. "The book had the scent of age," he continued after a while. "When I stilled the second stasis field, I could feel the ages pass me, eager to escape. The room was cold with time and the whisper of

time. The brazier wouldn't light and when it finally did, smoked fitfully the whole evening."

She turned her head the slight amount necessary to look up at him. "You live magic, you could have flown away too."

"I could never. I was waiting for you." The book had been a gift to him from a time after it was known he was interested in such things and before it was known how useless such a gift would be as a way to win favors he didn't care to give. Or had the heart to give, his soul too filled with longing and then bitterness to bear other people's hopes. His soul was open, it had wings now. The old man who had waited for death was completely gone.

"Ambisit wood charcoal, I remember the scent. The book was scented with the smoke after days of reading. And tea marks, splatters only, not rings. I'd lose track of where the table was and over estimate the distance needed to put the bowl down. Three days reading to even reach an incomplete translation. Bolda despaired of me. Loudly."

She laughed, moving against him, one hand on his leg now and with the movement, trailing braid ends that were alive with fire.

"It must still be in my room, a top shelf, I think. Opposite the window wall, not one of those on my table, the ones Gennady brought with him. Not one of those that I'd been reading..."

"Do you seek a different ending now?" Cassa asked, teasing now, words and fingers. "I did, I ran so hard away from you, but everywhere I turned you were there."

"Once on Lillisim?" he asked, taking the straying hand that threatened to end his storytelling before it started. "Or twice if you count your vision in the crystal. You must not have turned often."

She smiled. "Tell me what the pictographs say."

Present tense. He sighed. "The one at the top of the scroll, both with the edges turned in and unfolded, speaks of death. It says a petal falls to lie white against the snow. A winter rose."

"So it does." And when he would have continued, interrupted with: "What of the parable?"

Her skin was the skin of the book's casing. He felt the silver in her braids, and in the heat of Camerat, he was chilled. Gratefully, he took the easier story that she asked for.

"In the time known as the White Rose," he began, "in the beginning of that time and close enough on the tail of the Nexus Change to feel the chill of the Dark Wind's passing, a girl was born. It was a cold world where she was born and if she grew up cold who was to know if it was the Dark one or simply the winter snow that had frozen the breath of her shadow to her soul."

The pictographs in the wide margins on either side of those words were matched to each other, and to those on the front when the edges were folded to meet in the center. Matched, but not the same. He had seen them again, singly and doubled and doubled again, in the smoke of the brazier and in the rise of steam over his tea bowl. In his sleep. Ena had come the second evening, Bolda would have called her, no one else would have dared. She had read the old tongue version easier than he had and stayed with him that night for the first time since the end of their marriage.

"When the girl was a newly a woman," he continued, "she went to the Winter's Turning, to the ice dances at the City Common; but after a while, she left those she had come with. One followed from the emptiness at his side, as he always did, to find her. In the crystal dark of the night, her young man found her, standing by herself in a field of snow, the Temple drums far in the distance. 'What are you doing here alone?' he asked. 'Listening,' she said, tears frozen on her cheeks. And by the light of the stars, he saw the shape of the dance she had done to that song. The crust of snow was broken; the depths of her footprints were black marks on a silver skin of starlight. And before that winter was over, he stood in the promenade of Temple and watched her die.

"Near the end of his life, when he was honored in his age, he was given place in Temple to see the dances done by the Priests, the ones danced in the middle of the longest night on that world. 'Where is the one I knew?' he asked the person nearest him. And received a gentle smile for the confusion of his years. 'She dances in the snow... she listens to the wind.' No one would hear him.

"When the Priest dances were over and he hadn't seen her, he walked into the night, he walked until he couldn't tell which was the sound of Temple drums and which the song of wind and ice in the bitter cold. Before him, the snow was unbroken, scoured by wind and behind, his trail grew closer to him as his footsteps slowed until the mark he made was gone before his next step was taken. Starlight on the blown snow crowned him, snow robed him in silver."

Garm brushed the fine loose hair away from her face, the motion so familiar again all at once. "The story ends there," he said. "Below the Closure is a simple woodcut print done in black ink of a stone with the snow blown to make a hood over the top and curling in on one side. And where the stone offered protection from the storm, a rose bush and a single bloom with five petals. Just five."

Her eyes were soft. "And the rest?"

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Would it go wrong again, Ulanda wondered. She had no memories of this place to fight the binding with. And no body conveniently elsewhere to retreat into. She stood up, brushing sand from the robe, suddenly needing to move. Suddenly being able to move. The black overbraids looked stupid with the delicate white silk, she should have kept her own clothes. "Are you staying for all of this?" she asked the Empress.

"For a while longer. Do you mind the company?"

"Would it make a difference if I did?"

The Empress knelt in the center of the garden, the green bowl in her hands; the tea would be cold by now. She didn't answer. Ulanda looked at Cayse and then A'in. The two men looked back, their faces carefully free of any expression. Then to the ti'Linn guard and Yian, the two standing by the heavy wooden door set into the wall. A while longer. Nobody had anything to say to her. The walls were pressing in on her, she could feel the maze faintly, but the realness of it retreated each time she pushed her awareness out. The same as in the crystal flitter bay.

She walked along the water until blocked by a stand of reeds. Narrow straw colored stems, some of them had triangular seedpods growing up out of a narrow neck. "You said you'd grown up there, that last pull," she said, watching the seedpods. The heads quivered when she touched the reeds, moving much faster than the stems. Again, Poss a'Itic didn't respond.

"The farm, when did you leave it?" When Ulanda looked, the Empress was watching her tea, her face remote. "I said I'd listen to you, won't you listen to me?"

"I can hear you."

A start - or was it? She was being humored. "There are fields just down from South Bay Temple, they belong... belonged to the Temple. They still must. Leased by the local farmers, but all the children from the crèche would pick strawberries there in the summer. The fields nearest the sand dunes, they tasted of salt from the wind. The berries would. Always around the time of the Summer Turning festival, and we'd have them with cream... from the farms. In the fields, we'd... we must have been a nuisance." The memories seemed far away and as shaky as her voice must sound. It had gotten worse rather than better. Did she sound as though she were begging? The silence grew; all she could hear was her own breath.

The ti'Linn didn't move away as she tried the door next. The patterns were there as well, the same sense of seeing black and white forms for all it looked like wood and the stone around it, plain granite. The rough surface showed the grain

of the tree, the wood was warm to the touch. There would be more security people outside of here, she thought. Pull interface or no pull interface.

"Were the crystals that Rilla got from Riggyant from Anga?"

"Apparently," Cayse said. "Lady Ulanda, he expected this to happen in much the same way as Clan a'Genn did. Something that had a possibility of happening and that might take almost any form when it did."

Under her feet were paving stones, the path would continue until it was a corridor and the corridor to the Temple Center and the double spiral where one Cassa had been born, and another, died. Ulanda sat, letting the braid ends drape over her knees. The door was reassuringly solid against her back. She felt helpless and wondered if that was part of the binding or simply what she was.

Cupping her hands, she could smell the almond oil from her bath. Mirwin and Niv. The ti'Linn Warder next to her made chirping noises, she'd heard the ti'Linn in her suite do the same. Nothing noises, or did it sense the patterns here, or her response to them? Pushing the question aside, she tried again. A water drum, she thought, grasping the first impression that came to her. The small reeds only - many mouths to the larger one. Warm. She closed her eyes. Water dripping but she couldn't make it into the rhythm of the water drums. A random sound. Algae, but not pem'ka. The air was bitter. There was the scent of lavender smoke and paper burning. A door opening. And closing. Then nothing.

Hands touched her again. "It had gone too far even before you came here," Cayse said, drawing her braid ends out with his fingers. "You can't escape."

The man was kneeling in front of her, Poss a'Itic and her tass'alt just behind him. Had any of them smelled the smoke? She watched the sparks fall from the silk cords, feeling distant. Feeling strange. She should have been more afraid when she'd had the chance. Not now, even the fear was distant. Expert hands checked her points, she couldn't resist, not even when he moved to hold her.

"You won't fear it when it happens," he whispered, running his hand along her cheek. "You'll be inside the ritual. Live or die, you won't be afraid."

All she could do was bare her teeth. She wanted to bite again. "Don't patronize me," she managed to say.

He smiled and there was sympathy there, she saw. And resolve, he'd do what he had to. "I wouldn't dare," he said. "I've been to Alisim. You're very much your breeding."

Other hands touched her and Ulanda tried to see who. Sharp nails on her skin. "It's time to go," Yian said. "Uncle, if you're quite finished here..."

Cayse picked her up easily and carried her to the center of the garden. "They burn sticks to you on Alisim," he said, speaking directly into her ear. "They accepted the Lady Cult very quickly there, the Priests as well, I think. You are a much more satisfying conclusion to their prophecies than what our reality could



offer. If we go back to Alisim before I die, I'll remember your name at an altar there."

She thought she could hate him for his sympathy but the angry words wouldn't take shape in her mouth. No words would.

He put her down, warm sand against her face; she was lying on her side. She couldn't see the door or if the Empress and her tass'alt were still there, only the reeds and the oily mat of algae on the water's surface. "He wouldn't dare," the aide whispered as she arranged Ulanda's robe. "How could he?" Small tugs pulled the silk smooth and her voice became louder.

"Hurry," Cayse said. His voice came from a distance. The woman's robe brushed Ulanda's face as the aide stood and left quickly. A door opened and closed.

Black and white moved over her, getting stronger very quickly. Ulanda moved into one of the waves, wanting to see where the others had gone. And managed to turn her head. The door was closed. A small tea set was a few feet away. A green porcelain bowl, Priest size, was on its side, tea still spreading onto the shiny surface of the tray. Yian must have knocked it as she left.

Sand was under the edge of one cupped hand; she could see the arm that lay against the sand, the draped white silk showing the shape under it. A waste, she thought. The robe *was* beautiful, the moiré pattern from the two layers of silk moved even when she didn't: light to dark. The pattern coming out from the walls. One thing now. Her eyes stung and she closed them.

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"And your interest in this Initiation?" Mullaki asked. A bare stone room and the words echoed around her. She didn't like this.

"Interest?" Angsalit said, sounding vastly amused with the situation.

The loom-master but not as she'd last seen him. "You were getting old," she said. And smiled. "So was I, and quite aware of it even if I don't have the practice at dying that you do. Should I thank you for this transformation? Mine, I mean."

"Well, I needed a Priest with nothing better to do. As an old friend...?" His bushy eyebrows were raised with the last remnant of the amused look that had started dying when she smiled. She would have known him even if the gene pool the e'Anga family favored for their loom-masters wasn't so narrow.

The stone floor was uncomfortable and she stood up. "Is this the best you could do?" she asked, knowing that he couldn't have done this much. "Who's helping you?"

"The Empress Poss a'Itic."

The name wasn't familiar to her, Priest or Empress. A pattern pull, she knew, and one that would have had to been created by a Select. And what the loom-master could add? By his own word: her. And conscious of this happening to her and feeling as though she'd simply woken up from a nap. "You surprise me. I didn't think this possible."

"We've had opportunity to observe that it is possible. And more. This is our best shot and more than a little based on memory pulls of other re-creations. Hell, we're copying most of this and hoping like anything that repeating some things will make the rest of it easier."

"Did you like the outcomes then?"

"Ah..." He grinned hugely. "No." And scratched his broad nose.

There was no sense of place; Mullaki found it disconcerting to miss what she had always taken for granted as a Priest. Cold stone, uneven blocks but set without mortar, even the floor. The overall effect was a tumble of rocks but ones that had fallen just so, leaving not a hair line where they met. No door. "And me?" she asked, turning to Angsalit again. "Am I a copy as well?"

Small eyes sparkled as the skin around them was thrown into furrows. He laughed out loud. She was usually able to keep him down longer than this. Or it was youthful resilience; the body must make a difference, even for him. He was fleshing out and the white patches had black invading them but he was still a juvenile by Piltsimic standards. Most of the lives she'd known him he had been male and had proofed black. She thought the Archive he was the Voice for selected for those as well, for continuity and out of a sense of order.

Tucking her hands into her sleeves, Mullaki knelt again, careful to keep the skirt of her robe under her knees. White braid ends flowed over the overrobe of Poultat-blue angora. Against her skin was a paler blue. The ties on the robe were knots of white cord in the same complex pattern as the overbraids. Wind in the Branches, done in the variation that only required one color. She was surprised that she remembered the pattern without a Net to ask, but it seemed familiar and the name had appeared without effort. And the rest of the variations, she knew them too.

And the outfit - besides the braid cords? No particular memory appeared, but then she usually didn't pay much attention to such things, leaving the choice to her attendants. Was it from the other re-creations? And Angsalit? He was dressed as he most always was in loose pants and a demi-robe, both in black. Neither of them was costumed for an Initiation.

"Where's Clanny?" she asked. "Or isn't he necessary?"

The laughter died suddenly. "Who?"

She didn't know. No sense of place - the feeling extended to her own mind now. Wind in the Branches, there was a dance... A grinding sound surrounded

her, as though the rocks were teeth. The smell of powdered stone made her want to sneeze. Copying this? The dance, was that included? "Tell me from the beginning," she said.

What did he remember, Mullaki wondered as Clanny served the tea, using the extended Filtal ritual. She accepted the bowl from him. "I've always found such things to be more useful as a barrier than for drinking tea. Do we need a barrier between us?"

An older man, his eyes were silver and black in a delicate tracing that was most attractive. He would have grown old by her side. Had the younger associated Cohort a member by that name?

"Lady, I don't know what we need." Reserve and amusement. Some kind of memories, she felt the pain behind the polish of his actions. And the ability to block her prying that most her of tass'alts learned very early.

She had the broad picture from Angsalit, Anga... that name would do, she thought. Thick and solid, with a weak ending, like the man. "Have you looked at the books?" she asked her tass'alt.

Clanny shook his head. "Do you wish to?"

The sunlight on the green silk covered wall hadn't moved in the time they had been here. A lazy pull, she thought, the whole thing had a flat texture as though a sudden movement would tear it. But to show what?

She laughed. "Which book?" The room was filled with books. "I'm not sure they would be more in the hand than the sunlight. This Poss a'Itic is taking us step by step, settling us in like she would two dogs needing training."

"Imaginary dogs at that." He put his tea bowl on the tray and stood. To the table first, the books real enough there to be picked up. A blue leather book with rings on the cover. He felt it with his hand, a caressing motion that was almost familiar. She walked over to be next to him.

"You were with Poss a'Itic when she died. And, I understand you were alive after the Ladybug had gone. What do you remember?"

His eyes looked like frost in the moonlight. "More than I thought I should be able to. Up until the Ladybug went into the portal on Alisim, all of that, then... fragments where nothing should be. Memories by a person who doesn't exist about time in a place that doesn't exist." His soft hands put the book back on the table. "The Empress' link, I suppose. If she's dreams as Anga says. Although, I remember..."

"After her death?"

He nodded.

Her white braid ends gathered dust from the table. The other books were solid enough. "More than just her, this is feeding off the other Select."

"Ulanda."

"Of course, you knew her as well."

"Yes."

For all that the pull still seemed flat, the nearest bookcase was solid. "I can't call them fools," she said, "but what they are doing is foolish." Trying to pick up a box of crystals, her fingers slipped against the shiny wood sides, leaving her with the lid in her hand and the box on the floor. As Clanny picked the rods up, the clicking said they were solid too.

"Let me do that," he said when she would have fit the lid back on. "What are you looking for?"

"Other options."

"Do we have any?" He carried the box to the table and when he turned, his face was composed, overly composed. "Any more than they do?"

Her tass'alt and he knew her expressions and when to be worried. "Normally not. We would be less than players on a stage, acting out a memory or a fragment out of pattern. We wouldn't be conscious of it being a pull."

He had stayed by the table. Was he trying to lure her back there? "And what Anga has planned?" he asked, running a finger along the inlaid design as though studying it. Licking a finger, he moistened the surface. Green in the joins. She found another memory where there shouldn't be one.

He looked up when she didn't answer. "Don't you agree with the end result?"

She laughed again. He obviously didn't. Did the Empress know how reluctant at least two of her associates were to be involved? Would this be fine-tuned, replayed with minor adjustments, until they fit what she wanted? "I'm bored with this room, with waiting. Would I have been?"

He looked at her. "We would have played word games, we had a running account of who won, but you would have been bored. You would have gone into pattern to wait. You..."

"Retreated?"

"Yes."

Could she now? Her world-pattern surrounded her like an aura but was it real or part of the memory? "I asked for you, did you know that?"

"And got me," he said dryly. "You were my existence once and obviously, are again." Then he shook his head and dropped the formal tone for the first time.

"Mulli, this thing leaks. I don't agree with you about them not being fools, or it's that they're..."

"Desperate?"

"Or both." He smiled tightly with the rising count. "You had met Poss a'ltic before we left Palace on the Zimmer ship. And Ulanda, you had known her since she was a child."

As he would have, or known of her rather, the actual meetings infrequent. This was from the Overpriest's records that he had given Gennady before the Opening. "So Anga gave me to understand."

"If this is feeding off her, and I think you're right about that, then part of you is that other Mulli, my Mulli. Not just the limited amount that this Empress is capable of reaching in overpattern."

And using this pull, or re-creation, could only encourage that. "They must want the relationship, some part of it at any rate. Probably Ulanda's reaction to my presence, but with my own reaction to her being more distant. Or do you think that will change as the binding develops?"

"You're asking me?" A genuine smile softened his face and showed the fine creases in his skin. He would be soft to touch, interesting, he wore his life like a map on his face. As he spoke, he looked at the bound books one at a time, tucking the several loose scrolls under one arm, adding the crystal case last. "One thing, you and Sarkalt were very concerned about these books. The Zimmer took them with him. If you're looking for options, you're more likely to find them here, not on the shelves." He frowned as though noticing the scrolls he held for the first time. "Just bound, flat style books if I remember correctly. Do you think that makes a difference?"

She walked to the table after all and put one hand over his arm, feeling his heat through her bare fingertips. Then her fingers and palm. Even through the sleeve of his robe and her braids, his skin was warm. He was like her world-pattern: there but... she would have to accept him as real. "We'll have to let the answers come as they want to for now, I think."

Fingers stained with green ink traced the central ridge of braiding that marked each finger. He looked into her eyes, the hunger growing in him to match hers. A novelty, she was accustomed to being the only one of a pairing that required a reminder of their existence. When she pulled her hand away, he looked disappointed. "Tell me what you know about Poss a'Itic."

"She's very stubborn. And brave... but ruthless in her own way. By the time the ship went through the portal on Alisim she was accessing overpattern under conscious control. Maybe nothing to what Ulanda could apparently do, and not enough to break through the barriers set around her, but she had options that she lacked before. She chose the portal and then allowed the forming of this universe, quite deliberately. And she knew how to get herself killed, what to say to him. What happened to me wasn't important."

"Didn't you know her plans?"

"I suspected. Mulli, serving her was just something I could do. I agreed... it was better than being alone and the future hadn't been set in stone when I said I would. She was my chance..."

"But you stayed with her in the diamond. Or were you given a choice?"

"I stayed for the same reasons she goaded him to kill her. He wouldn't have let me live and the other me, if he existed, would have died needlessly. And I was curious."

She leaned against the table then wiggled up to sit on it. He moved the books further over and let the scrolls take the space between so they couldn't roll off, then smoothed her braid ends out. "An unusual trait in my tass'alt," she said, enjoying his attentions.

"I'd been through unusual times. Maybe I was just tired of being a prisoner."

And he thought himself one again. "What did it feel like when the ship left?"

"The Ladybug was outside the portal at the diamond mouth... whatever it was Poss a'ltic did left the center in ruins. I didn't see it happen but I thought the ship would fall to pieces. By the time I carried her body outside all there was to see was blackened marble, reeds and water. And..."

She had wanted his feelings, but this would do for a start. "And what?"

"I could see lines coming from all around and twisting into the center where something white glowed, the only white where once the entire diamond had been. The ship rose into the lines then snapped to them. I thought it was going to crush me, there wasn't very much room, the ceiling was low there, but it got smaller as the lines got closer together. When I walked it later, the distance didn't take more than five minutes to cover, but the ship went from... well big, to small enough to fit through the marble square. An area maybe six times the size of this table."

"This sounds like more than fragments of memory."

He hesitated. "It's all there now."

"And how you felt at my death? Is that included in your memories?"

"I thought I'd make you ask." He leaned against the table, they were arm to arm. His hand stroked her thigh and there were words in the motion. "I found I didn't want to die. Even staying in the diamond when the ship left, I didn't feel like I was going to die. And now..." He gave her leg a squeeze then laughed, his frosted eyes sparkling as he looked at her. "We're two ghosts talking, how can it matter if I didn't die back then?"

"Honesty's as unusual a trait in those who serve me as curiosity." She smiled. "I'm more used to a narrowing of mind, as though cruelty and lack of imagination are part of an instinct for survival when faced with what I am. This ghost finds the opposite refreshing." She had his feelings, a complex of love and attraction and fear and inertia. He liked her most of the time, she thought, and the Host, but liked himself better.

Reaching behind him on the table, with the edge of one hand, she scooped up a scroll. A cylinder of leather as white as the silk of her braids. The tube end was unfastened, the silver catch broken. The scroll slipped half ways out before she got it on her lap. "We were wanting options?" she said, smiling even though the

feel of the silver made her nauseous. He took it from her, letting the scroll fall back inside as he examined the case.

"I would have remembered this. Silver, definitely, you would have mentioned it as well. A rose... five petals, not six, although there's space for the sixth on the bloom. I saw the spins from the High Priest's staff and this book wasn't mentioned. Anything to do with Zimmer, even with five petals..."

"The sasi rose." She stood. "Did they go through all the books?"

"I don't know." After a look at the bookcases, he shook his head. "There weren't many in the index, and no stand-alone crystals or scrolls, I'm almost certain. The analysis must only have covered those books on the table. At least the analysis that made the final spins."

"And it's different now. Like you observed, this pull leaks."

Two other scrolls remained, one a rolled cream-colored paper cylinder tied with lavender cords, primary size, the other hidden in a casing of closely woven straw. "And these?" he asked, holding one in each hand.

She shrugged. And waited as he examined them. Inside the straw casing was a roll of textured paper, yellowish with darker flecks. Clanny spread that one out first, holding the two ends with books when the thin wooden bars at either end wouldn't keep it flat. Then the cream paper. Both were blank. Sight and feel, he apparently didn't trust his eyes.

"There's nothing there," she said, touching his hand as he made another pass. Pattern, real or not, had told her that much. "There never has been."

"What now?"

"We wait." It wouldn't be long, Mullaki thought. The pull was weakening; she felt another forming... and how tenuous Poss a'ltic's hold on this was. If she let her mind drift, the room started to fade but it wasn't the Camerat double spiral she saw under and over, all around her. What would overpattern look like, she wondered? Poultat world-pattern was blue frost, a lace design common to her people. When she closed her eyes, it was the veins under her lids. This was different; she caught only fragments and even that much filtered through someone else. A melody she'd heard before, a child's nursery rhyme, a rush of ice cold salt water, the scent of earth after a warm rain, the putrefaction of rotting meat, powdered sugar on her tongue and the howl of wind over teeth that reached to bite the red sky. And all around, white light sparkling as though to blind her.

When she opened her eyes, the room was as solid as tissue paper in the rain; only the man with her was real enough to touch. She was suddenly glad he was strong enough in his own mind to like himself; they'd both need that strength. Clanny had attempted to pry the scroll case out of her hands. Force hadn't worked, she felt it in the memory of strained fingers, his and hers. He was

rubbing points that should have relaxed her into letting go but didn't. Her teeth were chattering, her mouth full of the taste of the metal her hands held.

Ulanda tried to keep from shivering. Except for her attendants, the small bath was deserted. A plain stone room with a pool, water trickled down the wall in back of it instead of a fountain. A single reed drum, silent now although it had sounded for the first part of this. Two torches, one at either side of the entrance, the ceiling was lost in smoke, they'd be bathing in smoke as well as water if this didn't speed up. Hiding her impatience, she stood quietly as the Camerat Salin completed the ritual. Grasses tied together into a brush was used to flick water at her. The water tickled as it rolled down her skin, leaving her cooled for the first time since arriving on Camerat days ago.

Water and words. The woman chanted breathlessly, the sound hollow against the stone around them. High formal, she recognized although she didn't understand the language. And the occasional cough. The Salin's crest rose and fell with the action. The crest was a rich cream blue but ragged at the ends as though chewed. She must be old. She'd make a good brush in a large hand, Ulanda thought and felt like giggling.

And managed to bow politely as the woman put the brush on the flat stone beside her, the reed handle snapped in half so that it couldn't be used again. A tie from her wrist went over it in a coil. Both would be burned. "I will take your words into the spiral," Ulanda said in the plain tongue she barely spoke, at the last moment remembering the standard response. "My thanks."

The Salin bowed and signed an attendant to do the robing. Very thin white cotton, it stuck to the water on her skin but the other woman pulled it into the proper shape before tying the girdle around. Then put her wet hair into a single tail with a cord tie, wrapping it around to the end. The same braiding as the girdle: opal colored silk with a narrow black turn. A cross section would resemble a triple spiral - Altasimic Temple colors and braiding pattern. Ulanda licked her dry lips nervously. Her colors if she lived.

"This is the way of our people," the lead attendant said in as formal a way as the prayer had been but in the simpler language. She offered a small tray taken from the junior. "We give it to others as a sharing. If you wish I can make the Camerat prayer signs. Hands, the palms and the ankles in a ring. The neck." She made a slight bow over the tray with the last word. Small jars of paste dye, the lids off, the colors glowed in the flickering light. Ulanda thanked her but said no, then included the junior aide in her thanks. The two had the same pattern of colors around their necks as the Salin did. One family, she hadn't noticed before.

"I could use a sign for luck," Ulanda whispered and the lead attendant blinked as though startled, but turned away without responding. Ulanda took a deep breath. Sweat beaded up on her skin, she hadn't stayed cool, or impatient.



Suddenly, the slow pace was too fast. And she was thirsty, the smoke bothered her throat as it thickened around her head and she was starting to feel dizzy.

She concentrated on being thirsty instead of sick and wished she dared to ask for something to drink. The Camerat Temple official she had met with earlier suggested the abbreviated form of the cleansing ritual, citing the heat and humidity, and she was glad she had agreed. Both finished up in the spiral, no difference in that. She'd waited all her life for this; she had seen herself to this point, over and over in her own mind.

A roll of thunder... then she realized it was drums. Fear after all, she thought. He had said... She lost whatever that was, startled to find she was already walking beside the two honor guards who had opened the door to the baths at some sign from the Salin. A drummer walked in front, carrying a small hand drum, sounding in return to another in the distance, gradually working towards matching the beats. The call to Initiation. Very soon.

She had trained... been accepted as an Acolyte...

She couldn't remember. She was just here.

Then the drumbeats were matched, the other drummer was kneeling at the doorway. More guards stood on either side, living statues in the same posture as the carved ones in the wooden stands and beams that framed the door. The two with her turned and stood with them, making a double row to welcome her into the Temple spiral. Water lapped at their feet, the corridor had become a path through a swamp, the far walls lost in the growth of reeds, the stone walls only visible as they became ceiling and then were lost in the smoke of more torches. Black oily water reflected the yellow light. The stench, the heat... I know this, she thought, hesitating at the entrance, crossing her arms in front of her. Her wrists ached she held her stomach so tight and still she thought she might throw up.

The Salin waited behind her, nails clicking. "Shallow rapid breaths, listen to the drums," she whispered. Her breath smelled of pepper and fish. "Time your breaths to the drums. I can feel the power in you respond. Remember the w'ila ca lessons. Fall back into your training. Don't think, just be."

The word was familiar; it brought to her mind the beat of drums. Like these ones? They were sounding again; Ulanda had thought they had stopped. Why couldn't she remember anything?

Soft and scratchy, almost as though nails were beings dragged across the stretched skin. Rasping breaths of drum beats. And inside, the sound was returned, faint but drawing her mind. A tug-a-war, she thought, her eyes wanted to go every which way, her mind half a dozen other. Bowing her head, she stared at her feet and took deep breaths instead of shallow, the action instinctive. Sweat was running down her legs, long trails of moisture to wet the cloth ties of her sandals.

Yellowed nails almost but not quite touched her arm. The fish stink was worse... and strangely familiar. "You should go in now, the drums will take you in. Listen to them."

Ulanda took a single step forward but stopped again to look back. A wide corridor, with people at the far end watching, most of them Camerat. No water, no reeds. Low tables, cushions and mats on the floor. Statues like those in the frame of the door, but not stone or wood, these were clipped bristle brushes of dried reed, masses of hair-fine reeds. The corridor was a meeting place. There were still torches, she thought, although the more usual lighting would be glow globes, darkened ones were set on the walls at regular intervals. At least there were still torches. And guards and drummers.

One way or the other, she couldn't stay here. And was inside the door before she realized she had moved, the Salin walking beside her as the drumming grew stronger. The Net died in a whisper as she crossed the threshold. How did I get here, she wondered, fighting the panic that threatened to overwhelm her, and taking short rapid breaths now that the soft drumming had changed to something slower again. Am I always one step away from matching what I'm supposed to?

Granite pillars, gray and black, but with red in the stone. A reflection from the last of the light coming through the open dome. The sky flamed with the Grandfather's slow sunset. They were all familiar to her, she had seen them over and over, felt the smooth soapy flecks in the stone, watched the light drag across the wall. Listened to the drums, even the sound of her feet on the marble. Always to the point where she was now and then the vision would stop.

Now. She stood near the central mound, an aide to either side of her. A deep cut in the spiral was directly under her feet and she moved back a step. People milled about in the promenade, more Camerat, and she recognized a Poultat and a Piltsimic. A couple of ti'Linn, they were common on the trade ships. A Wa'tic, or was that two, the other almost on top? Zimmer. Some humans or at least from a close line to hers. A few others she couldn't begin to name.

Now. She wet dry lips and even with the stink of Camerat in her nose, she tasted the scent of the soil on the mound. Home? Like the soil after a dry summer, when the heavy rains of winter start but the soil is warm enough for the bacteria and molds to rot a summer's worth of death. Altasimic mark crossed the mound: six and three.

The small dark haired Priest walked around the double spiral, singing the Opening in High formal. Poultat, her braids were cobalt blue, and cords of the girdle as well, dividing the stiff white robe she wore into sections. The woman's eyes brushed over her and Ulanda looked away, disturbed. One at a time, the drummers responded to her song. Stronger, wilder. Ulanda found her body moving to the new rhythm and willed herself to let go to the sound.

And lost her place in it again when she saw the vass'lt. He wasn't Camerat. For some reason she had expected that the vass'lt would be Camerat. Human. A sun darkened man, fleshy and coarse with the contrast of the Temple robes he was wearing. His mouth turned down at the sides to join deep lines as though he had never smiled in his life. The bearer was almost to him and he watched him, not her. The streaks of white in his dark hair turned from red to silver as the last of the natural light died.

The drums were stronger, she should be lost in them by now but once she dropped the thread, she hadn't been able to find it again. She was skimming this in the same way that she did her visions, there and not there at the same time. Had she seen him before, had she reached this far? And lost that thought as she had the ones before in the fear that cramped her stomach. She wasn't matching anything here.

She had thought the visions meant that she could be a Priest. Any Altasimic Temple would have taken her in for the training even if she had her Bluestone blood from the wrong side.

An Acolyte House. She remembered the feel of it more than what she could see or hear. It was real; she must have taken the oaths, the training, that put her here.

She looked towards the Poultat Priest, the woman kneeling already, the Salin at her side. This wasn't taking long enough.

Hands touched her wrists; the aides were fitting the cuffs. Stop it, she tried to say but nothing came out. I wasn't supposed to be afraid, she remembered. Hadn't that been from one of the visions?

The Bearer retreated in a flurry of a dance, matching the wildness of the drums. The handle of the knife was lost in the vass'lt's large hand, the hanging cords looked like threads. He had started moving immediately, circling. And watching her now, his narrowed eyes half hidden by silver flecked eyebrows, but she saw gold in them from the yellow light of torches. And saw more than greed or carelessness, or even stupidity. Hate - directed at her.

I'll die here, she thought, relieved that there wasn't any reason to be afraid anymore. There was pressure on the cuffs, the aides moving to the back of her. Very soon.

The wind is what she felt first and then over that, or just recognizing it, the familiar tickle that meant her mind was reaching someplace else. A vision. Now? She thought her knees would buckle but still she wanted to laugh.

A cold wind, but only on her face, she relaxed with the luxury of enjoying the cold, pleased with the warmth of her cloak and mittens. He was riding beside her on that funny fat mare of his, the small animal huffing under his weight and the quick pace. Her gray mare pranced, showing off and she felt the pride of dominance the horse felt over the other mare, and its own pleasure in the day

and the chance to run. She had said something to the man and he turned his head to reply. Angry, she saw that much, but also the wariness as though he had reason to fear her. Or be afraid for her, she saw that as well. And saw his golden brown eyes in the sunlight and his darker brown hair looking as though touched by the same frost as the grass when they had ridden out that morning.

"I've known you," she said, trying to shrug her hands away from the aides and finding that she couldn't. "You didn't hate me." And how had she felt towards him? She did laugh, a small sound that matched the drums more than anything she had managed so far. Her wrists should be broken by now, but the aides were stopped, and across the mound, the three dancers she could see were stopped, even the cloth of their robes billowed out and stayed where the twist of the dance step had put it. Only her and the vassal were moving and he had his knife raised even though there had been no signal to begin. And the drummers... or were they playing? The sound continued at least, but the drummers were stopped, batons raised, their mouths open with effort.

Hands touched her wrists; the aides were fitting the cuffs. Again? Ulanda shook her head, her stomach lurching with a fresh tide of fear. Bile flooded her mouth, bitter as she choked it down again, making her eyes water. Maybe I'm just crazy, she thought, coughing to clear her throat. Her lungs were burning. "Now," she screamed hoarsely at the aides, twisting to either side. "Do it!"

The aides had frozen again, feeling like stone behind her.

She lifted her eyes, blinking through tears. Two of him, one moving around and towards her again, but his face was different, as though he'd taken some of the other into himself. And enough of the vision lingered that she saw what lay beyond the hill they were riding up: a series of stone buildings. And another man on a tall red horse, waiting on the crest of the rise. Then a cairn of stones near the green waters of a lake, granite rising behind, the lower reaches encased in ice but with peaks of bare stone tearing into the blue sky. Another cold wind, but this one blew through her, turning her bones to ice, shattering them.

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"Which should we compare, Empress, the fantasy or the memory?" Mullaki put the question in the polite form and let the context carry her displeasure. Temple Net reached into the interface and that alone showed insanity. And that she could feel the loom-master tying threads together for another attempt?

"Overpriest, is the universe a fantasy because we are capable of experiencing so little of it?" Poss a'ltic asked. She sounded distracted, much of her attention to

what was happening elsewhere. "You exist as much as I do..." She smiled towards her San, not her tass'alt. "... which some days isn't saying very much."

"The decision the Phoenix allowed was for us to remain the same," Cayse said. "Even a Priest, even an Empress."

"You mean separated from the flow of the rest," Mullaki countered.

He shrugged, apparently not concerned with the distinction. "She's allowed it over and over."

"Allowed?" she asked, letting her empty tea bowl fall to the rug as her hand went to the scroll case tucked in her girdle. The Empress's tass'alt retrieved the bowl, not Clanny. Her tass'alt was slowly pacing nearby the water but with each turn bringing him closer to where Ulanda lay. "That she's refining the question is more probable. All of you are indulging in wishful thinking better suited to children." She stood, tired of this useless back and forth that was only meant to pass the time. But turned before going two steps. "In an attempt at the immutability of Law, we've given the shape to something that was never meant to be defined."

"Confined, don't you mean?" A'in said.

She liked the hardness of the man and the cruel twist that his sense of humor took. "Yes, I did."

"Well, what's so different?" His icy smile was given to his Priest, not Mullaki. The Empress didn't look pleased to receive it.

Words they used to prop themselves up with, Mullaki thought. For lack of anything better, they thought that if they could bind one young woman then they could learn to bind chaos herself. "What was the creation of Empire and the world-patterns except a binding?" she asked. "We tied the lives of our people into Empire, keyed ourselves, our perceptions to what they are... were." Why did she bother, she wondered. She usually didn't argue, at least not with people who weren't listening. "Have you considered trying to cooperate in what is happening? Have a part in shaping this, instead of trying to stop it."

Touching the scroll case, she turned to Cayse. "The pulls have changed from what the Zimmer records gave you and that confirms that the link with either Ulanda or Cassa that you were looking for has happened. Or, if none of you had planned on that particular vass'lt..."

Cayse shook his head.

"... then with Ritsiniti."

Cayse passed the tea tray to Yian and waited until the aide had turned to leave the garden. "The spins on the scroll are inconclusive. I think you're right otherwise for all the good it does us. We have a simple parable and a story that's anything but simple, both together in the same scroll. And none of it matches what is happening here."

She didn't agree but only from a sense of fit when she read either one. "And the blank scrolls?"

"Commander Oimit says the effect is the same as what the Overpriest found in the rooms that in Cassa's reality had been occupied by her San."

One advantage of Temple Net access. "The Phoenix herself then," Mullaki said, disturbed enough to indulge in repeating the obvious. Again she looked for memories of her role in the woman's Initiation and was relieved not to find them.

Cayse's eyes turned to look at Clanny. Her tass'alt was kneeling next to Ulanda, brushing a loosened strand of hair off her face. "It would be best if you had him back off."

"Why? She's not conscious."

His tired blue eyes flashed then were just tired as quickly. "Suit yourself." Stiffly, he got to his feet, stretched and started walking. Would he end up with Ulanda as Clanny had, Mullaki wondered.

Poss a'Itic stirred, eyes focusing on her. "Did you mean for the vass'lt to be Lord Ritsiniti?"

The Net was blocked, at least the level she wanted. Tea, she'd had enough of. And marveling that the Net even recognized her at all had very quickly worn off. "Is it Anga's conclusion that I had?"

"Yes. In some fashion or other, all of the people who keep Temple ritualize the relationship between vass'lt and Priest, and create a mythology to explain it. But the Poultat take it further than most by using siblings of the opposite sex. We're aware of the close tie between Ritsiniti and Ulanda, besides the freeborn Zimmer coda concerning their relationship. All the major changes in the pulls have been focused on you, this might be as well."

"And Anga's selection of me?"

The Empress smiled, but her words were as cold. "Involving you was my decision, not his. I'd dreamed of you."

"Then you have your answer, if you'd only try thinking. This is your Empire, you made the changes that made it what it is."

"I dreamed about that too." Poss a'Itic's eyes went to Clanny with a proprietary look in them. The tass'alt looked up as though sensing her attention. He had ignored her as much as he could past the polite exchanges necessary. Being close to her visibly bothered him.

A'in touched Poss a'Itic's arm to distract her then ran his fingers to separate the braid ends, dark sparks slowly rolling off the ends. A sign passed from him to Clanny.

"Don't talk about dreams," A'in said, speaking to Poss a'Itic. She shook her head and looked away, ignoring him when he continued. "I feel like I'm about to wake up and find that I was one."

Cayse laughed from where he was by the water. "You'd wake in a fish boat, tangled in a net most likely. Isn't that what you want?"

His already dark face darkened more. "It's what our father was and had wanted. And if our mother hadn't taken us to Palace, it's what we would have been."

"Cayse, A'in. Leave it," Poss a'ltic said. "This isn't the time or place."

He didn't. "And Lord Ritsiniti? What were we seeing in the spiral? How many possibilities does infinity contain? Enough so that he lived to become what we first saw?"

Mullaki wasn't listening. "A boat?"

A wooden boat, the white paint flaking off. She remembered that much. And more now... different than originally, or was the memory more complete? Sunlight on the water's surface, the movement of a large fish in the depth showing in a flash of filtered light reflecting off scales. And her hands, strong and sure, touching oars shaped to being handled by her. White handles, worn smooth and with the feel of leather to the wood. She could feel the texture of the grain against her palms, smell the salt in the cold air and the scent of sun warmed wood. Then the weight of the water against the broad wooden blade with the first stroke of the oars.

A few steps brought her to Clanny and Ulanda. She knelt. "Did you have time to see the change in him?" she asked. The girl didn't respond. A trail of spit ran from the side of her mouth, sand had stuck to her skin. Her breath was deep and slow but her eyes moved rapidly under the bruised looking lids.

More sand and a sudden closeness to the already stale air. Anga had arrived. "She didn't see anything. And if she did, it won't matter in a few minutes."

Mullaki sat back on her heels and looked at him. "You weren't in the spiral with her, loom-master."

"Wasn't I?"

"No you weren't. You're too ambitious, Anga. A binding... a simple thing you would think." She laughed. "Except you would make it more."

"He might think it but he won't do it," Poss a'ltic said calmly. "The Clan Zimmer records came to me, not him. I know what to watch for."

Mullaki turned her eyes away from the loom-master to see her. "Do you? My brother was my ransom to the dark one; he holds my place in her court until I give back to him what I took to make me whole. How can anyone ask a stranger to do that? How could you?" Her people didn't talk of Empire Law when talking of vass'lt and Priest. The stories written on the scroll had fit places in her mind like a key does a lock.

Anga snorted. "Poultat are more fanciful than most when it comes to stories. You were a mistake."

"Apparently, not one of yours though."

"No."

She felt the threads of the binding change as though the Net controls had shifted from one system to another. And then saw the garden start to fade around her. "Were you looking for a change?" she asked when it had stopped and she was still there. Clanny came out of it looking startled, then angry. She motioned to him to be still. Neither of the Empress' men looked startled, their looks were reserved for surprise that she and Clanny hadn't vanished.

She laughed. "Our stories grow out of an attempt at understanding what we see, and more, what we feel. In them, it's as though we see overpattern, and then proceed to paint it in the colors of our limitations. Is it any wonder that Lord Garm's collection of stories have played a key role from the beginning?"

Clanny's hand was on her shoulder. "A man loves a woman he can't have," he said. "She leaves him in a way he can't follow by simply dying. And in the end, there is no end, but only a drawing to show what they were to each other."

The ridges of Mullaki's braids touched Ulanda's face. She wanted that contact. Sour smelling vomit and pungent sweat, the white silk robe was stained with both. "Was it you, or was Ritsiniti the one doing the offering?"

Mullaki turned her head to see the Empress again. "I first saw you standing in a room where everything had turned to stone but a tapestry and a few chairs." Closing her eyes, she could see it again. More than the room, the area around it was stone. Anga hadn't told her about that, had he known? "Had you?" she asked, turning to him.

He grunted, sounding disgusted. "What?"

She got up and walked back to the Empress. Clanny stayed where he was. "Stone, brittle stone like knives. Empire Law, loom-master." She shook her head and he closed his mouth on his reply. Cassa said that to Garm while he held her in the spiral, she thought. Her blood had been washing over his hands. He had lost her again as he always had, he could never hold her. That image was flooded with blue and the crackle of power found only in the spiral during Initiation. There had been a different feel in the reaching for that memory.

"There was a window over where the five of you sat," Poss a'Itic said. "Tea..." Her voice drifted. She was trying to remember, Mullaki thought, and reaching for overpattern for help. Here? Not a comfortable task from the Empress' strained face.

"Spawning fish tea," Clanny said, glancing over to her. "The loom-master's joke."

"And the stone?" Cayse asked, kneeling close by his brother and Poss a'Itic.

Clanny looked as though he had no intention of answering. Mullaki made a plea in the shape of her hands. In her mind, she held the image she hadn't spoken of like a gift.



"When Cassa, the Empress left, most of the Imperial Suite turned to granite," Clanny said, speaking reluctantly. "The source of the change was the study where she had been reviewing Empire Law cases. The twins were there with her. The Law case..."

"The same as the one here," Poss a'ltic said. "It had to do with possession and ownership."

"With identity," Clanny corrected. "And it wouldn't have been the same without Cassa to take it over from the High Temple Court. There was no judgment..."

"We are aware of that."

"Are you really?" he asked coldly. "Did you know that Gennady had been in the Empress' rooms with Anga for a tour, more than just the audience chamber where you saw them. That information would have been in the Ladybugs records same as the difference in the law cases. Your associates have held back."

Mullaki laughed. "And you're burdened with us. Another time, I told the old Simic."

"More memories?" Cayse asked.

The binding threads changed again, Ulanda stirred, a low groan sounding in her throat. Clanny soothed her, chanting a Poultat song under his breath. Mullaki was glad that her memories now included him. "What are any of us but memories?" she said as she knelt, signing her tass'alt to stay when he would have come to help her. "The Empress' San has chosen an interesting end for this," she said. "The minor story speaks his heart, the major... you were correct, Empress. I've provided shaping by being here, but then, I'm here because I'm supposed to be. Examine the second story..."

Cayse coughed to interrupt her. "Is it a story?"

She shrugged. "A series of images, if you prefer, and each of them paired. Consider that there are two characters, not equal mind you, but paired. And then seen in a mirror that has its own mind about what it reflects." She laughed. "Mirrored as a child is from an image of the parents." The binding threads were twisting again, but not to get rid of her and Clanny. The scowl on Anga's face told her he'd given up on that for now. She thought that the setting of the threads had a momentum that he could change only within limits. The garden was starting to yield to something else.

The wind blew Alicia backwards; Eunni broke her fall as best she could. They were both covered in ice: her hair, her eyelashes... she thought they might chip

off if she blinked. "Get me a blanket," she shouted. "Silassic..." The Zimmer medic was already there.

"No harm," he said softly, his hands working a shape that Eunni didn't have time for. He went back to Rit a moment later. Kori backed up to follow him, sheathing her knife as she went, but her black ringed eyes didn't leave the wall where Garm had gone through. Her skin was wet; she would have been close enough for the ice to reach her.

"This should do it," Bolda said, as he pushed a blanket and the warming coil at her, then picked up Alicia's rifle and threw it in the general direction of Mirwin and Cici.

Eunni scarcely noticed. "Okay for him to say there's no harm," she muttered, getting in the way of Bolda helping. She was trying to rub warmth back into Alicia. The girl felt like she was a slab of week-old hung meat. Bolda put a hand on her arm and squeezed until she noticed. "Well, get it around her," she said, brushing her face with her other hand. Her eyelashes had thawed out, leaving tears on her face. "What are you waiting for?"

Bolda did, tucking expertly. The soft brown wool blanket he had made for her. "Well, that's that," he growled as he sat back, looking sourly up at the Station Center wall after a softer look to her. Maybe he thought the wall was safer, solid again at any rate, not a mark on it to show where it had opened. "If any of you had just listened for even a second..."

She kept her hands on the blanket over top of the warming coil. "Bolda, shut up."

A bushy eyebrow was lifted as high as it could go. "You taking over? Is this the 'dotty about Garm' leadership club. Maybe Peecit should give it a try."

"Just shut up." Peecit was against the other wall, her eyes blank silver and nobody was paying her any attention.

"You know damn well he shouldn't have been anywhere near here until..."

Alicia came to with a start. "I can't move..." The blanket. Eunni helped her get her arms free. Then memory reached what had been instinct. "Oh Eunni..." she whispered.

She held her. "I know."

"Did you see him like that?"

"It's not something you really see. Just that once in a while..."

Bolda pulled the blanket free and picked up the heating coil from where it had fallen. "Are you two finished jawing?"

"She still needs that." He was folding it.

The others were watching, looking as though they'd wait for anyone else to make a decision. Was it just that she and Alicia been living with this longer than they had? And Bolda? "So," she said, aiming for his gruff tone, putting her hands on her hips for good measure. "What now?"

He scratched his head then rubbed his face down with both hands. "Hell, we wake Rit up and go where ever it is we end up at. What the hell else were we planning on anyway?"

"Kori?" Alicia asked, getting to her knees, looking as though she had to think hard to coordinate that much. "Can we manage a hint? Soon?"

The Zimmer had the red crystal in one hand, the other on the barrel of the rifle hanging from a strap over her shoulder. Set off by the dark algae on the tiles, her white skin glowed. She glanced at Rit, the tip of her purple tongue between pale lips. Then she hissed. "Aiming where now?"

The crystal was being held like a joss stick, the fingers wrapped around were making a prayer form. That much she recognized. "Really up to Rit, isn't it?" Eunni asked. Kori had been at this longer than anyone except Bolda. Except that she burned sticks to Cassa and unlike Alicia who was probably just trying to cover all the angles, Eunni thought the Zimmer believed in what she was doing.

A muffled boom stopped what sounded like it might be the start of another comment from Bolda. From back the way they had come. Then another, closer, or there wasn't as much blocking the way as there had been.

"Looks like company," Bolda said, looking to where the doorway used to be.

Alicia had one hand in the leather pouch around her waist as she tried to get up, throwing her off balance. "Kori, we'll handle it, keep doing what you're doing." Shaking her head at Eunni's offer to steady her, she made a step to lean against the wall, a bead in her hand only long enough to set it. Blue warding flared. Op'ki'na chittered as he set another ward and the blue color deepened.

Cici backed up, Alicia's rifle in her hands. "They wouldn't have been able to bring whatever it was in the flitter bay, would they?"

Cracks showed in one of the tiles about head high and followed the impression of the triple helix. White light peeked through, dust floated out from the break, glowing as it danced. Much brighter than their warding, the blue seemed to be an extension of the white glow, not in competition with it. Mirwin was dragging Niv closer to the Center wall, away from the break.

Eunni suppressed a cough, but it was just nerves, not the dust that was spreading out against the shield on the other side. Did the Empress' people have more tricks like that one in the flitter bay? "Now, Kori, now," she whispered as she pulled their glow globe inwards, turning it off at the same time. Red competed with the white light as Kori did something near Rit.

The tile broke and the slit became a blinding flood of light. Shapes moved in there, dark hazy images within the light, dying as the dust on the other side of the warding grew thicker. More tiles gone? The light wasn't fading with the buildup. Eunni found herself squinting to see, even with the dust the light was brighter, seeming to come from all around now, not just the wall. A world of sun-glare, of stark edged shadows. The air around them was moving, light to dark, as

though broken into pieces. Those people nearest her were masked by the contrast. Then blue was added to the black and white, the warding flared with a buzzing sound that seemed to echo off each separate particle. Reaching a hand out, she touched someone - Alicia, the girl flinched.

Feeling along the wall, she passed Alicia, tripped over Bolda, and landed on her knees beside Rit. Her hair was standing on end, the effect was worse again every few moments. It should be burning her, she thought, but it wasn't, cool somehow like a rain shower, or a fine mist, as though each particle of light was a drop of dew forming on her skin. She could hardly see... or hear. Buzzing from the warding and other noises, not speech but a pitting noise like gravel being shaken up in a metal bucket... people shouting, she decided, hearing herself to the same effect.

"Rit..." A breath of sound, like sand. She felt his face, his beard, a day's worth of growth, a familiar feel and she closed her eyes to help her concentrate. Hands were on her, Alicia, she thought. More pitting sounds, louder ones, and warm breath against her ear.

All those possibilities. All these people. And her right to do this? Eunni's hands were trembling as she moved them lower, feeling the movement of Rit's chest, the start of the patch of curly hair that showed when he left the top button of his tunic front unbuttoned. She felt another hand on one of hers very briefly. Smooth and hot. A Zimmer. Kori? Or Silassic? That close and she still couldn't tell. She would shut her eyes again if that were possible, the light strong even through her eyelids. Flares of light now, with no difference between them. No more white and blue - all one blinding glow. More tricks. Did the tricks include Rilla and Ge'on'ni getting through the warding?

"Rit, listen to me," she said, letting the sounds come out however they wanted to. In her mind she tried for an ordinary room, maybe with a fireplace, a living room or a kitchen. There were children playing... she saw her son for a moment as he had been before he'd gotten sick that last time and welcomed the ordinary pain as she bit into her lip. Too real, too easy. The images seemed to come out of nowhere, hard and solid.

A kitchen with a polished wood floor and hooked rugs by the fire. And wood furniture, plain but solid and well made, she felt the hard smoothness of a waxed surface under her fingers a moment instead of moist cooling skin. Proudful, her father had called such things, that and the toys she saw, the cradle and the rocking horse with the rope mane and tail. Children, a girl and a boy, and larger figures standing against the glow of the hearth fire... she should be able to see them...

The blast threw her against the tile wall. An ordinary room; an ordinary life. For all of them, she thought as she slid down, strong hands helping her. Bolda.

She tried to tell him. "Away from all this," she whispered, knowing she was confused. He can't hear - it doesn't matter, she thought.

An ordinary life somewhere and she'd given the only image of ordinary that was real in her mind, even now after all this.

"Ordinary?" she heard in the pitting sounds. "What about you?" she saw written in shadow words against a stark white ground. "And you?" she felt shaped on her skin with cruel fingers as she writhed against the touch. And laughter. Until the blow stopped it.

She tried to blink her eyes back to normal. Foul tasting sand was stuffed into her mouth. Then rifle blasts had her trying to dig into the sand with her face. She could hardly breath.

Reeds. And a Net system hovering just beyond her reach. Blocked? Camerat then. Really? Sand fused to glass just a couple of feet in front of her nose, a piece of green crystal stuck on top of the molten mass. Acrid smoke was being pushed around by sweeping energy fields, the warding didn't want to hold. Theirs? She doubted it and tried to dig deeper into the sand. Burning reeds, a column of flame reached up to one side then died in an explosion of stems. Real enough. She was being pelted with smoldering fragments.

She tried moving again but a weight pressed her head down. Tic-ticking in her ear. "Down, mother..." Then Hic'lic jerked, flailing at something. A burning smell and his head pushed in against the back of her neck.

Blue again, more warding and stable now, or at least the light was steadier. She couldn't see much. Fewer blasts sounded but clicking noises were starting up, coming from all around her - ti'Linn-native. She caught a few of the words, they were being spoken without worrying about anyone else understanding. Working out what had happened, she thought from the slight variations that were being thrown back and forth. From the ti'Linn that she'd gotten to know, they could be at that for hours, trying for a determination of what already was, much less what they should do next.

Ge'on'ni, she thought. How did I know that? Sounds like him... it. Then changed her mind, and changed it again. Must be. Her nose felt like it was bleeding. And hot, a rivulet of glass cooling close enough that she could have spit on it.

Then the weight was off her, Hic'lic had slid to one side of her and was trying to drag himself forward, and one of his pincers poked her in the side. Feathery looking arches in his mouth jerked in and out with a sucking sound. His robe hung in charred tatters and a bubbled ridge the width of her hand cut across the chitin on the back of his thorax. "Stay still," she whispered then put her arm over him when he didn't react. He was spotted with ash and his chitin rough with tiny burn marks. The dragging motion of his limbs slowed to twitches. His eyes were dark.

The hours turned out to be minutes of talking when other orders cut through the ti'Linn bantering. Eunni pushed up with her arms and looked around. A staggered row of armed ti'Linn were advancing, half a dozen of them, all with the same flags of color in their clothing and all of them the same pale ochre chitin. In back of them was a line that divided the smoking ruin where they were and the rest of the garden. The other way, Op'ki'na was in the shallow water, bent over, a Zimmer rifle still in one pincer. Poached fish floated belly-up all around him. Was he dead, she wondered? Then remembered the back and forth talking. Had any of that been him? She couldn't see the rest of their people, just the three of them: her, Hic'lic and Op'ki'na.

Eunni swallowed blood and concentrated on not gagging. Hic'lic had obviously taken a hit but the ti'Linn could have easily killed them both. The firing would have been right over top. They wanted prisoners then.

"He needs help," she said in plain-tongue, speaking to the lead ti'Linn. And got clicking sounds, something about orders. He sounded like Ge'on'ni but wasn't. The Net still wasn't reaching this far.

Then a tall blond man stepped past the ti'Linn. Cayse, Empress' San, Eunni recognized him from the spins she'd studied with Garm. "Lord," she said, one of the few words she knew in High formal, bowing her head. And had to resort to plain tongue for the rest. "A medic..."

"Is on his way," he said in the same language, returning her bow. Then with a look to Hic'lic, he bowed again. She didn't think Hic'lic noticed. "The rest of your people...?" he asked, looking to her again.

She'd been thrown against the wall, but she thought Bolda had been as well. Op'ki'na and Hic'lic? She didn't know where they had been when the blast hit, the blinding light... they could have been next to her and she wouldn't have known.

She rolled onto her side then sat up, closing her eyes a moment. The world was spinning - and still was when she opened them, but not as badly. The nosebleed had almost stopped and she raised her head to keep it from dripping and rubbed her lip with the back of her hand. Cayse handed her a cloth.

One of the ti'Linn guard had the Zimmer rifle, they surrounded Op'ki'na. "He needs a medic too," she said through the handkerchief, nodding in his direction, ignoring both the question and that the ti'Linn was probably already dead. And earned a frown then a slight smile from Cayse. "Op'ki'na," she said. Damned if she'd say 'it' and that's what the word felt like to her for all it was supposed to be neutral.

Lady Eunni," Cayse said with another bow to her. "Your people will be looked after, we've no reason to do otherwise. You took us by surprise again, the guards were... my Lady's safety is all that either they or myself were concerned with." He took a step to one side, drawing her eyes away from the ti'Linn. "Your knife, please." And held his hand out.

As though giving their own form of surrender, her fingers ached as she fumbled with the ties on the knife sheath.

The room was deep in stone; the thickness of the exterior wall shown by the way the window became a narrow tunnel. Eunni stood so she could see the darkening purple sky and feel the cooler air that came through. Cloth flapped outside somewhere, she thought they might use sails of some sort to catch the breeze and funnel it into here. Hic'lic preferred the corner out of the moving air; he stayed there most of the time.

Across the room, a human woman laid out their dinner service while a ti'Linn aide waited at the door. Two plates and an assortment of small covered bowls, a dish of what were probably fruit from the apple she recognized on top of the arrangement. Another pot of tea, the cold one went onto the service tray. ti'Linn guards opened the door to let the servant out and Eunni felt the lock form as soon as it was closed. The corridor was warded as well. What did they think that she or one small Wa'tic could do?

Almost immediately, the door unlocked and opened. The medic again. Human looking and blond as the woman servant had been. As usual, he seemed hesitant, taking a long time over the selection of herbs. The teapot held only water, which he poured over the mixture he finally decided on. Hic'lic took less time, the same collection of greenery as before.

She'd poured the last mess into the waste bowl in the bathroom. The one before that had made her sleepy, dreamy. She thought she might have been babbling in her sleep then woke up feeling as though she had someone beside her. The bedding had a warm spot when she touched the sheet, she must have rolled over just before waking. When she looked, Hic'lic was in his own bed, besides... She almost smiled at the memory but she didn't need dreams like that, not in this place where she felt watched all the time.

After taking Hic'lic's dinner over to him, she ate her own food while debating about the medicine. Bitter tasting and cool when she finally tried it and she put the mixture down without finishing. Silassic's hadn't tasted any better but she had trusted him. She'd rather the arthritis than living in their selection of a dream world. Warm water from the pot made a better drink, she used one of the food bowls.

"You should eat," she said to Hic'lic when he didn't touch the food. The layer of ice in the bottom of each bowl was melting. He wouldn't eat it at all if he didn't soon.

"Winter thaws..." The heavily accented words were faint and he pulled the blanket up around himself. Going back over, she sat next to him, he seemed to find that a comfort. "A flower blooms with petals of fire," he said, touching the dark red lace cloth of her overrobe. "Does the snow melt from the fragrance?"

She laughed. His robes were layers of white cloth, a faint blue in the folds, and he seemed to take some pleasure in them as well, handling the brocade edging as though reading a story in the white-on-white pattern.

They talked while he worked on the fresh herbs the medic had left, sucking the moisture out before letting the dried mass fall into the ice melt in one of the food bowls.

She must have nodded off; she didn't hear the door. "I hope I'm not disturbing you," Cayse said. Two guards were with him as they always were when he visited. "Would you join me?"

Her head pounded, she had moved too fast getting to her feet. Hic'lic hadn't woken up and she poked him with her foot until he stirred. "Join you where? The two of us?" She didn't like to be separated from the Wa'tic, not sure that he'd be there when she came back - or that she wouldn't come back.

Cayse made a motion of allowance. "If you wish."

Hic'lic refused to come in far and hunched down just inside the entrance, blocking the back swing of the massive wooden door. Others of Cayse's staff spread out and through the open doorway, she saw more of them in the hall. The human aides looked uneasy, Eunni thought, they didn't seem to notice Hic'lic there, but were watching her instead.

Or Poss a'ltic. The Empress was about where Eunni had last seen her. Unchanged, her tass'alt next to her. The garden hadn't changed either. Smoke still rose from smoldering reeds ... except the smoke didn't go anywhere and reeds never finished burning. Op'ki'na's body was where it had been, unchanged as well. She had asked repeatedly if he was alive and been met with silence. Now she knew why. One of the ti'Linn guard had been trapped the same way, half a step out of the water and frozen, the Zimmer rifle held in one pincer. Even the sand was resistant to her feet. It felt like spongy cork and didn't show her footprints as she walked to stand next to where Ulanda was lying. With the tip of her sandal, she touched the skirt of the gauzy robe. It might as well have been solid stone.

Eunni had carried Hic'lic out of the garden; she hadn't let any of them touch him. Would he have been here, like this, if she hadn't? And Ulanda? Could she have carried her out to safety?

And Poss a'ltic? The Empress had been by the door with her tass'alt. Drawn fine, the human part, that is, until it was difficult to see the woman under the Priest. Like Sarkalt, was Eunni's first impression, but without the same effect on her. She'd gotten more used to such things. The woman's questions had been increasingly out-of-synch but Eunni had put it down to her being more in the Net than paying attention to what was going on there. And she'd gotten used to



Ulanda and how her talk tended to come in from anywhere but where you thought you were.

Eunni looked at Cayse. Then away. "So, why ask me?" she said as she tried to make a line in the sand. She couldn't any more than she had been able to move the silk of Ulanda's robe. And there wasn't a trace of the Net in here anymore, not even the little she had sensed before. A pull interface, he had called it. Part Poss a'ltic and part Ulanda. Cayse hadn't been trapped, neither had the ti'Linn guard except for that one. She looked over to see Anga watching her as well. "You must have tried everything else to end up asking me what I couldn't possibly know."

"Well, you've told us piss all," Anga said. His tone was so like Bolda but unlike at the same time. "We figured this might be part of what you didn't say."

She shrugged. All she knew was that the room still spun around when she tried to see the walls or looked at anything too long. She turned to look at Poss a'ltic again. Blond and pale skinned, most the humans she'd seen on Camerat were. The Empress' staff she thought although nobody had actually said so. An attractive young woman in an ordinary sort of way. If you looked hard enough at her. Maybe close to Ulanda's age or a bit younger. Her features were too regular for beauty; there wasn't anything to catch the eye. If you persisted, you'd notice small things like the awkward angle of her lips, as though caught with a word half out, braid cords that shouldn't be able to float quite like that but didn't seem to know how to finish falling. She'd be like the sand, Eunni thought. Unmoving, solid. She could understand why Cayse hadn't brought her back here before this.

Anga was still waiting. "You're the expert," she finally said to him. "Our analysis said that you were trying to trap Ulanda in some kind of binding..."

"Lady Eunni," Cayse said, "if I thought Anga had anything to do with this happening, we wouldn't be standing here talking about it. The moment you came through, the pull interface changed. Two... people we had here disappeared and more of yours never showed up. Neither did Ge'on'ni and Commander Rilla."

"Ulanda's still here." Stilled well before Poss a'ltic had been, Eunni thought, touching her hand to the woman's face. She was cold to the touch, her skin solid feeling and not like skin at all. It had probably already been too late when she got here.

Eunni sat, wanting to be close, even if Ulanda didn't know. Maybe in some way, she did. The guards watched her without interfering. "Did you think bringing me back here would change something? Start this going again?"

Cayse sat on the sand next to her. He looked tired. "We don't know. You're quite correct in saying that we've tried everything else." With one long finger, he tried to poke a hole in the sand. Not a grain moved. "If any of it makes sense to you, I'd like to hear what."

"We're still breathing ordinary air, that's not frozen. And it doesn't stink."

"No, it doesn't." He stared at his finger a moment longer before looking back up at her. "Our scans show this room to be empty, as though nothing had ever been here. Plain stone, the same age as the Temple but never worked, never sat against or worn away by feet. No water marks, no sand ever rubbed against it. No people, ever. A few days worth of dust, that's all."

"And the pull interface is over top of that?"

"Apparently so. Our best people think that we might be in the middle of a change in reality. We've no way of knowing for certain, of course."

Would it turn to stone like Bolda said Cassa's rooms had? Was this the slow version? "What's stopping it?" she asked.

"You are."

She shook her head. The word still echoed in her mind. What had she asked Rit for? An ordinary life? Except that she wasn't sure the words really mattered. "What about Hic'lic?" As soon as she said his name, she wished she hadn't.

"The Wa'tic was a late arrival in this."

And she wasn't? "Besides," she said with a smile to make the words harder, "you're not overly impressed with the Wa'tic."

He didn't rise to her jibe. "I'd be more interested in your connection to it."

She thought back to the spins she had gone over with Garm and added the general flow of life at Ji'jlinlini Temple and the Station. You had to be Wa'tic to pay much attention to the Wa'tic and they paid very close attention. Everything in their lives was measured, everything was a prayer. Maybe that was what had interested her.

When she looked, Hic'lic still hadn't moved. With her hands, she shaped a request for him to join her. He might have blinked, his eyes seemed darker for a moment, but she couldn't tell which way he was paying attention, his visual field was huge. Maybe he saw it all just the same and didn't have to focus. From the request, she formed a sign of indulgence and shadowed it with one for allowance of fate, hoping she got the motions right. Still no response.

"There was another garden in the Zimmer pull on Alisim," she said, turning back to the others. Cayse waited. "Except that it wasn't Zimmer. Quin'tat said that..."

"Who was Quin'tat?" Cayse asked but from the look on his face, she thought he knew the name.

"Sarkalt's Chief of Staff. He said that it was the garden of Ka'It'ka, a Wa'tic Select. The original was in Palace, except that the pull was based on a human world. Altasimic pattern thread apparently, even though they wouldn't have existed at the time. I suppose time didn't matter much. Ulanda recreated it at the same time as the Zimmer pull, only it was where she was, the area immediately around her. There was a Ka'It'ka in Quin'tat's reality and also in the one that Ulanda came from."

"A Wa'tic Select?" The reach for Net came up short, making Cayse wince. He got up, went to the door and returned a moment later. "Angansit?"

The Piltsimic scowled. "Most people think the garden is just that, a garden. Have to be a Salin or Priest to tell the difference, or have access to a good scan and one won't hold in that place."

"You didn't think it worth mentioning?"

"Which? The garden or the Select?"

"Either one or both, your choice."

Anga snorted. "In reference to what?"

"To the Lady Cult dogma. For the garden at least. The Coda talks of a garden at the center of the universe where the Lady sleeps until the final battle."

"Well, there was that." He looked pleased with himself. "A rather obscure point though. And you would have had the information from the flutter crystal."

Cayse watched the Piltsimic as he spoke but the loom-master was watching her. "A red bridge, a pavilion and a pond," the Empress's San said.

Eunni nodded. A very deep pond from what she had heard about it from Slicannin. "That's the one."

"A damaged area in the flutter records... or so I'm given to understand. Too inconclusive to be included in the spins." He was still watching Anga.

Eunni was half tempted to let them fight this out. Cayse wasn't very happy - the Zimmer must have held back as well but he would have expected that. Had Anga interfered with the analysis of the stolen flutter crystals?

Gingerly, she rubbed her nose; it still ached from the bruising and itched worse. "There's more. The garden where we stayed in Ji'jinlini Temple was tended by Wa'tic gardeners. Goie, the records said. It's the star that made the sunstones for the original girdle."

"Who told you?"

"Hic'lic." She didn't turn to look at him.

Neither did Cayse. "Anga?" he said.

The loom master shrugged. "Interesting place, Ji'jin Station."

The lines on Cayse's face deepened. "I seem to be missing some key bits of information." He made a motion with his hands. Several ti'Linn moved forward from the hall outside and he stepped to meet them. Eunni recognized the shape of the braiding on one: a Salin, she had been introduced but had forgotten the name. A Net link hissed with static, the Salin was carrying a linking sphere that didn't like being here.

Cayse returned a moment later. "Commander Oimit has made a good will offer," he said, speaking to Anga, his eyes following the Piltsimic as the short man paced along the waters edge. "What remains of the other loom-master's records will be released to my people. You might rethink your position."

He stopped. "You mean if you've managed to intimidate two Clan Zimmer, I should be as well?"

Eunni laughed. "You might. Maybe should."

The Piltsimic snorted, obviously not intimidated by Cayse, the Zimmer or her. His dark eyes searched the garden as though looking for something. He appeared restless.

"What does it feel like to be immortal?" she asked.

"Like lunch was a long time ago." He was poking at a stand of reeds, the dangling heads didn't move. Turning to her, he crossed his arms. "What the hell do you think it feels like."

Cayse sat next to her. "Anga, you've said that the binding is stalled, is it?"

Anga went back to pushing at the reed heads. One broad flat foot was in the water, or on top of it, rather. The surface must be as solid as the sand. "Same as here. And you don't have to believe me about the binding, your own people have been over it enough."

"Obviously, they see what they expect to," Cayse said. "But I don't think the Zimmer knew about the Wa'tic Select either." He frowned and looked at her, the question in his eyes.

She shrugged. "I never saw the spins that Gennady's people made, just our own and that was after the fact by a couple of months. The Lady Cult studies that Garm and I did in Ji'jinlini Temple, and those of his that I looked at, the odd one mentioned a Wa'tic gardener, but knowing what I did, especially with most our gardeners being Wa'tic..." Trouble was, she had known just enough to ignore what she really needed to know. "The Zimmer, your Zimmer, could have made the same assumption." Then she smiled and shook her head. None of them needed to know anything. "If all this is part in parcel of a Law case that works down to a dispute between the ti'Linn and Spann, why would you be surprised that a Wa'tic Select would have an interest?"

Cayse's eyes were seeing something far away. "And why Poss a'ltic talked with a Wa'tic gardener at South Bay Temple while she was searching for the way to the ocean."

Twisting his head around, he looked towards Hic'lic for what Eunni thought might be the first time. His expression was easy to read. "Hic'lic is the Voice for his people at Ji'jinlini Temple," she said. "Gardeners and cooks mostly, at least those who do jobs that involve contact with other people. He asked to come." She didn't have the words to say what she was feeling, but had to say something. The feeling wouldn't last and this much understanding was better than none. She tried again, wondering if Hic'lic could do it better. "The ti'Linn, the Spann, maybe they are the Law case. Maybe, in a large way, the two peoples were created just for that. "If any people could ask a question with their existence, the Wa'tic could. Maybe that's all Empire is, a question that's being answered right now.

Anga snorted again. "Coming out of a reality that never existed."

"Didn't it?" Cayse said. "You must have thought this important to have held the information back."

"It was a complication that none of us needed, and if this mess hadn't happened, you'd never have known the difference."

"So there wouldn't have been a difference?" Cayse asked quietly. "The importance..."

Anga interrupted him. "Is there a point to this?"

Cayse closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, he was looking at her, not Anga. "We've been able to assume a dialogue at least, between Ritsiniti and... Cassa. Did you ask him for something?"

Was this her answer? Or was the universe waiting on her making her mind up about what she meant. She swallowed the words. It was easy to forget that the man sitting next to her had planned the deaths of people she loved. And the one standing by the water, worse again.

She got up. Hic'lic was watching her, she was sure of it. "I didn't see the garden," she said, speaking to him, not to those closer to her. "But I saw the spins and the memory pulls. There wasn't anything in that garden that hadn't been arranged, planted, pruned or shaped. Even the trees, the ones that looked like they should be growing wild on a mountain slope, the branches had been deliberately bent just the right way to compliment the plantings or the rocks." She glanced at Cayse, then Anga. The Zimmer had to have known. "I didn't like the garden, not really, except that part of me wanted to. It almost seemed ungrateful, but it was too perfect, too controlled."

The questions had all been clipped to shape in that garden and she wanted the questions to be as wild as the answers were. "I lived a winter by a mountain," she continued slowly, knowing she could only talk around what she wanted to say. She didn't have the words to state it more directly. "Last winter..." How could it have been? "The sasi bloomed in the snow, but I didn't see them either, I couldn't move, I was sick. But the mountain, I could see that from anywhere in the valley. The trees on the leading ridges weren't pruned by anything other than the wind and the ice. On the coldest nights, we could hear them die, the sap freezing, the explosions echoing off the mountain like an avalanche. The storms that came up the valley could have killed us all; they were unthinking, blind like the cold was. The mountain was like the storms, as unthinking, but in a different way. There was a lake..."

A milky lake in a field of glacier-rounded stones. Was it bottomless like the pond in the garden had been? For all the differences between the two, were they the same thing underneath? The world-altar at the Mound, En'talac and Sarkalt's burial by the cliffs and the mountain with Tennin buried there. All wild places and the people buried at each had been touched by the same thing. Behind the lids of

her eyes she saw more cairns, a pair at each place... she had closed her eyes when the room around her spun black and white and had found that instead. It doesn't matter, she thought desperately. There wouldn't be any of them on Alisim now. A name came to her from the spin of the world-altar: Sorsi, and she saw Nisstin watching a fire, night around him, face yellow in the flickering light. The priestess had been buried there, she realized. The world-altar. The shaping of what Altasimic was had continued after they had gone through the portal, the world she'd grown up in had continued.

She told them, finding herself describing the land, the air, how different each place was and how they made her feel. The people buried there, adding Willi with Tennin, knowing that as certainly as she did any thing else. And seeing Nisstin again, a very old man dressed in Temple robes with black cords braided into his long white hair, his flesh shrunken against the bones of his face. The death chant sounded around him and smoke from the joss sticks scented the crystal air. A young man stood beside him, slender and with the silver-blond hair of his mother.

Cayse and Anga let her talk without interruption, waiting for something to happen, she thought, feeling possibilities like bubbles in her chest, she had to breath past the lumps and was out of breath, her pulse hammering in her ears. And she couldn't stop pacing but walked holding her arms wrapped around herself as though she needed reassurance that she was solid.

"Garm said that the Opening, the lives that were caught up into the pattern lines, they went to shape what we actually were, not just what was planned." Sorsi and Tennin and Willi. She stopped walking as she lost the feeling for the flow of what she was saying. Tennin. If the Opening was trans-reality, he would be too. And what he'd seen at the Mound, the thing that had half killed him. Or eaten him, she thought, shivering even as one of the lumps made it into her throat and she thought she could cry for a man she had hated.

A man that Rit had loved. "I asked him for an ordinary life," she said. Possibilities were flying, she felt them like wing stokes against her face, soft feathers and softer air. The sensation was seductive and she smiled at the thought, then threw her head back and laughed.

When the echo died, she could hear Hic'lic. Tic noises, spastic sounds, his head was bowed, his forearms brushing his eyes as though cleaning them as a cat would. Except the motion was as spastic as the sound. "Wings," she said, going to kneel next to him, putting a hand on his thorax. He stopped his motion. "Do you understand?" A Voice and a cook, an old Wa'tic and well traveled, he had said. Worn eyes looked at her with the garden reflected in their facets. The missing sections were like holes, or winks when he moved his head. The bristles between each facet were stiff and this close, a lighter brown than his chitin, but as dusted with the yellow of age.

He didn't understand, of course, she saw his confusion despite the difference between them. "If things are planned, shaped, molded... what are plans except memories that haven't happened yet? Memories will never be enough for me."

Hic'lic reached a pincer to touch her leg, the serrated edge sharp even through the thick lace overrobe. "Song without knowing the notes?" he said in plain tongue, another two limbs making the shape that tuned the collection of words into a question. "Sing, you?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to own myself."

Cayse was next to her. The Net linking sphere was between his palms and he was staring at it. The hum set her teeth on edge and this close to the corridor; she could feel the Temple Net it was connected to. "Our world-pattern is supposed to be the song," he said as he knelt so that they were at the same level. "I'm owned by what my people are." His blue eyes rose to hers. "What do you understand of the difference?"

Hesitantly, she put a palm against the sphere, the energy sizzling at the moisture of her skin. He allowed the direct linking, Command level but filtered by security if she was right about the forms that floated to one side of her vision. Only long experience working with Garm let her take the complex spins whole. Zimmer in the taste as well as something of what she already knew of Anga. From the loom-master's flitter crystals, not the actual ones but the reconstruction by the Clan Zimmer with several thousands of years for them and the Spann to decide what was meant. And minutes for the Empress's people to make of them what they could. "And when we're not owned?" she asked Cayse.

He closed his eyes as though in pain. "Altasimic are the end result of the breeding, the result of almost an eternity of overpattern seeping into the Simic line. Your people have no stable identity, each of you float your self-awareness over top of chaos. The ti'Linn and the Spann aren't the only ones that pose a question, the Simic and Altasimic ask the same one, I think. Phrased differently. What you are, what you were supposed to be, I don't think that makes a difference at the core. And the Zimmer..."

Anga snorted, she hadn't heard him approach. "A white petal fallen in the snow," he said in a gruff voice. Hic'lic raised his head, his mouth working.

Another lead followed the last analysis as Cayse set new commands through the linking sphere then let it balance on her lap. A story, the old tongue forms floating before her even when she shook her head to get rid of them. Garm, she was sure, even if he wouldn't have written it. Then wasn't as sure that he hadn't, and with the thought felt a wrenching sense of displacement. A white petal.

The sense of displacement was getting worse. Holding the linking sphere close with one hand, Eunni pulled herself around so that she was sitting next to Hic'lic, her other arm around him. "We go to the sun," she said to him, seeing the

faceted eyes darken as she repeated his words to him. "The real sun." And to Cayse, "If someone asked you what you wanted, what would you say to them?"

His need was immediate and simple and he didn't have to speak. Poss a'Itic.

"Anga? And you?"

"I've made that plain."

So he had. She nodded.

The ti'Linn Salin. "Va'lin'si," she said, recalling its name. The Salin moved in a circling path so as not to come closer. Pincers shaped orders to the others nearby. "Service," it said in High formal but without any qualifiers as to her rank. And in ti'Linn-native, the sphere giving the translation, "The eye, the ocean, to own the shape of what we are by the words we use." And in plain tongue, added, "An ordinary life."

Cayse stood, watching the ti'Linn a moment, then signed both dismissal and ordered privacy with his hands and turned back to her without waiting to see if he would be obeyed.

It didn't matter, the ti'Linn were already here, she thought. Op'ki'na - and Ge'on'ni, somewhere. The guard frozen mid-step. And the Zimmer? Their three and she couldn't give a damn about the Clan Zimmer. Maybe they were the question too, Clan and freeborn. Who else? The Spann? Their problem, she decided. Besides, it wasn't as though she had to do anything; this place was falling apart around her.

"I don't know what will happen... Peecit was praying..." She remembered the smell of paper burning. One of her drawings from the leather book perhaps, Eunni had been busy with Garm and hadn't been paying any attention, the words were like the smoke, an indistinct haze in her mind. She hadn't been the only one making a request; they all might have been in one way or another, prayers or actions. Only, she had been the one with a close tie to Rit and Garm.

Hic'lic was half in her lap, white against the blood red of her lace robe. The linking sphere rolled until she caught it between her knees. It sizzled and Eunni yelped as she brushed it away from her. Noise was growing in the corridor outside; people were bunching up, crowding the door. Cayse ordered them to clear; there were shouts in a dozen languages. If there was a Net out there any longer, she couldn't sense it.

She kept Hic'lic in her arms as she struggled to get up, her robe catching at her efforts. "Get the door closed," she said, finding a strong hand helping her up. Cayse.

"Will it make any difference?" he said. His look of amusement surprised her. Then the Clan Zimmer after all, she heard Zimmer-native and High formal both, with orders being given in an accent different than she'd heard from Peecit, more like Kori but with the expectation of obedience inherent in the words. Cayse



bowed to the pair as they stopped at the entrance. "May I present the Zimmer-priest Tu'pin and Commander Oomit of the Spann Be'li'kini. Their servants..."

"Close the door," she said.

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Ulanda woke up with the feeling that someone had been calling her. Her feet were silent on the packed dirt floor as she walked to the porch, taking the heavy shawl she used as an extra blanket across the end of the bed and putting it over her arms against the chill. The thick earthen walls, so welcome in the summer, kept the cold of winter well into spring, but she saved the dried brush she gathered for the coldest nights and for cooking. Night still, but a faint glow brightened the horizon, just enough to dim the starlight and darken the branches against the sky. The moon had set. An hour to sunrise, the world was silent, hushed as though it waited with her for the call to happen again.

A rustle in the bushes at the side of the yard and Ulanda smiled to herself. Just the birds. Springtime and the sharp trill of their song would start before the light was bright enough to see them by. Sitting on the wood stoop with the overhang of the thatch roof above her, she hugged her knees, preferring what she saw here to the chance that waited if she tried to go back to sleep.

And slept, she must have, because she woke again and the sun was diamond bright through the filter of the bushes and the air had a dusty smell that meant summer and heat. The small garden she kept would need water today and every day now. But she'd have fresh vegetables she needn't spend her scarce money on. Or, she'd have what the birds didn't take. The berries, she'd share with them, strawberries and later in the summer, the tart lemon flavored pin berries of the bushes they nested in. She let the shawl slip off and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. Her head ached as though she had been staring at the light and she was sweating, her arms heavy, and when she tried to move, it felt like her bones had melted.

"Taking the cool?" Mother Pasbal asked from the gate as she closed it behind her. The large older woman had a straw weave basket over her arm. Ulanda nodded, not trusting her voice. "Going to be hot today," the other continued without a pause except for the puffing breaths. Even the nod hadn't been necessary. "Got the eggs? Right then... and these goat-tongues?" She was staring at the neat double row of lettuce. "They'll go to seed in this heat, save you watering them. Master Gina will take them along with the eggs, he can afford to and they go well together in a salad if he doesn't pickle all the eggs."

Ulanda nodded again and found the strength to go and start picking the thick fleshed center leaves of each plant while the other woman pulled the container of eggs from the cool of the well, still talking away, the sound of her gasps hollow as she bent over the high stone lip. The brown birds hidden in the pin berry bush trilled their sharp notes over and over, with a hoarse sound, as though protesting.

"Not your eggs," she said to them. Theirs were too small to bother with, smaller than her thumbnail. These were from the large awkward gulls that nested along the broken cliffs overlooking the Endicastrom. Ulanda had gathered the new eggs over the last few days, marking the nests that had been empty the day before, candling the eggs to check again, then boiling them. A long walk in the heat, and technically Temple land - along the ridge were Alisim Temple banners - but no one had ever bothered her and while she was there, she liked the stark isolation with only the wind and the birds, the river and a salt smell that didn't often come this far inland. She'd get more eggs today, the breeding season was too short to waste even though they didn't bring in much money for all the rough scrambling and climbing over the rocks and having to duck the birds, their clumsy waddle on land turned to a soaring grace when they flew.

"Girl, you don't have any meat on you at all!" Mother Pasbal stood with her fists on her own ample hips, the basket at her feet. "You just don't bother with what you should, it's not right..."

The usual, Ulanda thought. Start with how Master Gina would take her on to wait tables or as a chambermaid if she promised to show up on time, then she would get to the part about her eldest son being a widower now and how the gossip didn't matter beans. That crazy is as crazy does and there was none of that - the doing - then she'd pause as though waiting for Ulanda to confirm her opinion and then on to the next bit, and then insist she come to dinner that very night, and that no wasn't an answer she'd settle for.

Half listening as she finished picking the lettuce, Ulanda found herself suddenly standing, the leaves still in the skirt of her bunched up nightdress, listening to a different sound, a whine that stopped the woman's monologue and the bird song both. A large ship, a Zimmer freighter from the pitch. Coming in low, following the Endicastrom, the noise blocked until it mounted the cliff that separated the river from Intil Capital and the town that sprawled around the stone walls, extending to the flank of the hills. The sound bloomed in an echo against Dog Mountain behind her and was gone without fading.

Intil Port then, not the Temple grounds or the Holding at Endica. There would be work in the High market for a few days at least and a chance to meet someone with more to spend than promises.

Deep in their pockets of flesh, Mother Pascal's eyes narrowed. "Don't you be going off to the Port," she said then snorted loudly, her face showing that she knew how useless any warning would be. Then persisted, saying, "Someday,

you'll find yourself old like me, your looks gone, then what will you do?" And shook her head, chins wobbling. "Blood will out."

Ulanda picked up the few leaves that had fallen and brushed them off - the dew had dried already - then put them in the basket beside the bag of eggs. Even if it were true, she'd come to the blood the wrong way no matter what she looked like. Her mother certainly hadn't been Xintan. Her father? It didn't matter.

"I'll come to dinner, with thanks," she said, taking the handle of the basket before Mother Pascal could and walking to the gate beside her. They both knew she would only if she didn't find company. She wet her lips and pushed back the hair that had come loose from her braid. The other woman smelled of clean sweat and soap and warm cotton. Even her puffing breath was sweet from the burdock and thistle teas she drank constantly to fight dropsy. Then there was sulfur from the boiled eggs and the fragrance of strawberry preserves in the waxed cloth covered crocks under where she'd put the eggs. Fresh bread, sweet rolls, not in the basket but she must have baked this morning already, she held the scent in her clothes. Then Ulanda saw the second, larger basket outside the gate, bread for Master Gina's small tavern just outside the city walls. The older woman bent with a grunt to take a sugar encrusted roll from under the cover of a napkin and put it in Ulanda's hand, closing her fingers over to hold it. "Eat it, don't give it away."

She laughed, holding the still warm bun to her nose. More preserves inside the crusty covering, she thought. "I'll bring you some fresh eggs tonight when I come," she lied. She wouldn't be going collecting. Walking inside the house, she poured the last few cups of yesterday's water into the kettle then lit the stove. Hot water for a scrubbing, she thought, wanting the luxury of a bath but she didn't have the money for the bathhouse in the next street over. A fire anyway to heat the pressing stone, her best dress would be creased from the box where it had waited for better weather and a reason to wear it.

The bun was forgotten on the porch and when she remembered, the birds had been at it. Picking a feather from the exposed jam, she nibbled around the pecked out holes, then chuckled and stuffed the remainder into her mouth. Strawberry leaf tea would suit her, she thought, tickling the end of her nose with the tiny feather. Made with fresh water from the well, not that already heating on the stove. Tasting still of the winter rains, and cool, a sweet earth taste but with a hint of growing things, a mixed up time before the stagnant water of summer when the level dropped to a green slime in the bottom and she would have to fetch water from the common well outside the bathhouse.

The scent was on her hands already and she buried her nose in the cup of her palms. The water had boiled dry when she went back in and she watched the kettle blacken as she leaned against the cool plaster wall, afraid to lie down or sit, fighting the weakness that made her knees tremble. A few more minutes and it

would pass, but only if she fought it and didn't let herself drift back into sleep, or worse.

She woke up again to someone calling her. She heard the same voice in the snap of the sticks, then in the gut and crack of the embers, shaken by the persistence of the vision. Thankfully only the sound remained in her memory. Worse were the ones that repeated over and over as real each time as though she was living them. One had her in the killing spiral, surrounded by chanting and the sound of drums. And a Camerat across a mound of soil, a red cord-wrapped knife waving in her hand.

Bluestone Clan blood. If she'd known her father, if her mother even had, she would hardly thank him for passing that kind of talent to her. Choices. Too late for her to enter Acolyte training, and without backers, she'd never have been given a chance at Initiation, despite the visions. And if she had, she'd die in the spiral. There wasn't ever anything after that vision. Usually nothing for months, giving her a kind of horrible relief.

The sun was directly overhead before she reached Intil Capital, going to the Gates that lead to the High Market. Nearest the Port, the best merchandise would come there first. A smile got her through, she knew the guards and might see them later if nothing else came of her day here. Off duty, they hung out at the White Horn Tavern near the Gates. A smile would get her in there too, even without any money to spend.

Inside the Gates, the city looked as though gems had been thrown against drifts of snow. Like the outer city, most of the buildings were adobe, but set into the white plaster scrim were ceramic tiles in a dizzying blend of colors and patterns. The narrow streets were blinding corridors of light with shadows encased in awnings on either side. She'll look for work later, she decided, breathless with the possibilities here, catching the excitement from the crowd surrounding her.

At the Firstgate Speakerhouse, on impulse, she chose a joss stick and placed it over the others in the altar by the door. On the wall above the broad dish was plaster relief of the Wu'lim, just a smoke tinted hint of a shape raised on the plaster surface, not the brightly colored pictures that would be inside. The wait for the morning services had left a maze of ash in the bowl but partly burned sticks said that many more people had stopped here since, probably for the same reason she had. A Zimmer woman with a small child in her arms was on her knees, rocking back and forth, murmuring a prayer, the sound hypnotic. Lines in the dust in front of her gave another shape to her request, one that was being scuffed out by passing feet. The woman didn't seem to notice. Behind a light veil, her eyes stared intently at the smoke. Ulanda stepped out of the way, almost bumping an elderly Zimmer who was sweeping the entrance.

A penny in the coin slot for the joss stick, she felt the shape of the coin in her hand a moment before putting it in. How much was luck worth, she wondered. "Do you know if there's work?" she asked the old Zimmer, making sure her donation was obvious. Then was disappointed when he looked up, he was white eyed, blind she thought, until those eyes focused on her and she wished she hadn't spoken.

"Here?" was the slow comment, accompanied by a prayer sign. A saji mark on the yellowed palm. "Go with honor." Spoken in formal Xintan and she bowed her thanks for the courtesy, not sure what else was owed.

The Speaker watched her as she left, she checked over her shoulder. The shop next door let her duck out of sight; she found the intensity of his watching uncomfortable. Hanging fabric fell in layers, curtains of red and gold weaves from the Western Rim; they catered to the Zimmer for marriage robes. Too expensive, but she could look and run her hand along the metal threads, feeling the tingle. When she came out, the veiled woman was standing beside Zimmer Speaker. They both returned her look.

Ulanda walked backwards a few feet, watching them in turn, then shrugged and continued on her way. With one hand, she lifted the hair off the back of her neck, feeling the relative cool as the sweat evaporated. The Zimmer wouldn't stay outside much longer; the sun was on the Speakerhouse wall.

Warmed aromatic oils drew her into the next shop. From Celtha, the hawker by the doorway cried, holding fists full of the expensive joss sticks. His round dark face glowed with oil, he smelled of lavender and sunshine. Inside, all colors of lotions in hand blown glass vials lined the walls. She rubbed a drop from a sample jar onto her wrist, listening as two Zimmer argued. She followed the rapid fire Zimmer-native with difficulty. Not scents, politics. Or religion, rather. With the Zimmer there wasn't much difference. It was her that the owner of the shop was giving the dirty look to, the noisy pair must have money. When she left, the old Speaker and the woman were gone but a small crowd of ten or so others were near the door where they had been. The sound of more arguing reached her and she went the opposite way instead.

In the next street, banners in front a jewelry store advertised gems from the Zimmer ship. Carved stones and ice-pearls. A sober-eyed guard was at the door, screening each person who wished to come in, the Market Net buzzing around him. A smile wouldn't work, Ulanda decided and walked on, stopping at a street vendor to spend the last few pennies from selling the eggs. Much later, she decided not to look for work at all and chose the shade of the gardens overlooking the river, standing under a tree as she ate sticky squares of butter toffee from a cone of waxed paper. Her eyes burned from too much sun, her nose was red, she had left her hat at home, coarse straw that had been patched too often.

Jugglers tossed solid colored pink and white balls in time to a trio of musicians. The drums beat faster and faster until the balls were a blur in the still air, the sole three stringed lute playing catch up with a comical effect that was added to by the odd-man-out juggler who acted the clown. His one ball was striped, a spiral of pink and white that tripped and dipped in the air, refusing to join the others but never quite reaching the grass as he tumbled madly to retrieve it.

Several dozen people had stopped to watch, human mostly. Trades people in the colors of their Guilds, some carrying wares to sell. Next to them, rich matrons and their maids. One who didn't laugh was a supplicant on his pilgrimage to the Temple, still wearing the white robe and his face smeared with ash that was half washed off with sweat. He had a sun dazed look under his wide brimmed hat and she wondered how far he had walked.

Then forgot him as five or six children pushed to the front, trailing a couple of nursemaids. Xintan, with the colors of Silverfox Clan on the borders of their tunics. Shrieking laughter as the slight man tumbled, recovering only to stumble again. Another child, but more shy, peeked at the juggler from behind the blond nursemaid, one small hand holding onto the woman's tunic.

Several coins from the crowd had already been thrown into the waiting hat, but she thought that the colors of the balls were directed at the Zimmer watching from under the shelter of her tree. They liked the shade as much; at the back of their heads, the shorter hairs moved in a slower beat than the drums, a faint pink to the tips. Two of them wore ship's dress with the banding that gave their rank if she only knew how to read it. They had the company of two local Zimmer, she'd gotten a blue-eyed stare from one but she had turned away before he took any challenge from her being close. From one of the wealthy merchant families, she thought, the cloth of his tunic was of a lustrous heavy silk for all it was the dark color and plain cut that the Zimmer preferred for everyday wear. The other local was a woman. At least these weren't arguing. The crew ignored her.

She laughed as loudly as any of the children and clapped at the finale: the striped ball had been switched with a black one and the odd-man clothed in a black robe with a twist of his jacket in the middle of a roll. The other jugglers scattered, balls flying every which way, but all gathered by the one as though by magic and all transformed to black as they flew in his hands to make the classic rose outline. As though on cue, a party of people in Temple dress arrived and the jugglers melted into the crowd but not before a small bag of coin reached the hat. One of the crew had thrown it, a woman, Ulanda thought although the uniform made it more difficult to tell.

The two local Zimmer stepped forward to meet the newcomers. Pointedly minding her own business, Ulanda didn't watch the greetings, settling for listening to the lilt of the exchanges in some language she didn't know. Not Zimmer, something else, but she wouldn't be obviously rude and pull the Market Net for a

translation. When they separated again, two men stayed with the Zimmer. Strom, she thought, the taller man that is, and he wasn't in Temple clothes, but still rich, like the two local Zimmer. He resembled the odd-out juggler, thin and delicate with brown hair that shone red in the sunlight. Closer, she saw his eyes. Plain light brown. The other man was short and broad; she didn't know what he was. Maybe just fat. He waddled like Pasbal did but lacked her height. She wandered away into the sunshine, concentrating on unpeeling the last piece of toffee. The short man was watching her, if he'd been alone, she might have risked talking to him. He looked approachable and thirsty. She knew the look.

She didn't wander far. "The first hot day of summer," a voice next to her said in ordinary Xintan. The taller man, the one she didn't think had noticed her. She smiled yes to the question those brown eyes held.

The few goat's tongue she hadn't picked had shot to seed in only days. She had hoped the shade nearest the pin berry bushes would slow them, but the leaves were already bitter. The pocket of her apron held speckled purple seeds, bush beans, they would go in where the lettuce had come out. When she heard the gate squeak, she was on her hands and knees, shaping the hills with a dip in the center to hold water. Three beans to a hill and pushed in to the second joint of her index finger.

"I thought you would have come back," he said.

Surprised, Ulanda sat back on her heels. He must have had her followed. Or used Alisim Net to locate her, she supposed that was possible - and thought he might be high enough rank to have the access codes. "I bored you," she blurted out.

"Did you?" He offered her his hand.

Lin, that's all she knew, just his common name. Not even his House or rank, just assumptions, but the long split-side riding tunic was as expensive as his clothes the day they had met, tailored to fit his narrow chest and show off the muscles she hadn't expected seeing him in a loose robe first. High boots to mid-thigh. He smelled of oiled leather and horses but she hadn't heard hoof beats. He wouldn't have walked all this way, not and have kept the dust on the boots to sparse film of gray.

"I know I bored you," she said, getting up without his help. She had a bucket ready to dip over the beans, she washed in the water instead. He watched her, his arms crossed. "Besides, come back where? I don't even know where you're from..." Not local and she guessed: "Endica?"

She waited and he finally nodded. "Close. For a while at least. The summer, I think."

"And I was supposed to go all the way to Endica?" She wiped her hands on her apron, in the pocket, feeling the bean seeds that hadn't been planted yet.

"Besides, you're not there, are you?"

"I meant the garden where we met. Or the White Horn, in the common room."

"You thought I worked out of there?"

"The barkeep knew you. Was I imagining things?"

"Maybe it was you that bored me," she said. They'd both been drunk, but she couldn't shake the feeling that to him, she'd just been there to mark time. He still had that detached look. And he hadn't asked at the time how he could get in touch with her. "Maybe..."

"I hadn't thought you'd buy seeds with the money I gave you." He bent and picked up one that she'd dropped and rolled it between two fingers. "Beans, black bread, toffee and a flask of red wine." He looked up. "The wine I expected... do you have anything left?"

She shook her head. Bread, yes, but that wasn't what he meant. And found he had meant the money not the wine. "Do you need more?" he said, his tone taking the question out of the words. "We can come to an arrangement."

"For the summer?"

"We can talk about it over some wine. I left my horse at the Ossini Tavern. Master Gina... he knows you too."

The sudden anger made her cheeks burn. A smile broke the mask of his face, and in the wine-muddled memories of the other night, she saw that same smile. Detached, amused and a little cruel. That evening had left her vaguely disappointed, out of sorts, but it might have been her, not him. She hadn't been sleeping well and she had gotten too much sun, both collecting eggs and wandering the markets. And except for the cone of toffee, the first glass of wine had hit an empty stomach.

"Will you?" he asked again.

Her mental shrug showed on her face as another smile. "I'll have to change first. Then we can talk about it." He followed her in.

Alicia drew the shutters back, letting the morning sun search out the corners of the room. He couldn't hide. "Get up, now, please," she said, standing silhouetted against the light.

"No one's been murdered have they?" Rit asked crossly.

"No, of course not."

"Has Anga done anything?"

"Rit..."

"In fact, is there any particular need for me to get up right this moment?"

"Silassic says..."



He didn't want to hear what the medic said. "I'll get up," he said, interrupting his wife. He turned to his side and got to his elbow first, moving carefully and it still felt as though he left half his body behind. Or as though he was likely to crack and fall apart into small bits. Tika moved into the spot he left, and started to purr loudly. He couldn't even roll back.

Alicia wore a sour look but didn't leave his side until they reached the patio and he could sit. She hovered, there wasn't any other word for it and then tucked him around with a blanket. A blanket on a hot morning - she both hovered and fussed. "I'm quite fine," he said, exasperated with her.

Cayse waited until she had gone before speaking "Lord Ritsiniti," he said formally, giving a bow as Rit shifted gingerly to see the man without having to turn.

"Is this necessary?" he asked rudely.

"You must be feeling better," Cayse laughed. "Breakfast first, then we can talk."

"Why?"

"We've found her."

Rit nodded slowly, looking past the other man to the silver of the river. Alicia could have told him, he would have preferred the privacy. The Net had the details on a heavily protected link. No analysis, just her. Images: her talking, laughing. Where she lived... how she lived. "And the purpose of all this?" he asked tiredly, motioning to the breakfast dishes but meaning the meeting.

Other than raising an eyebrow, Cayse didn't respond.

He wanted to go somewhere. The river, Rit thought. A walk, he could take the Net record with him, draw it out until the link threatened to snap. Had Eunni felt like that, the choices overwhelming until only escape seemed desirable? Rit sighed and made a motion of acceptance of the tea bowl the attendant offered him. Breakfast first at any rate.

Capping a rise of ground overlooking the Endicastro River, the Guesthouse was set in the wall of Intil Capital, very close to the High Market gardens. Intil proper stretched towards the mountains like the tail of a comet, a lesser wall enclosing most of it. Xintan style architecture mainly, adobe and tile and woolen cloth to make awnings, the lines were fluid, organic, not the squared off timber and stone he grew up with in Wilni Province and different again from the Ocea inspired Holding. There hadn't been anything this close to the river on his Alisim, Intil had been further to the west, away from the river, a destination for the trade that came overland across the mountains. Now, the city straddled the Pilgrim's Road. The old Post road.

Temple Net had recognized Cayse's ranking even as the local Temple officials had the lameness of the story offered them about a flutter wreck. Did they see no recourse other than to cooperate, or was this simply courtesy mixed with

curiosity? The same reality? Cayse had been here before, certain officials apparently remembered him. But was it the same, Rit wondered? To his eye and ear, the welcome had a cautious note to it past simply surprise at the circumstances.

By the second bowl of tea, he had looked at the scant record on Ulanda until he didn't need the Net to call the images to mind. Leaving Cayse to his breakfast and silence, Rit took his tea to the edge of the terrace. Early still, the earliest he had been up since arriving. From the riverbank, offering fires bled thin tails of smoke into the air. Below the terrace and stretching down-river, were the steps where the supplicants bathed before continuing on their way to the main Temple and the world-altar. Rit followed the line of lemon trees until he could see the furthest reach of the steps. The high tide and the spring runoff had combined to drown the lower third of the steps in the muddy flow. Several people were there, made neuter by the distance and the smoke of their fires. Like a white fish, a robe caught the current, sleeves like fins; it turned and was gone, drowned in the brown water. He raised his bowl to salute the prayer offering. "May you get what you ask," he whispered. Standing on the lowest white step was a slim form, a small woman or a child, he thought. A woman, a child wouldn't need to shed their life as a snake does a skin.

Alicia wrapped an arm around his waist. "Go talk to him."

"Have you thought of doing that?" Rit said, gesturing to the woman on the steps. A woman, he was sure. A Temple aide was dressing her in the pilgrims robe for the last part of the journey to the main Alisim Temple and the world-altar. "A new start here. A chance to forget that there was ever anything else."

"Rit..."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"You might at least phrase it as a question. I don't understand you."

"I wonder what she's asked for?"

"Who?"

He gestured again. Was the woman still praying he wondered? Near the fire and in line with the smoke, she sat on the step, facing the river. From those days when he had lain semi-conscious, he recalled the murmur of prayers in the distance, now he thought it might have been the river's tongue mimicking human speech, or he had dreamed the noise. What he did remember was first waking to see stones rising all around him. Thunder in the distance, like horses running, but it was real thunder. Coating the stone like algae made of starlight was warding, keeping the rain off him. The Spine of the Serpent, he was in the wedge of rocks where Garm had taken Gennady to shelter him from the sun. Whatever the poison had been had disappeared in the passage, he thought the favor could have been extended to the hole in his back. Dreaming... he hadn't found out what had been dreamed and by whom, even recent events had to be pried loose from a

conspiracy of protection. Dreaming... when he opened his eyes, Alicia had been holding his hand, crying with relief.

She was holding his hand now. "Don't just hand it all over to them by default."

"Do you still see a balance?"

"Damn it, at least try. Talk to Cayse. We need to work out who gets access to her and when and under what circumstances. He'll negotiate, we've reached that far without you, but he insists the rest of it be with you. By his insistence, he's acknowledged all that goes with it. Her status as a Priest, Rit. He's willing to ignore what you might be. He'll play by the rules as Empire understands it, he has to, he doesn't have Poss a'ltic around to change them. Once the Net records any agreement, he won't dare change the details, his hold here is that tentative until he gets word from her. We've got to make sure that we have a hand this time in deciding what those rules are. Whatever you did at the Station Center took them by surprise..."

"What Eunni did on Camerat." She was gone. Hic'lic mourned his loss, spending long hours praying, words on paper arranged on the floor and selected one by one to be fed into the altar fire. Wa'tic prayer forms in colored inks, they looked like stylized drawings of their food.

"What Eunni did," she conceded with a sigh but only to appease him, he thought.

"Have you had word from Ri or Camerat," he asked Cayse. It was something to say to the man that approached neutral territory. Alicia talked of a balance between themselves, the Empress's man and the Clan Zimmer but he didn't see it.

Cayse nodded his thanks to the server as the woman placed a covered plate on the table and removed the used ones. He had obviously eaten. "Not yet. Using Gate jumps, the message would only just have arrived at Palace. And, you must understand by now that Priests think of time differently than most people. I'll hear when she wishes me to hear."

Cayse couldn't believe her dead and finding Ulanda here would only confirm his belief that this was a shaping being played out around them. More likely was that she wasn't aware of what was happening. Woven into the pattern. Cayse's brother hadn't shown up here either.

The official consensus was that Eunni was caught in the same thing and probably wherever Poss a'ltic was. But - wings, Hic'lic had told him. He didn't think Eunni was still on Camerat and she had no reason to be on Ri; he felt her absence like a hollow inside him. His loss, not hers. The rest made sense, they had been obviously trapped already: Ulanda, Poss a'ltic, A'in, Op'ki'na and Ti'pa, the other ti'Linn guard. The two Poultat whose names Anga had let drop but left Cayse to fill in the details. Rilla and Ge'on'ni would be on Ji'Jin Station, he hoped.

And aware of what had happened, he'd like that to be the last of those two, and not still bound up in the shape this thing was taking.

Rit fingered his empty tea bowl. Cayse seemed disinclined to talk after all. "Anything else?"

Cayse smiled thinly as he pushed the plate towards Rit. "Or did you wish tea...?" He looked up for the attendant but didn't complete the motion started with his hand. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably as he sighed. "Isn't the one thing enough?"

Was it? He still wanted to leave, but to go further than to be found so easily. Would this Ulanda go with him? Could he walk up to her and offer her an ice?

Cayse was watching him. "For all it matters, the Zimmer merchant ship that arrived a few days ago brought news originating from Ji'jin Station." Another moment was spent examining the surface of his tea then he shrugged. "An E'kalt Hunter from a Temple Scout ship, well, she's no fool but a story like that once spoken, gets spread and this one picked up both confirmation and echoes very quickly. Even allowing for stories originating in dreams, the end result shows major variances from what we remember."

Shielded Net had the spins, this time with Anga's fine touch on the analysis. "You remember?" Rit said, angry that the loom-master had been let anywhere near the Net systems. He didn't know what Cayse intended by shoving it in his face. Anga's mark had been unmistakable and therefore leaving it had been deliberate. He put his tea bowl down and kept his eyes on it as he tried to control his temper. "The perspective from your end may not match what we remember happening either. And besides, the news wasn't meant for us." No word of Rilla's fate, the Zimmer Speakers passing the information on hadn't cared.

"Our discussion can include this latest information, of course."

A bargaining ploy? He'd get more than that. "Keep him away from her." Rit stood up. At his tone of voice, the attendant backed away but he scarcely noticed. "No analysis, no Net reviews, no searches. I don't even want him thinking about her.

After dismounting, Rit handed the reins to Kori. Bolda had also dismounted, but made no move to join him. The last half block he would go on his own. A dusty street, kitchen gardens in small plots, a mix of livings obvious by the chicken coops and goat sheds that outnumbered the houses. Not really farms, the water was unreliable this close to the waste. His Intil had been more like this than

the city he had just left but he still felt like an intruder. They were being watched; people riding on horses that wore Temple trapping must be rare in these parts. Late afternoon, Ulanda would be alone, her young man back in Endica for a few more days.

It would help considerably if they had any idea of what was supposed to happen, or what would lead from any possible actions. Word in the person of the Overpriest of Forms had just come from Ri, both forcing their hand and allowing them to have some real say in what happened here. Poss a'ltic wasn't on Ri, possibly had never been there. Or dead thousands of years ago, Rit thought. All they knew was that the High Council Command Net on Ri looked for the Empress without understanding, even without a name, simply a certainty that she existed.

"I can scarcely remember her," the Poultat-priest had said. "The Willow Porch, Kascin playing the reed flute. Just days before she left for Camerat." He shook his head, describing events as one would read them, as though each memory was more a turn of the page than something once experienced.

He had brought the searching with him, Rit thought. The Temple Net, even the domestic links he used had the flavor of loss to them. Alicia told him he was crazy, she didn't feel any change even being in them both longer and deeper than he was.

"Am I imagining things?" he asked the Overpriest and brushed aside Cayse's protest to ask it again when he didn't get an answer the first time.

Ca'mit fingered the tea bowl his tass'alt had just passed him. Lanasi signed indulgence when the Priest still didn't answer. "He told the Empress that he had simply woken up," she told him later, out of Cayse's hearing. So as not to be cruel, Rit thought. Whether from denial or shock, the Empress's San persisted in acting as though she had just stepped out for a walk.

"Had he just woken up?"

"Yes, that as well." She smiled at him as though he had made a clever joke. "It was that first morning, when your flitter had just appeared near Rima Gate Station. Don't think it a lack of imagination, please..."

He had assured her he didn't.

"The Empress had a way about her as though she was living in a story," she continued, walking beside him with a smooth grace that reminded him of Garm. "An Empress should, I think, or what use are they? Ca'mit doesn't, he's no Sarkalt, if you were looking for one."

He wasn't. He would take the solid presence of Poultat-priest thankfully. Lanasi's fingers were on his arm in a light touch, she appeared to be in the Net as lightly but he doubted anyone could overhear them. "Cayse didn't tell you... he's living this as a story as well." She moved against him as though flirting. "A'in is on Ri. He's a fisher in Haltinport. An ordinary life..." She shook her head. "He's escaped into what he had wanted but being caught up in the change as he was,

he has no memory of any other life, much the same as Ulanda. He didn't want to come with us and we didn't insist. He didn't believe a word of our story, saying that his younger brother had drowned, that he had given the body back to the sea. And his brother as San of the Empress's House... well, his language... I liked him, but then I liked the other A'in. I was in the minority, I'm afraid. An ordinary life. An Empress out of a story isn't the easiest thing to live with..." She looked up at him, her blue eyes wide. "But then you know that."

Teasing him, he decided. Or still flirting. He didn't impress her, he could tell that now. And he didn't find her attractive, not in the way her actions begged. "I might."

She nodded as though he'd said something significant. "Did Cayse tell you anything of what happened on Camerat?"

"Not a great deal and our access to Anga is limited. We've got a little bit from Hic'lic but the language is a problem even with the Net translation."

"I'll trade what we know for what the Wa'tic Voice told you."

"Hic'lic?"

She nodded. "And what you understand from the stories in the scroll after you've had a chance to study them."

"Another trade?"

"Yes. Ca'mit hasn't committed to any course of action. The local political aspects don't concern him overly, and that includes the Zimmer, Clan or freeborn, even the Spann and ti'Linn squabbles. Anga's contributions, including opinions, will be heavily analyzed, and in any case, he'll be under our control, not Cayse's. Rigyant...well, arrangements have been made and *will* be kept. And, we expect the same control from your end put over the e'Bolda Piltsimic. There will be no attempt to change the Altasimic world-pattern in the way you say the loom-master Vivan did. Simply put, Ca'mit prefers that this be given every chance to play out within the form of what is contained in the scroll."

"Is that the conclusion of your analysts?"

"Yes. And a consensus from those others on the Council who make the decisions. From what we understand, if this reality is the final form the Phoenix has settled on, we can live with the result." She looked up again. "The alternatives are worse. At any rate, we will have to live with what the new Altasimic-pattern will do to Empire. A white petal... the changes will be profound but mercifully slow."

"Is it new? Are you sure about your interpretation?"

"The expression of it is new, all of the analyses that compare what Cayse has given us to what we see around us, say that it's less bound by Law, more open directly to overpattern. There is room in it ..."

"Are the details of that analysis part of the trade?"

"You bargain hard."

"You needn't have brought it up."

"I must have been tricked into saying it by the Wu'lim."

The joke sounded forced. Rehearsed. "That can happen," he said.

"And of course we're not sure about the interpretation, and even less sure about what any changes might mean. The one thing that has changed is that Ulanda has access to Altasimic pattern. From what little information Bolda has given, it is different than the access she had just before you went through the portal." She looked out over the river. "As I said, we'll settle for slow. At least the white scroll shows a relationship between Empire and overpattern, a dialogue if you like. That wasn't necessary. We have the loom-master's collection of stories which we can assume are the same as Garm's and some of the stories that might have ended up here didn't have even that much."

She told him of two scrolls found in Garm's room, talking of Poss a'Iitic's overpattern pull and the two Poultat as though they were real. A gift, he knew and wondered what return she expected. Two scrolls with nothing on them, but Anga's collection had them both. "Oh, one thing," she said when he thought she was finished. "You're right about the Net disturbance, the change will affect Cayse's ranking, or rather, the Net's recognition of it."

"Will the disruption hurt the Net?"

"Apparently not, there's no question of there being an Empress, only of where she is."

"And us?"

She looked back at him. "Can I assume our goals are the same?"

"No."

She nodded and he knew that both his answer and bluntness had been expected. "Ca'mit will let this take the shape it wants to as long as it does so slowly."

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The gate was open and Rit stopped just inside, standing in the path between the rows of knee high beans, watching her. Sitting cross-legged on the wooden porch, Ulanda had a bowl in the hollow of her lap and was shelling dry peas, humming to herself, totally absorbed in what she was doing with a singleness of purpose that was close to mindless.

Bare feet, heavy calluses on the soles. The pale blue dress she wore was cheap, the hem frayed. Too tight across the bodice, yellowed and sweat stained under the arms. She had better, most of them since meeting Lin, but... Rit

stopped the round of thoughts. He thought he'd had time to adjust to what her life must be like. Some of the poverty was from lack of choices in the rigid hierarchy of Intil society, much more of it from not really wanting anything significantly different, not enough to give up what she saw as freedom and work for it.

What he hadn't expected from Lanasi's description or the spins was the depth of her sense of place, her connection to Altasimic pattern. She reached the energy lines here in a way he hadn't seen since Panntin.

Along with the other was a wildness in her that wouldn't stay still, that part reminded him of Eunni, the look she had sometimes. A similar spirit hadn't been in the Ulanda he knew but he suspected it had died under the discipline.

How much of her was a shaping by Anga and how much was what she would have been under similar circumstances?

"Ulanda?" he said at last. She looked up, startled.

"My name is Rit Wilnmeit."

She stood without losing the startled look. Hard yellow peas bounced down the single step to the dirt path.

"I wondered if we could talk."

"About what," she said then frowned, half shaking her head as though at a sudden pain. "I'm sorry..." She was speaking to the dirt, squatting as she scooped the peas, dirt and all back into the bowl.

A hand on the edge of the porch for balance, he knelt heavily and started to gather the widely scattered peas, only to have to move to sit on the step. Bending over hadn't been a good idea. The wooden dipper of water she held for him tasted stale, there were mosquito wigglers flicking at the edge. "Thanks. I'm not used to the heat anymore. I've been away."

The last of the dipper went on the peas to make a mud bath for the yellow globes. She went for more water. "You're from here?" she asked as she poured only slightly cleaner water into the bowl.

Wilni Province originally, but I spent half my life in Endica."

"What's this all about? Do you work for Lin's father?" She sat next to him, giving off a ripe cheese smell he hadn't noticed earlier. She needed a bath very badly. "There's nothing to worry about, you know. Lin's not the kind to do something stupid."

A cold bastard who fed off the life in her, was Rit's estimate. "You mean he won't marry you."

"Hardly a question, is it? He won't come around much longer, maybe he won't even come back." With a clunk, she put the bowl of peas on the porch, splattering mud over both of them. "So, you can go now, you've done your job."

"I don't work for Lin's..."



The gate squeaked shut then open as fast and he looked up. A heavysset older woman was inside the yard, Kori following, opening the gate that had been closed against her. A close neighbor, he recognized her from the spins but as he did each time, he tried to find Eunni in the woman.

"You leave her alone," she shouted, and in the same breath: "I told you it would come to this, you don't have the sense of a goose. Do you know he's from Temple?"

Ulanda backed away, her eyes going to where his jacket sleeve covered his wrist. "Temple?"

From his pocket, Rit took a paper wrapped package and held it out. "This belongs to you." When she didn't come nearer, put it on the stoop where he had been sitting and walked past the older woman to wait with Kori at the gate.

Ignoring the running commentary of her neighbor, Ulanda picked up the package. The wrapping paper dropped to the stoop, forgotten as soon as it was taken off. The silver spoon. It rested in her hands, both hands as though balanced there, not held. He couldn't sense anything from her now.

Dark eyes looked at him and the birds, the other woman's constant talk, the wind - all were a distant buzz. "I heard you before..." she said.

"Will you come with me?" he asked. "To talk... I'm not making any claim on you, you'll be free to leave whenever you wish."

The talk from the older woman wasn't a constant after all. "She's not going anywhere," Mother Pasbal said and closed her mouth firmly as though nothing more needed to be said.

When they reached the gate into Intil Capital, Rit released the City Net lead as he switched to the Temple link. Kori stayed in both, he was too tired, finding himself getting sloppy with even the one. They picked up an escort, foot only, not mounted, a compromise apparently. Kori's eyes were full black. Yuin sight in the middle of a blazingly bright day, the white city must be a sheet of silver fire in her mind. This was turning into exactly what he hadn't wanted, a parade that would feed every rumor current in the city and breed more. The trouble with the local Zimmer that had started with the merchant ship had quieted after other ships brought only merchandise, not word about the Lady. It wouldn't stay down now and would certainly spread outside the Lady Cult Speakerhouses. The skin on his back crawled.

Curious eyes had followed the three of them from the Guesthouse, even with Net blocks in effect. He had known that their way back would be even more visible but he hadn't figured on this. A flitter would make more sense, Cayse had argued, looking for support from the Overpriest. It might now but hadn't earlier and events shouldn't have been allowed to develop to the point where it made sense at all.

Between the thick walls of the double gates, the air was cooler, but stagnant, smelling of men and horses. They waited as the massive wooden planks of the outside section were slid in to hold the gate in place, sealing Intil Capital from the rest of the city. The lesser gates in the outer walls were being sealed the same. None of them would have been closed in Ulanda's lifetime.

Kori pulled her horse between the line of Guard and his animal, one hand on her knife sheath, the blade partly drawn to show the white blade. A sharp order from him made her slide it back. Without thinking, he had spoken Zimmer-native. Eyes were back on him for a moment, but then Kori hissed, her horse rearing as she laid into the man closest to her with the end of her reins. Moren del'Apli, the Net whispered. Ulanda knew him, from the White Horn Tavern, a common off-duty hangout. The man had an arm over his face, bloody streaks on one hand. He fell back against the wall, his head cracking hard.

There wasn't time to ask her what she thought she was doing, Bolda had pushed his horse in behind them and they were out of the Gate area.

More uniformed Guards, City and Temple in two distinct camps, stood watch at the stable entrance to the Guesthouse. Inside was a small courtyard, encased by mud walls almost as thick as the city walls. A garden showed through one round gateway to his left.

The doors closed and before dismounting, he watched as the locks were set, feeling the warding pattern himself to make sure. Safe. The tension drained all at once, leaving him groggy.

Alicia didn't wait for them to come in; she was standing at the entrance to the garden, examining him critically. "You all look as though you could use a rest before we sit down to talk. I was just going to the bath house when the word came..." She took his arm. "... some tea along with a bath."

He thought he might make it that far. "Bolda?"

A snort accompanied the answer. "I'm out of the loop. Haven't you heard?"

Alicia rolled her eyes as Bolda left. "In the loop enough to go with you."

"Kori..." Rit started. He wanted some answers.

"Rit," Alicia said firmly. "Later, please. We'll need a synopsis at any rate. Oh, Kori, I'll take the Net leads."

The Zimmer woman had kept to what shade the wall gave her. "Both of us, I don't trust..."

Cayse cleared his throat, but Rit thought Kori had known he was there. "I don't think the meeting can wait on anyone resting," he said coldly. "If this deteriorates any further, we'll have to bring her here."

Rit took his riding gloves off, using the distraction to control the anger that had flamed instantly. "Were you responsible for that mess out there? Closing the City only confirms the rumors floating around."

"It wasn't my decision but it is one I happen to agree with. The movement of people has to be controlled, for Ulanda's safety if nothing else. The City Magistrate..."

Alicia tried tugging his arm but he didn't move. "Has no authority in the matter. You're using her to cloud the line of command. What else? The links to the main Temple are as heavily barred as that gate out there. Is that only for my benefit, or does the Overpriest even know about this yet?"

Cayse's eyes went to Kori a moment. "How couldn't he know? You forget that this isn't up to you. Besides our interests, these people have a right to take a part. They are well aware of the implications if this gets out of hand, both in general and with the freeborn Zimmer..."

"Rit, please." Alicia was pleading and he let her drag him several feet before replying.

"All this has done is made it certain that she can't reach me directly. Leaving her the choice of trying..."

"She's chosen," Cayse said and Rit looked to Alicia for an update.

He got a shrug along with a smile. Then as he reached for the Net, she blocked him. "Rit, your meeting was to just start things moving. Well, they're moving now. Leave her alone." And to Cayse, the smile a veneer over ice: "Keep your people away from her."

"As I said, for her own safety, we might not have any choice."

A step towards the man was brought up short by Alicia. "Rit, please, you're in no temper to handle this right now. She's fine, really."

He settled for words again. "Forcing her or me isn't a good idea. Will you never get that through your head?"

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The long corridor had floor length windows the entire length on one side, all of them open to a covered walkway. The river was a sheer drop on that side - as soon as the City Gates had closed behind them, Rit's mind had started thinking of escape routes.

At this point, the Endicastro was broad enough that the opposite shore was only a rumor of a darker line on the horizon and one scarcely higher than the water. Closer to Endica, the river split into many courses, the delta lands and their rich farms in between.

The sun line on the surface followed him as he walked but the glare was filtered through hanging flowers from the vines climbing at each post. Clusters of

blue flowers, darker than the sky, and with the silver of the river at the throat of each individual bloom. Were they native, Rit wondered but couldn't remember if they were identical to ones he'd seen before. Wilni Province, not Endica if they were, but like the pine trees in the garden Ulanda had created, his memory was too vague for an accurate comparison.

The walk was helping to work the kinks out of his body from the ride and some of the anger from his mind. The bathhouse was at the end of the corridor, more windows, all open to a terrace lined by potted trees and beyond, to the river. The molded walls were the colors of an oyster shell, and with the crackle-glaze of porcelain that said the room had been fired. A one-color mosaic of tiny blue tiles made the floor look like a reflection of the sky. If you looked more carefully, the tiles made a wave pattern and they weren't all the same color after all. Greens and blues, frosted as though there was foam on the water. The shape of the ti'Linn eye of the ocean pattern.

If he stared too long, the waves moved, the eyes blinked. Going to stand by the windows, he watched Alicia instead. The tiny blue flowers surrounded him; the vines framed the windows, scenting the air with their perfume. He picked the end of a cluster, meaning to put it in her hair, then hesitated with the tiny blooms crushed between his fingers. The kitchen in their suite at Ji'jinlini Temple. Eunni and the bowl of pink squash soup. The tiles and then the flowers.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" Alicia said, breaking into his thoughts.

There were attendants here, their eyes carefully to the floor. He tossed the crushed flowers out the window. "Why not just tell me the rest of what's going on." Their Net was ignoring him.

"A bath first, then talk." Some of the softness was gone from her voice, she sounded amused but it was brittle. Both her voice and the whisper of laughter that was all he got from the Net as he pushed deeper in. "You look as though you're about to fall apart. Was it that bad?"

He had never gotten used to casually treating servants as though they couldn't hear and was deliberately vague. "Bad enough," he said as he gave up trying for the spins. He could break her locks, but might break more than he wanted to. Easier to let her have her game.

"Care to elaborate?"

As they had made their way past the Firstgate Speakerhouse, an old Zimmer had stepped out of the door to stand in a swirl of smoke from the altar. Warding had crackled around them, he couldn't tell who had set it. Immediately Temple Guard pushed forward, mixing with the City men. The old man was flat against the wall, held there by the warding. Blood streamed from of his mouth as blue sheets of light flared around him.

Bolda's horse crushed his, the man had a handful of Rit's sleeve. "Kori's got it," Bolda shouted over the roar. Kori was in the Command Net like a winter storm.

The surrounding Guard froze and the warding died. Bolda slapped the rump of his horse and the animal shot forward. The smell of incense surrounded him a moment, then was gone.

"You saw it," he said to Alicia. As part of his slow unfolding, Ca'mit had allowed free access as high as the Net would accept. She would have been riding the links the whole time; he just hadn't had anything left over to notice her.

"I was asking you. You've been known to have an eye for what is important."

He stripped out of his sweat-soaked tunic and stood there holding it. Had the old Zimmer been alive when the warding released him? "Talk? I thought the talk was for later. Is Ca'mit back here or is he just going to let Cayse and us continue as we are?" He thought a moment. "And Oimit." As far as he could tell, the Clan Zimmer contribution had been limited to listening with only the odd word added. And prayers, he thought. And didn't know that odd words and prayers weren't as effective.

"And Oimit," Alicia agreed. "Rit, there's not that big a rush, Ulanda's been here for thirty-five years or so. She'll keep until you've finished your bath. Just let it be." Taking the tunic, she helped with his boots, tossing the tunic to the man who was hovering nervously. Rit couldn't remember his name and signed his thanks as best he could. He was suddenly fumble fingered.

"Silassic says you're just tired," Alicia said. He hadn't even noticed the medic scan or the report, he was out of the Net entirely.

Towels and robes were on a bench by the steps down and a basket on the wide tile lip held soaps and lotions in small jars. The water was cool, scented with orange and with some of the blue flowers from the vines floating on the oily surface. Tea was brought immediately and the tray left beside the basket. When the woman had gone, a Net block flickered against the walls like an exaggeration of the reflection from the pool.

Privacy. She must really mean to talk. He sat on the steps, half in, and didn't want to ever move again. His wife was in the water, brushing the petals away. He waited until she dipped under, swam a few strokes and waded back. Blue petals were caught in her hair, she shook like Slicannin had and with the same result.

"How far is this gone out of our hands?" he asked, slipping further into the water. The splashes on his skin felt cold.

"Ours? Entirely, I should think." She smiled gently as she soaped a sponge. "Of course in your case, everybody is still waiting to see if you're likely to do any of the things that a decent Wu'lim can do. Or Strom. Or Priest."

He snorted and got the sponge thrown at him.

"Don't be rude, apparently, you've been a major disappointment. Lanasi was telling me just the other day that..."

"I'm sorry." Occasionally, he had been sorry. Strom he could occasionally manage, but the rest still seemed beyond his conscious control. "What about Ca'mit?"

"He's waiting, just like he said he would."

"What else?"

"What else is there supposed to be?"

"Were you in the Net as we went through the Intil Capital Gate?"

She nodded. "Speaker Gitallinastic is one of our contacts."

"And before that, inside the Gate?" The image came back to him of the Guard sliding down the wall, his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Kori was upset."

"About what?"

A look from his wife asked him just what it was he thought to accomplish. "He wasn't a very nice man. Rit, you can't make up for a month in a few moments. You'll only get in the way."

"What are you hiding?"

"I'm letting Kori do her job. Speaker Gitallinastic is alive by the way, I think he half expected to see the Lady come riding by."

"Does he know that much?"

"I'm not sure how much is knowledge and how much is wishful thinking. He's not a Salin to sense pattern directly, but he has a hand in most of what goes on in the Zimmer community. Commander Oimit has contact with him as well, I think. Her bondservant, Be'ell, was part of the Lady Cult underground and the Firstgate Speakerhouse is definitely Lady Cult, they don't even try to hide it here on Alisim. What Be'ell is making of all this, I don't know - Kori says that her loyalties would have to be divided, one instinctive, the other based on belief." She shrugged. "So far, what's happening is what we want. Awillykh, I'm not sure about, he keeps quiet and his relationship with Oimit is different again."

"What about Bolda?"

She kicked water at him. "What about Bolda?"

"Alicia..."

"He keeps his own council about the important stuff, same as he always has. Ask him if the strawberry jam is better than the pinberry. Ask if the price of ..."

He pulled Alicia off the edge and into his arms. "How did you get everyone to agree to let you take over?"

She smiled. "The Zimmer awe of the Wu'lim. Besides, someone had to do it." Rubbing the length of her body against his, she kissed him slowly. "Just your luck... you must be too tired to do anything except talk."

He knew her, he knew the game, how couldn't he? Except that suddenly, he was too tired. He knew her and he didn't. "It might be best that way," he said. A crease across her forehead was the entire frown he got. "Knowing you," he

added, realizing she would think he meant about his being too tired. "I find I don't know you." Delicate blue flowers and floor tiles that moved when he stared at them. What had Eunni done?

"The bird is flying," Alicia said, leaning back against the tiles. "We don't have much time before everything changes again. The deal that Sarkalt made with Gennady, do you remember it? It was Gennady's connection with Cassa that Sarkalt needed more than the Ladybug as back up, and in exchange he got a chance to influence the outcome by being there."

"I've seen Garm's spins."

"Then you have to understand what Eunni has done. Hic'lic says that she's offered me this, that it's a gift, and I accept. My future, my connection to you, like Oimit did with Tu'pin. My Alisim, maybe even this Alisim, will be real. Regardless of what happens with you and Ulanda, I'll have something."

He seemed to have missed that as well. Surprise opened his mind; he hadn't realized that he had shut the world off that thoroughly. From Alicia came a fierce possessiveness but mixed with it was a feeling of loss. Past, present and future. As though she talked with a ghost. What had been asked while he was unconscious at the Station Center and what hadn't? "I'm here," he whispered to her, stroking the soft skin of her shoulders with both hands.

On her face, beads of scented water shone like diamonds on cream and rose-colored stone. Then she lowered her eyes as she reached to return his touch, and the stone softened. "Oh, Rit. You've been one place and one only since we found Ulanda. And before that..." She moved into his embrace, and the last words were whispered against his skin. "I can't forgive you for not loving me, but I can let you go."

There was more, a scent to her that wasn't the almond or the flowers. "I said I wouldn't leave..." he began, the words hiding that he was reaching deeper. Stone... or was it only her strong will?

Scented fingers were against his lips and the taste drove his wits out. She had a very strong will, the taste as sweet as it was strong. "Rit, it's all right," she said, a laugh in her tone, not desire or even seduction. "Don't you bother analyzing anything. I want this moment, for us. Now."

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Ulanda leaned an elbow on the low table and chewed on a ragged thumbnail as she thought. It must have been mid-afternoon when she had arrived here. How many hours? Four? As many as six?

An inner courtyard, the rooms and walls of the Speakerhouse surrounded her. A garden, potted plants and tables around the edges, a central clear area with an altar. There was a rocking horse with a Xintan style saddle. A Zimmer doll and some building blocks. With a faint whistle, a wind-catcher brought a cooling breeze into the enclosure, competing with the scent of cooking from the nearby kitchen. Roasting lamb, the smell made her mouth water. There should be people here, children playing, but there was only her and the woman doing her hair.

The time was dragging slower and slower but finally, the sky was darkening over her head, it would be time soon for the evening prayers. She was hungry and tired of tea and still more tea. The latest sat at the side of a small brazier set on the flagstones, one of the servants had turned the preparation into an hour-long session. Another woman was braiding her hair and taking as long and as little inclined to talk as the other had been.

She had started off thinking of the Speakerhouse as a refuge, now... No, she hadn't been thinking, only reacting. And it had been a refuge; she had grasped everything offered her as though it might make sense out of the chaos in her mind. And was promised answers to her questions even as the old Zimmer had backed away, his fingers flying as he made signs she didn't know.

Right now, she wanted food more than words. Would she have to wait for either answers or food until the Speaker broke his fast after the service? A hungry look up at more footsteps and she was disappointed again. A human girl carrying a book. Xintan dress, tunic and pants, leather boots with a knife sheath on one calf. She didn't look Xintan.

"My name's Alicia," the girl said in Hegemony as she knelt, setting the book on the table. "May I join you?"

Ulanda shrugged. An accent, but it wasn't Xintan, then she remembered that Rit had had the same way of speaking.

Alicia opened the cover of the book and turned the first page. "Can you read at all?"

"No." She got a look that said Alicia knew she was hungry and restless. "Is this part of the explanation the Speaker said I'd get?"

"A part, yes. The book is a translation of an ancient scroll that was written in an extinct Empire language." She started reading, using words that Ulanda didn't understand, a few phrases, then would translate them into Hegemony.

As she read, with one hand, Alicia toyed with her single long tail of hair. Green beads ran the length of it. The other hand held the book, on her lap now, she was staring at the words, her fingers on a drawing in the margin as though she could feel the meaning and not just see it.

Ulanda leaned forward and took the book, getting her hair tugged for the effort. The drawing in the margin was of a seashell, bumpy lines underneath for



waves and the whole thing in a circle. The shapes appealed to her, she'd like to be able to do something like it.

Another tug on her hair and Ulanda turned to see the woman. "Please just leave it." She wished she had never said yes to her hair being braided. She certainly hadn't expected the beads, but it had seemed foolish to protest after agreeing in the first place. A bath, fresh clothes... a robe of white brocade like the Zimmer Speakers wore in the High Day processions. She was being made into someone else. At a nod from Alicia, the woman left.

"Why is this happening? What's going on?"

The girl's brown eyes went towards the Hall where the sound of chanting had just started. "The spiral on Camerat is doubled, not tripled as here. Doubled probably because it's a binary system with two suns. For that reason, Initiations are usually done after a double sunset, both the small brighter Son and the huge red Grandfather. Apparently, from inside the Temple, it's the red light you see most, the central mound and the spiral is flooded as though already covered with blood, but the color fades until there's just torch light by the time the drums build to the start. The ritual bath is a small room a little away, a trickle of water over stone into a pool and they use a reed brush..."

Water that tickled her skin. "Stop it."

Alicia nodded. "Rit said you would have dreamed it."

"You know him?"

"My husband."

"How..."

"You got to know a man with connections in off-world trade, perhaps you loved him, then at least." She smiled gently. "Or talked yourself into thinking that you did. You ended up as crew on a merchant ship and then trained as a web-pilot. Then another connection and another. You must have had visions about going through Initiation, over years probably, and when you found yourself on Camerat..."

"The Acolyte training... I almost remembered it... I told them a lie. They saw what I wanted them to."

"Apparently. Still, it would have been the decision of a moment. You don't resist impulses. Well, none of it happened this time although it almost happened several times."

"I meant, how did you know?"

"A man gave us the information. He thought it might buy favors."

"Will it?"

"It's a possibility." Alicia's eyes were far away. "There's not very much about me in the Lady Cult legends, I hardly exist except as a shadow and a foil to the Wu'lim. When I'm mentioned at all, my story is shaped to serve as one lesson or another, usually to force the listener to do something against their nature. The

teller does what they want with my life. Shadows can be useful." She smiled at Ulanda's confusion. "I'm more real now. Since Ji'Jin Station." The smile became a laugh. "Use your ability to feel things to make us all real and I'll make sure the favor is returned. This man, he can't really die anyway, or so I'm told, I'm not so sure that's going to be true anymore and I don't think he is either. He's a loom-master; all his memories become part of the Piltsimic Archives. Anga, you've heard the name. He created Altasimic."

Alicia must have seen the knowledge grow in her eyes because she nodded. "There is something new. You connect with Altasimic world-pattern where you didn't before. Anga didn't mention it, but he wouldn't have planned that."

"I don't want to..."

"What? Hear the truth?"

"Alicia is a common name, and Rit..."

"Is short for Ritsiniti. And both are as common as Ulanda. We should be flattered, I suppose. You grew up knowing about the Lady Cult. The Zimmer and the Xintan, even most the Hegemony descended people here use at least some of the rituals." She glanced in the direction the servant had gone. "Ulanda, we came from the white diamond to the same place that Lord Gennady's ship Ladybug did, but near five thousand years later. A Temple ship reached us just before the a'Genn pods. For thousands of years, a'Genn had kept watch for us to appear. The Temple ship took us eventually to Ji'Jin Gate Station and... it's gets even stranger from there, but essentially, Anga tried another binding, on Camerat this time. You and this reality are the result."

Her head was empty of anything she could say.

"I'd like to think that you were the person I knew, but you're not really. I mean, you are, but your life has been so different, you're someone else as well. You don't know me and I don't know you. Maybe if you remember that, the rest will be easier."

"What?"

"That you are someone real and that your life is as real as anything else is. You are who you think you are, even with everything else, you're still that person."

She shook her head. "You're talking about me being..." The last word wouldn't come.

Alicia was chewing on the end of her braid. Her cheeks had taken a greenish blush from the color of the bead against her pale skin. "Did you know at all?"

Enough to fear Temple and what it meant.

When she didn't answer, Alicia nodded. "The binding stalled... there were other things happening at the time that had an influence on the outcome."

"Why was I supposed to die?"

"To complete the binding much like you would have during the Opening."

"That's a story."

"It happened. Both times, you would have been caught up in the fabric of the reality in a way that would sustain it, not cause it to change." She took the book back that Ulanda hardly remembered she still held. "There are some people you should meet. And we should finish the story. Cici, a Scribe that's of our Household can do that."

Ulanda started to get up, stopping with Alicia's hand on her arm. "Please stay." She pulled free and backed away. "I'm going home."

"Is it your home anymore?"

"I was born there." Earth from the yard made the walls, the patches matched the older parts, she knew where the best clay was and how much water and straw to add, the aging... she had gathered the brush last year when the thatch needed repair. She thought of the people she knew, the lovers she'd taken there, but her mind kept returning to what she sometimes felt she wore like a skin. "I want to go," she said, feeling desperate.

"You could have stayed. Why did you come here?"

What she had done was rage at Mother Pasbal for interfering, anger a poison in the words she spoke. Memory of what she had shouted - the woman's face pasty with shock, she could still see her eyes - the words had been a blade that cut her free. And she'd run into the house.

"I didn't come here," she said.

She had run into the house, briefly the cool had touched her skin; she had felt the dampness from the dirt floor. Except her feet were on the road and she was already to the cliffs overlooking the Endicastrom. Running still, with no memory of how she had gotten there other than what her body held of rock bruises on her feet and her lungs torn with pain. White gulls circled above her, screaming and swooping, it seemed they herded her, allowing one way only, towards Intil. She had climbed until the rough granite became smooth and the City wall towered above her and she couldn't go any further, her back pressed against dressed stone, all the footing left had been a narrow ledge. She had stood in her shadow, those of the gulls crossing and re-crossing hers, and hadn't known what to do or where to go. The water was a sheer drop below her feet, she was dizzy with exhaustion and heat, but couldn't stop watching it, drawn to the endless motion. She didn't know where the silver spoon was.

Then the scent of lavender joss sticks and a soft voice. "Can you fly?" the old Speaker said. He was standing close enough to touch. "I don't think quite yet." A sasi marked hand was held out to her. A tumble of rocks he led her through became a cave then a passage between rammed earth walls, prayer signs carved into the surface, the shapes twisting in the torchlight. Then more stone, huge blocks that could only be the City walls, but from the inside. Corridors branched frequently but the old Zimmer chose his path without hesitation.

As Cici read the story from the white scroll this time, not the book, Rit waited in the walkway that wrapped around the central courtyard, listening to the same words that she heard, but for what must be the hundredth time. What would Ulanda make of the story, he wondered. The book had been on Rigyant Station; the Overpriest had stopped there. Any and all stories about the Change Phoenix had been collected by Anga. Rit had asked the High Priest if he had found another Anga there, but dead. Ca'mit had refused to answer, retreating into silence. Rit thought there must have been if Cayse had died on Ri at the same time he had come through with them, which meant that the Anga from Camerat might not have the same information as the one who had collected the books had.

He would now - the books had been offered freely. In a locked case in the suite's library, there were now three blue leather volumes with rings on the cover, two with Garm's notes in the margins and one without. One of them was a copy made by the Zimmer from what Sarkalt had offered before going through the overpattern tear on Lillisim. Commander Oimit had given it to the Overpriest where she hadn't to Cayse.

The evening prayers were almost over. Responses to the readings from the Wu'similini coda were being sung back to the Speaker in both Xintan and Zimmer-native, another voice taking up as the first faded, then still another but overlapping slightly, the whole thing sounding choreographed.

"The fabric is unraveled, the cloth is rent. Blessed is the Lady, holy image uncovered..."

Cici had started on the next to last old tongue ideograph. More images, also without covering. He would hide from his mind if he could.

"Child of the wind, mother of the night. Blessed is the Lady, unborn never dying..."

The scroll talked of death and he still wasn't sure it didn't match the prayer.

Deliberately, he pulled his mind away from the prayers and story both. Kori was in the Net with Alicia, a tight link from the Temple Guesthouse. With a touch he was past the safeguards that kept the conversation private. Alicia felt like a blank slate waiting for words, he felt how deep in the Net she was. Then the essence of her came spiraling up around the rest, forming the mass of information into specific shapes. A map? She used one as a grid for the analysis, but the spin was under conscious control.

"A bit late for that kind of interest," she said with a laugh only the three of them would be aware of.

"Are you two serious about this?"

"It's one possibility of many, but, yes, if we have to. Do you have any better idea?"

Kori's support came like an echo to Alicia's words. Temple Net... how secure was this, he wondered.

Bolda's elbow in his ribs got his attention. "Do you have any better idea?" he said in his usual gruff over-loud voice. Another echo, there would have been four of them.

Ulanda hadn't noticed the exchange; she wouldn't have known the language anyway. "No," he said quietly. "Unfortunately." This had been one of dozens discussed earlier; his ideas hadn't been asked for, just his impression of the probability of each thing occurring. Alicia had been correct, he hadn't been paying attention. He thought now that only his body had been healed, the rest of him had already been here, already waiting for this.

He didn't use the Net like Alicia had. No map and not really conscious either, coloring the spin with pattern. Ulanda wouldn't have been able to trap him now as she had on the Temple scout ship when they first arrived at Ji'Jin Station.

"Do we need to pack?" he asked but already knew the answer, their things were part of what he felt. The essentials. And Tika, he was informed curtly. He didn't respond, not sure if Alicia was teasing again.

Through the Net, Kori formally asked for allowance and he gave it as a Zimmer Lord would. Zimmer - he knew what she needed and offered the only reassurance that would give some comfort.

In the courtyard, voices were raised in argument. When he looked, it was the Ulanda he knew that he saw, sparking an irrational feeling of relief that only fed the loss that immediately followed. He walked down the few steps into the garden.

"Are we going too fast?" he asked. Ulanda had stood, looking as though she was going to leave.

His perception was colored by memory. "Too bloody slow," she said. Staring at him, the expression on her face changed from anger to speculation, and then kept changing until it reached a wide grin. "I burned a stick to you the other day. Just outside the doors here."

"What did you ask?"

Shaking her head, she walked to the open square in the center of the courtyard, sparkling with nervous energy. The first stars dogged the full moon overhead; the crystal beads strung in her braids were fainter stars, her robe an opal flame. In the Hall nearby, evening prayers were still being sung and counter to the low rich sound, and more distant, chanting in Zimmer-native. Only the quiet let the further sound reach him. Drums and the sound of seagulls were further yet.

Alicia and Cici stayed where they were as he joined Ulanda. "I loved you," he said to her, letting his words fall as lightly as the moonlight. "It's said that we're

one soul made two so that the dark one could be better seen. I wonder if it wasn't that she was simply lonely."

"Do you see her?"

"What I can of her and stay alive... she looks like you when she wants to. Or I wanted her to look like you." He took her hand, feeling the rough skin of her fingers and the chewed nails, then the untouched satin of her wrists.

She didn't pull away but the face raised to his showed her confusion. "Were we lovers?"

"Yes."

"Is that what you want?"

"What do you make of the story Cici read to you?"

"How could she have left him?" Her eyes were moist with sudden tears as she turned her head away.

The words felt to his ear as though they had been said before. Garm - he was only a name in a legend to this woman, she was simply responding to a story and the half-truth that he had given her. Then her cheeks darkened with heat. "I didn't mean you and me," she added sharply.

"Ulanda, she never left him, ever, or him, her."

"The petal?"

He nodded.

"And the other story?"

He had read both of them over and over, the words and the series of images in the old tongue drawings, using numerous variations in the translation to get the flavor of each. "It's all one story."

"What it says..." She stopped.

"What does it say?"

She let her breath out. "It's her, what she's saying to him."

He touched her face, the skin burned under his fingers. He felt the heat of her body through the heavy robe, her own musky scent rising from the silk. Closing his eyes, he let his awareness of her grow. And felt her poignant sadness, felt the hollow in her breath, and the laughter that colored it. He felt the romance in her. "What does she say?" he asked again. He wanted the feel, the taste of her lips on his, not at all sure if they would be familiar.

Her eyes were distant in the story as she spoke. "She was his mother, his daughter, she bathed his body when he died and when he was born. She was the wind of his breath when he sang, the wind that took his breath when he was afraid in the night."

A series of paired images written in old tongue, those could have been some of them. His hands were on her shoulders again. Had he kissed her or was it her words that burned? Fire and fire, but he couldn't keep up with her, she didn't

differentiate between the emotions she felt, but left them race through her without check, almost as though she had no substance.

He let his hands fall to his sides. "The scroll is new, at least this use of it is new. It's from a collection of Change Phoenix legends, each one taken from a possibility, or a seeing of a possibility, much as the Strom or Bluestone Clan can do. As we left Ji'jin Station, Garm returned to the Phoenix, we think the change in the story happened because of that. Because of our experiences, we're different people, he's different, so the details of the ending changes."

Stepping away, she let her eyes sweep the courtyard, resting them a moment on Alicia and Cici, then the dim figure of the old Speaker in the open corridor before completing the circuit. Her slippers didn't make a sound on the flagstones as she moved out of the moonlight. She had a native balance, but no grace in her motions. With her words, he'd thought: Ulanda. Seeing her, he felt as though he had reached out and his hand had gone right through what he sought to touch.

The rocking horse stopped her backing up, she felt behind her for balance. "The story said he killed her in the spiral and he danced in her blood," she said, her voice breaking. "Do I have to do anything at all?"

"Not a thing."

Her fingers were twisting the strands of the rope mane into a knot. "Except, I will."

At that moment, he would have let her dance in his blood if he could have.

"Will I?" Her eyes narrowed as she asked again. "Your wife said that I pull Altasimic world-pattern and overpattern. How can I? What does that mean? I'm not a Priest. I never left Alisim, much less went to Camerat."

"But you are the Xintan Lady." He started to tell her what they did know, letting Alicia take over after a while, and listening instead to what was happening around them.

The drums were louder, and the chanting. Not inside the Speakerhouse, the sound was coming from the street. For an instant he could smell the torches and the joss sticks, the mass of people tightly packed, another scent that defied the sudden cold of the night. He switched to Temple Net, finding barriers past the domestic levels that suddenly didn't include placement. Their tight link to Kori was still there and he followed that back and forward. Placement for a moment until someone snapped the line. Then, as quickly, placement was back, with Temple security scans superimposed. The Overpriest's mark on the reinforced links, they were all that was keeping them open.

The crowd was Zimmer for the most part, but humans were starting to gather on the edges and were noisier as the rumors spread back and forth. With the rumors, came possibilities. They moved around the Speakerhouse almost as random seeming as the milling of the crowd but with the same overall intent: inward. If the future had a voice, they were being sung.

The old Speaker spoke a serviceable plain tongue. "Have I been played for the fool?" He addressed Ulanda and added the question immediately in Xintan.

Ulanda looked up. "What?"

Rit stood. "She doesn't know..."

"Lady," the Zimmer continued as though he hadn't spoken, a prayer sign shaped with one hand. "You've ridden the winds of Zimmer with the Clan, I can smell the sasi on your breath."

She stood, alarm showing in her posture. "What's he talking about?"

Alicia stood. "He's just figuring out that he's been maneuvered by more than one source." With one hand, she signed Cici to flank them.

Weaving his words into a chant as though praying, the Zimmer ignored Alicia as he had him. "Who are we?" he hissed. "Words lost in a storm, an ember dying in the fall of snow... we pray to the Kori'simi, bearing words and embers. For her sake, hear the other Zimmer! Hear us!" The last was a shout.

What Rit held of Temple Net sparked against the internal Net of the Speakerhouse, failing to get through. Technically part of the City Net, it was heavily shielded. "We can break it," Alicia said, sounding detached but he caught her intent through the Net and countered the order. At the level where they were, Temple Net would have allowed it, connections between the two systems existed - with the trouble, they had them and then didn't almost as fast - but for him, now, a moment would be all that was needed. Except branches lead from that action, not one of them where they would want to go. Alicia shrugged, still detached, but then smiled as though pleased.

"Lady," the Speaker cried, making Ulanda cringe. Fear was a rancid smell on his breath, his lip had broken open again, and a trail of blood reached his chin.

Rit grabbed the man's arm, feeling the heat through the ceremonial robes the Speaker still wore. "Did we put the words in your mouth?" he said sharply. "I've heard many words this evening that have lead to this, but none of them were ones we gave you."

Silver eyes looked at him from a yellowed face then past him. Footsteps on tile and the gasping sound of someone struggling weakly. Both Cici and Alicia had their knives out.

Be'll was being held by two freeborn, her veil torn, her clothing smeared with dust. Blood streaked her face, one eye marked as though broken somehow, she appeared barely conscious. Then the Clan affiliation marks on her cheeks flamed only to fade against the silver and red of her skin as Rit's sight changed. The blue of the good eye that stared at him was so pale that the red flecks were black on silver. Staring at him, not Ulanda and he sensed the core of her mind shrink further back. They let her fall to the floor where she knelt, her face down, rocking back and forth, her head at an angle that he recognized. The two men backed up,



but Rit scarcely noticed them or the orders being given to them by the Speaker. They turned and ran.

Be'ell was a Salin; he knew what she had seen in him. And what Bolda had known. He didn't let go of the Speaker's arm and slowly, the aged eyes turned to his face, awareness growing in them as well. "It's all one thing," he said, trying to whisper but it came out a hiss as though over sharpened teeth. "Kori allows it, I allow it."

Too late, he realized that he was speaking Zimmer-native with the inflections used by Clan. He swallowed hard, sharing some of the fear the freeborn felt, remembering his first reaction to Gennady. The old man had faced his god easier than he did the possibility that he had played into Clan Zimmer hands. Perhaps his god was too unlikely - or at least improbable, he didn't have a suitable way to react, only seeing before him a woman he had seen before, his mouth knowing the words to speak, his hands making the appropriate gestures, but his mind quite unable to bridge the difference.

Alicia was between him and Ulanda. The Zimmer pattern drained and he felt he would be sick. Letting the old man go, he sat against the edge of a clay pot. "We'll be going to the world-altar," he said to Ulanda in Hegemony. She didn't react, still staring at him.

"Kori?" he asked through the Net link and received a map of the tunnels. The Overpriest's mark was on that authorization as well; he must be following this closely. With only a quick glance at the map, he let Alicia take the lead. But on the heels of the map was a message that made Alicia stiffen: "Lord. Be'ell, kill her."

He got the meaning of the words, spoken in Zimmer-native as well, but otherwise he was too away from any sense of Zimmer. A part of him knew the mercy of what Kori asked but the major part was numb. "A mercy," he said to his wife and only managed to sound bemused.

"Would it be?" she asked, her eyes on the Zimmer woman. The cold animal that was a part of her mind twitched, clothed in memories he didn't want to see in the mind of his wife.

He shrugged. "Kori says it would be - she should know." Blood was on his hands. Had Panntin felt like this as his humanity had faded, leaving only the Priest? "Leave it," he said.

Ulanda had backed into Cici, the girl holding her from going further, and too shocked to struggle. Yet. Cici's yellow hair floated in the dark that hid her face quite effectively but Rit heard the whispers into Ulanda's ear that were meant to reassure her.

Still, Alicia didn't move to turn away.

He looked at Be'ell then took the few steps to raise her face so she had to see him. Crystal eyes could break; she was blind on the left side. It would be a

mercy. If he were Zimmer. "Did you think the sasi-spun was for luck? What did you hope?"

Her hope was cold and hot. He heard the whisper of a chant: black and white, and for a moment thought it was coming from outside. Confused, he shouldn't know the meaning of the words but did, an older form of a language he sometimes understood. Cold air and a sweet scent, he'd fallen back into Zimmer again. From touching her, he thought, and he let her go, clenching his hands into fists. What had she hoped? Her mind had always been split, like a crystal broken. Oimit had chosen her tool well.

The Speaker moved on Be'ell. Alicia only moved to block him from interfering. "Their affair," she said. He was glad not to, his response had been instinctive.

"I remember her as a child," the old man said, holding Be'ell in his arms, smoothing her crest, his hand trembling. Her eyes were open to death; she'd be burned with them open. "I remember her as a woman, a mother. She was brave... she believed so strongly, her faith was a flower that grew and bloomed." He looked up, blood from his mouth dripping on the woman's face. "How could this have happened? How could this have been allowed?"

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Carefully avoiding the view of those around them, Oimit shaped the true form of her words on Kori's skin, not trusting to speak them. "You're the one who had her brought to the Speakerhouse," she said out loud. Those kinds of words were allowed between them. The woman hissed her disapproval as Oimit continued. "Do you see your way from here or are you blind?"

Yuin sight at least and Oimit laughed. Mirwin looked up from tying a pack, then at a sign from Kori, continued with his work.

"Take care, Commander," Kori said as she buckled the rifle on her leg. "I don't belong to you."

"We belong to each other." Her nails bit into skin then pulled Kori's hand off the weapon to feel the swell of the child. "The same blood, aren't you flattered?"

"As flattered as Be'ell?"

"Does this concern you?"

"As little as it appears to be concerning her right now." Kori jerked her hand away. "And you needn't play games, I'm not some cub seeing Clan for the first time."

"Didn't you want him? How could you not, you were fertile and he was your Clan Lord." Oimit stopped without pressing the point; she thought she might even

be wrong. Besides, they had company now that was more likely to be concerned. Silassic waited to be noticed, fingers toying with his oath band. A talisman against her, Oimit thought. His timing was predictable. He looked for trouble between her and his wife; he looked for them being together and assumed trouble.

"Would he know you...?" she began, and then smiled. Tu'pin had followed the medic and she raised her voice to include her brother. "You breath air, does the wind think you a thief?"

"She would," Tu'pin said, his bound hands making a private sign between them. "Especially of us."

It had been said as a joke and her fingers shaped a rebuke that she regretted too late. "I thought you were at Alisim Temple."

"I didn't want to miss this."

"This?" she asked with all the irony she could find. Obviously, the others were leaving, but the Net link that Kori was taking her orders from was closed to her. "I see guns and packs. A cat and a rug. What do you see? The Overpriest is apparently too busy, his staff too busy, to share what was agreed."

A second rifle went to hang on Kori's back, the cat was next to be picked up, supported with one hand, the creature's claws digging into the other woman's shoulder. Golden eyes stared at Oimit with mild interest, the animal appeared more concerned with balance than threat.

Tu'pin watched her with much the same expression. "The ranking Priest at Alisim Temple has formally questioned the allowance granted the Lord Cayse. Her sense of timing is rather interesting in light of what has happened since. As you said, the Overpriest has been busy. I thought you might not know."

She didn't, except that he was here and the others were packing. "And you've come all this way to tell me."

"Do I need an excuse to come here? You would almost make me think so." Black flickered in his eyes, but it wasn't threat or challenge, Oimit thought. A motion asked her to walk with him and she agreed, leaving the others, Silassic putting himself between her and Kori now that it was safe to.

Tu'pin turned his mild interest to the view now, apparently not minding the limitless black of the sky and the press of the stars over him. Widely spaced torches illuminated the terrace, not glowglobes, the yellow only slightly softening the cold of the stars. "I found it a very Altasimic type of thing for her to do, without apparent reason, simply because it was possible and the result unknown." He toed a fallen leaf on the flagstones. He wore the robe he had worn to meet Poss a'Itic, the tails of cloth blowing free in the wind from the water, a nervous movement that reflected the yellow fire back at her. She had to look past the fabric to see how still he was. "I had the sense that she wished to increase the

degree of unknown, not find a resolution. Should I say she is Strom? Or did I say?"

"And the Overpriest's part in all this?"

"He waits for the sky to fall, for the ocean to turn to blood. I don't know what he waits for."

The veil on Zimmer - did he wait on mirsasitin weather and the sasi rain or had he changed worlds to mean here? "How can't you know? Is all this preparation for them to go to the spiral? And us?"

He didn't answer and Oimit took one of his hands. He didn't resist the handling, she wished he had. "How far up do the marks go?" she asked, feeling the braiding under her fingers. "Little brother, you don't talk to me anymore, I've hardly seen you in days. Do you talk to your tass'altin instead? Or the other Priests at Temple...?"

There was braiding to the fingertips, but he was capable of moving his hands. A slow touch from him trailed fire on her skin and she felt the child shift position as though eager to be born instead of sound asleep. Tu'pin was like the smoke rising over an altar, he was the stones, the clay bowl. He bloomed with color in the night and was striped with scent. Pulling away was difficult. She leaned over, holding onto the edge of a planter with both hands, the sickening smell of the lemon flowers in her face as a needed distraction. The night was cool, but the writhing chiti on her back felt as though they would burst with blood and heat.

"If I lose you," she said, her face still to the flowers, "the price of anything we gain here will have been too high." Behind her, he crooned a song while his hands traced the line of the crest on her back through the layers of cloth, a passive movement more of weight than touching. "Damn it, stop!" She turned, pushing him away, but stopped with her hands still on him. "Tu'pin, what do you see when you look at me like that?"

"That I've stolen your need."

He had. She shouldn't be able to feel like this so close to the birth.

"I selected you, not the other way around. Why won't you behave?"

His mouth took her breath and gave it back, his honor teeth scraping against her lips. "How could I do anything but what you want," he said and she heard the irony in his tone. Then, with his braided fingers on the cross ties of her uniform, added, "What is it that you want now?"

"Is Be'ell dead?"

"Of course she is."

Disinterested, a mild tone again as though he hadn't asked anything. From the doorway, one of his tass'altin watched. And listened - a reaction there about Be'ell if not from Tu'pin. A freeborn woman, her name was Athliki.

She had lost him, Oimit thought. To Zimmer, to this world. To Empire. She didn't know which. "Tell me what you know. Don't you understand what is at stake here?" Her teeth ached; she wanted to bite instead of talk.

"Your wishes, your desires."

He made it into a singsong as a child might when alone. "Freedom," she whispered, searching his eyes with hers. "Access to overpattern, a chance not to be trapped in the world-patterns, in Empire Law. Tu'pin, Clan Zimmer, what we could be... can't you see it? It's the only thing worth the obscenity that was done to you. And then, only because it will be your freedom too."

He was crooning nonsense words back to her, weaving slightly in her hands, stealing her mind with the rhythm. "Tu'pin, please. Little brother. It's what the Spann want from the Wu'similini but don't get. It's what Lord Gennady found in Cassa but didn't have the courage to take."

"Was it offered?" he asked, startling her, she had been half gone in the chanting noise he had been making.

"She was there, he was there. What more offering do you want?"

"And now we are here. So you force the phoenix to the altar... should she fly? I thought you were the one who flew."

It had been the both of them. Slowly, she sank down to her knees, bringing him with her. "I've hardly been in a position to do any forcing. It's what is happening *now*."

"Now," he said, returned to the singsong again, repeating the single word over and over.

She didn't think she could move but managed just once. Athliki kept out of immediate reach after that, holding her scratched hand. She had tried to separate her and Tu'pin. "I won't allow this," Oimit said barely able to remain upright but for holding onto her brother. "The child is asleep, it can't be now."

A medic scan and Awillykh was holding her instead. "Get him away from her," he hissed at Athliki. The starlight was in Oimit's eyes; she couldn't see what was happening.

"I stopped..." she tried to explain. The child had gone into the still-sleep, she was sure. It should have been content to remain in the dreamtime until she woke it again.

"Apparently, you weren't successful," Awillykh said, then added to someone else, "Don't try to move her yet, she's going into late wassilk but she can still do some damage."

Athliki. "Jass is with Tu'pin, he's down... a blocker. I don't know... he gets like that sometimes. The midwife is on her way... the differences... she said she didn't know about Clan Zimmer births."

"I know what to do but I'll be glad of the help in any case. Here, you will do until she arrives. The wassilk goes much deeper and lasts longer, she'd be

impossible to approach otherwise even with the bonding between us. The instincts are more to the surface with the Clan."

Another person's hand on her... was Awillykh letting the tass'altin touch her? "I've heard... they kill their babies," the woman said, matching the words to the touch of her fingers. Skilled hands. "What kind of instinct is that?"

"It can happen."

"No," Oimit tried to whisper.

"Why?" the tass'altin persisted. The hands moved again. "And what are these marks?"

"Ticti, they mean..."

Oimit managed to move again. Awillykh let Athliki lie there bleeding, the screams bubbling out of her throat for a few moments and then she was still.

His fingers stroked the round of the child and it calmed under his touch. "I said I would be on Zimmer for the birth," she said to him. "I promised my Clan Lord. Our future... a link, I knew what he wanted and I promised." She could see him again, the yellowed eyes calm and without a trace of yuin sight. A torch was set into the wall closest to them. Above her head, the white flowers of the lemon tree floated against the shine and the blade sharp edges of the leaves.

"You still might be," he whispered soft enough that those helping Athliki wouldn't hear. "The wassilk is fading, you have some time yet."

Her mind was clearing and Oimit wondered again who the old man served. Were their interests the same? Except she wasn't sure what hers were anymore if she ever had. Lord Ollti? Her child - she thought of the others, the ones that were dead. Two daughters and a son. She shouldn't even know that much, they didn't exist except as dark marks on her thighs. Prayer marks, asking forgiveness for the offense against the Clan for the waste of blood. Interest? Clan a'Genn should be her interest except she wasn't sure about that either.

"Which Zimmer?" she asked as she pushed hands backwards, trying to get herself upright. The wassilk robbed her of strength, it might be regressing, but each movement both took conscious effort and threatened to bubble over into a killing rage. Where Athliki's hands had touched, she wanted to tear the skin away.

"The Zimmer you are creating. Be'ell is dead..."

"I know."

"Lord Cayse has publicly had his teeth blunted. The Overpriest has decided to stop waiting and the Wu'lim is... reacting as he must. Isn't all this what you planned for?"

Had it been as concrete as a plan? She had put Be'ell out and let chance take her. And she had nothing to do with Cayse. Or had she... the Strom Priest that had done the challenging, she would have followed the temper of the changes happening here.

She pushed him away and the old medic let her go, squatting carelessly within reach while she struggled. He must be very sure of the relationship between them. Tu'pin should have been the one with her. And there was no senior sister-wife. Would Kori do? "Are you sure you want any Zimmer that I have a hand in?" Her laugh showed her weakness. Had he really thought she had that kind of control over what was happening? Or did his faith give him that belief?

The old man made a sasi sign with his fingers as a Speaker might in prayer and held the motion. But not to her. "The Overpriest requires that both of you attend him," Kori said in High formal. From the far end of the terrace came the sound of hooves striking flagstones.

Oimit bit back a hiss as she got to her feet, swaying. "Tu'pin?"

"All of us."

A white horse, like the lemon flowers were white. A moving glow against the night sky and the faint silver of the river. Bringing music with it, a jingling sound. Stars were captured in the long white hair as the mare shook her head, nostrils flaring. Not stars: bells.

"Where?"

"Alisim world-altar."

"By horse?" She looked at Awillykh, then back to Kori. "I agree," she said.

At her touch, the mare shivered but didn't move away. Mirwin held her bridle tightly as he murmured soothing words. He gave a nod and she mounted without help, took the reins and let the animal dance away from the pool of blood. Bells were tied to the long gray and white hair of the mane.

"Under what other conditions are we to attend to him?" she asked Kori. Silver bells, she tasted the metal on her fingers. Silver and horse.

"Must there be any?" More horses were being brought forward from the stables. "Commander, you can check the orders on the Net, if you wish."

Should I care, she almost said. "I'd hear nothing useful on the level allowed me," she did say. The wassilk was almost gone; she had her balance again. Riding felt strange with the animal alive under her. Awillykh mounted his bay with what looked like an old skill. He was still paying more attention to Kori than to her but at least his hands were busy with reins and not prayers.

And then with Litti when one of their borrowed servants led the child out by the hand. She looked half asleep and as the woman lifted her up to ride in front of the medic, Oimit caught the scent of the drug. Awillykh hummed a lullaby and the girl's eyes closed, her head resting back against his chest.

A loud banging made the mare sidestep. A brief echo and a change in the movement of air. Heavy doors at the near end lead to the main courtyard, sealed since their coming here. The scent of the city and a distant roaring noise that wasn't the river.

"Is there trouble?" she asked.

Kori took a pack from an aide and fastened it across the back of her saddle. She had been watching Litti. "No," she said without looking up.

Mirwin looked from his horse to Kori, his face asking the question. "Does she lie?" Oimit said and laughed at the change in expression. "You needn't answer," she added, to see the confusion turn to a red cheeked anger directed at her.

"She doesn't owe you any explanations."

She ignored him. "What I need are weapons," she said to Kori as she flicked one of the bells on the mare's mane to make a tinkling sound. "You've marked me instead. Or does the Overpriest show me honor in the same way that there is no trouble outside these walls?"

"That's something you'll have to ask him," Silassic said instead, leading his horse up beside his wife's animal.

"If I see him," she said, trying to start the mare forward with the clicking noise she'd heard in Net records of people riding. "Ulanda and Gennady went into the spiral on Lillisim in the night. All we need is some fog. Will the river oblige us, do you think? Of course, you were on the Ladybug..."

Plain muddy eyes returned her stare. Had her mother looked like that? She hadn't known her parents and the records were sealed. She had always suspected freeborn but could never have asked, like asking if you were bred out of a horse, or a cat. Eliminating the paltin game would have simplified the breeding program.

"And you were far in the future," Kori said as she mounted her own animal, another mare but darker, a speckled gray. "Why bother with memories you've only stolen?"

"Should she be riding?" she heard Mirwin whisper as he brought his mount up next to Kori's.

"We're not human," Kori snapped and the boy turned aside as though slapped.

We? Oimit thought of what Dacca's reaction would have been to Kori and laughed as she copied the easy way the others handled their animals. Her Zimmer? She had studied the records from the Ladybug and could map the changes in the woman, the result of more than simply an adding of experiences. This would be Kori's Zimmer as much as hers.

They had guides, but not through the city streets. Broad marble steps like shallow terraces lead towards the water but they followed the length of one to the side into a garden, reaching a narrow way between stones that grew around them until it could only be the stones of the City Wall on her right. They were under stone arches and domes, then starlight, the paler animals glowing, the others like a shadow to them. Gates they passed had the settled dirt of decades plowed aside by the heavy doors. They were in a dream, Oimit thought, a surreal movement of people and animals. Kori and Silassic. Peecit rode next to Mirwin but the girl's eyes were on her. Tu'pin with his other tass'altin and two aides in Alisim Temple dress. Guards. No one spoke.



Shapes moved in the glow of the starlight, more guards were on the walls above them. The roar grew in the open areas, faded within stone. Once, the buzz of a flitter passed, the sound coming from the other way towards where the river would be, she wouldn't have thought those in the streets outside could have heard but the building roar of voices followed the flitter noise and died slower.

The end of this tunnel wouldn't be far, she thought and let her horse fall back until she was next to Tu'pin. He hummed a tune, apparently taken from the noise of the crowd. His eyes were pale from blocker; she could smell it on his breath. Jass, his other tass'altin watched her nervously but didn't let go of the lead rein. The faint silver night became violet as Oimit deliberately raised yuin sight.

Tu'pin looked at her. "Was that a mercy as well?" he asked then turned to his tass'altin a moment. "Jass? Would you like such a mercy granted to you?" At his words, the tass'altin shook her head as though an answer was required.

Tu'pin must be speaking of Be'ell's death, but she didn't know where the reference had come from unless he was being given information she wasn't. Or was taking it from pattern. Athliki must have died as well. "From the moment she entered your service, she came under my control as well. Her life was mine to take." He didn't reply. I have lost him, Oimit thought again, but was unable to find any sympathy in herself for the tass'altin. The woman had let herself be used. "If you wanted her alive, you should have been more careful of her. Either you were lax or you thought the result was worth the risk." As she had with Be'ell.

"Which result is that?" he asked before turning his face away. His words had been soft, out of the hearing of the others, but they cut like a blade.

For him, she could find sympathy. "The old mother called your name. Not mine."

"I see her at night. I'm on Zimmer then." He looked back at her. "Except..."

One of those with Tu'pin brought his horse up, stark fear riding his concern. A Salin - was Tu'pin raising pattern? She signed dismissal; Tu'pin echoed her motion and the man dropped back.

"I fly until I think the clouds have to break, that I'd be able to see stars and the curve of the world under me but it doesn't happen. What is there is world-pattern. Like the scent of the sasi rose, like the veil... like the taste of sugar in my mouth. Like the taste of you."

"Is that all you bring back with you from pattern?"

"From dreams. And it's not all." He blinked as though seeing it. "We call it pattern, as though it has a static shape, but it's nothing like that. But it does take a form although I see it more easily in my memory than I do at the time. I'm learning some of this at Temple, mostly how to put it in words. It really has to be experienced rather than understood."

"The words appear to have only taught you how to escape into them."

He smiled, showing points and she felt better. "What are they for if not that?"

With her fingers, she held the shape of indulgence that was lacking in her voice. "Tell me."

He looked relieved to be talking about it. "It's like I'm flying, the pattern shapes leading inward as though I were getting smaller even while going into the spiral. At the center is a point, not light but rather the opposite. Except it's not a point, it can't be... I have a sense of distance, the forms keep growing in scale around me."

"And it gets larger?"

"I think if I ever reach it, there won't be anything else."

"When you reach it," she corrected.

He reached across to put his hand on her leg. "Oimit, I don't have your courage, I never did. I feel a'Genn slipping away from me and it terrifies me. Our people have been my whole life, they should have been yours too, and you only speak of freedom and possibilities. I feel that I should be able to stop this, to contain it somehow. Then I think of the Wu'similini and wonder if out of all the family, only you really have faith." He shook his head, looking puzzled as though having to search for the words. His hair flashed in the silver night and all at once his face relaxed again. "She should have called your name," he said, smiling at her. "Not mine."

She raised his hand from her leg so that he could feel their child, automatically running a finger where the spurs were hidden by the braiding. "A different kind of flight, I think. Were you seeking a chain to this place so that you couldn't get lost? Lord Olti had intended much the same thing." And Awillykh sacrificing the tass'altin to prevent their child from being born here? The Spann were playing for high stakes if they would accept nothing less than everything.

Deliberately careless of the white robe, Ulanda sat in the dirt with her back against a large stone. Warm still from the day and she wanted the heat close. They had stopped very near to where she had been earlier, the same exit from the maze of tunnels but they had gone further away from the city, following a track that lead along the edge of the cliff. Their glowglobes had faded to what might be only a reflection of the stars. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the night. Past being hungry, she just wanted to sleep.

"Here," a gruff voice said and something soft landed on her. A fuzzy blanket. "No sense you getting chilled."

From the voice and the shape that blocked the stars, it was Bolda. The short round man. He was from the legends too. The names ran through her mind, or circled rather, as though she was practicing a chant for a recital.

"How about hungry? Am I supposed to get hungry?"

"Might." He smiled as he reached inside his vest pocket. "Why didn't you say something before?" He handed her a flat paper wrapped package to her.

Her mouth was watering at the spicy scent. Ginger cake, the baker's mark pressed on the surface. At the Winter Turning, she'd bought one still warm from the oven, and with six almonds halves in a sasi rose design on top. Even cold, this was better, from one of the expensive shops. "I saw you in the High market," she said through a full mouth.

"Why wouldn't you?"

She licked buttery crumbs from her fingers. Away from the backdrop of stars, his face had a dim light like the full moon through a curtain. "You were with Lin."

He grunted. "And you never did have any taste in men."

"Why didn't you say something that day?"

"You in a rush?"

She bit back a laugh at the tone of his voice, refusing to be amused. "Does Lin know who you people are?"

"No. All he saw was a pretty girl giving him the eye."

"I was looking at you."

"Tried to tell him but he didn't believe me."

She did laugh. "You're the one who didn't believe." She stood, draping the blanket around her like a shawl. He would know who Lin was, she thought, but didn't ask. She didn't ask for more food either, even though it felt like the cake had woken up her stomach rather than filled it.

"How long are we staying here?" she asked. Dark shapes of rocks, a few trees - more sound than sight for them, the leaves of the closest blew in the wind to make a noise like rain falling. Alicia, she was sure the white blur must be her face, the others she wasn't sure where they were. Someone was snoring, Rit, she thought. After relieving herself of some of that tea, she'd found herself reluctant to go back, but she didn't leave either.

He did have another cake. Stubby fingers peeled back the paper seeming to take forever, but the cake was gone in two bites. "We're here until we leave," he said, brushing crumbs from his vest.

"Good idea. You know, my house isn't far, maybe twenty minutes running." She could leave now. She took a step in that direction. Then another step. Net prickled against her skin and a buzz started in back of her ears. A placement scan? She supposed so, but nobody came out to stop her.

A path, a road soon if she wasn't totally turned around. A few more steps and she was free from the protection of the large rocks. More sky was visible and she had the low blue star of the Wellwater constellation in front of her and the occasional light showing from Intil to her left. She knew where she was now.

She looked back after walking several more steps. "Rit said you wouldn't stop me from leaving."

"So who's stopping you?" Not stopping but following.

Hesitating, she tried to make him out in the dark. Did she hear bells? A hand on her arm and she jumped, barely swallowing a scream. Quick moons swarmed around them, Bolda whistled and the glow globes rose abruptly, brightening as they did. The two of them stood in a circle of light. The sound of bells was louder and with it she could hear hooves striking stone. She couldn't tell how far, sound had a strange way out here of appearing very close and then just as fast, far away again.

Another buzz from the Net, Temple Net, she realized. Even with her night sight destroyed by the glow globes, she could see the curtain of blue flicking where the lights of the city had been moments before.

"Warding?" she asked. She'd seen small areas protected, usually just faint shimmers of light at gates, even more often only concentrated at the locks.

"Why?"

Definitely horses, but Bolda didn't appear worried. "Some trouble in the city. Seems people have heard rumors about the Lady appearing."

Ulanda pulled the blanket closer, wishing she had the dark back again. "That's old news," she said, startled that she hadn't made the connection. "Nobody believes it anymore. And nobody would believe it of me."

Hanging flesh scrunched into a scowl. "The Overpriest of Forms arrived a week ago. He's believable and less inclined to lie about all this than we were." A loud snort. "At least the Priests believe him, the Salins, the Councilors... you name it, just work your way down from there, whoever had the ranking to get the news first off, then more got it second hand, worrying the various Nets for Temple leads like a dog with a marrow bone. Finding them too, the Net's a mess. Nobody around here seems to be able to keep a secret." He scratched his nose. "The San of the Empress's House is here too, came with us."

Almost a month since she had seen him in the market. "Were you waiting for the Overpriest?"

"Waiting for something."

"Is that part of the explanation you haven't gotten to?" Alicia had reached as far as a rather muddled account of the Wu'lim leaving the Holding for Wilni. "I've heard better from bards in the market hoping for a penny or two."

Bolda scratched his head. "You'd hear better from what's being said in the mob outside the Speakerhouse."

The riot. She hadn't made that connection either, she felt as though her mind had shut down. "The Speaker, he was talking about Clan Zimmer."

"Them too. A'Genn."

"You all really believe this."

"You sounded as though you believed it."

"That's just asking questions. Just words." Overpriest? Here? Ri wasn't much more than a story, like the Clan Zimmer, like the Lady Cult. His being here added to the improbability and made her feel better. "You're all crazy."

"Well, you can talk to Rit about it, not me."

She was going to. Except she was leaving. "Is he really the Wu'lim?"

Bolda snorted. "Those must be some of the words that aren't supposed to sound as though you believe a thing we've told you."

"I've heard the stories about him," she said, caught again between anger and wanting to laugh.

"Yeah, well so have I. My favorite I heard at the White Horn. Except it only sounds good when you're stupid drunk - you've got to know it by heart."

About the Wu'lim and the Lady. Lovers, Rit had said and she turned her face away so Bolda wouldn't see the blush. "I keep getting back to it if it's not true, then why all this, why mess with me?"

The blue warding was brighter and extended further. Bolda took her arm as he nodded towards where the sound of bells and horses was growing. "You'll need some introductions."

Would she? "I was going home, remember?"

"Didn't your mother teach you to be polite?"

The lead guards were in Alisim Temple colors but they were followed by others, wearing braiding she didn't recognize. Their faces were expressionless as they split ranks to form a double row and passed on either side. And surrounded them from the back. Ulanda wet her lips nervously, a smile wouldn't get her anywhere with these.

A white horse and the source of the bells. "Lady," the Zimmer said, bowing her head slightly.

"Commander Oimit a'Genn de Zimmer," Bolda said. Adding in a stage whisper that was just as loud: "In the Spann military. Intelligence. Paltin in case you hadn't noticed that she's pregnant."

Ulanda didn't know what to say and so said nothing.

"Her brother is around here somewhere, there he is..." Another Zimmer, his horse being lead by a young woman dressed in Temple robes. He was a Priest but with the same markings on his face that Commander Oimit did. "Lord Priest Tu'pin and his tass'altin Joss ris'Dalti a'Alisim."

Neither of them said anything, just stared at her. Ulanda looked from the Clan woman to the Priest, back and forth, trying to see how they were different from the Zimmer she had known all her life. Looking at the tass'altin to compare, then back to the Clan... the hairs on her arm were standing so far up that her skin hurt. She wet her lips again, she felt as though she should bow or something. Kneel, that was it.

She couldn't, Bolda had her arm again, supporting her as though she'd stumbled. He plowed on with the introductions, apparently not caring if anybody said anything. "Let's see, Mirwin. And that's Awillykh and Litti..." She managed a motion of honor for the old Zimmer, one hand had shaped a question showing the sasi mark more clearly than what he was asking. The child was asleep; his other arm was holding her tightly. On her face were marks similar to those the Clan Zimmer had.

"Kori you met earlier today, but maybe you didn't notice... and the marks on her face were covered with makeup. The Kori. Her husband Silassic, I don't think Alicia had gotten to that part of the story yet. And Peecit, their daughter, ditto for her.

Kori made a sign of some sort to her but didn't seem to care any more than Bolda did if she responded, they all acted as though they knew what they wanted to do.

The warding had grown to be a rippling sheet across the sky. Stretching from the river all the way to Dog Mountain, Ulanda thought, with the ends curving in towards the world-altar. As though following them, each time she turned to look, the blue light had seemed closer. The maze of rough paths finally lead to a tiled road but they went towards the river, not Alisim Temple. Dog Mountain was a dark mass set low in the sky and they turned their backs to it. The world-altar then. And they didn't stay on the road, but cut across rough ground again when the road took the longer way. The night had gone from cool to cold and she kept the blanket around her and concentrated on not falling off, her horse quite happy to follow the one in front. She'd ridden before, but only doubled up and only on level streets.

"Sensors cover the rest of the circle," Bolda had said. It took her a second to realize what he was talking about. He had come up beside her as they followed a narrow path along a crest of high ground, below them and in the distance, she could see segments of the road when the moonlight reflected from the tiles. "Intil is the main danger. If you had access... well, don't worry about it. Anyway, the leads that control the barriers and sensors come from the Overpriest's ship, not Alisim Temple. We're not talking small scout ships either. One ship here..." He gestured towards where Alisim Temple had to be. "... two more ships in orbit. The Jump gates are blocked, nothing coming or going by that way and I've been told that any idiot that tried an independent jump would get a surprise they wouldn't appreciate."

They were traveling without extra lights, trusting to the stars and moonlight. Not seeing should help, she thought, not make it worse. The height made her nervous, the drop off on either side was steep and if her horse didn't appear to care, she did. Bolda was crowding her.

"Do you have to tell me right now?" she asked, the tone harsher than she had meant.

"Just being sociable." Out of the corner of her eye, Ulanda saw him reach back and slap her horse's rump. The mare jerked forward; she almost fell off.

"That's it." She pulled back as hard on the reins as she could without letting go of the saddle for more than a second. The horse stopped.

"Going home?" he asked with a smirk. Those in front kept going; the ones behind didn't have a choice. "You keep saying it but don't do it."

She hadn't been forced to go with them. Some choices had been offered so obviously that even she realized what they were, others, she wasn't sure except that at certain times, events seemed to hang in the air instead of simply happen. As though waiting. Then what happened next would tumble into place and it would be over.

"I could..." she started to say. But she hadn't. The horses had been sorted out, apparently already planned who should have which animal. Alicia had brought over a dapple-line mare, much like Kori's but with black points and mane. And a soft mouth that tried to find a pocket Ulanda didn't have. Bolda offered her a sugar rock from the same pocket the cakes had come out of. What could it possibly mean when time stretched out only to start again with a snap when she took the sugar to give to the horse?

"What did the sugar mean?" she asked.

He looked startled. "What the hell are you talking about?"

His face blurred, she felt as though she'd ridden the mare over the edge and was falling.

Maybe she had been falling; he was holding her arm tight enough to bruise. "I don't know," he whispered. A real whisper, she had the sense enough to realize. There was a buzz that made her clench her teeth together. A Net block. "Sorry about that." The buzz eased until she could breathe again. "Hell, Ulanda, do whatever it is you want to. If you turned around right now, nobody would stop you and that includes at the warding line. Chances are you'd end up getting stoned, the outer gates are down and with us out, they didn't think it worth... wanted to let the mob run out of steam, is what I really think." He squeezed his eyes shut then blinked hard. "But... you want it, you got it. Hell, I know Cassa and she could probably even use that kind of mess to get the same result. She doesn't so much screw up as reinvent ways to..."

Stoned? Mob? Fear tracked along her spine like a crackle of lightening. Where was Mother Pasbal?... Lin?

A stone in his hand. She felt the weight of it, the dry feel against the sweat slick palm. As easily as the stone, she felt the core of his mind, detached as though nothing else was quite as real as he was. Somewhat cruel in an idle way, part of the detachment, he picked away at emotions as though all of his were

scabs over boils and she remembered knowing before what he was and not caring. He was excited now without knowing why, and she knew he wouldn't ever look inside himself to see why. And angry in the same way. At her for pretending to be what he knew she wasn't.

Dirt streets led to a cobblestone square, she recognized the bathhouse, the doorposts were carved with dolphins, painted gray against green, the paint flaking off. Blood spotted the steps; a bloody handprint marked the side of one large fish.

She looked past her mind to Bolda, forced herself to stop whatever it was that was happening. Her fingers had torn the heavy felt of the saddle; they only started to hurt as she loosened her grip.

Bolda was still talking. "... arrive where you're already..." He stopped, staring harder at her, but the exaggeration of his expressions had smoothed out. The same moment, a different buzz than earlier started up but just as loud. This time it was welcome.

Was this instant one of those choices, she wondered? But when she kicked her heels to coax the mare forward, nothing happened except that the animal started walking.

The world-altar. Ulanda didn't know what she had expected... from the road, the building was just a wall lit by rows of torches set in the stone. Past the massive gates was a courtyard with a stable to one side and more blank walls. An arched door was around a corner and they were in another courtyard and she had thought that was it, but they took yet another corridor, leaving their horses and most of their guard behind. The corridor broadened out into a series of rooms, nested into each other.

"Lost yet?" Bolda said in his usual loud whisper.

She shrugged. Yes and no.

A glance at Alicia, and he took her by the elbow, leaving the others. Her room opened directly to a terrace but from the bright glare of the inside, all she could see were the flagstones immediately under the cover of the roof overhang.

"Home for now," Bolda said, folding the screen to the terrace back the rest of the way. In the dry air was the scent of water. Wind and drums. They combined to make a sound like river ice cracking in the thaw.

She pushed the screen shut that Bolda had just opened. He didn't appear to notice, busy folding back the covers of the bed. "The bathroom's there..." He gestured off to one side. "... don't worry about... hell, just get some rest." His eyes narrowed as he straightened. "You still hungry?"

She shook her head. She was numb.

"Well, Net access is a bit of a problem, but there'll be someone outside the door. Ask if you need anything."



Please don't leave, was what she wanted to say but only nodded.

The door shut with a ripple of blue around the edges that stayed, sparkling against her fingers like static when she checked. Locked? She tried the latch and it didn't move. A couple more jiggles to be sure and she heard a rustle of movement from outside. She froze. Breathing? Leather rubbing on wood? Either footsteps or her imagination, she decided, but moved away from the door anyway, flattening her back against the wall. Nothing happened and she let herself breath again. Bolta had said someone would be out there, she felt stupid for being afraid but she was.

Home for now, he had also said. A prison with a locked door. It was a square room, tall with a domed ceiling. White walls but with designs cut into the plaster: a large triple spiral design on each, close to where the wall sloped to become ceiling, other, smaller spirals trailed off to form a border that defined the corners. As she walked, she watched the other walls and how the shadows cast by the glow globes changed what was seen as she moved. Going to the center, she turned around again but very slowly. White on white, even the deepest shadows were very pale grays and blues. The floor had the only bright colors in the room. Patterned rugs in blood red and sky-blue, several greens and a clear yellow. The deep pile caught at the calluses on her feet. Besides the bed, there were wardrobe chests with drawers in the sides, a low table close to the screen, an altar opposite but no firebox or joss sticks in the Zimmer fashion. No design on the table but the natural grain of the wood, she expected more spirals to appear somehow, but under her fingers the surface was as smooth as glass.

Warm at first from the bath, she sat on the bed until she was shivering but didn't pull the blankets over her; it was just one more thing that wasn't worth bothering with. Besides being hungry, she was tired and her head ached. I'm dreaming, she thought, starting with this morning. I don't need a body to dream in.

Except she couldn't wake up. Or sleep. Every time she found herself drifting off, the vision of Lin came back to her. Dreams and visions, it was just one more, she should be used to them by now but wasn't. All that was constant was the wrenched-gut feeling and the slow coming back until the things she touched were real again.

Rows of cloth banners moved over her head, suspended from the support beams. Am I dreaming this too, she wondered? She might have fallen asleep, didn't remember leaving her room at any rate. Reaching up, she touched one of the banners. Silk, very dark, black, she guessed. Except for the short fringe, they were probably the same as the ones throughout the city, a larger version along the river, flying from the marker cairns. The triple spiral of Alisim Temple in the

center of each. Opal. The spirals floated free where the light from the few glowglobes reached them.

Past the stone was dirt with a few bushes and clumps of grass, leaving her feeling disappointed. More glowglobes were set into the rocks above the path, just enough to steal her night vision here. They had traveled most of the night; dawn would be in a couple of hours. Were there pin berries here, she wondered? The same birds at least. Sage hoppers. A shrill challenge came from the direction of the rocks, and was answered by another in a bush nearby. The familiar sound was reassuring, some things didn't change.

Screens were open to some of the other rooms, the interiors as brightly lit as her room but she couldn't see anyone. Just voices drifting, difficult even to tell which room they came from. Alicia. Maybe Bolda. They were speaking a language she didn't know. Not Rit or she might have followed the sound back in. When she got the rest of the story, she had decided she wanted it from him, nobody else. One soul, he had said. The words haunted her. She believed him. Lovers but not like in that stupid drinking song. Her hand remembered the feel of his, and she raised her fingers to her nose as though she could find his scent there instead of the bath oil.

I really should try to get some sleep, she thought tiredly. Assuming I'm not already asleep, she added to herself, not sure if she was going as crazy as the rest of them here. Better seeing Lin in a vision or dream than acting stupid like this. I should, she thought, but didn't. Longer banners brushed her face as she walked out, the tassels crawling across her skin like flies. Pushing one aside, her fingers caught in the tassels and she pulled the whole banner free by accident. Very fine silk, the fabric was strangely warm, then hot. She dropped it.

A guard at the foot of the garden turned and she caught the movement where she hadn't seen him before. She thought she'd been more alone than that. Human? Dark lights moved in the face, red and green... or were they colors the glowglobe had picked up with the light coming through the banners and shining on white skin? He... bowed. Not human or Zimmer.

Armed, but he didn't stop her. Not Alisim Temple colors, but braiding to form a girdle much the same as the mounted guards had worn. And the short robe was the same brown as theirs if a different style, but center of the chest was a design in two shades of blue, the darker almost black.

All of the guards she passed wore the same mark and as she climbed the steps, none of the others gave any sign that they knew she existed. They must all be crazy, she thought, finding herself at the top, laughing silently as she twirled around, the world-altar and the waste of star drenched shapes that formed the land all moving with dizzying speed.

If she thought at all, she would have thought he was a rock. The moon had set and none of the lights from below reached up here. And her mind was twirling even though her body had stopped.

"Let your mind relax," he said. "Look at the world-altar, the shape will come to you. More than seeing it, you'll feel it."

She thought that only the strangeness of the night kept her from being frightened. His words were stilted, and then she realized he must be pulling a translation. "I wear your colors," he continued and she saw him better when he moved. A shape against the stars. She missed his words, and then caught them again. "...for honor, I suppose, although I know you don't remember. My name is Ca'mit, if we can leave off with titles, you wouldn't remember those either."

The Overpriest of Forms. Suddenly she was glad she couldn't see him better. "Were you waiting here for me?"

"Yes."

"And if I hadn't come?"

He didn't answer but came closer. He didn't smell human. Nutmeg, she thought and it wasn't just a perfume or incense in his clothes. This came from the man, in the warmth of his body, his breath in the cold air.

"Rit said I didn't have to do anything." And she remembered what she had said. That of course, she would.

"What is it that you have there?"

Her eyes were adjusting to the dark and she saw the braiding but felt it more as his hand touched hers. The banner, she'd forgotten and then remembered that she had dropped it. Against her hand, the banner took a color: red.

"An honor banner." He lifted the free end by running his hand under the silk. "You can tell by the shape, much more narrow and it has a tassel made from half-weight primary cords and not just a fringe. Zimmer - for the Priest Tu'pin. Likely the first ever made for a Clan Zimmer. The two lines over the sasi flower mark are the teeth of the First Mother, for their world-altar."

She couldn't see anything.

"Use your fingers, you'll have to feel the shapes. Even in a better light, the colors aren't something you can see. Here..." As though he guided her hand, she felt a difference in the weave, but only a small part, not enough to make a complete shape. "Or I should say that you can see them. Ritsiniti could, you've merely forgotten how." He laughed but the sound didn't frighten her. "Forgotten how to see, but... Ulanda, there's a forest of Office of Forms signature banners, and Poultat banners as well, at the main Temple and here. It's someone's job - perhaps their only job - to hang these." He laughed again but in a slower chuckle that made her feel like crying. "One from a forest."

"I didn't mean to pull it down."

The silk didn't hold against the braiding that covered his hands. Catching the wind, the cloth billowed out, brushing her. A sail, like on a ship. "I dropped it in the garden," she added. One of those times when things changed - not when she had grabbed the tasseled end, or had let the silk fall, or when she must have picked it back up, but now. The banner was flying; all she had to do was let go.

Cold, not hot. The silk cracked in her hand as though it was covered with a skin of ice. Ice crystals as fine as sugar dust blew against her face, she almost sneezed. Sweet. How could it be like sugar?

"Is this all I'm here for?" she said as she bunched the fabric into a ball, keeping her mind set on noticing it in her hands.

The Overpriest didn't answer.

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The tea that arrived with Alicia was helping, Rit thought. And that Bolda was grumpier than he was, or at least more vocal about only getting three or four hours sleep. Except for a couple of yawns, Alicia looked rested, although he knew she had been up later than either of them.

"If you're tired, try sitting," she said, following his aimless wandering. "Or go back to bed, you didn't have to get up."

From the terrace, Bolda snorted loudly through a mouthful of toast. "If I did, he did."

"Well, you didn't have to either."

"Frumph."

Rit thought she might at least smile at Bolda's antics but she didn't. The weaver didn't look any happier, perhaps he hadn't been joking. Alicia was as wary as she was irritable, conflicting emotions ran very close under the surface. Rit checked the Net for at least the tenth time in half an hour. Everybody else in their party was sleeping including Ulanda. Mirwin was with Cici. That was new, he thought but didn't ask, not wanting to have it pointed out to him again that he didn't normally notice things beyond his own nose. The placement on Ulanda had stalled, with a slight pause before opening. Bolda snorted again, he had been following.

"And the Zimmer?" With the snort, the question had come from Bolda but through the Net link. "Might work for you. I guess they're outside my 'loop.'" Rit tried, but that thread went nowhere, and when he pushed harder, the locks on Net placement outside their suite came into view.

"So why don't you ask?" Alicia said, stopping. "Either of you."

The sun was rising over top of the rocks that crowned the spring. He walked in the waving shadow that a enitree bush cast. Rit stopped as well. "Or you could."

Alicia flushed. "Am I the Wu'lim?"

"I have no intention of provoking either Alisim Temple or the Overpriest."

"So you let him just take over?"

"What's there to take?" Bolda asked without his usual theatrics. "Or did you have something in mind?"

Did she? How couldn't she, was the better question. He looked harder, much as he had to get the placement of Ulanda. She didn't wait very well, but was it just a difference in temperament or something more? He ran a finger along the side of her face, and her jaw clenched. Angry. "Is my touch so hard to endure?"

She turned her face away, her cheeks darker red. He dropped his hand, if he touched her again, she'd strike him. Rage crowned the small cold beast in her mind. Rage like thorns and the white flowers that smelled of rot.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The moment passed and she sighed. "Maybe we all need more sleep. I'm sorry too."

"And you don't wait very well."

She accepted his excuse for her. "And you wait all too well." A smile tried to make it a joke.

He felt as though he was using his reputation as armor for them both. "Not so well at all. I feel like I never left here. Intil didn't feel like this." Summer in the waste and along with the familiar sense of waiting, his body had reverted to an edgy watchfulness. Almost as though the Opening and all the rest of it hadn't happened. A glance, a chance sight of a shape or color, and suddenly, for an instant, he was back. The waste, the Mound and waiting for death in the form of a Xintan bullet or knife.

"We've been here over a month," Alicia reminded him. "You should be used to it by now."

Well, it was only hitting him now. Or it was worse, growing from what he had consciously known and finally reaching gut level. "All this time and nothing has changed."

"Of course it has."

"Not substantially. Not the people or the languages, the land." Or how the air smelled. What had Bolda said: that the world-altar wouldn't change, ever. He hadn't mentioned the people. "From Empire a few words and rituals have been added, but... what our world was at the Opening has been frozen." That Empire itself didn't change, Rit had known but it was alien to him anyway. But this... his skin crawled.

"You talk as though that's a bad thing," she said.

"I don't know if it is or it isn't." He started pacing again. Dust followed him, the air quickly changing from cool to a choking heat. His eyes burned already from wind driven dust, his throat caked with dust. Or anticipation of heat and dust, his mind was wandering as much or more than his body was.

She brought him a bowl of tea. "Rit, slow down, you'll make yourself sick. Here, drink this or better still, come sit and drink it."

She had refused the Audience robe offered and wore instead a cool white and blue that matched the pearls. What he had on felt like sacking against his skin, itching even through an underrobe. The aide who brought it had handled the formal garment with a respectful care. "I said these pearls had memories of your family in them. I don't feel anything now."

"You don't want to."

Her words tasted of the iron he used to wear: buckles, rivets, belts. The weapons. "No

Alicia put her hand on his arm. "What are you running from?"

The night. Or this worse day. Or it was this place that brought him out from the haze he had been living in. "I thought I was strolling."

"I thought you might be running away from me."

"No, of course not."

Taking the tea bowl, she put it on a nearby stone, and then wrapped her hand around his. "I'm sorry again. Maybe if I just said it, get it over with... Rit, I'm going to stay here. If there's someplace else, or you and Ulanda... create something, you can leave me behind. I wanted to tell you before, but I was afraid." Her voice died out and she looked up at him.

The feeling of irritation from her had died. A step taken, he thought. There was no fear in her expression either. And nothing much of love. "You've already told me," he said, wishing for love even though he knew he didn't deserve it. He noticed again that the long night had left her looking beautiful. A woman, not a child and each time he looked at her, it was a discovery. He found himself drawn to her beauty quite for its own sake. Pale smooth skin, a little freckled, her eyes a clear hazel framed by darker lashes. There was nothing shy in her look, and her courage wasn't arrogance but something much deeper and which was the greatest part of her beauty. He smiled for her sake then thought it was for his. "It was a very pleasant way to say good-bye," he added to mask his thoughts. When had she started to remind him of Viy'lana?

"It's not really good-bye."

"Well, we don't know yet, do we?" He looked away.

She sighed and took a step, pulling on his hand. "You haven't been up to the world altar."

"Curiosity isn't one of my faults."

The evasion earned him a chuckle but she didn't let go of his hand, backing up as though pulling the lead on a stubborn horse. The ti'Linn guards ignored them as they had Ulanda during the night. Had they even seen her? The first obviously had, from the bow, but the others, had their awareness of her been as faulty as the Placement Net's was proving? The record died half way up these stairs, resuming when she returned as though walking out of a bank of fog. Despite the allowances given them, he had thought it a block set by the Overpriest's people, but the analysis said no.

Did placement see him and Alicia here, he wondered as he looked, or were they in a fog as well. A reach for the Net brought him nothing useful.

"Fontil's grave would be up there somewhere," Alicia said, pointing into the arm of the spiral. If she noticed his failure with the Net she gave no sign of it. "Do you know where?"

Dirt, lots of rocks, ladyflowers in bloom, yellow sweet swordflower, thistle, enitree bushes, sage. It was hard to see the spiral shape. The wind was from the distant ocean, the moving clouds told him that, but it circled here, drawing inwards along the start of the spiral where they stood. Alicia had her eyes narrowed to the sun; the blown grit was at her back.

"Do you feel anything at all?" she asked when he hadn't answered her last question.

Raw power, it danced on his skin. His tiredness was forgotten. Altasimic, changed again, but a change that he fit even better than he had before. From the Alisim after the Opening, to Vivan's changes, to Gennady's reality, to this.

With a hand to shade her eyes, Alicia was watching him. He shook his head, thinking she must mean something specific to do with Fontil. Even she had to feel at least something of the pattern rising around them.

"Maybe closer," she said with a determined note, already walking inwards, the wind pushing her. She didn't stop where the grave had been on another Alisim.

The mound at the center was bare soil, looking freshly scoured. "Did the wind do that?" she asked.

"It must have." If so, it would have been a whirlwind, the sculpted pattern was repeated. It wasn't forming now, the force of the wind had died, they were in a circle of calm. Above, the clouds had followed more of the spiral shape, the eye forming above them.

"Do you feel anything now?" she repeated after a glance to follow his upward look.

He didn't have to watch her; his restlessness had died like the wind, or had spread as thin as his mind appeared to have. She didn't repeat her question and it became just one of many. In the stillness this close to the center, what he had felt as raw power divided and divided again until he could sense the delicate

states of chance that always came to the same end. World-pattern. A static Empire. Change barely existed here and his body had known before his mind did.

He couldn't hold at that level, he felt himself starting to disappear. When he blinked, he was sunblind, the image turning to blood behind his lids. Except the sun was behind one of the bands of clouds. It was Empire he held in his hand, a crystal. Would the crystal become glass? White flowers and twisted straw?

He rubbed at his eyes with both hands. "I ask myself if I should just let you do it."

Her face hardened. "Am I that obvious?"

"To the Wu'lim?"

She didn't laugh. "If you don't know what's going to happen, what's to say that this isn't it?" The warding bead from her pocket was in her hand now, her fingers rubbing the surface. Checking the setting or was it nervousness? Or was she waiting for his permission?

"You didn't include this part in the analysis."

"Should I have to have? For the Wu'lim?"

Would it have changed their course to this point? He didn't think so, and just perhaps, she was correct in that she shouldn't have had to add anything. "Then why tell me now?"

She shrugged.

He took the bead from her, a little surprised when she let it go easily. "I can't read these kind. Is it similar to what Kori used on me at the Station Center?"

"She used most of the same settings but refined them to fit into a bead instead of a crystal. We don't know exactly what worked, just that something did." She looked back the way they had come but there was nobody there. "A preemptive move, we thought, except they almost beat us to it last night." She shook her head and put her hand out. "Rit, please..."

The bead was sweat marked, as though the surface had absorbed the moisture. A green bead, narrowed in the center instead of with a hole. He'd seen similar ones braided into her hair. The cracked red bead he wore in his own long braid was the only original left them after the fight at the Station Center.

"Rit?"

From impatient to worried but the tone of her voice was edging into anger at his stubbornness. "And what does Kori want?" he said, still looking at the bead.

"I trust her."

She was lying; he didn't have to try very hard to hear that much in her voice. "What almost happened last night?"

"The straight Clan version of Zimmer. What do you think, that we're alone in this? That these others don't have a bond with Cassa? The question, Rit. The Wa'tic question."

"Can't be answered with a yes or no. Our interests aren't mutually exclusive."



"That's an opinion that might not be shared by the others. And exclusive or not, to affect the outcome, we have to be actively involved, something you appear to find difficult to comprehend." One hand was on her belly in a protective motion that was quite unnecessary. "Don't you have any interest in the outcome?"

He tied the bead into his hair. "No. Not an interest." He grabbed her arms when she would have reached to pull it off. "Alicia..." He held her as she struggled against him. Pure temper and not lethal, she was almost sobbing with frustration but hadn't reached for the knife hidden by the long skirts of her robe.

"Damn you," she spat when he let her go.

She had wanted his permission, or at least his compliance. "You said you were staying here. Is this part of it? Was I supposed to rescue you? Turn this into a shaping that would protect you and our child?"

"I thought you would die for us. Everybody thinks you would."

As he had promised Cassa. The person who had done that seemed as distant to how he felt right now as the stories about the Wu'lim. "What you're trying to force here might have a different outcome than you expect."

"You don't know what would happen."

Behind her, visible shapes were taking form on the mound, blending with what was already there. Zimmer? Sand and dirt, small stones, rising air and clouds. But the shape of the pattern was more in the energy fields, what was formed by the other things was a chimera, a heat phantom. Was there a blending of the small chances as well? He couldn't sense them anymore, having stepped out of that awareness like he had stepped out of a pool of water. He had never reached that far before and would prefer not to again.

Regardless, she was right, he didn't know what would happen, not even what he would do. He was drifting. Had they made a change even without the bead, simply by talking about it? His hand on the knobby bead for reassurance that it hadn't disappeared, he followed what he could feel of the paths here. What he reached were possibilities outside of the world-pattern. Like fingers tightening around the crystal, he thought and smiled at the image. Last night, or early this morning rather. Ulanda and the Overpriest.

Looking away, he searched for a horizon, as though he could escape that easily. What he should ask is when had he changed so much.

"You knew that Kori would key the bead differently. It wouldn't be neutral like it was before. How couldn't she change it? All those prayers to her by the freeborn and a chance to balance the effect of Oimit and Tu'pin. If there was a shaping at all coming through to here, she would have to be affected."

"It's keyed to what pushed you into overpattern last time. Then Zimmer. Then Alisim. Both, damn it."

"Kori's ideal of Zimmer obviously. Whose Alisim?"

Alicia crossed her arms. "Whose were you thinking of? What do I have to do to matter?"

He lowered his eyes. There was no child yet but possibilities swarmed much as the larger patterns in the mound did. "I've given you what I have." What had his father said – or had he? Careful pleasures. "Forcing this... Alicia, you're right, I don't know what I would do. I thought I did a moment ago when I said I didn't have an interest, but any understanding comes and is gone as fast. Could I deliberately form a reality to protect you and our child?"

"This is what you asked for, maybe Eunni as well. This is our world, our people, and whatever happens, wherever you end up, this one will still include both me and our son."

Son? He shook his head. "I don't remember what I said to Cassa this last time, and the time before... I told you what happened. Alicia, each time there is less distance between us. She said that I didn't know how to ask the question about knowing her, her knowing me. I think I'm learning."

Her anger was quickly buried under a careful watchfulness.

"I think that the reason I don't remember is that there wasn't enough of me there to bring back something as human as a memory. I'm afraid that..."

"Afraid?"

Would she use scorn where anger had failed? "Would 'terrified' do better?" He was afraid that he wouldn't remember who she was and a vague interest might be worse than no interest at all. "I think that during the next change, all the realities will collapse into one, that there won't be anything else. Empire will be tied off as though it was a glass ball."

"Rit, you're babbling. You don't know any such thing."

"Do you remember what Garm said while we were in the bathhouse garden on Ji'jin Station? That there wasn't any difference between Ulanda and me except skin. I think that when this change happens, there won't even be that much difference, and none between us and Cassa."

The reason you don't remember asking Cassa is because you were more than half dead at the time."

Was she going to ignore what he had said? "Well, being half dead seems to be a habit with me." And his being dead wouldn't have mattered to Cassa and still won't the next time. He didn't let go of the bead as he turned to leave.

The sky was overcast with lowering clouds, the air leaden with heat. "Looks like there'll be a storm soon," Ulanda said as she looked back after closing the screen. Mirwin smiled thinly and continued setting up for breakfast. Had she said something wrong? Other than for the black oath band, she wouldn't have realized he was with the others. The introductions yesterday had gone in one ear and out the other, her attention mostly on the Clan Zimmer, and then on not falling off

her horse. If she thought hard, she could just remember him riding at the back with Cici. Or maybe it had been one of the freeborn. Peecit? Or the medic. Two medics she remembered, but one had a little girl riding with him, it hadn't been that one.

"I'll finish up here," Bolda said. To Ulanda's relief, Mirwin nodded and left quickly. Blue flared as the door shut behind him. Mirwin had refused to talk, wouldn't even look - and she'd tried her best, bored with waiting for something to happen but too scared to leave the room again.

Kneeling at the low table, she put both elbows on the smooth surface and examined her reflection. A mirror and not a flattering one. Her hair needed brushing and she had dark circles under her eyes. "I don't think he likes me."

Bolda set the covered tray at his end of the table. "Probably not." A plate of biscuits was clunked down in front of her nose. He wasn't looking either.

"Did he like me before?"

"Wouldn't think so." Next was a pitcher of orange juice, ice bobbing on the surface. Using her fingers, she hooked a raft of ice and chewed it. "You might get off your duff and do this," he growled as he put a glass down.

"Too weak with hunger," she said through a mouth full of ice splinters. She liked the crunch. "He isn't in the Lady Cult stories."

"Picked him up at Ji'jinlini Temple."

Slightly warm to the touch, the biscuit felt hot in her mouth after the ice. "What's he do, besides wander around looking glum?" she asked with a full mouth, licking butter from her fingers between words.

"Tass'altin."

Suddenly, the biscuit was dirt dry.

"Try putting one thought next to the other, works wonders." He grunted. "Why do I bother?"

"I wouldn't know." She draped the skirt of the sleeping robe so it covered her legs, leaving buttery smudges on the silk. She could see skin through the translucent fabric. She glanced towards the terrace. From where she sat - if the screen had been pulled back - the first of the steps leading to the world-altar would be visible. Had it been a dream? When she woke up, her feet had been dirty, that's all the proof she had. She didn't even remember being cold, not even what she had been wearing even though she noticed the guards and Ca'mit's clothes. The Zimmer robe she had left in the bathroom was gone when she went in this morning.

She started picking up crumbs from the table, leaving smears. "Should I know why you bother?" she asked without looking up. Tass'altin? She hadn't thought of that. She hadn't thought of a lot of things.

"Well... don't worry about it. You don't have anything he hasn't seen before and there's nothing you can do about the other part. You're alive and he's alive, and there were times when neither thing seemed likely to continue."

"He is kind of cute."

"Well, tell him that, not me." Bolda put a bowl of pin berry jam on the table by the plate, a spoon was next. "Here, those are better with jam."

Cold metal, silver, she thought again. She picked the spoon up by the wings, not the body of the bird. "I left this..." She couldn't remember where she had left it. "Or is it a different one?"

"Nope." Bolda straightened and rubbed his back. "Pasbal had it, you dropped it when you ran off."

The tip of one finger followed the length of the breast. Just solid metal quickly warming in her hand. No heartbeat. "When did you see her?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I took a flitter back. I managed to convince her it would be a good time to take her brood and go visit a niece in Ojin." He scratched his chin and smirked. "Well, the jam's from her. Nice lady, but she talks too much. Got your whole life history, that of your mother, grandmother, grandfather, then..."

A flicker. The spoon caught the light in the shallow bowl and threw it against the wall. Ulanda looked around for the source but couldn't find one that appeared bright enough. The thin cloth of the door screen allowed a textured halo of light at that end, but the size of the room soon swallowed it. "Did she mention that I was supposed to marry Harrison?"

"... son and settle down and have a pack of kids before it was too late..."

She could move the spoon just so and have the light follow the cuts of the wall spiral. The beat of her heart through the spoon made the spot flicker. She held her breath a moment as though that might help, then shrugged, repressing a grin at her own silliness. "Pasbal and my mother had it all planned, except Harrison's an idiot and his feet smell, and he had to marry someone else when..."

"... but she's not surprised, always knew there was something strange about you..."

Blue and gray of the shadowed cuts became silver and the lines still danced to her heartbeat. She decided she liked the effect. Bolda's eyes narrowed as though bothered, but he didn't seem to notice otherwise. Ulanda smiled then chuckled. "Except she doesn't believe a word of it, just Zimmer-craziness, so what else is new?"

"... and that you keep to yourself except when you shouldn't, besides bad-mouthing each and every body who could do you some good..."

The dance was on his face and he brushed at the light as though it were a fly. Ulanda's smile was so wide, it hurt and she could barely make the words form. "But she puts up with me because my mother and her were like sisters."

Bolda stopped with his mouth still open. "Who's telling this anyway?"

He had swallowed the flicker and she started to giggle. Her smile was tearing her face in two. "So, why do you bother?" she managed before the giggles turned to laughter. He wasn't laughing, but she couldn't stop. Her fingers were numb, the spoon clattered to the table, knocking biscuits flying. Ice was against her mouth, her fingers, but she couldn't feel them. Then she could, scalding hot tears were running over them.

A handkerchief was all she got from him - actions or words. She ached with the need to touch someone, to feel their breath against her skin with comforting words. But the person who got up from the table a few minutes later was perfectly calm. Bolda watched as she pulled the screen back to let the light in. A ceiling of hanging banners the width of the terrace, but even the tassels were motionless. Past them, dust, ti'Linn honor guards and stone steps. All motionless.

The only noise was the hiccups that were the remnants of her crying. The sense of being displaced had disappeared with the sudden breakdown, she felt drained of all the dreams that had fogged her mind. What remained was an inner cold, the color of the silver rings she had handled in the market, and with the same bitter scent. Then from it grew a thought that shattered the heated air around her - that she might die before touching anyone ever again.

The yellowed glow of the storm was behind her, she knew the effect, especially as the slightest movement molded the thin silk against her as though in a caress. But he still wasn't looking. Just watching. Her voice broke a little but it was the remnants of the tears, not new ones. "Don't you have something clever to say?"

"Just come back and eat your breakfast." Quickly, he finished emptying the tray and sat at the other end of the table, looking like he planned to stay. A covered plate, teapot in a cozy and two tea bowls. The biscuits he left on the table where they had been knocked and he didn't touch the spoon. After a few minutes, when she hadn't moved, he added, "You got anything better to do right now?"

No. She sat down again. Scrambled eggs under the cover. With white cheese that stringed out when she speared a clump. Salty, the way she liked eggs. "They're ti'Linn," she said. "The Overpriest's guards, I mean."

He poured the tea, passed her a bowl and snagged a biscuit on the way back to his end. "Some of them."

The ones on this side. Where the way out wasn't locked. "Why? The ones coming here last night weren't."

"The horses don't like them."

Would she have to drag this out of him word by word? The questions were coming from the same cold clear center of her mind that the first thought had. Last night, she hadn't known the guards were ti'Linn.

"Am I still a Priest?" Am I still myself, the question riding that question asked. And below that: am I anybody?

From the expression on his face, she thought he wasn't going to answer, but he surprised her. "I've got blisters on my butt from all that riding yesterday which are only marginally smaller than the ones on my feet from all the walking. We could have picked you up by flitter for one. For another, we could have been here in twenty minutes from outside the City Walls if we had wanted to. Or cleared that mess in the High Market before it really got going. Rit, for one, certainly didn't need to be scrambling half the night over rough ground and I wouldn't think that Oimit did either, although..."

Like sundogs to the questions, the answers were there.

"... hell, nobody's complaining.

A rectangle of blue flashed out from the door. Raised voices and she realized she had been hearing people in the corridor for a couple of minutes now.

Alarmed, she started to stand, pulling the sleeping robe closer around her.

Bolda shook his head and motioned her to sit. There was a sharp buzz and the noise was cut off.

"You didn't answer my question," she said, rearranging her clothes again.

"I thought I had." He sighed heavily. "Not in the way Empire usually thinks of one, but yes. If you want to get technical..." He blinked. "I guess that Garm probably said it best, one of the few times he made sense. He said that you're a point of focus for what part of overpattern has interacted with Empire. Bit of a different direction than for an Empire Priest but the effect is the same. What is going on here is beside the point to what you actually are. They can't change that." With a puffing grunt, he made a long reach for another biscuit. She slid the jam closer to him.

They could change how she felt about it though and tried to explain. Bolda listened, nodding occasionally as he scooped jam out with pieces of biscuit. "Hell, that's what I was trying to get across to you. Everybody is waiting around to see what you're going to do." Half the remaining jam was precariously balanced on the last biscuit; he examined it thoughtfully then popped the whole thing into his mouth. "A little pushing here, nudging there. Some of it's obvious, but the rest... well, you'd have to be paranoid to even think of it. Much the same is going on with Rit, at least among those who suspect what he is."

"What does that mean?"

"He told you."

She shook her head, she couldn't make what Rit said hold still although she remembered his touch and when she thought he was going to kiss her.

"The dark one. The Change Phoenix. Hell, you know the Lady Cult stories. Use your brain for a change."

"They're afraid of me, aren't they? And him."

He sighed then nodded.

She crumpled a fragment of biscuit into her bowl of tea. "And you aren't."

"No."

"I think I like having someone around who isn't afraid of me," she said, still looking at the floating crumbs. Or too afraid for her either, she thought, then looked up to confirm her impression. "Of course, why would a loom-master be afraid of one of the threads?"

His face was like a theater mask of disgust. "You get that from the stories?"

"It's the usual pairing. The Zimmer stories pair everything, like the Lady and the Wu'lim. You and the evil Anga, you two weave the white thread and the dark thread on the loom."

"Well, you can put that bit of nonsense out of your mind right now."

"The eye of the ocean. One open, the other closed." She tapped the bowl of the spoon against the side of the tea bowl. "Layers and layers of reality and the big loom keeps clicking away, the shuttle flying back and forth from hand to hand." She repeated much the same thing in Zimmer, the language coming easier as a prayer chant.

"Well, tell him that, I'm not interested."

"Who?"

"Anga." The spoon fell to the table. "Brain. Think."

"Then tell me that I'm wrong."

He moved the tea bowl; she hadn't realized she'd knocked it over. "Are these some more of the words that don't mean you believe anything you've been told? Weren't you the person who just asked me if she was still a Priest?"

Ulanda met his eyes as though she could stare him into telling her. "You were there at the beginning and you'll be there at the end."

Sitting against the side of the table, Bolda held her tea bowl in both hands, running his thumbs along the sides. "The beginning for you," he said, all the bluster suddenly gone from his voice. "More or less. Not really the beginning at all. Even Niv probably wasn't the beginning, where he was born that is, not where he wasn't."

She didn't know what he was talking about. "And the end?"

"It won't be that either."

"But the end for me."

He shrugged, still rubbing the side of the tea bowl with his thumbs, his eyes on that, not her.

"You knew her, the dark one. I mean, really."

"When I knew her wouldn't have been the beginning either. It started with the Simic on Lillisim a very long time ago."

"What was she like?"

His eyes narrowed, but at least he was looking at her again. "She didn't listen worth beans either. Maybe it's something that comes from overpattern, she drifted just the same way, couldn't hold one thought long enough...." He ran out then sighed again. "All Priests do that, she was just worse than most. Ulanda, she made the best of a bad deal. And it does work both ways, the human to the... other."

"In the story... the wind..." She was shivering again even though the room was already warm. "Or am I just the snow wrapping around the stone?"

"Don't take it so frigg'in literally."

"I think I almost ended up on Zimmer last night, at least the Overpriest thought so. Is that literal enough? They say that the Lady created Zimmer on Alisim out of the pattern of a Zimmer warding shield. What could I have done with a Clan Zimmer prayer banner in the center of the world-altar? Why Zimmer?"

"It's more the question of 'which' Zimmer. And it's just, well, it's like the snow. It's just what's easy to see but the shape you get depends on the wind which you can't see and what it's being blown against. Empire, or Empire Law actually, same thing. The stone. And the white petal lost in the snow - it's the part of us, well, like an image of the snow, that's the part of overpattern that we can comprehend. Except it's twice removed from the real thing, the wind, but it's the most... If you ended up on Zimmer after this was all over, you'd be able to see how the changes went, the basic flow of things even though the details would be different for each people and their worlds. It's likely that the Zimmer people were created deliberately just for that."

"How?"

"There's a book, get Rit to show you. Then you tell me. A better question would be *why* they were created."

"You just told me."

"I told you diddly-squat."

"You and Anga..."

"Shut. Up." The two words exploded across the table. He gathered his composure slowly in jerky tugs of his clothing. "Just don't," he added hoarsely.

"And me?" she asked, the tone so even that the words had to have come from the cold center of her. "Can I ask that?"

He turned his head a little as though he wanted to see her differently. His eyes narrowed again and were lost in the folds of skin. "I watched you dance the Opening. The wind was there, hell... too much there. Ulanda, take the other for as long as you can. You're a hell of a lot more human than the Lady ever was. The part that could care about people... she wasn't complete. You can't go through what she did growing up and allow yourself to trust or to love. You're more like Cassa. She fought to stay human."



"Was she from Alisim?"

"No. Similar gene line though... things tend to get linked together, genes that is, particularly these kind and the tag-a-longs give them some stability. Not in your looks so much but ways you have of doing things, the way you talk and move. There's a limited amount of material to work with."

"Does it really go both ways?"

"We're living the result. Every Nexus Change affected Empire, and contributed a little to create the Change Phoenix and the Change Phoenix is like the snow, something we can see except on a larger scale."

"I meant will I know who I am?"

He scratched one ear then rolled the long earlobe between his fingers. "I don't know."

Ca'mit knelt in the sunshine on the roof terrace of his suite at Alisim Temple. Dog Mountain was in back of Lanasi, behind the awning. She liked to face the water no matter how distant and didn't care for the sun as he did. Hes'nna fanned her slowly, then more slowly still until she straightened with a start, the girl dozing with the repetitive motion and the heat. The breeze they had enjoyed earlier had died; all the wind was higher now, being taken up over the world-altar to build the column of cloud. Hes'nna was glowing with sweat and in the filtered light, the widely scattered scales on her bare arms winked at him as she moved. She would lose them within the year, leaving her with the clear skin of the mature Poultat.

Dozing but not dead, she noticed him noticing and smiled from behind the fan. Lanasi stirred. Not sleeping, she'd been deep in the Net.

"Tea," she said sharply, dismissing the aide, then turned her disapproval on him. "Have you decided?" Dressed in an undershift, her formal robe was draped over a chest, a selection of girdle ties thrown over top. "Or should I ask Uspani to reschedule everything until tomorrow?"

"I'm being dressed for an Audience. It must be now."

Another flutter passed the warding line, and he had a reprieve as she dipped back, her link directly with Security, not his San at all. He followed but feeling mostly just her, not the information on the threads. Her disapproval was merely a surface show; this was like making love to her. She swam like a fish in the Net, all of it below the surface lines. "A nice surface," he said at last, thinking of the other and Hesan laughed, dropping one of the braid cord bundles. Lanasi scowled at the boy then sighed, shaking her head.

"You didn't answer me."

"Didn't I?"

She brought over one of the tall glasses Hes'nna had brought. Iced tea. "Or would you prefer hot?"

"Neither."

She shrugged as she knelt close by holding the glass in both hands, then wiping it across her forehead. Hes'nna would have brought the fan over, but Lanasi waved her off. "You have your own answer," he said, noticing that the backs of her hands weren't painted yet, nor were her cheeks. "You haven't even started to get ready."

"You haven't said when. And if later, I would only have to do it over again." She sighed. "Did you pick any of that up?"

He had, or some at least. Much of the Temple Net was active, low level was expected to be, what with placement adding people, the orders for refreshments, baths prepared, rooms being assigned for those staying later than the Audience, security... especially security, both his and the Temple's. But Command Level Temple Net was under his staff's control and shouldn't have been humming but was. "Your worrying it doesn't help," he said.

Another flitter and he didn't have to follow Lanasi to feel how Command Level moved over the craft. A Charter House official and his staff from Wilni Capital, none of them with the authority to call up that level of Temple Net. They probably weren't even aware of it. But the right species and the Net persisted longer than it had for any of the Zimmer. It was starting to be selective.

"How many does that make so far?" he asked his tass'alt.

"People or flitters?" She took a sip of cold tea and he shuddered, it was invariably served sweetened. "And do you mean simply here, or already in the Audience Hall... waiting for you to make up your mind?"

She had the answer for each, he thought and would make him ask or check the Net himself. A piece of ice from the tea was in her hand, she was running it along her throat, trails of water marking the front of her undershift. "Is it you think I need a distracter?" he said. She didn't answer, then did, but only with a pointed look at Hes'nna then back to him, one eyebrow raised.

He chuckled then laughed and his tass'alt joined him. They were each being wary of the other, there had been too many disagreements and too often on minor things because in the major she knew he was right. But she was masking her wariness as concern then gilding the concern with consideration and politeness. The laughing ended with a cough and she offered the tea again. "Just a sip," he said and she held her glass for him and when she sat back down, it was closer again and as much in his shade as she could manage.

"You're like a brazier," she said, running a cold hand over his shoulder, then down, tickling him. Moisture from the ice streaked his skin. "Another sip?"

"Just one more." Lemon and honey. He let the ice burn the back of his throat; it masked the taste of the honey she knew he disliked.

"You hold the heat like a rock. I wouldn't be surprised if you're still warm tonight." Leaning against him and drawing her legs up, she closed her eyes as though napping, the half-full glass of tea held between her thighs, wetting the silk gown there to match the runs of ice melt and sweat between her breasts.

"The black cords alone," he whispered to Hesna when he would have added blue cords for the next sequence in his overbraids.

"Both," Lanasi said without opening her eyes. Both it was. Hesna didn't hesitate past using the opportunity for an appeal to his sister. A moment later, Hes'nna brought a second glass of iced tea. His Chief of Staff followed her from the shade, still puffing from climbing the stairs.

"I've increased the precautions," he said, wheezing in the Poultat-native he preferred whenever only members of the Host were present. "Besides extra people, I've had the passive Net baffles reinforced, both for the flutter run and the holding area where they'll stay until the Audience. I don't like this latest change in the Net." Ca'mit waved the flag spins away; he'd reviewed as many as he wished to. "It *is* a change," his Chief insisted.

"And do I need Net spins to know this? Will *she* need Net spins?"

His Chief's orders for more attendants lingered only long enough to get Lanasi's agreement added to the growing sense of finality about the matter from the Host. Her eyes were still closed.

"Am I expected to vanish as well?" Ca'mit asked as he made a motion of displeasure with more movement than necessary. Hesna let the fine silk slide from his fingers rather than risk damaging the cords he was braiding. Lanasi straightened, frowned, then snuggled against him closer but he felt the shiver of her laughter. Ca'mit looked towards the awning. Uspani, his San, was there already, eyes narrowed against the light. The man's attention was drifting and being nibbled on by others placing themselves for a shift within the Host.

Careful not to disturb his tass'alt, he bowed acceptance and using Poultat-pattern *saw* Uspani at the coming meeting. *Saw* him still as San.

Uspani blinked, appearing startled. Lanasi opened her eyes. "You're such a spoilsport."

"I'm not as suggestible."

She pouted then laughed, unable to hold her amusement in. "And will you say when?"

The flitters. The Assembly, the people gathering. Suggestible enough. "Now."

Restricting the Net caused the first flurry of excitement. Ca'mit let that die down to a disappointed muttering, then formed a sign of welcome and waited for the others in the Audience Hall to notice. A spreading buzz of talk ensued but was followed by silence as people turned expectantly, many with mouths open, their last words still on their lips.

"You should have done that earlier," Lanasi said against his shoulder.

"You needn't hide in a whisper, nobody is paying us any mind." Including his personal guard already in attendance. They were reacting to their companions who had just entered as escort to Ulanda and her party. Random sounding tic-tic noises. Lanasi motioned to Bis'ti, a few words and the ti'Linn clacked orders that had the rest instantly quiet.

Ulanda wore an Audience robe that matched the crystal beads in her hair. A bit tidier than when he had seen her at the world-altar, the wispy strands had been tucked in, the braiding on the ends redone. Sleep and food appeared to have restored her, that and the humanity she wore like it was a virtue. He had reviewed the Net records given Poss a'ltic by the Zimmer, and appreciated the differences. Discipline had honed that Ulanda to a sharp knife-edge but this woman... a lack of discipline hadn't kept her from being able to make decisions last night.

He stepped forward away from the table and bowed. "Lady Priest, will you join me?" He spoke in carefully rehearsed Hegemony and let that sink in for those watching them. And then, relying on the translation sphere on his girdle for the variation he needed, added, "And your tass'altin..."

A tug on her sleeve by the weaver and she bowed awkwardly in turn. "Mirwin Kilsal of Ji'jinlini Temple, Ji'jin Station," she murmured, glancing at the boy as though not sure she had the right person. Dressed as formally but not as simply as she was, his choices included makeup in a complex repeating pattern in black against his pale skin. His oath braid was in the same pattern and prominently displayed with the sleeve on that side tied back. And his heart as openly on display, Ca'mit thought. When he moved to arrange the heavy beaded robe as his Lady knelt, she brushed his hand away without thinking, then hesitated, obviously unsure what to do, and then did nothing when Mirwin knelt, his eyes carefully avoiding hers.

Lanasi covered the awkward moment by performing a welcome using the silent version of High formal, adding only the name and that in Hegemony as he had done. "Salin Ritsiniti." The man nodded, his attention regained, he had been watching Mirwin and looked as though he had been about to interfere.

Skittish rather than tired, Ca'mit thought. And different again than he had appeared at their first meeting. A Salin? As much a Salin as the woman was a Priest.

"May I present my wife, the Lady Alicia," Ritsiniti said stiffly. Instead of the Audience robe offered, the young woman had preferred one of her own. A heavy shot-silk, frosted blue and white over a darker blue underrobe, the cool colors matched the pearls around her neck. Spann tops swung from the girdle ties, sounding like ti'Linn tics when they knocked together. The guard that escorted the pair to the table tic'd in response.

Instead of sitting, Ritsiniti motioned to the remainder of his party. "The Lady Kori of our House," he said and without pausing for the whispers to die down, "Asam e'Bolda, Master Weaver of the Imperial House." To those here, they were creatures of legend and myth. And lies - only the demonstration of Ca'mit's own belief made them believable.

"I feel quite overshadowed," he said as he settled back onto the cushion. Instead of kneeling, Lanasi squatted instead, one arm leaning heavily on his shoulder; she was the only one who chuckled at his joke.

"The Camerat?" he whispered to Lanasi in Poultat. He had expected Kalduka d'Nivkh. She didn't answer for a moment, then whispered in the same language, "Shall I open a Net link?"

Ca'mit shook his head and she sent an aide instead. Sitting back on his heels, he made a motion to his San to perform the acknowledgments of the others attending here, then succumbing to a whim, added a sign requesting indulgence, forming it as an inferior would to his superior.

Lanasi moved against him. The same blue as on the backs of her hands was around her eyes in a thick band and continued into the frost pattern on each cheek. A talc and butter smell for all it was ground up beetle cases. "If you're going to be difficult, you might reconsider and make this a private Audience."

"He could be reciting recipes and no one would notice."

Lanasi glanced at Ritsiniti - did she think he would notice - but all she said in return was, "I would."

He softened his voice although he wasn't the only one talking, although perhaps the only one being obvious about it. Waving fans and sheltering hands, heads together behind convenient backs, all opportunities were taken advantage of, the size of the Chamber and the large number of people helping. "Am I being a trial?"

"You are, haven't I've always said so?" She had.

Uspani raised his staff as the whispering continued unabated. Small taps on the flagstone floor were lost in the noise. More taps, taken up now by the guard with the sound of hard claws against stone. Knowledge of the action's significance

spread in a wave of concentrated whispering, leaving relative silence in its wake. Clearing his throat, Uspani looked around slowly, the staff poised.

"Lady Priest Finola...", Uspani began in a ringing voice.

The ranking Alisim Priest had half her staff attending her, arranged in rows back of where she sat, only her tass'alt and San kneeling beside her. Uspani worked his way through all of them, full names and ranking, social and Temple. Then started with the others, the few other Priests and their staff, then with the dignitaries, but only those of a rank or interest that they had been invited to attend to the table. Magistrate Esval quis'Grenvil of the Intil Assembly, surprised to find herself so honored... and worried. Of all the non-Temple people here, she had perhaps the clearest idea of what had led up to this. Cayse's main contact, an acquaintance from another visit but one who apparently was increasing having trouble remembering him. At his request, she had authorized the closing of the High Market Gates and the Security spins said Esval worried about that as well.

Councilor Isan of the Hegemony Charter House Council, only surprised at some of the company, not bothered. Not a man who bothered easily, Ca'mit thought. Thin, he knelt awkwardly on bony knees with a cushion tucked between bottom and legs. He looked around for people he knew as though attending the theater instead of a Temple Assembly. Justice Ei quis'Istan of Onetree was beside him, and was one of those the Charter House Brother knew, but the stone-faced Xintan woman didn't inspire any idle chatter on his part.

Despite Uspani's injunction, a subdued whispering continued, meanings conferred as much by motion and pantomime as talk. Ca'mit watched the interactions of the bodies as he listened to the words, dipping into pattern to pull snips of conversation for the translation globe to whisper the meaning, leaving others to drift past him. Time flowed: fast, slow, he didn't notice it now. "A theater," he said to Lanasi as he picked the image out of memory and then wondered where it had come from. Then remembered and chuckled. Councilor Isan was sitting now, attempting to hide his long legs with the same cushion and balancing a tea bowl on the soft surface.

His tass'alt smiled and motioned to Uspani. The man was in his glory, he loved names and titles and it didn't matter what language. He always managed to incorporate several, using the trans-languages as garnishes. Perfect pitch and breath control: he chirped the words after biting them into pieces. The translation sphere he had with him was quiet; the man had learned both Hegemony and Xintan on the journey from Ri and in the few days here had practiced his accent at meals with the Alisim Temple staff. It was as though the fluid sense of rank within the Host itself had left a void in him. He delighted in the hierarchy of other peoples.

As people were acknowledged and sat at the table, those standing shifted, but the talk continued to flow, renewed rather than broken by the disturbances.

Hegemony was the common tongue, prompted by his using it first. In honor of Ulanda although he knew she spoke Xintan as well as enough Zimmer-native to get by in the Markets. The elaborate titles would be another language in any case and one she would understand poorly.

Skin browned by the sun, nose peeling across the narrow bridge, her fingers, as brown, picked at the end of one girdle tie. Priest? He looked to one side and at the edge of his vision she changed. Pattern bubbled in her from an inexhaustible well, flooding the room, the threads sang with her power, she moved her head and a mixture of overpattern and Altasimic pattern sparked from the crystal beads. He looked directly again. Simply a young woman, overdressed for her own comfort and obviously uneasy with where she was.

"... Lord Lintall and Lady Erini Wistasil dis'Cansil of TriHawk..."

At the words, Ulanda looked over as though led to them by a string but he saw that she didn't know why. Ritsiniti did, he had tensed more if that was possible.

Linwistas's father was a heavy florid man, the boy took after his mother in appearance. She was thin without having the strength of her son. Blond hair - tacked down by ribbons - was fine and limp, she played with it constantly, winding a loosened strand around one finger. When he looked for words in the drift of pattern, he saw her as a young girl, the hair brighter... in the sun, she sparkled... and suddenly she was slightly older and it was night. He caught the scent of gardenias, there was music coming from another room. And a question, the small part that finally came as words asking: *would her new husband love her?* Ca'mit leaned forward, the whole of the young woman's question was caught in the twist of hair around a thin finger... chewed to the quick, her nails were bluish under the polish, the spots of paint so carefully applied on them made her look like a child playing at fancy dress. That image was hers, and so was the shame.

Lanasi put more of her weight on his shoulder to whisper in his ear. "Is'lin'si says you'd better pull back."

Had the ti'Linn Warder said anything out loud? A Net link, Ca'mit wondered? The Net restrictions had been both authorized and insisted on by him as a precaution against the loom-master or anybody else's interference, but he decided not to press the issue with her. "His father's son," he said roughly. In place of an answer, he had a woman with no questions left to be wrapped in a coil of faded hair.

"She must not even know his full name."

"No." Lady Erini's eyes brushed his and she flushed as she immediately looked down before turning to her husband. He ignored her.

"Shall I give them special attention then?" Lanasi asked, not bothering this time to hide the tight Net link. With it came placement from the passive nodes that had Lin at the back of the room. Special interest... his hadn't earned him a

place at the table where it had - less deservedly - for his parents. "Lord Lintall is quite intrigued with the possibilities. Have you changed your mind about not forcing this in any one direction?"

His own words were shaped on the back of her hand by his fingers. "No, leave it as we decided, there's no need to throw him in her face." He sighed. "Besides, have some sympathy, don't you see her at all?"

"I'd rather not." Her was breath moist where his fingers had stayed against hers. "I wonder about you, though."

"I think it's simply that I catch the taste of youth from her." He gestured without thinking; his answer was having his moving hand caught in Lanasi's and the braid ends sifted between her fingers. Poultat blue and Altasimic black cords, with small tassels at each end, the white fingers handling the silk were well fleshed and smooth. Would she coil a braid around a finger? Did she have questions that might be answered in such a way?

Apparently not. "If I find it over-easy to catch youth from her, it is because it is so lightly laid over the rest." He turned his eyes to Lanasi's. "Have I changed?" Was he only days old, made new as the Altasimic pattern was?

"Only in that your caring has made you cruel."

Her words were echoed by Is'lin'si, the Salin behind them now. The sphere at his girdle would have attempted a translation but he didn't need words. His caring had indeed made him cruel.

Uspani had worked his way to the last introduction in a song that ended on a questing note. Ca'mit made another sign of allowance and bowed. The Chamber's door opened again.

"Lord Priest Tu'pin a'Genn d'Zimmer, his tass'altin...." The woman's name and then that of the attending Salin and aide were eaten by the upsurge of talk. Only the Temple people had been familiar with the young Clan Zimmer-priest but rumors had been rife throughout Intil. Uspani plowed on, trying to dampen the talk by persistence, increasing the volume when that didn't work. His staff was raised but he was almost finished. The last was shouted into a sudden silence as the second Clan Zimmer entered the room. "... Commander Oimit a'Genn d'Zimmer of the Spann Be'li'kini."

In the silence, Uspani hesitated, looking to him. Ca'mit stood. "Will you both join me?"

Commander Oimit ignored the whispers that were coming back in force, her part of the greeting was performed in High formal in an act of concentration that made it seem as though only the two of them were in the room. Ca'mit bowed, both hands needed to shape an appropriate response, but left the vocal portion to Lanasi. When the exchanges had worked into a polite chit-chat he nodded to Uspani again.



"Lord Cayse, San of the Empress Poss a'l'itc. The loom-master Anga of Rigyant Station."

Despite the baffles, at the San's name, Temple Net surged in wave that crashed the talk to silence again. And retreated, trailing disappointment like a wave does foam on sand. Ca'mit motioned to the space next to him, on the opposite side as the Clan Zimmer and waited until the two were settled, their attendants standing back of them.

"Ulanda," Ca'mit said in a voice that did its own job of crowding the room, "we managed without titles between us last night at the world-altar... if there, would you mind here?"

Tired-eyed, pale under the tan, she had lost much of the restored look with the arrival of the loom-master. There had been explanations then. Legends had come crashing down around her. Biting at her lower lip, Ulanda glanced behind as though seeking for reassurance. Settling on the weaver, Ca'mit noticed, not Ritsiniti at her side. The Piltsimic leaned forward to whisper something in her ear and she nodded.

"This is like the ride here," she said. "The one last night, I mean. Like keeping doors open, keeping things loose so anything could happen if it was supposed to." The weaver whispered again and her eyes fell for a moment then she straightened. "If this is leading anywhere, you might get on with it."

For an answer, Lanasi put a wrapped parcel on the table. White silk crossed with white cords. Slowly, she untied the cords and folded the silk back, each movement as delicate as the cloth. Ulanda's fingers continued to pick at the girdle tie but her eyes didn't leave what Lanasi was doing.

Lanasi lifted the scroll case so that it lay across both palms. "The Overpriest would make this a gift." An aide removed the silk wrapping. "Do you accept?" The silver lines of the sasi rose blazed in the light of the glow globes. A moment of waiting for an answer that wasn't going to come and she put the case on the table and released the scroll inside.

Trailing braid ends, Ca'mit eased the folds apart to reveal the inner story, letting the silk lengths hold them open, his hand on the cool of the table, not the parchment. He had felt Lanasi's distaste at the silver more than from what he sensed himself, and thought it full circle. She'd have gotten it from him, he could feel the echo in the part of his mind that he shared with the Host.

"We've been told that we're living in a story," he said. Speaking to a silent room, he told how the scroll had been found and a little about the stories written in it. "As Overpriest of the Office of Forms, I am Empire Law. I see that what Empire is right now fits these words, the story is half done." He looked around to the faces watching him, feeling again how it all fit. Pattern. They were threads waiting for weaving, a selection, a setting of the warp and the winding of the shuttles. Then to Ulanda, falling into her eyes, only Lanasi's hand on his shoulder

keeping him there. "I have followed you from the emptiness at my side," he whispered as to a lover. Lanasi's hand tightened but they both had known the words would come. "I have watched you dance in the cold night to music I can't hear."

Ulanda had paled more, the tan like dirt over her drawn features. "And would you stand in Temple and watch me die?" His silk cords whispered against the parchment as she pulled the scroll free.

The Hegemony word she had chosen meant only to die. He countered it with another that was derived from Empire plain tongue with the broader meaning that allowed either a dead Initiate or a live Priest. "Either one will ground what you are in blood," Ca'mit said, opening himself to see any response from her other than the obvious. And in Ritsiniti, at the words, the man had looked up, his eyes asking but there was nothing offered in exchange. "Either one will tie the rest of the story - the longer story - into the fabric of Empire. The changes will still happen, but slowly. The Overpriest Mullaki said: 'Another time.' This is that time."

"That you see only that interpretation," Ritsiniti said evenly, "shows how trapped you all are in the shape of Empire."

"Which is of no consequence as we are at the end here." The soft voice didn't mask the force behind the words. Finola stood, her tass'alt beside her. Opal flame ran the lengths of her braids and the Priest weaved with the power she was releasing. "An interesting Audience, Overpriest. I've never before been restricted Net access - outside the spiral that is." Her red-flecked eyes sparkled as brightly as the pattern fall as she glanced at her tass'alt. The challenge on the Net baffles came from him. Two of the guard nearest the Alisim Priest stepped out of formation then hesitated at a motion from Uspani. His San had the room sealed, the Net barriers held easily, but Lanasi's link was gone.

Finola smiled broadly. "Shall you dance now?" The woman's smile widened when the girl didn't move, her attention apparently captured by the scroll. "You needn't, you know. I've flown that night..." She was still weaving, but in time to her words. "... there are other stories..."

"They're all one now," Ritsiniti said as calmly as he had spoken earlier. Then he looked towards the main doors into the Audience Hall as they opened. Command level Net surged into the room. He didn't look surprised, he didn't look as though he was capable of being surprised. Those standing in groups watching the Audience drew back to open a path.

Guileless - Ca'mit thought that Niv had simply asked the Net to let the doors open and they had, baffles and restrictions and all. Uspani gathered himself together enough to acknowledge the Camerat tass'alt's arrival.

The new surge of Command Net had already separated into whispering tendrils. Swarming threads, stretching, coiling, regrouping, always asking where, who - are you the one?

Ca'mit stood, for a moment he could actually see the threads as in a weave of gauze, his eyes were filmed as it passed him, formed, turned... it was quite... crystal eyes were watching him through an unraveling fabric of questions, but it was Commander Oimit, not the Zimmer-Priest. He saw the shape of the motion now: Alicia, Kori... a spinning, then a weaving of questions... then Net moved on. The Alisim Priest sat again, arm in arm with her tass'alt, apparently content with the chance. He wondered what she saw of this. The women first and only those who had a connection with Ulanda - another change in the search. Then Bolda... he batted the Net away and it went. And Linwistas, the Net buffeted the air around the young man, he frowned as he moved forward, only vaguely aware he was being herded. From the action of his hands, wanting to swat something, he thought rather he was being attacked by flies.

Ca'mit laughed and spoke in plain tongue. "You've let them out, Kalduka d'Nivkh. Can you put them back?"

"Out? Back?" High formal in a lisping voice, hands flying to shape words that complemented those spoken. Midnight blue eyes regarded him, steady where the Camerat's body moved with grace as fluid as his fingers. Colored deep blue but with each scale etched along with outer edge with white to match the flaring crest.

Linwistas stopped swatting flies he couldn't see and stood near the end of the table by his parents, looking at Ulanda. The Net persisted but the boy didn't have the ears to hear.

Ca'mit pulled away from Lanasi's restraining touch. "The flies," he said. Niv stopped, his nostrils flaring.

Ritsiniti stood. "Will you join us here, Niv?" The restless, questing threads of Net hadn't paid him any more attention than they had to Ulanda.

Instead, Niv looked around him at all the people. "Are these notes in your song, Overpriest?"

"Yes," Ca'mit said.

The weaver was whispering to Ulanda again, the girl's eyes had turned to Niv and then to him as he had answered the tass'alt's question.

The Strom Priest spoke of dancing and the white paper Ulanda held had broken under her hands. Paper? Or it might not be paper. She should know this, but the knowledge fell back of her awareness even as she reached for it. Only half listening to what was happening around her, she smoothed the scroll out again,

biting her lip over the tear at one edge. Part of one design was ruined. Not paper, she hadn't torn it further from playing with it. She looked over when Bolda started whispering again.

"Try listening," he said. "Door. Niv. Tass'alt. Flies."

Flies? "You told me about him," she said under her breath. Bolda heard her and so did the Zimmer woman across the table. Her narrow fingers made motions that were as frustratingly obscure as the rest of what she didn't know.

"Damn it, Ulanda..."

"Then talk sense," she countered to stop him. His voice was getting louder and out of all this, she thought she still might be embarrassed. "What the hell is 'flies' supposed to mean?"

"Maybe you want to go home then?"

Home? She bent her head over the scroll, her fingers still working at the tear - she must be trying to make it larger, she certainly couldn't make it smaller. How many people were crowded into this Audience? At least fifty without counting servants. Two dozen or so at the table, the rest standing. And the ti'Linn guards, those stuck in her mind. Some weren't ti'Linn, the ones from the ride last night.

Bolda tugged one of the longer hair braids. "Are you a horse?" he growled as though he had read her mind. She had to look. A Camerat - she'd known that already, they were familiar to her from her visions. Lin was close to where the tass'alt was standing. She must have known that as well, there was no shock at seeing him, and her eyes went back to Niv as Bolda whispered a translation.

"Yes," Ca'mit said to Niv in Hegemony and she looked at him.

A song? Choices for her? In trying to hide - or it had been a last attempt at privacy - she hadn't looked at the people other than the few near her. Anga and the Clan Zimmer. Cayse. Those she had noticed. And the woman with the Overpriest, his tass'alt. She had forgotten her name. No, her name was Lanasi. She straightened away from Bolda, looking at the woman. "His song?" she said.

"What?" Bolda said, his voice rising further out of a whisper.

Lanasi moved, her whole body answering with more of the grace that Mirwin had. "As you said, we are holding this open..."

"To the spiral."

She bowed. "There will be no binding there. You'll have the same choices, if not the same chances, as any candidate."

Chances? She wondered where the forcing stopped and the chances began. Had the binding really stopped? "And it's offered freely?" she asked and got the positive answer she expected.

Notes in a song. Turning her head away, Ulanda looked around. One man near the door at the back she recognized. Market day in the plaza just outside the outer gates. She had waited behind him at a farm stall as he bought a small basket of cherries, and on a whim, she'd done the same instead of the cheaper

winter apples. He gathered the stems and pits in the palm of one hand as he ate them and rubbed his sticky palm against his pants when he was finished. Dust stained clothes and boots; he'd had a horse, she remembered. There was a young man waiting for him, holding the reins of two animals. Had she followed him to see that? And did he remember her from then? He had appeared absorbed in eating, his steps hesitant as though not sure where his feet might end up. Did he have the same look now? And what would it mean, if anything?

Niv knelt close to Mirwin; she had to strain her neck around to see him. He bowed deeply to her and murmured something. That close she saw the damage to his scales, the edges had cracks, some were chipped, most were speckled with white. Like the tear in the scroll... had she done that to him? Leaning so that their arms touched, Mirwin began to talk to Niv in a soft voice. A different language again.

"They're all staring at me," she said to Bolda.

"Of course they are."

"Lin?" she said. He raised his head from talking to a heavy man kneeling at the table.

"Linwistas Wistasil dis'Camsil," Bolda said as though announcing him.

"May I present my father and mother...", he said, giving their names. His eyes were knowing; he had his father's eyes. His mother only stared at her son, bloodless fingers pressed over her mouth, motionless as though she hadn't heard the introduction.

Lin had thrown the stone. Blood on the tiles of the bathhouse. The molded clay dolphin with blood on the scales. Ulanda would have stood up but for Bolda holding her down. The room swam around her, suddenly hot and airless.

"Empire's song," she said to Lin's puzzled look.

Ca'mit held his hands in a motion of polite apology. "The song of your people..." He bowed. "... is Empire's song still."

Behind him, the old Speaker was there, blood still dripping from his lip. "Her faith was like a flower," Ulanda said. Except he wasn't there at all, another Zimmer was, returning her gaze with a blue-eyed stare. From the High Market, the day she had met Lin. Would he disappear like the Speaker had? "Would you have thrown it?" she asked him.

"No," he said.

Niv held the word: two fingers over an open palm. "Thrown what?" Bolda echoed.

A red and white ball. The Zimmer crew, one was a Tech Second, the other... Ulanda saw them too. A change purse, the coins rattling inside. Leather... white leather now except originally the purse thrown to the jugglers had been cloth. The purse split against the wood table in a hail of coins. Ulanda picked one up. A

dolphin was stamped on the surface, the head making up most of the animal, the body curved like a comma to fit on the round. On the other side was the same.

"Ulanda?" she heard. A woman's voice, Alicia, she realized, looking over with a start. But it was Mother Pasbal she saw, her broad face darkened with bruises, a cut on her right cheek, her lip was split and her breath whistled as though teeth had been broken. A stone was in her hand. "And you?" Ulanda whispered. Except it wasn't a stone, but a bun.

"An ordinary life," Pasbal said through her ruined mouth.

She did stand, despite Bolda's tugging. "Is that what you really want?" Her heart skipped wildly.

"You would too if you had the sense of a goose," the Speaker said, back again, his eyes... they were speckled with red, same as Be'ell's had been.

She felt arms around her. Rit's - she knew his breathing, his scent. Her hands touched his face, she couldn't see him. "For those who need words, would you give them?" he whispered.

*What would you do if you were me?* she heard in a voice that spoke of a loss and a hunger that had nothing to do with the words.

"It was a favor for a young girl," she said, her lips pressed against Rit's neck, tasting her own bitter fear with the salt. "It's not your fault." Camerat. Grandfather. From her visions, she had seen huge red sun set so many times, the last of the light winking out as the chant for the Opening of Initiation began. But she was running in the wet streets, in the smell of the rain...

"... the garden in Cam'lt Temple," Rit said as though he could read her mind. "Do you remember it now?"

"Too many times," she tried to say.

"Let your mind go."

"Kill her." The words were all around, not Rit's voice but familiar. "Kill her." She tried to push away as the last of the room dissolved. She knew... "Kill her." The shadow forms that must have been the real people were gone. White. Like a shell, she thought, a gull's egg, but inside and as though someone held it to the light. She had fallen to her knees. "Rit?" Only blinding white, she had no sense of distance, only that of knees and then hands on the cold. Handprints of black, no blood, she recognized the copper scent.

"An ordinary life," she heard with a tic-tic in the sound.

"And you?" she asked, knowing it must mean something.

Cayse. "You are very much your breeding," he said.

"They want what they've always wanted," she whispered to the sound of a reed flute. To the sound of laughter all around her. A woman...

She heard the words take flight from her lips: "Wings, wings, wings..."

The sound of waves hitting shore and she found herself being held again, but the arms were both strange and familiar, the voice the same. Breath that was bitter and sour, an old man's breath. "I'll always be here."

"Always..." She fit in his arms, she knew where she was when being held by him.

"I would have liked to see this dance."

"... always a dance." The white all around her had a shape after all. In his eyes, silver against the emerald, was a tiny diamond. "Will you come..." she started but his hands had already released her and suddenly, it was sunrise again but on Alisim. The sound and scents of morning, an offering fire, the coil of smoke seen through the window, an altar with the black sticks from Ce'tha burning lavender somewhere nearby. The small brown birds.

"What have I left unsaid?" she heard against the beat of wings. "What have I lost if you were only my god?"

She felt Rit's hands still on her, his breath in her mouth. "Wings," she laughed, her breath against his skin. "Is that enough of an answer?"

She felt his laughter through her lips. "Oh, yes."

As a discipline, Ca'mit looked for appropriate words from as many languages as he knew any words at all from. Hio'kasiti: meaning those remembered. A s'Minik word. Or tt^spk: the dwellers in the mind, an older version of devotional Wisti, the word from a prayer that had survived the changes in the common tongue.

Remembered or dwelling, those missing from here had left a hollow in his chest. With a moaning sound his breath moved around where all the people should be. More words, he was losing his concentration again. From his own language, the only one he knew well enough to dream in: bis-ka\*t inlat or the notes that are left when the sound dies. Meant to describe the instant of transition, literally, how the ear searches to hear the end it can't distinguish. Used to describe the moment of death, the separation from the Host. His song. Empire's song.

"Words to be used over tea for discussing poetry," he said out loud. "Or better, for writing it." Is'lin'si didn't acknowledge his presence by the door, the ti'Linn's eyes rotated slowly, the lights were mostly red now, and from it's mouth came a noise like teeth grinding together. Through the open door, the guards paid no attention to words they wouldn't have heard, or, he thought, seen to be spoken, but in the human ones, he felt a relief at not being on that side of the threshold. The ti'Linn? A relief of sorts: they mourned those of their ti'ticini they thought trapped in this, even those who Ca'mit knew were missing. From the corridor, the air brought the scent of evening cool, already familiar to him after less than a week where the languages spoken around him had persisted in simply being noise

if he didn't have a Net to translate. The scent of a joss stick, lavender he thought... there would be prayers but the sound he heard might have been the wind catchers on the roof of the Temple picking up the storm.

"Don't you wish to hear about those gone?" Ca'mit said to the same reaction from Is'lin'si as before. He tried instead, the names of those here. "Ulanda, Ritsiniti, Alicia, Bolda..." He didn't do as well with the names as Uspani did, but Is'lin'si was polite and didn't mention it. "... Bolda, Anga, Oimit, Tu'pin..." Keep them in groups, Uspani would, he thought. But didn't, he'd look later if there was significance in the order. Too lazy, Lanasi would say. "Am I?" he asked Is'lin'si but the ti'Linn Salin didn't respond.

"... Kori..." He stopped, that was one out of order. "... Peecit..." he continued. She hadn't been in the Assembly but she was here and her name just as out of order but the two of them could perhaps make a separate group. And Hic'lic. The extent of the garden here may very well have included the small courtyard room where Ulanda's people had waited. A selection there as well. Cici was missing, as well as those serving the Clan pair and whatever others had been in the area affected.

He continued with a listing of his people now, he would do those who were neither, last. "Lanasi, you..." A gesture to the Salin. "... D'pin'ka, Qta, cel'Inis..." He forgot the name of the other guard, the color and form of her braid said she was a Security third but the woman was new in her assignment to his personal staff.

"Overpriest?" she asked in plain tongue, noticing him looking at her.

"Op'ki'na," he said firmly and she looked towards Lanasi as his tass'alt walked towards them. "Another out of order." The guard's worried look had become more immediate.

"The ti'Linn is dead," Lanasi said as though he had asked. "This is Kin cel'Pan."

"How couldn't I have known that?"

A gesture to the guard to remain and Lanasi took his arm, fingers wrapped in his braid ends as she led him away. The design was a variant on the Wind in the Branches, only slightly different than what Ulanda had worn for the Opening.

"She's agreed to talk."

"I can feel them," he said.

"I know you can."

"They can't hear me."

She looked behind them to the open door to the corridor. Those remaining there had dwindled to Security, a couple of human Salin from Alisim Temple and four of his. Not familiar to him but they wore his markings and weren't Altasimic human or Zimmer. The last two groups constantly changed, only the security remained constant. Earlier, the sound of a Justice Cruiser landing nearby had



competed with the breaking of the storm. They were fools to bother, he thought and had said so. They hadn't heard him.

"Had you gotten any further?" Lanasi asked.

"The corridor here. I can feel the Host...the Net." But they couldn't feel him.

"The people that were here," Lanasi insisted.

"Those missing."

"Yes," she sighed, leaning into him as she walked.

Splinters of wood crushed under his feet. Pale wood with a lavender fleck, the rings were the same color, but the surface had once been painted with bright red lacquer. Yellow grass and the pine trees nearest the pond were dead, brown with most the needles fallen. A dry scent, like the joss sticks. A musk though, not lavender or the native pine. The Ji'jinlini Temple guard was buried under pine needles. Pine, a musk scent and that of burned chitin.

This was a climax with nothing to do, Ca'mit thought. Above him, the sky boiled with clouds but the light was an even dull yellow that didn't cast shadows.

Ritsiniti joined them as they passed the pond; the black surface was littered with needles and grass and bits of wood. "When she was unconscious after the Blueknife attack, we brought her into the pavilion. We'll meet there for much the same reason."

Although they were spoken in the plain-tongue he understood quite well, Lanasi translated the words. His globe hadn't come through the change along with him. "A house," he nodded. An area had been cleared of debris, the few remaining beams overhead appeared stable. The small space smelled of musk - the same pale wood with lavender flecks and rings as the bridge, and where the beams were split, the scent was as strong. Alicia waited by the steps. From behind a screen came voices but without a translation, he didn't know what was being said, having to settle for who spoke, when and their tone.

"Do you attach any significance to the choice of the people remaining?" Alicia asked as she got up, blocking their way. Ritsiniti waited patiently for either the answer or his wife to move.

"That's a question whose answer we will be exploring with your Lady," Lanasi said politely, or at least her tone was and the form of her words in Poultat as she translated softly to him were polite. The whole time, her eyes were to the Spann top the girl was spinning between two fingers.

"Those missing," Ca'mit ventured. Did she see them in the spinning top?

"Do they matter?" Alicia said. "Can you do anything about them?"

A caustic tone, he thought, not sure with the difference in species, but quickly felt the words bubble and spit acid... then Lanasi pulled on his arm and he followed as Alicia had to move or be stepped on.

As they passed, Ritsiniti whispered to his wife, one hand stilling the movement of the spinning top. Lanasi didn't translate.

A thick splinter of wood was in her hands; Rit could see teeth marks on one end. Sitting, her back against a fallen timber, knees drawn up, elbows in, forearms against her thighs. The wood was being played with but more carefully than she was perhaps aware. Her wrists were swollen, the sleeves had fallen back to show him that.

"I don't give a shit what you think," she said to Lin, then glanced at him, her cheeks red. She looked as though she might cry. Lin had tried a casual remark as a way to approach her, acting more cautious than Rit had thought likely.

Before Lin could answer, the Overpriest turned to the boy, "I looked for her." Lanasi exchanged a look with him as she dutifully translated.

"Lord Priest, I don't understand," Lin said.

Ca'mit sat heavily, the timbered floor creaking under him. "Boy, you are a poor answer to the question, but the answer, none-the-less." The Overpriest fingered an apology over top of Lanasi's translation of his words.

Bolda snorted. "Don't go ruin a good opinion."

Forcing himself to settle, Rit sat on the opposite end of the rug from Ulanda. Past the screen, the side of the pavilion was open to the further garden, the raked surface was scarcely disturbed. On a rock in the center, the Zimmer-priest sat, his sister close by, Kori by the near edge of the waves, between the Clan and Ulanda. Anga was walking down the rising path that only lead to the same place coming or going. He had seen Hic'lic go that way earlier.

He picked up a smaller piece of wood than the one Ulanda was chewing and settled for breaking it into minute segments which he let fall to the rug as he talked. "The consensus is that what has happened here can be taken as a model for what will happen in the new reality. One of those is that Empire as we knew it, won't exist. The framework of the world-patterns won't exist." Bolda's opinion had become the consensus when the rest of them hadn't anything to contribute. "The changes aren't really happening here faster, but... think of this garden as being like a splinter off a log, a much more restricted area. The peak of the change is simply apparent sooner. It's likely those who didn't make it here aren't part of the weave; they may well wake up whenever tomorrow happens to come, and not know anything." He sighed. "Or they'll have dreamed something of it." A look to Bolda but he was intent on rolling a ball out of fibers pulled from the rug fringe. Or they were cat hairs. Tika was off looking for whatever mice might be around.

"He won't come in," Oimit said from the bottom of the shallow steps.

The Zimmer-priest was deep in pattern; Rit didn't think there had been so much a refusal as lack of any response. "He watches the waves in the sand," he said in Zimmer-native, with the twists that made it part prayer.

"An interesting observation," Anga said as he passed Oimit. "May I join you?" He already had, sitting next to the Overpriest in the same relative position as in the Audience. "A considerable amount of effort was extended to reach... to allow this mess to happen."

Literal and figurative mess, Rit thought.

The loom-master wasn't finished. "Where's Cayse?" he said to Ulanda, then repeated it louder when she didn't answer.

"I'm not deaf."

"Then..."

"I don't know!" she spat, dropping the splinter of wood. "I don't even know who you're talking about."

Bolda picked the bit up and threw it at Anga. "Haven't you been paying attention, cousin? I heard he drowned on Ri. Fish bait by now."

"That's enough," Rit said quietly.

Ca'mit stirred, his braid ends sweeping debris. "A small piece here, and as you said, fast. How long on Zimmer after this?" With some effort, the Poultat reached a hand out towards Ulanda. "At the world-altar last night, you wanted words of explanation." Strain showed in the native words that didn't in the translation. Rit brushed the surface of his pain, feeling the power that lay under it, then retreated as the Priest continued. All he needed from the man was being said. "I don't know about those not here dreaming of this. They don't exist... or where I am - or will be going - knows nothing of them. Or the little of me that is here doesn't have the wit to know them. All I know is that you said you wanted choices before making up your mind. I gave them to you; you've had them now, a choice of words. I heard them scream in their choosing and that makes the silence here much deeper. Explanations, our lives are those. Didn't you know? The weave is made of lives, it always is."

Rit felt the shift in Ulanda before she spoke. Her mouth opened even as the confused look in her eyes persisted. "He wanted to be with her so I left him." Confused changed to frightened, changed to sick. "Niv..." Mirwin reached to touch her arm and she drew away, tucking her arms as tightly in as she could. From somewhere came the scent of rain washed streets. "I let them both go."

"And Cici?" Mirwin asked.

Ulanda shook her head.

Bolda grunted, then looked at Anga. "You happy with your answer?"

The loom-master ignored him, his attention on Ca'mit. "Are you happy with the result of your meddling? Do you still see a future for Empire in the scroll?"

"Future?" The Poultat sat back heavily and looked around. "The future is this." He turned back to Ulanda. "Tell us what you saw."

Waiting was rewarded with what had been inevitable. "You should all stop badgering her," Lin said gently as he moved to offer the comfort Ulanda had

refused from Mirwin. Rit stopped Bolda with a shake of his head. If he was surprised, it was that it had taken so long.

At Lin's touch, her face had drained of expression. "I know you," she said, looked at his hand on her arm.

He thought she was crazy, Rit thought. Through him, he saw the madness in her eyes. Priest? Lin didn't think so, only that she was being used. Memories passed like sun shadows, Lin felt like laughing at the chance even as he didn't understand what was happening, only that it involved power, political if nothing else. And how power can be used between a man and a woman. Memories... Rit pulled back, sickened. "Get away from her," he said, already half up, but Mirwin moved first.

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Ulanda nodded her thanks to Peecit for the tea and the girl went back to her drawing. She had been casting enough shy glances her way that Ulanda thought she might be having her portrait done but when she looked, there were only squiggles and circles, boxes and waves. Coloring in now, the Zimmer was using ink sticks rubbed in water for the paint. On one side of a battered leather case, the small ink stick boxes were crossed with their lids like she was preparing to start another fire, more ink sticks were spilled than still in boxes, some sitting in puddles of water. Funny looking shallow bowls balanced precariously, the paler ones showing the colors of the inks mixed inside them.

Mirwin added a few pieces of wood to the fire then stretched out on the grass, lying on his side, head resting in the crook of one arm. "Are you really a tass'altin?" she asked him in the trade-Zimmer that was the only language they had in common, hoping Peecit wasn't paying any attention. Her cheeks were burning but not from the small fire that was keeping the tea warm. Her tass'altin.

Traces of kohl still circled his eyes - especially on the swollen one. Lin had managed one good punch. She wasn't used to men wearing designs drawn on their skin, but it had seemed to suit him. He had a strange appeal, like he could be either male or female. He hadn't answered her question, so she asked it again, a little louder. He looked even more upset and she was sorry. "Yes," he nodded.

"It's just that you..." She was lost for words this time, what she had been going to say sounded stupid even to her ears. Instinctively, she found herself trying to copy his grace, the same way she was gruff with Bolda. And with Rit? She pushed the question away. "Why did you choose that as a job?" If they made love, would she remember him then? She smiled to think she would dare... her

couplings had been without any art at all, and with more enthusiasm than passion, especially at the start of meeting someone, before the quarrels started. If they got that close, friends and lovers, he'd think her clumsy.

One white hand reached towards her but he hesitated and lowered it to cover his tea bowl. She put a hand over his and was surprised by the smoothness of his skin. "My father was a tass'alt to a Priest of our people, he... our family has served Temple for generations. I never thought of doing anything else. Niv arranged for my service with you." His hand turned in hers; his fingers stroked her wrist softly. Eyes still down, he leaned a little closer, resting up on his elbow now. Stroking, then biting with his nails - shivers ran up her arm.

She swallowed hard then needed to take a deep breath. "Do you..." Bolda sat down, already scowling at her. "... want some tea?" Her cheeks burned as she pulled her hand back and busied herself with the teapot instead.

"You know what that is, don't you?" Bolda said.

"What, the pot?" He gestured at the tea bowl by her leg. "Tea?"

"Tea." He shook his head in disgust.

"Expensive tea?" she growled back at him. Besides the fact that his timing was lousy, how the hell should she know what kind of tea it was.

Mirwin put his full tea bowl to one side then got to a kneeling position. "The waters of the Wu'loss cass."

Rit sat on a rock by the pond, looked up at the word, then went back to tossing bits of dried grass to add to the debris floating there. Pond water filtered through a square of cloth had gone into the pot for the tea. Mirwin had washed the black paint off his face with the same water.

And he had asked again about someone called Cici. What she had seen so far was a teapot, tea bowls, a rug, writing case, a little food, clothes and a cat. Except for comments that always sounded like accusations, she hadn't known about the people - who was still with them and who was gone. Except for Cayse and Niv, and the memory of knowing that felt borrowed from someone else.

She shrugged and was the one who looked away first. She thought Bolda's timing had been deliberate and if she wasn't being clumsy right now, she was certainly being stupid.

Bolda snorted. "Don't worry about it."

"About what?" she snapped back.

The white ends of Mirwin's black hair shone fire back as he added another stick of wood to the fire then he stopped with the second piece in his hand. "Seems dry enough, but it's not burning very well."

Ulanda put her hand out and he passed it to her, managing to brush her fingers - she dropped the wood. His turn for the glare from Bolda, but Mirwin only smiled as his hand made a shape that had Bolda snort again.

Mirwin picked the wood back up, passing it without touching her this time. A branch from one of the pines. The smell was almost gone even though it must have been green when it had broken off. Drops of resin on the splintered end but they weren't sticky anymore, feeling as hard as amber. They were the color of the light here.

Bolda took it from her and with his fingernail, flicked the yellow bead off. "Shit."

"What now?" Mirwin said, his voice showing... not just fear, maybe not fear at all, Ulanda thought, but more like a numbness.

Bolda glanced at Mirwin, but tossed the stick to Rit. "It's not cold enough for a fire anyway." He started to kick the border of stones and pebbles over top.

"Lord, please don't..." Peecit said, looking up from her painting.

"Don't start in with that 'Lord' crap..."

"Stop!" The Zimmer girl was on her feet even as she cried out the word.

"Please," she added in a softer voice. Paper crumpled in her hand as she made a sign that had to be an apology. "I'd like to make the proper prayers, it must be evening by now."

"Somewhere, I suppose," Bolda conceded.

Peecit glanced at her, then away as quickly. Ulanda shrugged. Would the paper burn any better she wondered but didn't stay to see. Leaving her bowl of tea untouched, she walked over to Rit, Bolda following behind. Mirwin stayed where he was, but watched her leave. She looked.

"Bolda said you had a book about the Zimmer." She let the anger she felt at her helplessness show. Rit looked past her to Bolda. "Well, do you?" she insisted.

He tossed the stick into the water and then stood. "With the other things we packed." He was still watching the surface of the pond. Rings of disturbed water, bobbing mats of yellowed grass, but the stick didn't float. More eyes than Mirwin's were on their departure, the Overpriest, Lanasi and two guards in the grassy area nearest the corridor. Ca'mit looked as though he were turning to stone much the same as the branch was.

The carry bags were in the ruins of the pavilion with Tika asleep on top of the one Rit chose. The cat purred in Ulanda's ear, at least she was content with her being who she was, or at least content with a ready shoulder. Alicia and Lin were by the moon-gate talking, Rit watched them, not her as she turned the pages, still holding Tika but on her lap now. Bolda leaned on a beam and watched.

"It's just pictures," she said when she reached the last page. Tooled leather, she couldn't see many details with the strange yellow light and not disturbing Tika.

Alicia laughed about something, she hadn't heard the words but suspected Rit had. "In some languages, the words look like what they are supposed to mean," he said after a moment. He sounded as though his attention was across the raked

garden with his wife. "Others don't, or not consistently. A drawing can be the whole meaning, a part, or represent something else."

"Why is this..." She tipped the book to emphasize her question. "...important?"

Rit rubbed his face then knelt. "Not in itself, but because it represents something, what the Zimmer were meant to be. Peecit uses the images here as the basis for her drawings." He smiled gently at her and his golden brown eyes warmed. "Some of her drawings, I think she had a new subject just now."

Ulanda nibbled her bottom lip then shook her head, the beads in her hair clicking together. Tika opened her eyes, the rest of her body suddenly tensed. Stroking started the purr back up and a slow pick-pick of the cat's claws on her robe. "She's burning them as prayers... does that make the prayers represent something else too?"

"Like what?" Bolda asked softly.

"What ever it is that happens next."

"Is happening," Rit said. "Like the branch. Like the changes in the rug."

She didn't know what it looked like before and Rit didn't volunteer more. "What do you think is happening?" she asked.

"Bolda?" Rit said.

When the short man sighed. "Like in Cassa's Suite, only slower. Maybe it seemed slow to them too." He told how the rooms had turned to stone. "Except... well, maybe they weren't all caught inside either. They probably hadn't existed more than she had needed them to for that reality. Never thought of that." He gestured towards where a stream of smoke rose. "Well, what we get out of this will be real enough. There's some prayers to be answered. On Zimmer, I think."

"Are you setting it up for that?" Anga asked. She hadn't heard the loom-master approach.

"We don't have to," Rit said. "It's what's happening. And it's a way out for those who fit into what eventually forms. You'll stay behind, I think, and I don't care if you wake up, dreaming or not."

"Something you'll manage to arrange?"

"I might." The tired sound in his voice was gone, replaced by an intensity she hadn't seen in him before. If Peecit had drawn him as one of those boxes or squiggly lines, Ulanda thought it would have burst into flames just then. "What will happen on Zimmer is what is happening here, but it will be the real thing, not solely symbols or images. Is there a place for you there? You just have to look around to know there isn't."

Threat as well as intensity in his voice, Ulanda could almost follow him to a vision of another world... almost did, then Tika dug her claws in, struggling against being held too tightly. Instead of Zimmer, as the image faded, she saw a piece of cloth, a tapestry. A tree. A black and white striped cat under it.

Rit looked to her before continuing. "Zimmer will be a representation of the changes but one that has a basis in a reality we can live in. Slower than here but faster than the rest of Empire. I think what this is..." He gestured around. "... is probably much like Anga's binding, only instead of tying in with the pattern of Empire, it ties those same patterns off. Including the Empire version of Altasimic, or its symbol, the ni'at tree. Stone... bare branches."

The binding that had made her into who she was instead of the woman he remembered. Should I regret what Anga did, she wanted to ask Rit. From how his face softened as he watched her, he knew her mind. Do I... did I love you, she also wanted to ask. Except Bolda had said that other Ulanda hadn't been capable of loving.

She scratched her wrist where Mirwin had touched her instead of meeting Rit's eyes again. The tingle that had made her drop the wood had changed to a strange ache. He had probably known her last question too. Strom. Do you love me? She smiled at the thought but hid that with the rest, and probably as poorly, by bending over Tika, the cat raising her face until the golden eyes were all of her vision and they touched noses.

She rubbed the cold wet spot on the tip of her nose. "The Overpriest said that what was in the scroll was what they wanted." Tika was back purring and snagging beads and threads on the robe. "He said it offered two possibilities, not just that the woman died in the spiral... or whatever their Temple had instead. Does this here mean he's not getting what he wanted?"

"Ulanda, I don't know. Empire will be tied off, not really destroyed. Perhaps as they see it, time..."

"Or he's getting diddly-squat," Bolda said.

"No, he's here," Ulanda said.

Anga was toeing the rug, working the pile as though there as something to see under the surface. A tree with a mat of long bronze leaves at the base, as though it were late fall even though the rose vine climbing on the bare branches was in full bloom. Birds darted among the roses and tiny black and white lizards peeked out from the shelter of individual petals.

"Yes, I am," he said and looked up.

"Are we all just symbols?" Ulanda asked. Leaning forward, she fanned the tufts of the rug much as the loom-master had with his toe. Details were lost then formed again. Like a picture, she thought, but not just surface, each individual fiber had several colors along their lengths - she'd pulled one earlier that showed shades of red, two greens, a brown and a mustard yellow. "When... just before the Audience Hall vanished," she continued, "people appeared. I didn't know them all, but some of those I do know couldn't have been there. There was a man..." Anga looked up at her, his tiny black eyes glittering like cut glass.



Ulanda stood suddenly, with Tika turning the start of a fall into a jump to the floor. The cat glared at her, ears back, flicking her tail. "I'm sorry," she whispered to the cat, feeling like an idiot then walked to the steps, back the way they had come, crossing her arms into a tuck.

An offering-fire and for a moment, waves crashed against rock far below, bringing the scent of salt on the rising spray. She was on the edge of a cliff. "There was a man," she repeated as though having to convince herself. Then she blinked and smoke still rose in a thin stream, but it was only Peecit's small fire and that was almost out. Ulanda could see the Zimmer girl, somewhere she'd gotten red paper to shred, it was scattered all around her, more fragments in her hand, but those being placed on the embers to flare up then die almost immediately. Mirwin was watching Peecit. The Wa'tic, she'd forgotten its name, was sitting by the water where Rit had been earlier, its back against a stone.

The wood floor creaked behind her, she recognized the footsteps. "There was..." She stopped, feeling helpless against the tidal rush of feelings. A man. I was real to him, she thought. All of me was real to him and I don't even know his name.

"What is it?" Rit said.

She felt the warmth of his body behind her. "I got what I wanted, didn't I? To be an Altasimic Priest... except I changed what that meant as well."

His large dry hand brushed wisps of hair from her neck. "Circumstances changed it... and you."

"And what am I?"

"Whatever you want to be. Your memories - our memories - are a shell over what we are. If it didn't start out that way, it is now. Why, do you feel yourself dissolving?"

"Yes."

His own yes was sighed against the back of her neck. "We've no grounding, nothing for our bodies to grab hold to." He held her to him, his hands over hers. "You could be bound in braids like a Priest, you could..." He sighed. "It wouldn't matter now. The time for limitations is long over. Our minds, memories, future and past, they are as mutable as this garden is."

She turned her head, her cheek against his throat. "We'll be together."

"Anga can't stop this now and there's one end that's certain - that we'll be together."

Moving her in his arms so they were face to face, his lips brushed hers, as dry as his fingers. He needed a shave and somehow, that seemed funny. "What about Alicia? Does she mind?"

"Yes, of course she minds. Ulanda, I can't help that."

A man on a cliff, there was smoke rising to the dawn. He was praying. A mile back on his path along the cliff's edge - out of sight, but she could trace his vision

like a path well traveled - were two cairns. She had seen them before, and others... the people... the taste of silver... she saw Ca'mit, just for a moment, but it was someone else, but what Ca'mit had said to her echoed in her mind: *'I have followed you from the emptiness at my side. I have watched you dance in the cold night to music I can't hear.'*

Alicia was in the garden, talking to Anga and Lin. She felt Rit watching them, felt the other woman through his senses. Felt the distance. And the love fractured like sunlight through a prism, the colors silver and violet. As though from another place, she saw his eyes, a strange black-ringed blue and knew that love was a scent he could taste in his mouth.

A room of molten light, silk sheets against skin. The walls sang of stars and web jumps. A kitchen, the scent of herbs. Caramel sauce and apple. A red haired woman, Rit's hands in hers as she laughed and pulled him to his feet.

Ulanda rested one hand on his shoulder; he covered her hand with his. She laughed, she couldn't help it.

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Tu'pin let his footsteps on the raked sand be loud enough to be heard, and knew they had been, even though Oimit didn't stir. "Elder sister," he said as he sat beside her.

"I thought you might not have come back."

The words showed more concern than the tone and her eyes were as empty. "I didn't have to come back, I think. Zimmer-pattern is becoming as brittle as..." He wasn't sure, retaining an image of wood becoming stone but without knowing from where. He had sat earlier and found himself motionless in the spiral instead of flying as he did in dreams. Zimmer-pattern was all around him as always, but with it, over it, was a shimmer like sasi-spin falling. A net.

"I heard you call me a coward and decided to prove you wrong by coming back," he added, trying to joke and not sure where that had come from either. He had seen that net before, he remembered, but then the thought was lost. Stone dust and roses, the scent of both had been there and as scents did, persisted through the confusion in his mind. What he could feel of Zimmer had been turning to stone; even the sound of the old mother had been brittle as though it was an echo coming back along the deepening spiral, from the darkness in the center. Would the sasi-spin be as lucky for him as for Be'ell? "I was almost stone," he said, puzzled, not knowing anymore what it was that had brought him

back. Dust, acrid and bitter, that's all he smelled both here and where he had been.

Then, from the pavilion, he heard Ulanda laugh and he remembered. A laugh such as a lover makes and the species didn't matter, simply the intent. That was what he had heard earlier, and had taken to wing, fighting the weight of the net, following the call, and found himself sitting on a rock in the center of the sand garden.

Suddenly, he moved so that he faced Oimit, raised his hands to her shoulders and pushed in under the edges of her robe, only to have his hands taken in hers, strong fingers around his wrists. "Will you make love to me?" he said, almost frantic in his desire. She had a scent of roses, sasi-sweet. Her body sang of Zimmer and none of it was dying as the world-pattern was.

Her lips pressed against braiding on one palm. "A small inconvenience," she whispered against his fingers, then moved his hand to feel their child. "Is all of Zimmer becoming brittle or only pattern? Only Zimmer-pattern, I think. We'll invent our future, not be dependent only on what we already are."

Red dripped from his braid ends, spilling over her robe and the swelling under her hearts. "Only Zimmer-pattern? Is that all that's becoming brittle in me?"

"I feel flesh, not stone."

The same fierceness was in her as on the journey here, as strong as his desire had been. "No," he said, moving his hand on his own now, using what strength was left or had grown since the breaking of his wrists. He was weaving with the effort and wondered that his sister couldn't feel the cold in his touch. "Do you feel..." he started again, wanting the reassurance.

"Do you feel?" she interrupted him, insistence as strong as the pressure of her fingers holding his hand.

Don't you feel the net falling around me, his eyes asked hers, but all he could see was a courage that made a mockery of his fears. "Two children," he finally said, forcing himself to feel the heart beats under his hand. "Were there always two?"

"No," she said, then laughed as she released his hand. "Or, it might be that there were always two, except I don't remember it that way." Her eyes searched his, and late, he saw the start of worry. Something in him was alive enough to hope wildly that her laugh would call him back as Ulanda's had.

Laugh again, his eyes pleaded, but thought she would only see the coward that he was.

"Would you have it any other way now?" she said, the worry reaching her voice and almost as quickly, her hands. Strong fingers stroked his face, running into his crest at the back. And stilled. A puzzled look grew on her face, a searching inwards that exploded outwards as suddenly. She never moved, only

he would ever know the struggle she mounted. And too late. He felt her mind slowing as her hands were.

"No other way," he answered as though releasing into what held him and moved into what had started as a caress from her. The binding was meant to strip his will from him. There is none left, he would have whispered, his lips to Oimit's throat. No will and now, no body. Zimmer-pattern burst through the last of his consciousness, following the line of his tongue on her flesh.

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"No!" Ulanda screamed, already running. Just two lovers kissing, her mind gibbered, trying to rationalize what she was seeing. She was the first there, and threw herself full weight against the Zimmer-priest. He didn't resist, but toppled like a statue. Under her hands as she pushed herself up, his flesh hardened, cracks growing as she watched. Brittle stone, gray stained with blood. I did that, she thought. How... can I put him back together? She found herself scooping up fragments that had broken off and mixed with the sand, trying to press them back in place. Vaguely she knew Rit was beside her, doing something to the other Zimmer. Sounds roared, waves of shock in her mind, becoming words that slowly sorted themselves out into Zimmer-common.

"Mirwin, get her away from him," Bolda shouted but didn't wait. He threw her into Mirwin's arms. They both fell, but he landed with his arms tightly around her.

"Let go of me," she spat and he did, but helped her up, the other hand already starting to brush her off. His fingers reached for her wrists, then stopped as though he had just realized there weren't any braid ends to smooth. Rit was still with the Zimmer woman, others crowding where she had been seconds before. Silassic, the Zimmer medic was there, Kori forcing others clear, a white knife in her hand.

Mirwin was still herding her back, never quite touching anything but cloth. The other people might not have existed. Ulanda squeezed her eyes shut a moment. "I'm sorry," she said softly and let him touch more than cloth. His comfort, she only had to be a woman to see his need, not a Priest.

His hands still searched for braid ends. "What?" he asked in a whisper.

About her apology or what had happened? Despair tore at his voice, edging it closer to the hopelessness she had heard at the fire when he had asked the same question. "I don't know," she said.

He looked up first, and one hand reached for his knife instead of her. His eyes were on Rit, no, on the loom-master about twenty feet away, standing by the moon gate, working something between his fingers.

The small man's eyes turned to meet hers. "Stone?" she repeated, feeling the porcelain cracks snaking out against the skin of her palms. "How can a net be ...?" she began, then felt a twist, almost painful. Anga smiled and made a single step towards her, she didn't doubt his approach. Then he stopped, the strange look of pleasure on his face growing into puzzlement around the knife in one eye.

Alicia's knife, Mirwin's was still in his hand.

There was a sound like thunder, then hail. Something fell around them, as quickly and cleanly as ice, and then the air was clear.

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Rit's hands were useless against the power-blade cut. He could have put his hand through, front to back, with the main arteries, wind-pipe, the spinal column, not so much severed as sliced open from just under her chin through what in a human would have been the breast bone but in the Zimmer were cartilage plates. The opening reached past the cartilage to soft tissue, a membrane bulged out of the lowest portion of the slice, a twisting motion under the skin and the shape of a foot wrapped in white caul kicked through and was gone.

"They're alive," he whispered. Eyes that were an impossible color watched him, the only sign of her dying was her teeth drawn back to expose the honor points. That it might have been reflex, he dismissed, he felt her awareness and how it was dimming. There was no sound of air, she wasn't breathing. Time - too slow and too much of it always, when these things happened.

Silassic ran a scan over her, didn't hesitate at the damage and moved lower immediately. Stopping over the swelling, he raised his grayish eyes to Oimit's and Rit felt the woman's focus change. "She agrees," he said to the medic. Silassic used Oimit's own white blade cut through the remaining ties on her robe.

Her body didn't move but Rit felt how much she could still feel. Pulling back, he skimmed the surface of the blue that was her eyes, crystal like the blue sky after a rain, when the clouds break at sunset, but with the yellow and rose already vanished into gray, and between the bands of cloud higher in the dome of the sky, the blue is different than at any other time.

Anga was dead. He felt the effects of the binding dissolve - an echo to what he had already felt in Oimit's flesh - and cursed himself for not feeling more than a

vague unease earlier. "My fault," he whispered, holding Oimit's head in his lap as Silassic worked to free the children.

But her eyes didn't speak of blame and he told her instead of what Tu'pin had done, how he had saved their children from being trapped here. And what the new Zimmer would be like, and of the twins growing up there. The ancient prayer language came easily to his lips and from the long tail of his hair he took two beads, one that Alicia had given him and would have taken back, Kori's Zimmer and Alicia's Alisim. And a bead that Gennady had given him, the one with the hair-line crack, the one the black and white lizards had tried to steal. Her blood was on his hand and on the beads and that would matter too.

A small hand covered his clenched fist. "Rit, come away, there's nothing you can do." The Zimmer rifle was in Alicia's other hand, but loosely, the area was cleared. Other than the Overpriest's guard standing at the steps from the pavilion, only their own people were present. Rit followed her hand to her arm, shoulder, then to her face, as though he needed the path so as not to get lost. Brown, gold, green. Hazel eyes? He had been about to fly, the air was clearing after the storm, night enveloping his wings.

"Rit, please." Her fingers pried at his. "This is already happening, you said it was, the one bead, the green, will only shape the details. Adding the red... would you destroy what we are, what your people are?"

Eyes the color of warm earth. Sand and loam, the scent of the central mound, her words were the drums in his ears. "Are you...?" Stone, he was going to ask, taking the image from the last of the crystal blue sky that still drew him. Her and Anga. He shut his eyes, human again, and almost let his hand open, thinking it might be better to let her have her way then to admit how lost he was to her.

Bolda snorted, closer than he had been.

Rit didn't turn to involve the weaver. "How long have you been working on this?" he asked Alicia instead.

An answer not an apology. "If the Overpriest hadn't come, Anga was our only chance to balance the Clan Zimmer. At the end, all Cayse wanted was Poss a'Itic... was Empire just as it had been, regardless that it didn't exist anymore. Anga was our only hope to get anything out of this that wasn't pure chaos. A place for our children, our kind of world or what it could have been. He thought he could do it and keep Empire or at least the world-patterns intact. I didn't think so, but the form of the end results we agreed on. At least what we already had, Rit, that's all we wanted. You were too sick to be involved, and I don't think you would have understood."

"And your loyalty?"

"To the Clan Zimmer?" She looked around with a roll of her eyes. "I did what I had to. And if you want evidence of my loyalty, it's stuck in bone only a few feet away. Rit, I didn't expect it to be pushed to this extreme."

"And you trusted him?"

"Of course not, but we needed... I needed to be sure of what was actually happening, not just what you thought you were letting happen. I don't have the luxury of the kind of faith you do." Alicia's eyes went to Kori and released his.

"Kori, it was your Zimmer too."

The luxury of faith. Rit blinked away the images. "Was it?" he asked.

Kori licked her narrow lips, her nostrils flaring. Blood scent, his, and he felt how alien it was to her and how, just now, the strangeness didn't matter. Then she shrugged and Rit remembered how Gennady had done the same when he'd first seen him at the Spine of the Serpent, and how alien the very human motion had seemed. "Back... on Alisim, in the Anteroom, it was my Zimmer then, but now... there wouldn't be same question. Alicia is fighting for a difference that scarcely exists."

He nodded, thankful to drop his eyes. "Bolda, please," he said and waited. Alicia had more words, but didn't speak them out loud; she probably knew she didn't have to. He followed her path by the sound of her feet on the sand, then the stone of pathway. Keeping ahead so that Bolda wouldn't touch her, she walked past Ulanda and Mirwin. The tass'altin didn't sheath his knife. Footsteps on wood, then the hollow return that said she was in the pavilion. As if an echo, he heard the tic-tic sound of the Wa'tic coming from the same place.

The babies didn't cry, a part of him expected they would and was worried. Eyes wide open, silver, the both of them, a boy and a girl and he smiled at the memory of how he knew to tell. Silassic cut the robe back from Oimit's arm then sliced deep into the muscle with the tip of the blade. Blood slowly filled the line but didn't flow. "Her blood pressure is too low. Kori?"

Kori knelt beside Silassic and they shared a look first, then baring her arm, she took first the girl from him, letting her bite down. The needle sharp hollow fangs cut the skin easily and at the taste of blood the baby clamped down and began drinking. Then the boy. Peecit had come along beside and was pulling Oimit's robe to cover her, murmuring the death chant in a soft voice.

"And Tu'pin," Rit said.

The girl hesitated, the cloth of the robe in one hand, then gathered sand from where she knelt and scattered it over top, then small pebbles, the sound of the chant in time to the fall of the stone. Once more she hesitated, then selecting two tiny stones, passed them to Silassic. The medic held them in his palm, then closed his long white fingers over them and nodded as he looked to the twins.

The sound of sand and pebbles on heavy silk continued as Rit turned Oimit's head so that she could watch her children feed and waited through the moments left her.

Ragged leaves floated above his head, the long narrow shapes looking like tattered prayer flags against a silver-blue sky. Rit rolled over and got as far as to all fours and waited to see if the world would change again. It stayed amber sand, skeletons of leaves curled like snail shells and broken yellow grass. The air was dry and hot and where he was, very still. Overhead, the leaves shook in the wind, he could hear them. And there had been wind here, the grasses and old leaves formed rolled mats of debris and the single stone in his range of vision trailed a sandy hollow. He looked around. The start of the spiral where he had first met Cassa. Lillisim.

The sun was directly overhead as he followed the spiral inward. He searched the ground, stopped and listened, walked forward a few feet and stopped to listen again. Shrubby growth gave way to grass, yellowed but with a few freshening blades growing from the centers. In the shelter of the larger clumps and once in the relative damp of a thicket of reeds at the waters edge, small animal tracks had been preserved for him to find. Goats, he decided and laughed out loud, then again and again, enjoying the sound.

"Next, you'll start talking to yourself."

He turned. She was standing behind him. The central mound of the world-altar was only feet away, a dome of amber sand. The round of water that separated it from them was clear and impossibly still. For all its apparent depth, it had no surface.

"What shall I call you this time?" he asked.

She squatted near the water, hands hanging loosely between her knees. At the edge, sand broke free from her weight and sank in the water without a ripple. He saw the black shadow grains rise to meet the amber. "As many choices in a name as there is in this," she said.

And looked over to the mound of sand.

He closed his eyes against the layers of images, like disks stacked one on the other.

"Which of them do you want?" she said. The shadow words rose up to meet the ones he heard. Closing his eyes couldn't stop him from seeing what he was creating.

A single Alisim world-altar. "Is it this?" Cassa said, a hand on his arm, he put his over top. He thought he heard sympathy in her voice. Not one Alisim, but as many as in the sum of the all the others. Alicia's was there, somewhere, and he felt his heart go out to it. A memory of the child and the beautiful woman she had become. The courage and the strength and the pride.

"Or this?" Cassa said. Zimmer. The tooth of the First Mother rose above him. A mirsasitin called, answering his call of laughter at the beauty he saw there. Feathers brushed his face and Cassa chuckled deep in her throat.



Then it was blue lace, not a spiral. A network of cracks in a porcelain surface. A glossy white surface but the white was deep in the glaze, he could see the blue lines from different angles, seeing it through the clear layers as well as straight on. Under his hand, the surface was slick. It appeared flat, but he knew it had to be slanted, the blood would run inwards. A shallow bowl, he thought, and the image persisted even though he could see no sides, only an even plain that stretched into the distance without change.

His feet didn't make a sound against the blue lace as he walked inwards. In the center where the mound should be was a single skull. A giant fish. Rit ran his fingers along the white bone. A surprisingly high arch for the dome of the skull. A wide hinged mouth, the sharp teeth as long as his hand. Bits of dried flesh clung to the surface of the skull, he hadn't noticed until a piece crumbled under his touch. Gritty, salt dried, not rotted.

When he looked away, the promenade of the central Temple was there where he had seen only a flat surface earlier. If anything, he would have expected to see Lilliesim, or at least more images.

Blue and white tiles and torchlight, even the flame had a blue cast. Kneeling by the lead pillar were two young Poultat, a game of rings and sticks spread between them. Rit sat with his back against the pillar and watched.

There was a lace pattern on the back of the girl's hand. She picked a ring from those thrown in front of her and held it, a silver round on her smooth palm. "Always, the price is blood," she said and looked at him. In the girdle of her robe was a scroll case, her other hand rested lightly on the leather surface.

Rit reached forward to choose a stick, he was kneeling at the game. Almond oil, the scent was heavy in his mouth. Not a stick. A reed, all the lengths were tiny reeds. The diamond mouth winked blue torch light back at him. He turned his hand over and let the reed fall. On the back of his hand was a matching frost pattern. Skin like parchment, nails like chips of ice. Almond oil and a natural scent he didn't have the words to describe.

"If I cut myself, should I be surprised that I bleed?" he asked, not afraid this time of what he heard. The language was music in his mouth.

A hand as white as his turned, releasing the ring to fall. And they were in the water, the world a hazed blue around them, a net of light above. Silver light... or it was her laugh, then the laugh of many, many others, and the sound rolled across the world in the long ocean swells. He closed his eyes to hear them better and felt the water go from surface warm to cool as he sank.

He landed on grass and opened his eyes. A meadow. He had been here before, he thought. Or Ulanda had. Memories were in pairs, groups, and crowds. They stretched as far as he could see and he wasn't sure he could tell which were his own. He looked around. The ocean - not the one he had just left - was a line of a different green against the sky. Clouds cast shadows, sharp with distance, across

the rising sweep of the land. Fields and stands of trees. The meadow he was in stretched back enough and the slope of the land was sharp enough to let him see the mountain over the trees. Near the top, exposed stone reflected the sunlight. Ri-altar.

"Your turn at the game," the breeze whispered.

In his hand he held a stem, the flowers in a spray like a wand of feathers. His nose tickled as though he had just that moment bent to smell the blooms. His hand still held the sensation of breaking the brittle stem - the pad of his thumb, the side of his index finger - the feel of the snap, a clean, sudden break.

Lemon. He must have bruised the green stem to release that much the scent, but looking closer, the end appeared dry and had the look of having been broken from the plant years before, the outer layer shrunken to expose the harder inner core, like a tooth in a corpse where the gums draw back. The feathers of tiny blooms were dusty, the white flowers dried and yellowed with age. Dust and the memory of pollen, he'd lost the lemon then found it but only on his skin. Thumb and forefinger, where he had bruised the fresh stem.

As easy to kill as to be killed, he thought. Ulanda's fear, and for an instant, he saw her and Poss a'ltic in a garden, a stone building rising before them. A child - she ran like a storm driven wisp of cloud across the grass. This grass was as damp under him as that would have been; he'd sat down quite suddenly. The green sky, the green ocean. They looked strange again. In his borrowed fear, he had taken the only familiar left him, that of being himself.

"Cassa?" he asked. "Was all this just to change her mind?"

The mountain was gone. As far as he could see in any direction was grass. Waves of grass, an ocean of grass and a sky as green. He thought if he looked too closely at the sky, it would be grass as well.

He held the spray of flowers to his nose. His hands, his own skin. "Oimit's dead. I followed her here, as I did Simitta. Tu'pin saved..." What had he saved? In his hand, the stem had become two beads. "I'm the wrong person to be asking or answering questions."

"Questions. Answers."

Was it the wind? He turned his head, heard nothing more and continued. "The questions and answers seem to be half in dreams and I seem to be content to sit and wait in a dream while other people plan and still more die." The beads were flowers again.

Wind stroked the surface of the grass, light moved in a ripple from bright to bright, moved in a wave that crested. He felt the warmth of her body next to his. "There's a story," she said, looking at the meadow as the sun played catch with the wind.

In her hands was the white scroll, the wind unrolled it, he caught one free edge and then the roll bar at the top. Carved fishes on the bar, each with a very

large head, the skull rising to a dome. Would the story be changed as much as the roll bar?

"I've read it," he said. She waited without speaking so he gave what he thought the story had meant, adding the most likely translations of the old-tongue ideographs.

She let him finish. "You make it very complicated." One finger touched the first drawing on the front then moved to second of the pair on the other side. "It's only a love story. They almost all are. This form here..." She touched the first again. "... see how the line changes... no, feel it." She guided his hand. "And this..." The other now. "And the linking symbols... here and here, where they are the same. The modifiers define the time scale... it's not linear, but moves with the other lines."

He could fall into the lines he touched. "How small could I go before reaching the end of these?"

Cassa laughed, leaning against his shoulder. "Wherever you look, there the whole story exists. It's non-localational, the act of your looking brings it into place."

"I'm not sure I want to look."

"Just words to hide behind. You spoke the truth to yourself as the garden grew around you."

While he had held Ulanda. And not remembered it until now. Wings and an ordinary life. Perhaps the difference was that he had brought some of Oimit's spirit here with him... and some of Tu'pin's love. I could say her name for courage and luck, he thought, and for a moment held the scent of fresh bread and sugar in his mouth. "You mentioned a story," he said to hide the agony that threatened to overwhelm him.

Smoothing the parchment against her leg, she brushed her fingers over the first drawings again. "The Simic stole the words from the Hij, words that were lullaby and child both. A tree and a cradle, and the wind... I had grown ears listening to them."

"Just ears?"

"Just that. Ears to catch the quicksilver notes - the Hij flash into life and flame to their deaths, and all the time singing."

Gently, almost afraid of what he would feel, he put his hand over hers. "They live at the level of matter where everything is probability." What he had sensed at the Alisim world-alter.

"Lived, live, will live. That's probability too."

"And the Simic froze their song into a single note." He smiled. "Two notes."

She laughed. "I had ears, how couldn't I hear? Two notes, over and over and over. The Simic recreated themselves and their two notes became old tongue and the shape of the world-patterns and the melody became Empire."

A story rose from the touch - her touch on the page, his fingers on her hand. The man looked like Garm and Rit wondered if what he was seeing was reflection of the Simic he knew or if this man had actually lived. Lillissim, he thought but not as he'd seen it. A city by the ocean, a land that wasn't covered in sand. The images flashed, close then far, most of them distorted as though frozen mid-transformation.

I don't have the reference points I need to understand what I'm seeing, Rit thought. Had the man foreseen what would happen, or did the magnitude and violence of the changes that grew out a single tentative choice take him by surprise?

He turned his head to ask Cassa and found himself looking out of a window. From a tall building but there were more just as tall between him and the shoreline. The window was open, he could smell the salt in the night air, the wind brushed his hair from his face, he leaned forward, hands on the windowsill, there were tracks for the windows set in the surface and they cut his palms. The scent of glass and a familiar metallic smell. Copper in the rain, the air was moist and cool. There had been clouds and rain earlier.

Voices came from behind him, he should know the language and knew he could, all he had to do was slip deeper. Immediately, the shapes of the words started to rise around him, he felt helpless to resist. Individual words sorted themselves out, names and a chant of numbers that felt like rain driven against his skin. He could go deeper, and would have to make sense of this. His skin was numbed, at this level he felt like a shell with sound and sight, even smells barely penetrating."

"What would undo this?" he asked. The words kept him from sinking.

"This?" The word teased, like a butterfly kiss against his skin.

"They've done something to reality. Your two notes, the song is taking shape. The changes, they look like curtains of light rippling across the sky. I should see stars, the storm passed hours ago, but the night is blinded by what I... what he, what they have done. The curtains of light fall against the city, they're tearing against the buildings, the people. Like stone, like ice..." He closed his eyes but knew the other man still watched and he wasn't numb at all. His dream was a nightmare.

He lifted his hand off hers and the world settled. "A love story?"

"He's very beautiful, how couldn't I love him?"

Her eyes laughed, her mouth shaped to a quirky smile. "Just ears?" he asked, tracing the curve of hers with his finger. "Not a mouth?" The smile stayed under his touch. "Or eyes?" He kissed each one. "How could I be surprised that you love him. And now..."

She moved against him. "Their song and children both," she whispered, touching the surface of the scroll again.

He remembered that there had been other books besides this one, then gave up trying to tie what she was saying with them, already having found it impossible even with the one. "Children? Do you mean the twins?"

"Rit, again, you make it more complicated than it needs to be. It's a simple love story."

"Simple?"

She nodded as though to reassure him.

"Children?"

Cassa laughed.

Rit struggled to his feet. Grass. It might as well be water, he felt as though he were drowning. Song and children both, she had said. Her birth, her children. When he looked, she was still there, her face calm as she watched the wind against the fields. Grain. The green had dried to gold in the wind and there was a rustling sound from the seed heads. Tufted seeds and whiskered, bristled, feather sprays and single, stiff spikes and nodding. Gold and amber, yellow, a shot green turning silver then dark, a melody of browns and rust, blood red.

"What of the other stories? Why this one?"

"Watch the dance."

He had been. "Why this one?" he persisted.

"The fruit of the sowing," she whispered, her eyes on the ripening field of grains. "Watch the dance."

He still had been, through it all. Did Ulanda know this dance? "I told her that we were one soul," he whispered over the song of the dried stalks. Reeds and drums in the wind, and shivers of sound like a multitude of rattles.

"A pairing. What do you expect in a love story."

"Except you had to invent me."

"So you said."

So she had. "And the Wa'tic, the ti'Linn and Spann?"

He thought the wind howled. "Isn't this enough for you?"

He thought of Sarkalt and Poss a'ltic and their parts in shaping this. En'talac and Quin'tat and how she had all the courage for the two of them. Garm. Empire, Simic and Altasimic. The Zimmer, Clan and freeborn. Questions asked and answered. Promises. He still held the allipalli stem and blossom in one hand.

He turned his head to look at her. Cloud shadows and sun. He stood in a garden of sand, the golden light above him breaking. He held both beads in one hand. Oimit's body was gone; at his feet was plain sand. No pattern of rings or waves and his were the only footprints. No shattered stones that had been Tu'pin. He looked around. Kori and Silassic, Peecit, the twins... they were all gone.

Alicia stood at the entrance to the ruined pavilion, the light casting shifting runs of dark and gold over her. Bolda was beside her. She took one step down towards him then stopped, her eyes on Mirwin and Ulanda. "Both beads," he said

to Alicia and saw her eyes return to him. "I won't say good-bye. She said it was a love story. I think it's just beginning."

"Yours or hers?"

One small hand crossed her waist; he didn't think she realized it. Twins. A pairing... again. He laughed - thinking of growing ears and eyes and how the pairing of male and female could be a difficult concept for a god to master, but once done, repeated over and over much as a child pats sand into a pail to make the same shape over and over without tiring of it. A simple joy, a simple love story. His laughter died when the golden shadows moving across Alicia's face darkened into a frown. He told her. "The Simic created her - or the awareness that is her - but it was both too static and too small a part of what she was... what she is." What Garm had of her. The words he wanted didn't exist. "What will be created now won't have the same limits. Your choices, the Spann..."

Bolda snorted.

One of the moving shadows behind Bolda had a form. Hic'lic. "Go, stay," it said in plain-tongue. "Petals in snow. Fly."

"She had to invent me, I didn't exist before." He thought Bolda would say something, but the man stood silently, a scowl on his face. He bowed to him and the Wa'tic before turning back to Ulanda. She stood alone, Mirwin was gone.

In her eyes the storm had followed him. A spiral of gray and black, he didn't need to see anything else. A funnel of clouds, a spiral, the center very dark and very far away. There was nothing else, no garden, no people.

"I thought I'd be afraid," she said in Empire plain-tongue. Not afraid, but he saw the pain of awakened memories. Or lives meshing and suspected there were more of them than he had shared, that she had taken Cassa's as well and perhaps the reality where Niv had been born and grew up. And another, where the person she had been had died in the spiral.

Gently, he stroked her hair, the crystal beads singing under his touch. On the longer ends, the hanging beads danced fire, reflecting the lightening that ringed the cloud spiral, all around them now. Bolda, Alicia and Hic'lic had vanished.

He kissed the next words from her lips. She smiled and nodded and the center of the storm in her eyes wasn't far away at all.

Built on stone, the town ran the crest of the ridge and part down the side into the valley in a series of terraces. Bolda walked the interconnecting paths down, passing the odd hiker, none of who looked any happier at the cold than he felt.

The triad of guards at the bottom where the trails met up with the road into the valley, had a slightly glazed look but were enduring boredom more than cold. They were Zimmer and the gene line wasn't so different they'd think this was cold although they wouldn't appreciate the damp.

In the shelter of a grove, Bolda leaned against a pine and watched them. Very glazed looking, they weren't even talking to each other and for Zimmer that was unusual. Trampled snow made a path either way that was perpendicular to the road, eventually curving in, ignoring the vagaries of the terrain. Only tire tracks showed beyond where he was, obviously none of the other hikers had gotten past the Zimmer. He debated going on but had lost his taste for exploring some time ago, his getting this far was simple momentum.

He'd seen the vids even before leaving Zimmer. It took a great deal of effort and tools invented just for the purpose to tell this had ever been anything other than glacial debris. Or rather, the rocks were glacial debris but could almost have been something else.

Breaking off a fresh pine-needle cluster, he absently wove a tiny basket, getting sticky fingers along with his souvenir. Shoving the needle basket into a pocket, he walked to the road, waved just for form in case the Zimmer had seen him earlier, then headed back to his hotel, taking the drier roadway. The snow had a tired look that matched his mood. Things were rotting; the temperature was above freezing, even at ground level.

He canceled his booking for the rest of the week then found he had missed the last bus out by ten minutes. Aircraft weren't allowed through the mountain preserves. Upset the birds.

"Wintertime, there's not much call for public transit out this way," the clerk said, peering at the bus schedule. Evening in, morning out. "You could have a car sent up from Ogsinli..." She looked hopeful for a moment. "Even a driver if you don't have a license." The novelty of his being there had worn off; he supposed leaving in style would restore some luster. When he said to forget it, she wrote the bus times on the back of an envelope, mouthing the hope that his stay had been pleasant, but her heart wasn't in it.

He got a drink and carried it to the window. From the bar in the hotel, probably from most of the buildings in town, the sweep of the narrowing valley below them led to only one view, the mountain and the glacial lake that fed on the summer melt. Part of the valley had the sod and brush stripped; from here it looked as though they'd skinned the earth. A few tents and a stake-line of military trucks provided the color.

He noticed her first by how she lifted her glass of beer. Framed by the window and the bright sky outside, he couldn't make out details, but the movement drew him as being familiar.

As though just wandering to see the view from different vantage points, he circled until he was close enough to be heard without having to shout. "Not much going on here in the winter."

Her back was to the light, still robbing him of getting a really good look at her. Small enough, slight enough. Maybe fuller in the face, a bit more weight on the bones, though it was difficult to see with the heavy cable sweater she was wearing and how she hunched forward, elbows on the table. Three opened books were spread out before her and a pad full of cross hatched marks and columns of numbers, most of them scribbled over. A palm-scriber was under her glass of beer, acting as a coaster. It wasn't turned on. "Hmm?" she said around chewing on a pencil. She didn't look up.

Bolda knocked against an empty chair to get her attention. "Winter. Here. Boring."

The chair knocked against the table and her beer slopped over. The scriber wasn't a very good coaster. She looked at it for at least thirty seconds, her face blank, before she looked up. She didn't have to look up very far.

"You're not human," she said then blushed.

He nodded to the spreading pool of beer threatening one of the books.

She picked the book up then shook it so that everything was speckled with beer. Then tossed it onto her bag on the floor. "Sorry, I mean, you don't have an accent. I was just surprised... I mean you speak Heg really good."

"It's not exactly the most difficult language going."

Her smile was the same. Shy and hesitant, then, quickly, becoming open and trusting. "Are you here for the dig?"

"Just a tourist. What about you?" The books didn't look like archeology texts. More numbers and some other stuff he thought were numbers. The odd line was in Heg, but most of it wasn't and didn't fit any of the few other languages he'd run into in the past six months.

"Yes, but not the digging part." She patted the seat of the chair next to hers.

He'd seen the look entirely too often since coming here. She thought he was cute. He didn't sit, his feet would have dangled. Too cute for words. "If you don't dig, what do you do?"

"I'm a mathematician."

"Maybe you can help me add my bar bill," he said, idly kicking at the leg of the chair.

She was tapping her pencil in time. "Does it involve trans-dimensional shifts?"

"By the time I leave here, it just might."

Her laugh was the same as well. "What do you do when you're not playing tourist?"

"I'm a weaver."

She waited as though he had more to say about the matter.



"That's it. I weave things."

She blushed for the second time in as many minutes. He decided not to be difficult. "My name's Asam e'Bolda. Bolda will do just fine."

"Alicia."

That did it. He was staring and her blush was getting deeper. He turned one of the open books around with a finger. Right side up it didn't look as strange - definitely numbers and various lines and boxes - but he still didn't know what it was supposed to be. Working on all the details was helping. She could have only looked like Alicia.

"What is this stuff? No, let me guess, it's classified."

"Mother no. They're games. Number puzzles." She closed the book, showing the glossy printed cover. Red and yellow printing, bright enough to cause retinal burn. Standard Heg script. He'd seen ones like it in the bus station in Endica along with the porno magazines.

"I use them to get myself going... combine a few to make it more interesting and take it from there. I just let my mind wander. I take today's date, transcribe the digits by multiplying them with the..."

He should have pushed her whole glass over. "Did I ask?"

Her expression tightened. "What are you doing here? Do you have..."

"Authorization?" He picked the pencil up and pulled the pad of paper around. "This is the coast, the Endicastro here, Ojin up there, Endica here. Oh yeah... the Sky Tooth here." He'd used the short form of the Zimmer name for the mountain. Damn if he'd call it Mount Conlin after some local politician who'd died a few hundred years ago. As soon as he started drawing, she leaned forwards on her elbows, intent on watching what he was doing. Humans were worse than a cat after a length of yarn. "The Temple..."

They were head to head. "The Zimmer call it that, but we don't know what it is."

"There's a Temple here... and here, near Intil." He waited for a protest at the second Temple but she didn't say anything and her lower lip was stuck out again. "The Temples don't matter," he added and waited again but she was still staring at the drawing. "It's where they're at that counts. Or rather, why they're where they are." When she still didn't say anything, he shrugged and put an 'x' at the cliffs, the world-altar and the mountain. "There's a pair of graves at each point."

Her face was blank with thought.

"Ah..." He dipped a little see her face better. Did she pull any memories through with her or was he wasting his time? "Are you still with me?"

"Excuse me sir, we'll have to see some identification."

Security. Two men in dark blue uniforms, id picture badges front and prominent on their chests. Hegemony State Guard, Zimmer Empire color bar along the bottom of the id to show who was footing the bill here. A matched pair,

one blond with gray eyes, the other dark, with a blue bristle of stubble on his chin and a major case of razor burn. Both had those abstract eyes, the kind focused about foot behind your head.

The blond glanced at the id-square. "We'll have to keep this for verification. You'll be staying at the hotel?"

"Booked for the week."

"We have you leaving tomorrow. Canceled..."

"Changed my mind. Again."

He turned aside for a short whispered conversation. "Very well, Mr.... ah, e'Bolda, we'll return your papers to you here then." After writing something on it, he passed a small card over in exchange. Then to Alicia, as though it was an after thought, he added, "Is there a problem, Mrs. Calmuit?"

Married? She had one of the puzzle books over the writing pad, hiding the map as she dragged them into her lap then into the bag on the floor. Obviously pregnant. "Not at all," she said. "Thank you. I was just leaving."

Bolda fingered the card. The blonde's picture and ranking along with a written-in incident number and a place to call for more information. Lieutenant Cem Cathlan. Hegemony was a police state. A polite one, but he didn't like it any better for that.

Bolda had the balcony window open to see the colors better. Freezing his butt off, but a few more beer would take care of that. Sunset, only the top bit of the mountain still showed the sunlight. Pink and black. The few runs of snow that high up were pink as well, but different from the stone.

A double weave, he decided, then doubled it again: make the top and bottom layers a non-repeating lace, all four layers joined only at the snow runs. Rilka spider-silk would make it about as heavy as the average cloud, except it wouldn't take the dye he wanted. Ustinillsi fiber, then and make the inner and outer layers from various parts of the stalk and he could take advantage of the natural colors. Pinks and black. Grays, maybe a red fleck. Silver with a hint of blue for the winter sky. Heavier but still scarf weight.

Even knowing he was dreaming - he didn't have a clue where to get Ustinillsi fiber now - he had the weave half planned when Alicia knocked at his door. The knock was the same. Dr. Calmuit, or would be soon thanks to the Zimmer. On the room's vid screen was her doctoral thesis, a footnote saying it had been published first on Terra under the sponsorship of Dr. Manuel Marcos. Who was here. Somewhere.

He'd gotten a bio on her from the Zimmer. It didn't mention a husband. A private school, graduation at fifteen, her first University degree at seventeen. On course for her doctorate a year later. A fairy-tale life except she's been thrown out of the University and her parents had disowned her. Pregnant. No mention of

who the father might be. He suspected a husband could have been arranged; her parents were very wealthy with the kind of power that wealth in a culture like this suggested, but she might have refused.

He'd called the paper up from the local Charter House library, not wanting to go through channels and draw still more attention to her, but thought now he should have. Along with the file - which had come through a link with the Provincial University in Denman Capital - was a popup tag with the logo of Hegemony State Guard and an incidence number in a box, the same number as on the card Lieutenant Cathlan had given him. Small print at the bottom of the tag thanked the viewer for their cooperation and gave the vid number to call if they needed more information.

"It's not locked," he yelled as he slid the window closed, then turned the vid screen off. He could weave a pattern to match those squiggles but he didn't have the slightest idea what they meant.

She had two bottles of beer, the long necks caught in the fingers of one hand. In the other was the carry bag she'd had in the bar. She kicked the door closed behind her and dropped the bag on the floor, frowned at the rug next to the bed, then looked back to him.

"I was told that you're Piltsimic. Not from the Zimmer Empire, but um, 'allowance' made by..." She had the pronunciation of the Zimmer word off by a pitch or two. "... the Commissioner of Imperial Favor in the Bes'tili Sector, wherever that is. Your security allowance..." The Hegemony word this time. "... says you get to go where you want." The beer went on the desk at the foot of the bed. She noticed the pine needle basket and picked it up, turning it over and over in her fingers.

He popped the lid on one bottle with his thumb. "Should you be drinking?"

She shrugged through a blush. "My business."

So it was. He passed the beer to her, then quickly checked the rug and felt like asking her to move one foot so he could see it better.

She followed his search with her eyes but didn't mention it. "Security was impressed but Director a'Vasi says..."

"That it's a Zimmer kind of thing," he offered and she nodded.

"I didn't mean to pry, but, with things so tight at the dig, I wanted to know what..."

He coughed to interrupt her ramble. "So what brings you here?"

She sat on the edge of the bed crossways with one leg up. The tiny basket was still in one hand, being examined by touch alone now. Holding the bottle in front of her face, she stared as the bubbles rose and broke on the surface. "How much mathematics do you know?"

"Diddly squat."

She nodded as though it had only confirmed what she already knew. Or was used to. Reaching into her pack, she took out the writing pad and tossed it on the bed. Where he'd drawn the map, she had added a spiral, starting where the world-altar had been, pulling wide around to the cairns along the cliffs near Endica - houses covered the spot now - and even wider continuing to the Tooth, all in a smooth curve.

She didn't look at it, just her beer. "You know that at any one spot at the dig, there's a reduction in the randomness at the quantum level..."

He nodded.

"Well, it gets fancy from there, if you look at more points, lots more points, but limit the number of dimensions, or rather, pretend that the dimensions you want can be expressed as... well, the shape suggests a spiral and it matches your map. I knew about the spiral part already even if nobody believed me."

He sat on the edge. "You mean Manny?" He'd gotten a bio on him as well. Older by ten years and with ten years more of indecipherable papers to his credit, and not just on Terra, but on Zimmer as well. Visiting professor.

"He's the only one here capable of following the calculations. Really, for anyone else, it comes down to who has the most credibility. I don't have much."

Not in Hegemony certainly, not eighteen years old, unmarried and pregnant. And not to the Zimmer, they were worse, if that was possible. "How'd they get you involved in the dig?"

She shrugged. "They wanted someone local. Local to Alisim, I mean. The government said they had to, but left the choice of whom up to the Zimmer and they left it up to Manny. He had read my undergraduate thesis... he asked for me, he insisted. I said yes, of course. I'd... left the university. I needed the job."

When she moved her foot again, he bent over to check the rug. No changes, he was getting paranoid. Rose vines, just like he'd woven it back in Palace. By the time he'd gone to repack the mess that Rit had left, the last of the ni'at tree in the rug had disappeared. Likely about the time that Alicia had killed Anga. One lizard scurried out as he rolled the rug but Tika got it, bit the head off and ate it. He hadn't thought at the time that Alicia had noticed, she was busy being noble but when Hic'lic picked up the cat, she noticed that and didn't interfere as the Wa'tic carried it out to the sand garden Rit and Ulanda had disappeared from. Between one blink and the next, the Wa'tic and the cat were gone.

He'd half expected Alicia to have vanished when he looked back. "You plan on staying here?" he asked her.

Alicia had looked around as though 'here' was much more than kindling. The golden light - storm tossed for the short while it had taken Rit and Ulanda to do whatever it was they had done - had a red tint to it. The scent of sugar had replaced the musk of the niat.

"What do you keep looking for?" Leaning on one hand, she was bending over, looking at the rug with him.

"Nothing." He straightened.

"I don't have a rug like that in my room."

"Did I ask?" he growled loud enough that she jumped. "So you're working for the Zimmer now?" he added a little more politely.

"For Manny really, not for them." Her tone said that the distinction was important. The basket was abandoned on the bed, she was picking at the beer label, a mess of curling strips already on the bedspread. "He's got a lot of pull. I think the Zimmer lump mathematics right in there with their religion. They don't expect too much tangible to come of it, but it makes them feel good."

The beer was cold; he set it to warm between his hands. Her cultural bias again, like against calling the buildings Temples. "Kind of makes you a priestess, doesn't it?"

Alicia frowned, looking puzzled.

"What you're finding is a residual effect," he said, wondering why he felt he had to rescue her. "Like the Temples are, and the cairns." He thought it was a residual effect of Cassa having been human, she just couldn't leave well enough alone, she had to be noticed.

"I knew it had to be residual," Alicia said, sounding happier with this slant on things. "The problem is, residual of what?"

He raised his bottle in a salute and she blushed again. "What would happen if you didn't so much eliminate the randomness as to direct it?"

"Directing randomness would eliminate it."

It would, but that wasn't what he was getting at. From Zimmer the first time, he'd gone to Lillisim. If you looked small enough, the Temple was there. And an oasis with natural springs. No ocean. No Simic either for that matter, just a few goats. He'd been glad to take the relief ship back to Zimmer. An empty world or not, he'd been seeing ghosts at every turn. The goats were half starved and by the time he left, most of them were dead, the oasis stripped bare of anything the animals could reach. A couple of months, the zoologist had said - from when the goats had started eating until the ship arrived.

Something had been eliminated, sand dunes were moving in, covering the carcasses and the hardier trees that had survived so far. Another few months and without the barriers built by the survey team, all sign of the oasis would have been gone.

"Loosen it up some," he growled at Alicia. She looked too pleased with herself and that didn't help. "And include the people."

She hadn't thought past her comment, he could tell from the startled look on her face when she did. "You mean deliberately direct the probability shifts? How? And how could you include the people?"

Bolda pulled on an ear but the familiar motion wasn't the distraction he hoped it would be. "Why not the people?" he found himself saying. "What's consciousness?" Can't leave well enough alone a sharp tug told him. His ear hurt.

"The macro-sum of the effect of... oh no."

"Quantum stuff?"

She didn't move even to agree so he tried again.

"Same thing?" And guessed again. "At that level, what's the difference between a rock and a person?"

Instead of nodding, Alicia stood, still staring at him. In her eyes, the sunset on was on the tip of the mountain peak, a flame that turned her hazel eyes to red gold.

"You could," she said, backing up. Her beer bottle was on the bed, at the end of a growing wet spot. Both her hands cupping the swell of her belly, protecting the children.

He picked the bottle up. "Don't take it so seriously."

"No, I mean, you wouldn't even have to start at that level. There's a resonance..." She bumped against the door, her eyes wide open, blank and still staring.

He'd used the end result of what Alicia was talking about, but he'd used it like he breathed air. What was she seeing? "Squiggles," a small voice said in his mind and he heard Cassa laugh. "Will you weave me a blanket?" it added in the noise of the door slamming. "Rose and gold? Black and white?" He spent an hour on his hands and knees searching the rug for any change and finding none, not sure if it was that or the line of empty beer bottles on the top of the vid screen that made him feel better.

The breeze came out of the grasslands and carried the scent of spring to the ice and stone. Bolda made a slow go of it on the glacial rubble and Alicia must have heard him coming but her eyes didn't leave the lake.

"You'll freeze your butt off dressed like that," he said. A leather jacket, her hands in the pouched-out pockets. Jeans, a cheap local knock-off. They were all the rage on Alisim, an import from Terra, same as Manny. No hat. She didn't react to his words except to push her hands deeper in the pockets.

Clouds had come in at about the same pace he had, backing up against the peak. The fog obscuring the lower ice fields was thicker, halfway to the lake. The weather service was as wrong as usual.

He tried again. "If it starts snowing, you could be dead before reaching the dig. Does anyone even know you're here?"

"You do."

"Well, now I'm here too."

"What you were talking about..." she said without taking her eyes off the green surface of the water, "... I sometimes feel that if I could just turn my head the right way, I'd see it." She faced him as she took one hand out of her pocket. A flat stone the size of her palm. Smooth quartz, frosted from the grinding action of centuries of ice. "I picked this up... I think I expected bones underneath."

He took it and with a flick of his wrist, skipped it across the water. Three bounces and it sank. "You'd have to turn more than your head." The ripples took their time disappearing. The breeze didn't show on the surface at all. "Do you remember anything?"

She shook her head. He was getting the same look as the water had.

"Just woke up pregnant one morning?"

"I thought I had the flu. Then thought it was stress from preparing my dissertation. When I knew, what could I tell anyone? Who would have believed me?"

"Any dreams?"

"I never remember my dreams."

He sighed. "You wanted to be pregnant. Hell, you wanted everything to make sense too. Looks like you got both wishes."

"In this *almost* place of yours? Couldn't I have arranged a husband?"

"You had one."

"You?"

It would be easy to say yes. "No. It was a political marriage. He did his best. So did you."

Damn if she didn't smile. "That bad?"

"Yeah."

"What happens now?"

"Whatever you want to happen."

End of Book 3