

# The Patchen



By  
Valorie Beer

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**Winterwolf**



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# Dedication

To Bonni:  
Teacher, Daughter, Friend

And to Dick and Raye:  
Who read to me every night.



# - 1 -

## First Sight

Pema knelt in the forest clearing and Jorn arranged her outer robe over her, just as he had done at her Becoming. She stood and felt its familiar weight on her shoulders. A slight mustiness, borne of Nyta's mists, rose from the cloth. Jorn held out Pema's Weapon, but did not touch her with it. She extended her pale hand toward his dark, muscular one, and the device leapt lightly onto her fingertips. This time, she knew that she would not keep it.

"Hold it safe for me," Pema said, handing her Weapon to Bikan. "I must be completely defenseless for whatever is coming."

"You are unarmed, but never defenseless," Jorn replied in a stern, sonorous tone. His voice had frightened Pema for years until she discovered the depth of caring that belied the master's gruffness. "Remember my teaching . . . and follow that which your heart already knows."

All three were silent for a few moments. Then, Pema felt, rather than saw, the black *nothing* that had formed a short distance to the east of them. It materialized at the edge of the glen where Jorn and his students lived in a small, but comfortable hut.

Pema strode to the blackness and stepped in. She knew every rock and tree in this part of Nyta, and a boulder that she had seen just before the blackness appeared was still there. She felt its presence, and then touched it with her toes. Sensing no danger, she sat down with her back against the rock and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark. Except for the muffled rush of the stream, the forest was quiet. Pema regretted leaving her Weapon behind. It would have provided at least a faint illumination.

Pema listened intently as hesitant footsteps crunched the undergrowth in her direction. Something could see in the darkness. The footsteps stopped beside her

and Pema felt herself being lifted, an arm under her knees and another around her back. The stranger held her, not unkindly, and walked a short distance in what Pema guessed was the direction of Jorn's garden. She was feeling somewhat disoriented by the daytime darkness and the surprise of being picked up by a complete stranger.

"It has arms and legs," thought Pema. "At least it's a species I might recognize." She sensed nothing from the stranger except a mild curiosity about her and, surprisingly, tenderness. Did it know her? Pema was in no mood for hide-and-seek. She wanted to see what held her. The stranger stopped and moved to set her down. She stood still in the darkness, waiting.

"There's a bench behind you, if you'd like to sit."

The voice was male, but Pema could not discern the species of the speaker. Like her, he spoke Galactic Common with only the accent of the diplomatic corps that gave no hint of his homeworld language.

"Jorn told me you were blind," he added.

"I'm not blind," Pema retorted, "it's, it's just dark here." She hesitated, puzzled. "But I don't know why. It shouldn't be."

"It's barely past midday," the stranger replied in a gentle tone, "and even with the mist, there's plenty of light. It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you. If you're as skilled in the Path as Jorn says you are, you must be able to feel that."

"Yes, I can," whispered Pema, desperately trying to deal with an unexpected truth of the situation. The darkness was real only to her. She would not have her eyes for this test.

The strain of this and all of her previous tests and choices suddenly flooded over Pema. She lashed out at the stranger, at the rocks, at the trees.

"I don't want another test," she cried angrily to a sky she could no longer see. "There are supposed to be lessons before a test. I don't know how to do the choice I made. I am *not* going to deal with one more monster that's going to beat me, tear at me, or try to kill me. Stop this test, Jorn. I'm not going to play this time. I don't know how."

Fighting back tears, and weary from a young life of trial, Pema sank down onto the bench.

The stranger, now equally angry, shot back. "I am not some test for you, Pema. I'm not a monster and I wasn't sent here to hurt you. I'm a Pathen, just like you, and I'm as real as you are. Or are you? How do I know that you're not a test for *me*? Jorn said that you and I had made the same Pathen decisions and he suggested that I talk with you. I was coming back from a hike and found you by the boulder back there. That's all I know. I just thought you might be more comfortable on a bench instead of on the ground."

Pema rested her elbow on a small, round table to her left and put her head in her hand. Tears fell through her fingers and splashed silently on the tabletop.

The stranger inhaled deeply and continued in a softer tone.

"I'm sorry, Pema. Maybe this isn't a test. Or maybe it's a test for both of us." He paused. "By the way, how did you know that table was there?"

Surprised, Pema quickly withdrew her arm, and then put it back.

"I felt it. Like I felt the boulder in the darkness where you found me. There's another bench that connects with this one on the other side of the table. And you're standing about two meters in front of me." Pema extended her right hand, exactly indicating his spot.

"Well, if this is a test, we might as well make the most of it, I suppose. I'm Erik. I'm here on Nyta to study with Jorn. My Becoming Ceremony was this morning." Laughing, he added, "I thought that meant I was done with tests for a while."

"Who's to say what's a test and what isn't?" asked Pema, lifting her head and smiling in the direction of Erik's voice. She was sorry for lashing out at him and she wanted to make amends. "Will you come for a walk with me so I don't fall into something? I'm restless, and I want to feel this place that I know so well but now can't see."

Erik moved to help Pema to her feet. He took her right arm and slipped it into the bend at his elbow. Pema noticed that his hand, covered by a soft glove, had fingers. She felt the outline of a being similar to herself, although taller, and wondered if Erik belonged to a humanoid species. They set off along the creek, moving slowly as Pema felt the way in her darkness. The forest floor was uneven, and Pema stopped often to pull twigs and leaves out of her sandals.

"Why did you pick me up back at the boulder?" she asked after they had walked in silence for a while. "You could have just said 'Hello.'"

"I know," Erik replied softly, but he didn't answer her question.

They walked on. Pema's ability to feel her surroundings improved steadily, and soon she was able to walk without leaning on her companion. Still, he held her hand. She did not pull away.

After a time, they stopped in a clearing to rest.

"I'll get some water for us," Erik offered, starting down the gently sloping bank of the creek. On the opposite side, a sheer rock wall plunged into the current. When Erik returned, he saw that Pema was absorbed in the basic Pathen exercise of putting objects together using only the energy of the Path and her own concentration. In the few moments that Erik was gone, Pema had made an elegant and symmetrical tracery of twigs, despite the fact that she could not see what she was doing. The effort and focus of the exercise had soothed her. Pema seemed calmer. Erik watched silently, admiring her skill with the Path.

"You're staring at me," she chided softly.

Startled, Erik asked, "How did you know that?"

"I may not be able to see your eyes, but I can feel them," she replied, reaching directly for the water flask in his hands. Erik was surprised again at Pema's ability to detect objects and movement through the Path, rather than with her eyes. He knew that her skill was far beyond his, although he guessed that they were about the same



age.

He could teach her a thing or two, however, about drinking from a flask. Unaccustomed to the awkward container, Pema spilled more than she drank.

"I guess I should stick to stacking twigs."

"I'm sure your robes will dry someday."

Laughing at Pema's struggle with the flask, they spoke at the same instant. It eased the tension that neither had realized was there. They were no longer strangers.

For two days, Pema and Erik wandered the riverbank. It was the height of the Nytan summer, and wild fruits and berries were in abundance. The nights were cool, but the double layer of Pathen robes that Erik and Pema both wore kept out the chill. An ease quickly developed between the two friends, born of similar training, a shared commitment to the Path, and the delight of an unplanned vacation after years of study and routine. Besides, they appeared to be trapped, however pleasantly, in the narrow valley. Erik told Pema that a blackness blocked their return route.

"That's probably a clue that we aren't supposed to go that way for awhile," she surmised. "I don't mind. It's a nice break from training, and you're good company," she smiled in Erik's direction. To herself, she added, *"But you're wearing too much clothing and shielding for a safe place like Nyta. I wonder why?"*

Pema was certain that Erik was humanoid, but that was about all she had been able to discern. In their time together, she had observed him through the Path, but not actively probed him. He wasn't as skilled a Pathen as she, but he did have something that made her hesitate to use her skills to study him. A complex defensive structure of pure energy emanated directly from Erik's body. Pema understood the structure well enough to know that it was inherent in his species, and not caused by his use of the Path. While she could have easily penetrated Erik's shield, she suspected that he would detect the probe and consider it an inexcusable intrusion.

*"If only I could see him,"* Pema mused to herself in mild frustration, *"the mystery would be solved at once. But I can't see him, so I'll just have to wait."*

She didn't have to wait long. Later that afternoon, Erik informed her that he was going to the creek to bathe.

"Pema, I must ask that you do not follow me or probe me while I do that." He added with a laugh, "We don't know each other well enough yet."

Pema heard the laugh, but the nervousness behind it gave her the clue she needed. In this part of the galaxy, there was only one possible reason why a cloaked and shielded being would insist on taking his bath unobserved and unprobed. Erik was a Sanderman.

Pema bowed silently in acquiescence to his request, hoping that her discovery hadn't shown on her face or through the Path. She strode off up the hillside, away from the creek.

As Pema suspected from their first meeting, Erik was a humanoid. He belonged to the Sanderma, a species that shared all of the basic humanoid characteristics, ex-

cept one. The Sanderma lacked skin. In its place, they had evolved tough skeletons and muscle sheaths, as well as the ability to exude a protective field of energy directly from their bodies. When needed, Sanderma could also marshal their shield energy into a self-healing mode.

With such easy access to the insides of their bodies, Erik's people had exhaustively studied the humanoid structure over several millennia. With a gentleness borne of great strength, coupled with great vulnerability, the Sanderma enjoyed a reputation as a peaceful and compassionate species. Their healers were considered the best in the galaxy.

There was only one problem.

Other species found the open body of the Sanderma disturbing, even repulsive. There was nothing to hide all of the organs and tissues. For that reason, the Sanderma had learned that it was best to be completely covered when they traveled to other worlds. In the custom of his people, Erik wore a thin, opaque, full body cloak and hood under his Pathen robes. Soft gloves covered his hands and, in place of the typical Pathen sandals, long boots hid his feet and lower legs. Perfected over the centuries, the garments were comfortable for long periods of wear. Pema sensed the cloak around her companion even as he slept, although he must have known her blindness prevented her from seeing his body, day or night. Pema had met a Sanderman only once before, when she was a small child. She remembered being fascinated, and a little frightened, at the woman's all-encompassing clothing. Pema's parents had told her that Sanderma only removed their cloaks when they were in the company of their own kind, or alone.

Erik returned from his bath refreshed. He had become more trusting of Pema during that time, for he knew without asking that she had not violated his request. His shield had detected no intrusion. Whether or not he sensed her discovery of his identity, Pema could not tell.

By necessity and tradition, Pathen did not discuss where they came from or the lives they had led before they started Path training. Knowing the past of another being might bring up old inter-species animosities or prejudice. Pathen learned to accept each other for what they were in the moment, and Pema and Erik did not ask about each other's pre-Pathen lives. However, they were eager to discuss their Pathen training experiences.

As the more advanced student, Pema knew that she was expected to offer her story first. On the third morning, they settled onto a carpet of leaves near the creek. Erik sat attentively, ready to hear Pema's story. She quickly summarized her early training with Jorn. Since Erik would have been through the same process of learning the Path, there was no point in going into detail about an experience that had been the same for both of them.

The initial training, which qualified one as a Pathen, culminated in a test that was tailored to each student's needs and fears. If the student passed the test, a Ceremony of Becoming was performed the next day to officially mark the novitiate's

status as a Pathen.

"What was your Becoming test?" Erik asked.

"Having my face and chest bashed in by a winged creature armed with a rock."

"Ouch."

"No kidding. She was also screaming at me, rather gleefully I thought, saying, 'You're going to die. You're going to die.' I finally said, 'There's nothing to kill,' and she vanished. Fortunately, so did the wounds," Pema added with a laugh, touching her hand to her face at the memory of the ordeal.

"I must have fainted," she continued, "because the next thing I remember was waking up the following morning in my alcove at Jorn's. He wasn't there, but there were new Pathen robes on the table by the bed. I took them and went outside. Jorn was in a clearing nearby, waiting for me. I set the robes down next to him and knelt. He put the robes around me. Then he took a Weapon and touched my shoulders and head with it, then handed it to me.

"Yes, he did the same to me, and never said a word," interjected Erik. "Did he speak to you?"

"No. There was nothing more to say, I guess." Pema paused. "We had an understanding without words. I left with Bikan that afternoon."

Pema sat silently, absorbed in the memory of her Becoming. Then she took a breath and went on.

"Bikan took me to his home. He was headed to Kala on a diplomatic mission and his homeworld was on the way. For several years, the Path was quiet. Then, a choice showed up and I came back here to Nyta for the test that went with it."

"Did Bikan bring you back?"

Pema detected an odd tone in Erik's question, but she dismissed it and continued.

"Yes, but I'm getting ahead of myself. A choice, a wordless choice, was offered to me. I could either choose what I guess I'd call 'integration,' the opportunity to consolidate my energy and essence around my heart. Or, I could choose 'expansion,' which seemed to involve having the ability to dissolve my essence into the universe. It was clear that there was no right or wrong answer . . . and equally clear that the choice I was about to make would guide my actions for a very long time to come, perhaps even for several lifetimes. Integration felt familiar, like I already had it, at least to some extent. But expansion frightened me and brought up all of my old fears about being torn apart and having my energy drained away."

Pema paused, and Erik sensed an echo of the fear in her being.

"So, like a fool, and an idiot perhaps, I chose the one that I most feared, the one I most needed to learn from. I chose expansion." Pema sighed. "And no sooner had I made the choice than Bikan showed up to accompany me back to Nyta."

"What came after you this time?" Erik asked with a chuckle.

"Big black dogs and hooded figures with hatchets. My only defense was to use my newfound powers of expansion to the point that there was nothing substantial

for them to hack at or sink their fangs into. But that wasn't the scariest part. The creatures vanished, and I thought the test was over. But then I couldn't figure out how to become solid again. It was Bikan who saved me. He touched my arm and said, 'We only become real through our relationships with others.' His touch and his words restored me, and I was solid again."

Erik said nothing, but Pema sensed that he had turned away, involved in some inner struggle of his own. Was it a memory of his own recent test, or something else?

In a flash of insight, Pema knew the answer. Erik was jealous. She now also began to suspect why he had picked her up the day they met. She felt her face becoming hot, so she hurried on with her story.

"Don't worry, I'm almost done. The next part explains how I ended up here on Nyta this time."

Erik did not turn around, and Pema noticed that his self-generated shield had strengthened slightly. Was he trying to protect himself from a pain he imagined might come from her words?

"After that second test, Bikan took me to a remote and beautiful valley on an uninhabited world in a nearby system. He said he was going to leave me there alone. I suddenly felt very tired. I asked him if this was another test, and he said, 'No, it's a reward.' He left, and I had seven or eight glorious days all to myself in complete silence."

Pema paused. "But something wasn't right, wasn't settled," she continued, "and another choice came up. This one was much harder. It was *the* choice, the one all of us Pathen must make sooner or later, the choice between becoming a master and completely developing our skills with the Path as far as possible, or becoming a partner and knowing fully the love of one person for the rest of our lives." She sighed. "The age-old choice between power and love."

Pema's voice softened and Erik turned to face her so that he could hear her words.

"I thought about Jorn and the other masters that I knew," Pema continued in quiet reflection. "All of them were without partners. Then I thought of the partners I knew, including my parents, who had found happiness and fulfillment in a life-long relationship. None of them were masters of the Path. I felt each option. Being a master felt powerful, but empty, while being a partner felt complete." Pema paused before adding, "Almost."

She continued, "Bikan came back and we sat overlooking a hanging lake above the valley. I asked him about his experience because I knew that his own choice had been to become a master, not a partner. He held me for a long time. Then he said, 'Choose to become a master and we'll do it together.'"

Pema felt Erik stiffen, and she chose her next words carefully.

"But I knew that what he asked was wrong, was impossible. I love Bikan, Erik, but only as a childhood friend and fellow Pathen. I could not be his partner. His own choice had already precluded that."

Erik did not relax. He was waiting. Pema went on quickly.

"So I told him it wasn't possible. He seemed to wake up then, and he stepped away from me and said, 'Maybe this was a test after all, for both of us. You have made your choice?' I said that I had. I would follow the path of being a partner. I took off my outer robe and gave it to Bikan, along with my Weapon. As you know, those who choose the partner path keep only the white inner robe." Pema added with a small laugh, "I must admit that I felt a bit naked."

"But you have your outer robe now," interrupted Erik. "Did you change your mind after all, and decide to become a master?" There was a touch of impatience in his voice.

"No," retorted Pema. Erik had baited her with his question, and she wanted to tell the story at her own pace. Nevertheless, Pema softened her tone. "This is my story, so let me tell it. You can tell me later how you came to be sitting on a riverbank with a blind woman."

Erik laughed. "Go on, then. The suspense is killing me, I admit. You haven't always been blind, have you?"

Pema ignored his question and continued her story.

"Bikan took me back to his homeworld, but it wasn't right. I can't explain it. There was something wrong with the choice I'd made for the partner path. I re-examined it, and I also took another look at the master path. But it felt so empty, Erik. Power without love has no meaning for me. So, I made a decision. I discussed it with Bikan and a couple of days later we returned here so I could tell Jorn, before I had a chance to scare myself into changing my mind." Pema frowned, puzzled. "Although, it seemed as though Jorn already knew." She paused, and then shook her head to clear her thoughts. "We must have arrived just after your Becoming Ceremony."

"You decided to take both paths, to become a master and a partner," Erik interrupted softly, suddenly understanding what Jorn had meant when he said they had made the same decision. He tried to steady himself before Pema's Pathen skills could detect his reaction. If this was the woman that the Pathen Council had chosen for him, then Erik knew that what he had felt at the boulder, and in every waking and dreaming moment since then, would not end as just a fantasy. Unless, of course, she refused him.

Pema didn't notice his consternation. She was distracted with a different analysis. In his voice and through the Path, she sensed immediately that Erik's Becoming test a few days earlier had resulted in the same choice for both paths. What a monumental subject to be given as a first test! Erik might be younger and less experienced than she, but he had been forced to make the crucial Pathen choice far sooner than most trainees faced it. What were Jorn and the Council thinking? Pema felt a new admiration and respect for her companion. It wasn't until many years later, when she once again returned to Nyta, that Pema learned that Erik had been given the test only because she had just made her own decision to take both paths. The Council

hadn't chosen her for him, as Erik mistakenly supposed. They had asked Jorn to test Erik for her.

Pema felt Erik move to sit beside her, then reach hesitantly for her. She wondered why he thought she might resist. She said his name softly, in permission, and he enfolded her in his arms. She leaned her head on his shoulder and her tousled dark hair brushed his lips. Erik sensed an inviting softness beneath her robes that belied her Pathen strength. He was tempted to remove his gloves and touch her, but decided against it. Her willingness to let him hold her was enough, for now. Pema took a breath and continued her story.

"When I told Jorn about my choice, he said that it was rare and dangerous. He warned me that it might be too difficult to divide my attention between being a master and being a partner, and that one or the other would likely fail. Probably the same thing he told you." Erik nodded as Pema continued. "He told me about a Pathen, a former student of his, who had made the same choice some time ago. The man, a Kalan that Bikan knew, had gone mad with the strain and turned to evil." Pema shuddered.

"What did you say to Jorn then?"

"Nothing. The choice was made and it felt right, despite his warning. So, I just knelt before him and he took my old outer robe from Bikan and put it back around me. He offered me my Weapon again, but I told him that I wanted to be defenseless for whatever was next. He didn't argue, only reminded me that I was unarmed, but not defenseless. I gave my Weapon to Bikan to keep." Pema sighed. "Then the blackness showed up. I went in and sat down at the boulder, and you know the story from there."

Erik said nothing for a long time. Then casually, almost as if changing the subject, he asked, "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Only for those who can see."

Erik laughed, and then bent his head to kiss her. To his surprise, she opened in response to his gentle pressure and he tightened his arms around her as his mouth explored the warmth and softness of hers. Without thinking, Pema reached up to touch his face. He caught her hand before it reached his hood and held it against the robes at his chest. He didn't want to spoil the moment by having her find out what he was.

"I'm sorry," Pema whispered. "I didn't mean to do that."

Erik sensed the sincerity of her words and released her hand. He ran his gloved fingers lightly over her robes, following the curves of her body, then brought his mouth to hers once more. She curled into his embrace, feeling more safe and protected than she had in a long time, and enjoying the stirrings of something she had feared would never be hers.

After Pema told her story, Erik became increasingly restless as the day wore on. He had never felt his emotions and needs so strongly before. He was frightened by their intensity, and wanted to take refuge from them in activity.

"We need to move," he said to Pema the next morning after a restless, sleepless night. "I don't see the point of this test, assuming it is a test, if we just sit in one place."

"You said that the route back is still blocked," she replied calmly, "but perhaps there is another way."

"I'm going to check it out. I'll be back before dark." He kissed her lightly, and then strode quickly away.

Pema was relieved to have the day to herself. She needed time alone to organize her thoughts and feelings about recent developments. She had grown accustomed to her blindness, and using the Path, could navigate almost as well as when she could see. Erik helped her if she needed it, but was careful not to treat her as disabled. She appreciated his approach. It wasn't his manners that puzzled her, it was his heart.

Erik's kiss at the end of her story had been followed by others that left no doubt about what he was feeling and what he wanted. Pema returned his passion, but was careful not to repeat her unconscious mistake of trying to touch him beneath his cloak. She could sense his growing trust of her, and his growing desire. The reason was obvious to Pema when she discovered that they had made the same Pathen choice. She assumed the Council had paired them as soon as they both had made their decisions. It wasn't likely that there were many other potential partners for either of them, given what Jorn had said about the rarity of choosing both paths.

Whatever the Council's arrangement, it did nothing to change Pema's feelings. She and Erik were both at an age when they could expect to be offered a partner, and Pema knew she wasn't the one with the doubts. Far from resisting Erik's touch, she welcomed it and returned it as best she could, despite his gloves and clothing. She did not attempt to penetrate his shield, guessing that he might still resist.

"For some reason, he doesn't want me to know what he is. But I know what he is . . . and I accept him as my partner," Pema said to herself, then laughed aloud at a most pleasant and unexpected surprise.

She swam in the river around midday, and the refreshing chill of the water brought back a wistful memory of her homeworld. Then she took a nap and later, gathered fruit for dinner. Erik returned, exhausted, near sunset.

"The cliffs at the far end of the valley end in a shear drop-off where the creek goes over a waterfall," he reported, "and the way we came is still blocked by the blackness."

They were silent for a few moments while they finished the meal. Erik sensed, rather than saw, a change in his companion. He was troubled by it without knowing why. To hide his confusion, he stood and strolled over to the rock face that bounded the north side of the narrow valley. He stared at the stone without seeing it, his mind on the woman he had left in the clearing.

Erik's explorations that day had been frustrating, not because he couldn't find a path out of the valley, but . . . why?

"Name it, Erik," he said angrily to himself, ashamed of his sudden inability to face his own feelings. His reverie was broken by Pema, who had followed him at a distance to the escarpment. She stopped a few paces from where he stood. Erik turned to face her.

"I love you," he said softly.

"That's what I came to say to you," she replied, and turned away.

Erik stood silently. He made no move to follow her. In a trick of the fading light, he imagined that Pema had looked directly into his eyes as she spoke. Would she still love him if she could see what he was?

The next morning was strained and awkward. There was now a tension between them that neither felt like discussing. So, they turned instead to the business of getting out of the valley.

"It looks like the only way out is up the rock wall and along the ridge," Erik observed. "I noticed yesterday that the blackness doesn't extend to the top of the ridge, so I'm going to see if I can find a path that will get us above it."

Pema used the Path to follow Erik's progress. The going was steep, but he had found a usable track that slanted up the rock face on a wide ledge, and then switchbacked onto another, similar path that led to the ridge top. He was on his way back down to tell her.

Later, Pema couldn't recall if she had started to run toward Erik before or after she heard him scream. Coming down the ledge, he had lost his footing and was in free-fall down the face of the cliff. The shock of the fall disrupted his shield, and Erik landed hard on the talus slope, breaking several ribs. A knife-edged rock sliced deeply into his upper right thigh, nicking the exposed femoral artery. By the time Pema reached him, he was barely conscious from the loss of blood; his self-healing mechanism was overwhelmed by the sudden trauma.

Quickly, Pema turned Erik over, drew back his clothing and removed his boots. She easily reached through his weakened defenses, found the ends of the tattered artery and held them together. Using the same exercise that she had employed with the twigs, she re-aligned his broken ribs. As she finished, she sensed Erik's self-healing begin, and she removed her hands from his body. Gathering his robes and cloak into an improvised litter, Pema used the Path to lift Erik gently off the ground. She moved him into the shade of trees near the creek and carefully arranged him on a soft bed of leaves.

By late afternoon, Erik's self-healing had repaired his wounds. He lay as if asleep, but Pema sensed that he was awake and troubled by more than his fall. She stood silently beside him, waiting.

"When did your sight return?" It was more a statement than a question, and there was a trace of annoyance in Erik's voice as he looked up at her.

"Late yesterday morning," Pema answered evenly. She decided not to add, "as soon as I accepted you as my partner."

"You might have told me. This changes everything, Pema, now that you can see



what I am."

"Why? Because you are a Sanderman? I knew that before my sight returned." Pema paused, and then gasped softly. With a sudden and agonizing certainty, she also knew that her blindness had not been her test, but his, and that he was on the verge of failing it. "I love you, Erik," she added, desperately hoping that she could influence the outcome before it was too late.

"We can't, Pema," he cried, in more pain now than he had been from his physical wounds. "You know what I am, so you must also understand why we can't be together. I don't know what the Pathen Council was thinking. Other species don't often accept Sanderma as partners, and they can rarely tolerate the . . .," Erik hesitated, "*joining* that we do. Even with all of your Pathen skills and your love for me, you still would not be able to permit it to happen to you, Pema."

"Show me," she challenged him gently, stepping out of her robes and kneeling beside him.

Erik turned away from her, stunned. He had imagined this moment countless times since the boulder and especially after Pema had allowed him to touch her. But his yearning had always been tempered by his belief that she wasn't likely to accept a Sanderman. Now, she seemed willing to try an act of intimacy that he knew would be difficult, if not impossible, for her. Was it worth the risk?

With a sigh that indicated he had made a decision against his better judgment, Erik sat up and removed his gloves. He put his fingertips on Pema's shoulders with a gentle downward pressure and looked into her eyes to gauge her reaction as his hands entered her body. Like most humanoid eyes in this part of the galaxy, hers and his were dark blue, and Erik realized with a pleasant jolt that hers could now look back and see him. In her eyes and through the Path, Erik felt Pema's trust and desire. She was cautiously expectant, but she was not disturbed by what he was, nor was she afraid of what he was doing to her, to them both.

The joining of their systems had already begun. Pema felt Erik's hands move inside her and noticed the foreign feeling of his blood as it began to flow with hers through what were rapidly becoming *their* veins.

Erik kissed her slowly and deeply as his arms held her from within. He wanted to give her time to adjust to what was happening so she wouldn't become frightened and refuse him. He didn't know how Pema's people arranged themselves for physical intimacy, but he was almost certain that it wasn't like this. Few humanoid species had the ability to merge completely with other beings. Sanderma joined for many reasons besides lovemaking, and if they were going to be partners, Erik wanted Pema to not only accept, but to participate when they joined their bodies.

So he took it as a good sign when she returned his embrace. He was delighted that her Pathen skill allowed her to reach through his shield without his help. Her fingers played on the surface of his muscles in a seductive tickle, and then went deeper in a massage that was as soothing as it was arousing. It was a practiced touch; she clearly knew what to do with the outside of the body. Erik briefly wondered if

there had been any other men, or if Pema was simply an excellent masseuse. He regretted that the veil around their pasts would leave his question forever unanswered.

Her caress was beginning to make it difficult for Erik to breathe with any sort of regularity. He enjoyed her touch for a few more moments, and then joined her arms to him. He felt her tense at the unfamiliar sensation of her tissues absorbing into his. Then he pulled the rest of her body to him, and from their shoulders to their toes, they gradually became a single being. Pema felt their hearts beating next to each other, automatically adjusting to make a common pulse.

Erik had been right about one thing. Despite her feelings for him, it did take all of Pema's considerable Pathen power to surrender to the joining as it progressed. She was literally losing herself in him, and he in her. She closed her eyes and lay still, thankful that Erik knew how to breathe for both of them. When he felt her relax, he began a gentle caress that traveled slowly through their joined form, finding and awakening sensitive places within them. Gradually, the caress became firmer, more purposeful and more insistent. Erik watched Pema's face closely for any signs of rejection. He wanted her so much, but he could sense that this wasn't at all how she had ever expected a man to make love to her.

Pema gasped with surprise and pleasure at Erik's movement. Eager to follow his example, she experimented with touch and pressure, then resumed her massage, only now from the inside. She sensed Erik's concern about her acceptance of the joining, and she wanted to give him both pleasure and reassurance. Her tactile sense was more attuned than his, and although the Sanderma joining was not how she had ever dreamed of being with a man, she quickly found subtle areas for arousal. Erik moaned softly and kissed her. She wasn't the only one who had never imagined a union quite like this.

Their explorations didn't last long in this first joining. The days and nights of unreleased desire finally had an outlet, and they shuddered with pleasure and delight as they came together once, and then again, as one being.

When the movement subsided, Erik disconnected their bodies. He held Pema in his arms and kissed her softly. She had accepted the joining beyond his most fervent hopes, but he wanted to make sure that she felt steady before they moved. Pema nestled contentedly in his embrace until the evening chill finally forced her to get up and find her robes. Erik lay naked in the twilight, enjoying the rare pleasure of not having to be covered.

"I won't doubt you again, my love," he said softly. "Oh, and thank you for saving my life." He smiled at the double meaning.

Pema returned his smile, but said nothing. It had been a long time since she had felt so loved, and so at peace.

They joined again later that evening, and stayed as one being long after their passion abated. Through a rare break in the Nytan mist, they watched the stars turn slowly overhead and quietly spoke the words that accepted each as the other's part-

ner. When and how they disconnected and slept, neither could remember.

Pema and Erik were hardly surprised that the darkness at the west end of the valley was gone the next morning. The real surprise was that Jorn and Bikan had somehow managed to assemble so quickly a large gathering of friends and Pathen students to witness the Bonding Ceremony for the new couple.

Bikan waited at the door of Jorn's hut while Pema changed into fresh robes. He had trimmed his light hair and beard for the occasion, and Pema had smiled her surprise and congratulations when she saw that his stocky frame was now covered with the robes of a Pathen master. There had been many changes for the two old friends in the past few days.

Bikan had made a garland of tiny, iridescent purple flowers for Pema, and he arranged it over her hair as she emerged from the hut. He extended his left forearm, and she laid her right hand on top of it.

"You look spectacular, Pema. It's good to see you happy after all this time."

"It's good to be happy," she replied with the most joyous smile he'd ever seen from her.

For a fleeting moment, Bikan wished that this were their day to become partners. Pema sensed his thought and gave him a warm smile. They both knew that their choices had been the right ones. Bikan kissed her lightly and escorted her through the crowd of guests to the clearing.

Stopping in front of Jorn and Erik, Bikan lowered his arm away from Pema's and stepped back. Erik removed the glove from his left hand and placed his arm where Bikan's had been. He felt the light touch of Pema's fingers and saw in her eyes a look of such complete trust and love that it took his breath away. They turned to Jorn and knelt. Erik pushed back the hood of his cloak.

"Pathen Pema and Pathen Erik," Jorn began. His tone was solemn, but there was a twinkle in his eyes and a smile played at the corners of his mouth. He hadn't known Erik long, but he had been Pema's teacher for years and he was delighted that the Council's pairing had succeeded against the odds.

"The Pathen Council offers you to each other as life partners," Jorn continued. "On this day, and for all your days to come, the Council asks that you encourage and support each other's life, that you be respectful and truthful, that you not harbor anger, and that you work tirelessly and compassionately for the benefit of your relationship, putting it first above all else. Although you have chosen to be masters, as well, you are asked to work for the fulfillment of that goal only in ways that strengthen and deepen your partnership." Jorn put a hand on each of their heads.

"Pema and Erik, do you wish to honor the Council's offer and commit your lives to this partnership?"

"We do," they answered in unison.

"The Council accepts your vow. Your Bonding is completed and your partnership has begun." Jorn removed his hands and bowed.

Pema and Erik stood and turned toward each other. He took her face in one

gloved hand and one naked hand and kissed her. Pema closed her eyes and felt the difference in the textures of the two hands on her skin. It was Erik's turn to take her breath away, and she felt her knees become deliciously weak. He put an arm around her waist to steady her. The guests laughed warmly and murmured their approval of the ceremony.

Afterward, Bikan offered his heartfelt congratulations to the new couple. He was relieved to see Pema fulfilled after so many years of trial and sadness. His partner for the diplomatic school and Pathen training would not be his partner for life, but they would remain close friends. Bikan also felt a warmth and respect for Erik that he knew the other man was not ready to share. Bikan hoped he would, in time.

"Do you think Jorn knew what the outcome would be?" Erik asked as he held Pema in his arms that evening after the Bonding celebration. Pema just smiled. There was no telling how far the insight of their teacher reached, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. Her mind was elsewhere. A question had been bothering her since she and Erik first joined the previous day.

"When we join, why do you stop at our shoulders? Is there some reason that our heads can't be together, too?"

"Yes, a very good reason," Erik replied. "My people discovered long ago that a complete joining involving the brain might become impossible for the couple to dissolve by themselves, especially at first. If such a joining accidentally becomes permanent before the partners are ready, it can lead to madness or even death for one or both of them. Being irreversibly joined to someone who's dead or crazy – even if it's you, my dear – is something I'd rather not think about." Erik grimaced and Pema laughed, but she felt the horror of what he described.

Erik paused, hesitant to go on. "We can try it when we get home, if you want. Most couples don't attempt it until several months after their Bonding. I've heard that it does result in a . . . closeness that can't be experienced any other way. But we must do it only on Sanderm so that our Observer can help us disconnect if we get into trouble. Even Jorn doesn't have the necessary skill to separate us, so we can't try it here."

"You mean someone is going to watch us do *that*?" Pema asked, not bothering to hide her skepticism.

"No," Erik laughed. "The Observer watches through the Path, not directly. There won't be an audience."

Pema and Erik said their good-byes to Jorn and Bikan the next day after the rest of the guests had departed. Then they boarded the shuttle for Sanderm.



## - 2 -

# Ambassadors

Erik's home on Sanderm lay at the edge of the embassy district. Both he and Pema had been born into the diplomatic corps of their respective homeworlds, and the house would serve as a convenient base for them. A mature and slightly wild garden buffered the dwelling from the city bustle. Inside, a large open space, bounded by gallery windows, looked out on the garden. A dining area and guest room lay to the right of the entryway. To the left was the kitchen and above it, on a split-level, three bedrooms ringed half the open space. The home had been a gift from Erik's parents when he became a Galactic Ambassador the previous year on his seventeenth birthday.

"We'll move some things around to make room for your belongings," Erik said as he led Pema into the house. He smiled. "This is now your home, too." He took off his outer robe. It was a warm evening.

"I don't have any belongings, Erik."

"What do you mean?"

"You know I can't tell you that. We aren't supposed to discuss our pre-Pathen lives."

"Not having any belongings is pretty serious, Pema. Don't you have a home that you want to bring things from?" He paused, embarrassed at his own thoughtlessness. "I never asked you if you wanted to live here."

Pema smiled at his consternation. "I don't have a home, Erik." She sighed. "All right, I'll tell you just a little, but don't ever let Jorn know that I'm doing this." She gestured to the seats in the open space. "Can we sit down?"

Erik took her hand and led her to a long, white couch. Like all of the furnishings in the house, the couch was covered with the same soft material that was used in Erik's traveling garments, material specifically designed not to irritate the skinless Sanderma body.

"My parents were the ambassadors from my homeworld to the desert planet of Abreez," Pema began. "They and my newborn brother were among the first to be killed when the civil war broke out there. I was four when it happened. A stray rebel missile hit our home. It burned in moments with my family trapped inside. I was playing at Bikan's home and saw the smoke."

Pema paused. Erik sat motionless, suddenly ashamed of his own sheltered and secure childhood. Next to Pema, Erik's parents were his best friends. He couldn't imagine growing up without a family and without a real home to live in.

Pema inhaled wearily and continued. "For the next ten years, I lived at the diplomatic training school for half the year and with Jorn for Pathen training the rest of the time. Bikan would often come with me. He and Jorn were the only family I had. They looked after me and kept me safe." She paused, puzzled. "If Jorn was your teacher, too, I wonder why we never met before."

Erik laughed. "A few months ago, my original teacher here on Sanderm got a better offer than teaching me, I guess. You'll meet her. She's now the Foreign Secretary. She handed me off to Jorn. I'd never met him until two weeks ago. I thought I was going to Nyta for more training," he grinned. "Now please continue. Your story is much more interesting than mine."

"I received my Galactic Ambassador credentials and my Pathen Becoming just before my fourteenth birthday. I was the first person from Assar ever to have both before the Coming-Of-Age Ceremony." Pema sighed. "It wasn't as grand as it sounds. Since I hadn't been able to have a normal childhood, I started the training at a younger age than usual. The teachers didn't know what else to do with me."

She sat quietly for a moment, lost in memory. "In the five years since then, I've lived at Bikan's home when I needed a place to stay between diplomatic assignments. But mostly I've been on Nyta for more training and for those awful tests."

"Thanks a lot. I was one of those tests." Erik laughed, but he was humbled and impressed by her story.

Pema laughed, too. "I know. And now you know why I don't have any belongings. Your home is beautiful, Erik. I'm honored to be in it." She kissed him lightly, sensing his embarrassment at his riches and at his uneventful past.

Two days later, a message arrived as Pema and Erik were eating breakfast.

"It's from Bikan, and it's for me." Erik frowned in surprise as he opened the holopage. Feelings of jealousy returned for the man who had almost taken Pema as his own and with whom she had apparently lived for several years. Bikan's choice to be a Pathen master did not seem to have prevented him from having a woman, if not a partner. Why had Pema stayed with him in defiance of Pathen ethics, and what did he want now?

Erik put the page in the middle of the table and touched the corner of the document. A small Bikan appeared in holographic display on the table. The image bowed, and then spoke.

"Erik, I need your help. I've decided to stay here on Nyta to study with Jorn

and become a Pathen master teacher. As you know, it's a five-year commitment during which I will not be allowed to leave. I need someone to take my place on the diplomatic mission to Kala. I hope you'll agree to do it," Bikan smiled mischievously, "because I already told the Trade Secretary that you would. She's expecting you to be on Kala by tomorrow evening for the next round of talks. Thanks, and say hello to Pema for me." The image bowed and vanished.

Pema watched Erik closely. She sensed that Bikan had intended his message as a peace offering, as well as a genuine acknowledgement of Erik's skill as a diplomat.

Erik stood without speaking and walked out to the garden. He took off the inner robe he had worn to breakfast and sat down on a bench in the warm morning sun. He closed his eyes. In a few moments, he felt Pema sit down beside him.

"What are you feeling?" she asked quietly.

"That you weren't truly mine until this moment," Erik answered, not looking at her. "I recognize in my heart that Bikan has given me a gift. He believes in me, Pema, and has confidence that I can take over an important part of his work." Erik paused. "I'm ashamed that I felt . . . badly towards him, and that I doubted you." He looked into Pema's face, prepared for her anger. What he saw instead was acceptance and love. She knew what was troubling him, and since she had already broken the rule about discussing their pre-Pathen lives, she decided that one more revelation wouldn't matter.

"You are the only man I've made love with, Erik," she said softly, trying not to smile at the look of utter relief that washed over his face. There was no need to ask him the same question. She knew by his hesitation and his misplaced doubts about her acceptance of joining that she was his first woman. "After I came of age, I lived with Bikan because I didn't have anyplace else to go and we had been friends since childhood. I'm grateful that he took me in and gave me shelter and someone to talk to. But that's as far as it went, with him or anyone else. I learned to give a good massage because I desperately needed the touch of other beings. I had no family to hug."

Erik took her in his arms, but she pulled away and gave him a penetrating look.

"When you return from Kala . . ."

"Yes," Erik nodded. "I'll tell Observer Tansik so that he will be ready."

Erik departed for Kala the following morning. He told Pema that he expected to be back in three or four days. They left the house together. Pema had decided to walk over to the Foreign Secretary's office and present her diplomatic credentials. Perhaps there would be some work for her. She arrived just as the Foreign Secretary was saying good-bye to another visitor. An attendant escorted the man out, then ushered Pema into a spacious, carpeted office overlooking a fountain and garden.

"Secretary Kannan," the attendant announced, "Galactic Ambassador Pema requests permission to present her credentials for your evaluation."

"Enter the credentials," the Secretary directed. Pema noticed that the woman still wore the robes of a Pathen master teacher, despite her recent change of occupa-



tions.

"Yes, Madame Secretary." The attendant looked confused. "Don't you want to examine them first?"

"No. I accept Ambassador Pema as a full member of the Sanderm diplomatic corps. Please record her credentials with that notation." She gestured a dismissal, and the attendant left with Pema's documents.

Since the Secretary was a master, Pema elected to make the formal Pathen bow of deference rather than the customary diplomatic greeting. Pema was sure that the bow was correct, but she wasn't so sure how to interpret the scene she had just witnessed.

The Secretary returned a Pathen bow, pleased with Pema's sensitivity to the proper protocol.

"Ambassador Pema . . . Pema," she began with a sad yet friendly smile. "Before I became a Pathen master teacher, I served in the diplomatic corps for many years. I was the Sanderm ambassador to Abreez at the same time that your parents were there. I cannot tell you how it warms my heart to have their daughter standing before me now as a Pathen, an Ambassador and the partner of my best student. Welcome to Sanderm."

Pema realized that she had been holding her breath as the Secretary spoke. A swarm of conflicting emotions made it difficult for her to reply. She was grateful for the warm greeting, sad at the memory of her parents, and a little taken aback by the instant acceptance of her credentials.

"Thank you, Madame Secretary," she finally managed to say.

"All right, enough of the formalities," the Secretary laughed, motioning Pema to a chair. "I want to hear all about what's happened to you since Abreez, and then I have an assignment for you."

Pema started her story. At first, she skipped over the details, not wanting to bore the Secretary. But the woman asked many questions, drawing Pema out. She seemed genuinely interested in how Pema's life had unfolded since the tragedy of her childhood. She especially wanted to know about the recent years of diplomatic work. It was two hours later when Pema finally finished her story.

The Secretary was silent for several moments. Pema didn't dare probe her through the Path, but she could tell that the woman was weighing a decision.

"Pema, I have an assignment for you," the Secretary spoke at last. "The Galactic Ambassador's office has requested our help on a particular mission. I was going to send someone else, but now that you're here, you are the right one to go." She turned and took a briefing book from her desk.

"The wall that the Abreez rebels put up around their territory has been breached in the past few days. Neither side claims credit for it, but neither side is blaming the other, for once. The Abreezi President tells me that both sides may be ready to talk. I want you to go there and assess how ready they really are. It would be wonderful to get this civil war behind us, Pema."

Pema sat rigidly, not knowing how to respond to the Secretary's request. To go back . . . there. To see it all again. Could she even stand to be in the same room with a rebel? Suppose she met the one who had fired the missile?

She lowered her eyes. "Jorn says that sometimes we must do that which scares us most."

"You're getting pretty good at that, Pema," the woman reminded her.

Pema looked up, surprised.

"Yes, I know about some of your choices," smiled the Secretary. "Expansion versus integration. Master and partner. Jorn told me that you have a habit of choosing the more difficult way, and then making it work."

"When do you want me to leave?" Pema asked.

She read the briefing book that evening on the flight to Abreez. She had left Erik a note saying only that the Foreign Secretary had given her an assignment and that she would be back in a few days. The note did not say where she was going.

Pema met the two negotiating teams the next morning in a conference room at the Abreez Presidential Complex. One team represented the rebels, the other the planetary union. They sat at tables facing each other with a chair for Pema in between. There were two negotiators on each team, and all four were enveloped in the light caftans that so effectively diffused the Abreez heat. None of the negotiators was Pathen.

"*That could be an advantage,*" Pema thought to herself. Aloud, she began the instructions for the initial negotiations.

"Each side will start by giving their observation of the current situation, their story of what they think is going on."

"The only story they have is a flagrant disrespect for the fatherland," the junior rebel negotiator interrupted angrily.

"The rebellion isn't old enough to be the father of anything except a hothead like you," his planetary counterpart retorted.

The rebel stood and pulled a small Weapon from his sleeve.

"That will get you nowhere," Pema said firmly.

The man glared at her and pointed the device at the offending planetary negotiator. With a swift movement, Pema reached into the Path and stripped the Weapon from his hand. It settled gently on her outstretched palm.

"That will be enough of that," she declared. "Now sit down or get out."

The negotiator nervously resumed his seat. Pema waited for everyone in the room to begin breathing again, and then she continued with the instructions.

"As I was saying, the first step will be for each side to present its observation of the current situation. This will include an analysis of what that side has done to make the situation what it is, for better and for worse." She paused and looked each negotiator in the eye before continuing in a slow, measured tone.

"Any attempt to blame the other side during this phase, or at any other time, will result in immediate termination of these proceedings. I expect each side to ac-

cept its own part in what has happened to your world. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ambassador," the four answered in unison. They did not want to risk another demonstration of Pema's Pathen skills.

"Good. Once each side has presented its story and analysis, the other side will have an opportunity to ask questions to clarify what they heard. But that's all. There will be no debate or discussion until both sides have completed the process."

"But that will take forever," groaned one of the negotiators.

"Fifteen years is forever to spend killing each other," Pema replied. She decided to take a chance. "My entire family was wiped out in an instant at the beginning of your civil war. Your families might be next. We will take as long as necessary to insure that it doesn't happen. I am prepared to make that commitment, but if you are not, then I am prepared to leave."

The four negotiators sat in stunned silence at Pema's revelation. Tears rolled down the face of the lead rebel negotiator.

"We had no idea," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

All of the negotiators now sat attentively, waiting for Pema to finish the instructions. They were eager to get to work on saving their own families. The gambit had worked.

"After the observations and questions," Pema continued, "each side will state what it needs and make its requests for how those needs might be fulfilled."

"What's the difference between a need and a request?" the junior planetary negotiator interrupted. "If I say that I need something, isn't that the same as requesting it?"

"That's an excellent question," Pema smiled at the woman. "We often confuse the two. Let me give you an example. You may believe that you *need* the rebels to tear their wall down. But what you really need is free movement of your people to all parts of Abreez. Your *request* might be that the rebels tear the wall down, put gates in it, dig tunnels under it, or grant over-flight rights. All of those would meet the need."

The negotiator nodded excitedly, suddenly seeing the larger point. Pema decided to let her teach it to the rest of the group.

"Now, tell us what the difference is," Pema directed.

"Well, what I think you're saying, Ambassador, is that we must understand our needs first. If we can really get to the core of what we need, then we may be able to see several options for meeting that need. The options are the requests. Tearing the wall down is an option, but there are other ways to meet the need. I think you want us to understand that we have more options than we often realize."

"That's it exactly. Well done," Pema nodded approvingly. She turned to the group.

"Both sides will now have the rest of the day to prepare a statement of observations, needs and requests. We will reconvene in the morning."

All the next day, the rebel and planetary negotiators struggled to follow Pema's

process. They had a difficult time at first. Each side frequently interrupted the other, eager to rebut the obvious flaws and biases in their opponent's story. Pema silenced them patiently, knowing that their ability to listen non-defensively would not develop overnight.

It was late in the afternoon before both sides finished their statements and questions.

"Well done," Pema praised the group. "Please be ready to respond to each other's needs and requests after dinner."

The negotiators groaned.

"Can't we take a break?" one of them asked.

"Not while your people are fighting and dying," Pema replied. "The cease-fire held today. The whole planet is waiting for your recommendations. But we all know that their patience may run out at any moment." The negotiators nodded.

After a hurried dinner, the discussion resumed. It was slow going. Every request seemed to have flaws for one side or the other. Near midnight, the lead rebel negotiator stood up.

"Your responses to our requests are meaningless," she said to the planetary pair. "You have offered nothing but tokens that will not improve the lives of our people if there is peace." She glanced at the junior member of her team. "Let's go." The two moved to leave.

The two planetary negotiators shrugged, gave Pema an apologetic look, and followed the rebel team. The foursome approached the door and paused, waiting for it to open. Nothing happened.

"It's locked," Pema said quietly. "Now sit down and make some meaningful requests and concessions so that we can all get to bed."

Both teams returned to their chairs. There was a stony silence and several hostile glances in Pema's direction. She calmly took her seat and put herself in a light Pathen trance so that she could rest, but still monitor the group. With an imperceptible movement, she reached into the Path and disabled the room's climate controls.

Near dawn, the negotiators began to realize that the locked door was not a bluff. Pema sat serenely, apparently prepared to wait as long as necessary for them to break the stalemate. As the Abreez sun rose, so did the temperature in the room.

"Our side accepts the rebel request that we pay for the reunification of our peoples," the lead planetary negotiator said suddenly, his voice full of weary exasperation. The rebel team gasped. It was a stunning concession.

*"That woke them up,"* Pema smiled to herself.

"Our side agrees to abandon our currency and fixed economy in favor of the planetary open market," his rebel counterpart replied immediately. "And we'll take down the rest of the wall right away," she added with a slight smile. The impasse was over.

As Pema prepared to leave later that morning, she addressed the negotiators. They had been excitedly debating and accepting each side's needs and requests for

several hours. Pema was pleased with the sincere effort that all four of the negotiators were now making.

"I will return periodically to help you until you have a treaty. You've made an excellent start," she smiled, bowing her farewell.

\* \* \*

Pema walked into the house that evening in time to see Erik reading her note. His arrival had preceded hers by only a few moments.

"Hello," Erik grinned and kissed her. "Well, I managed not to discredit the Kalan mission. They've asked me to stay on. I'll need to go back there next week. Fortunately, it's a topic I know something about. Trade disputes." Pema was listening attentively, but Erik sensed that something was on her mind.

"How was your trip?" he asked, putting aside his enthusiasm for his own mission.

"I went to Abreez, Erik," Pema replied hesitantly, not sure how he would take the news.

"You went *where*?"

"To Abreez," Pema repeated. "Secretary Kannan said that the two sides might be ready to talk. She wanted me to find out. I did, and they were." She paused. "It was safe. No one was shooting. I insisted on a cease-fire before I let the shuttle land."

"What did you do then?" Erik asked in amazement.

"I taught them to listen to each other. They spent almost three days practicing non-violent communication, probably for the first time in their lives. At the end, they had a good start on some treaty proposals. And I haven't heard that either side has fired a shot since I left. Of course, that was this morning," she added with a laugh.

"How did you get them to make so much progress so quickly?"

Pema shrugged. "I locked them in the conference room until they agreed to have a productive discussion." She paused. "Then I turned off the air-conditioning."

Erik took her in his arms. "What a woman," he laughed. "I'm glad you're on our side."

"I know, I'm a handful," said Pema teasingly. "Now I want to be a brain-ful."

Erik took Pema's hand and led her up the stairs to their room. A holo-image of their Observer was waiting. "We're ready," Erik said to the image. Observer Tansik began the instructions for their first complete joining.

"Pema, if you feel uncomfortable with the final stage of the joining, let Erik know and he'll do what he can. If that doesn't work, but you still want to continue, put your request into the Path and I'll come and give you a mild sedative. It can be frightening to merge completely with another being for the first time, especially for

non-Sanderma. Because your thought processes will be joined, your sense of who's who and your ability to act will become very confused. It usually takes a while to adjust. If you don't fight it, the sensation will pass in time." Pema took a deep breath and glanced at Erik.

The Observer continued. "Erik, if you want to disconnect and need help, let me know through the Path. If I think you've been joined long enough, especially this first time, I'll ask you twice to disconnect on your own. If I feel that you aren't complying, or that you're endangering yourselves, I'll come and do the disconnection for you."

The Observer vanished, and Erik and Pema were alone. Each could feel the fear in the other, and the love. Silently, Erik took Pema in his arms. He desperately wanted to be complete with her, to experience something that his people considered a vital expression of partnership as two beings became one. Erik had never joined completely with anyone in his life, and he felt the pressure intensely. He was the Sanderman, so he alone would be responsible for the success or failure of the joining. Since Pema wasn't Sanderma, she couldn't help. She could only accept or refuse him.

Pema stepped back and dropped her robes to the floor as Erik did the same, and then she reached up and kissed him deeply. It was a long and passionate gesture, filled with all of her love and confidence for him. Erik put his arms around her, then in her as he joined them slowly up to their shoulders. They eased their combined form onto the bed. Pema touched her forehead to his.

"Let's make children," she whispered. "A Sanderma boy first, like you."

Erik gasped at the absurdity of the request. She wanted them to accomplish their first complete joining *and* a pregnancy at the same time? Impossible. But Pema's head was still touching his. Her eyes were closed, and a feeling of utter trust and surrender emanated from her.

Erik took a deep breath for both of them, and then gently eased his head into hers. He encountered no resistance from Pema, and his own relief was immense. From head to toe, they were now one being. They lay still for a while, adjusting to the expansiveness that came with being in each other's body and thoughts. They found that, even though they could no longer speak aloud, they could communicate mind to mind. The oddest sensation was that their individual boundaries had softened, just as Observer Tansik predicted. Neither could find a separate self anymore.

They didn't have much time, so they quickly satisfied their immediate passion, and then silently discussed the children they wanted to make. As Pema suggested, they agreed on a Sanderma boy first, then an Assarian girl. There was a brief tremor in the Path; the Observer didn't like them doing too much on this first complete joining. They acknowledged his concern, and then ignored it. Erik had seen in Pema's mind that Assarian couples made their first child before their Bonding Ceremony, and he wanted to assuage Pema's mild – and justified – annoyance that Sanderma and Pathen customs had dominated their relationship up to that point.

He felt a quiet joy as they began the process of creation, and by the time Observer Tansik made his first request for them to disconnect, a male Sanderma embryo was safely implanted in Pema's womb.

They lay awake, disconnected but in each other's arms, well into the night.

"I am complete with you, Pema," Erik said, kissing her hair. He felt an overwhelming fulfillment that was almost painful in its intensity. Although Erik had chosen both the master and partner paths at his Becoming test, partnership had always been his stronger conviction. Erik recalled the test now, and spoke of it to Pema in quiet tones that she knew belied the emotion of the memory.

The test had first placed Erik in a family where he experienced the fulfillment of love with a woman and children. But the relationship withered with his growing disappointment and resentment at not being able to develop his Pathen skills further. Then, the test let him experience the other option. It took him to the end of his life as a Pathen master. He had enjoyed incredible power and status in that life, but all was overshadowed by an excruciating despair at the loneliness behind his success.

At the end of the second option, Erik had faced Jorn with defiance and determination, and declared that he would follow both paths even if his new teacher wouldn't agree. Erik didn't realize at the time that it was the strength of his commitment, and not the choice itself, that Jorn was looking for. The Council had requested just that morning that Jorn test Erik as a potential partner for Pema; however, the master was always more interested in the depth of his students' convictions than in their actual decisions. Jorn knew that Pema had the strength and dedication to be both master and partner, and he needed the same assurance from Erik before he would allow them to meet. As soon as Jorn had that assurance, he ended the test. To Erik's surprise, the master responded to his defiance by simply giving him the same warning he would say to Pema the next day, and then accepting Erik's choice for both paths.

As Erik finished his story, Pema reached up and gave him a lingering kiss of thanks and love for his choice, and for the emotional pain he had endured to make it. Then she snuggled deeper into his embrace, happy beyond the wildest fantasies of her lonely childhood. She had a partner who loved her, their son was within her and she had a home. She wanted to say something about all of that to Erik, but before she could find the words, she was asleep.





## - 3 -

# Binai

Pema returned home from her appointment with the obstetrical healer and found Erik seated at the dining table in the open space. He was engrossed in a scroll from Secretary Kannan.

"How are the two of you?" he asked, getting up and enfolding her in his arms.

"We're fine. What's the assignment?" Pema motioned to the document. "I hope it's for you," she added, stepping back from his embrace as he reached for the scroll and carefully perching herself on the back of the couch. She wanted to get off her feet. Her ankles were swollen and tender from the child's pressure on the circulation in her lower body. "I've got another month of being big, and I don't feel very diplomatic."

"Your favorite place. Abreez." Erik laughed at Pema's grimace.

"Not this time. It's too hot there, and I'm too pregnant."

"It's final negotiations, Pema," Erik said, his tone becoming serious. "You've spent too much time with them, and they've come too far for you to leave them now." He hesitated. "Although I suppose I could do it for you." Between his own missions to Kala, Erik had accompanied Pema to Abreez several times in the past few months.

"Final negotiations? They *have* made progress." Pema was pleased. "All right, I'll do it. But I want you to come with me, and I want a beach at the end of this."

"A beach?"

"At moonrise, with water warm enough to swim in."

Erik laughed. "Anything else?"

Pema frowned. "Does it say where we'll be meeting? For the last round, we were in planetary territory. That means we'll be on the rebel side this time."

"It says here that you and the two planetary negotiators will be flown directly to the prison in the rebel capitol. The two rebel negotiators will meet you there." Erik

paused. The prison was the only secure building in rebel territory. Still, he didn't like the idea of her going there, especially in her condition.

"Pema, this worries me. That prison commandant, what's his name, isn't the most stable person, even for a rebel."

"Stassy. Commandant Stassy. I don't like him either, but thankfully he's not a negotiator. The rebel commander wouldn't let him be one. He won't be in the room. And I promise I'll go in, sign the treaty, and get out. It shouldn't take more than two days at the most."

Pema was silent for a moment, and then sighed. "I'm glad this is over, Erik. The neighboring systems will be relieved to have a united Abreez on their borders. Almost sixteen years this stupid civil war has been going on, and all over some misguided notion about making all Abreezis equal. The rebels were equal all right, equally poverty-stricken while their so-called leaders lived like kings." Pema went on, her disgust growing with her memory of the place. "And then, the rebels built that ridiculous wall around their territory. Caged their own people is what they did."

"That's very diplomatic of you, Pema," Erik interjected when she stopped for a breath. "Stupid war, so-called leaders, and calling the cornerstone, pun intended, of their foreign policy ridiculous. I suppose you're going to say this to their faces, right there in the prison?"

"If it's hot enough I might," Pema laughed. They both knew that she was engaging in the usual pre-mission venting that both of them found therapeutic. When they said their private thoughts about an assignment to each other beforehand, there was much less danger that they'd say something damaging in the real situation. The tactic contributed to their growing reputation as skilled and patient diplomats. Several worlds besides Abreez and Kala had requested their help over the past several months. In less than a year, they had already developed a satisfying rhythm of working together and supporting each other's assignments.

"I'm glad to have helped bring some peace to that place," Pema added softly, almost to herself. Erik saw the tears of a childhood memory in her eyes, and took her silently in his arms.

Pema spent the rest of the day reviewing her notes from previous trips to Abreez. Early the next morning, her shuttle left for the prison. Erik would follow that evening and stay in the Abreez capital city until the treaty was signed.

Pema slept during the flight. She wanted to arrive refreshed and ready to lead this final effort. The two planetary negotiators came aboard quietly from a shuttle in orbit around Abreez. It was a small concession to Pema's pregnancy so that she would not have to stop twice on the planet. Pema sleepily nodded her thanks to the pair as they came aboard.

The shuttle touched down at the prison landing platform. Two guards ushered Pema and the planetary team directly to a conference room where the two rebel negotiators were waiting. The room was identical to the one they had used at the

Presidential Complex, except that the room in the prison did not have windows. A draft of the treaty was projected on the walls. The guards closed the doors and stood at attention, clearly pleased at being allowed to witness such a momentous occasion.

The lead rebel negotiator greeted the visitors warmly. She took Pema's hands.

"We're thankful that you returned, Ambassador Pema. The planetary terms are acceptable to the rebel command. We are tired of war and are grateful for the generosity shown by our former opponents. We're all looking forward to a reunited Abreez. We just need some help with the final details."

Pema spoke to the four negotiators. "Please be seated. Rebel side will start with their requests. Planetary side will demonstrate their understanding of the rebel position, and then offer acceptance or counterproposal." Pema paused, then added with a smile to break the tension, "You all know that routine by now, so let's get to it."

For the rest of the day and into the next morning, Pema guided the negotiations. She didn't have much to do this time. Under her tutelage, the two sides had learned to listen to each other. As each proposal was discussed and accepted, Pema spoke it aloud. The draft on the wall, keyed to her voice only, changed before their eyes.

Shortly before midday, the two lead negotiators informed Pema that they were ready to sign the treaty. Pema thanked both teams for their efforts and gave the command to unlock the voice keys. Each negotiator stated his or her name, followed by the words, "I hereby sign this treaty." Their nameseals then appeared on the document.

Pema spoke last. "Transmit the treaty to the President," she said. The treaty disappeared and the words, "Transmission Completed" appeared on the wall.

The four negotiators, smiling and exhausted, bowed to each other, and then to Pema. She mounted the small platform in the front of the room so that her words could be recorded for the Abreez archives. "I declare these proceedings, and the Abreez civil war, ended." The four negotiators began to pack up their notes. They chatted about their plans for going home and rebuilding their society.

Pema gazed for a few moments at the pleasant scene before her, and then stepped off the platform. By protocol, she would leave first. She picked up her belongings and was almost at the entryway when the doors exploded toward her. The two guards fell to their knees, stunned by the blow from the collapsing doors. Two rebel soldiers ran past them and felled the astonished negotiators with one shot to the head of each. The four died instantly on their feet, still clutching their notes. A look of bewildered surprise was permanently frozen on their faces as their bodies slowly sank to the floor.

Pema was dazed, but had enough presence of mind to stand her ground. The soldiers fled and the guards stood up, brushing powdery debris from their uniforms. Commandant Stassy strolled into the room. He wore the green-black uniform of the prison staff, and Pema wondered how his complexion had managed to retain its sallow paleness in the Abreez climate.

"These negotiations are over," he announced.

"Yes, they are," Pema replied evenly. "The treaty has been signed and transmitted to the President. The war is over."

"Don't try to fool me with your diplomatic tricks, Ambassador. The war is not over, and the rebels hereby withdraw from the treaty. Seize her!" he commanded the guards before turning and leaving the room. The guards stood still, not sure what to do. They had seen the treaty signed, and knew that Pema was telling the truth.

"Do what he says," she directed them. When they were close to her, she whispered, "It will be all right." However, Pema wasn't as sure as her words.

The guards took Pema to the Commandant's office. He was sitting behind a desk at the far end of the room.

"Please come in." It was an order, not a request. The Commandant rose and closed the door behind Pema. The guards held her arms, but gently.

"I want you to know that I have sealed the prison." The Commandant stood close to Pema so that he could look down on her. He was going to enjoy watching her be afraid. "The two soldiers who killed your friends," he spat out the word, "have been sent out to alert the rest of the rebel enclaves. No one, and no communication, will go in or out of here until you and I have come to an agreement."

Pema stood calmly and silently. She looked at the Commandant's face, but not into his eyes, as she probed him through the Path. He wasn't as confident as he seemed. He also wasn't sane.

"You are a planetary spy," the Commandant continued. "I offer you one chance to save your life," he gestured toward Pema's midsection, "and the life of your child. Negotiate with the President, and only the President, on our behalf for a separate rebel state, and I will let you live."

"Is that why you killed two of your own negotiators?" Pema asked. "So that you could negate the treaty and take over as the leader of your own empire?"

"Do not provoke me," the Commandant replied in a low, threatening tone. "Just answer my question. Will you negotiate for our side or not?"

"I am a Galactic Ambassador and I do not take sides. The war is over," Pema said quietly, but firmly.

The Commandant leaned closer to Pema's face. "No, it is not."

"Yes, sir, it is," the guards answered in unison, before Pema could reply.

"Traitors, all of you!" screamed the Commandant. He took a garment from the table by the door and threw it at Pema. "Put that on. Until we have an agreement, you are my prisoner. Dress like one or give me the answer I want." He took a step toward Pema and raised his hands as if to remove her robes himself.

Pema stepped back calmly. "All right," she said. "Please turn around." She made a mouth of impatience as the Commandant hesitated. "I obviously can't run very fast, and you could shoot me before I reach the door if I try to escape."

The Commandant turned his back to her. The guards held the prison uniform

for Pema and looked away as she stepped out of her robes and slipped it on. It was an extra large size and fit easily over her bulging middle.

"Take her away," the Commandant ordered. "Put her in the first cell downstairs and keep an eye on her." He turned to Pema. "Let me know when you change your mind."

Pema said nothing. The guards gently took her arms and led her to the cell.

"The water from the sink is safe to drink," one of them whispered to her as he closed and locked the door.

Pema probed the lock, but its seal was keyed to the guards' palm prints. She would not be able to unlock it using the Path. She turned her attention to the cell. It was about three meters square, and contained the sink, a toilet, and a cot with a mattress. A high slit window let in a meager shaft of afternoon light.

*"At least it's cooler in here,"* thought Pema as she lay down on the cot. It wasn't as uncomfortable as it looked. She carefully massaged her abdomen, soothing both herself and the child moving within her.

When Pema awoke the next morning, the guard who had told her about the water was standing at the door of her cell.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice and eyes full of tender concern.

"I actually slept fairly well," she replied, sitting up. "Where's your friend?"

"He's still asleep. We're pretty much prisoners here, too, since Stassy isn't letting anyone in or out until you help him."

"Well, I'm not going to do that. You and I both know the war is over. He's really crazy, isn't he?" Pema asked in a friendly, encouraging tone. She wanted the guard to tell her as much as he knew about the Commandant.

"Absolutely," the man answered. "Even the rebels don't like him, especially the commander. But he's dangerous. If he says he's going to kill you, he just might."

"We'll see. By the way, is there anything to eat?"

"No, that's part of his strategy. He thinks if he starves you, you'll do what he wants, especially for the baby."

"I see." Pema smiled and turned away. He had told her what she needed to know. The Commandant thrived on confrontation and defiance. It was a game he wanted with Pema and she needed time to figure out how to play it to win her own life and the life of her child. She knew that there would not be a rescue attempt until all other options had failed. A planetary invasion of rebel territory would annul the treaty and destroy any hope of a reunited Abreez.

Pema waited for two days, and then called for the guard.

"Tell the Commandant I'm ready to have dinner with him."

"All right," he answered glumly. He had hoped that she would hold out longer. The guard returned and escorted Pema to Stassy's office.

"I understand you'd like to exchange your prison uniform for some food," the Commandant gloated.

"Never," said Pema in her best diplomatic dudgeon. "But I'm tired of waiting

for you to come to your senses. By now, I'm sure you've checked the prison transmission records that prove the treaty was signed and sent to the President. Every Abreezi has known for three days that the war is over. You're the only holdout, and you're going to look very foolish when someone finally gets in here to tell you," Pema's eyes flashed, "and to arrest you for imprisoning a Galactic Ambassador."

The Commandant opened his mouth, but Pema continued before he could reply.

"Do you know what the punishment is for kidnapping a member of the diplomatic corps? And one who's pregnant, at that?"

"You are a planetary spy. The war is not over until I say it is. If you do not meet my terms, then you and your child will die. End of discussion." The Commandant turned to the guard. "Take her away."

Pema stood her ground. The guard hovered, unsure of what to do. He didn't want to force her in her condition.

"You will pay a price for this," Pema said softly, looking directly into the Commandant's eyes.

Stassy stepped menacingly close. He was enjoying Pema's feistiness. She obviously wanted to take their confrontation to the next level, and he was ready. He had spent the past two days wondering whether she would have the courage to fight him. He'd never met a Pathen before, but he knew he could overcome whatever feeble skills Pema might have. He enjoyed the thought of defeating her, and he toyed with the idea of releasing her if she proved a worthy opponent, or if she begged hard enough for her own and her child's life. On the other hand, keeping her in the prison would force the President to listen to his demands. He wondered how much that disagreeable old woman would give him in trade for a Galactic Ambassador. Would he get more if Pema were alive, or dead?

"If you will not negotiate for my demands, *you* will pay the price," Stassy intoned coldly, suddenly striking Pema hard across the face with the back of his hand.

The force of the blow knocked her off-balance, and she fell to the floor. The Commandant was disappointed when she did not get up to fight back. The guard intervened and grasped Pema's arms. He half-dragged her away from the room and down the stairs while Stassy's laughter echoed through the cellblock. As the guard locked Pema in, he leaned toward her.

"My friend and I want to help you, but if we try, he'll kill us," he whispered as he closed the cell door behind Pema. She nodded in understanding as she gently rubbed the wound on her face. The guard hurried away, intent on some errand of his own. Pema turned and took a step toward the cot.

Without warning, a sudden, blinding stab of pain tore across her abdomen. Water gushed down her legs, drenching her uniform. Pema gasped and sank against the door of the cell.

"Not here, not here," she pleaded softly. A terrible fear arose in her and she staggered toward the cot in panic as tears streamed down her face. A second, strong-

er contraction sent Pema to her knees. She dared not cry out. She had no doubt about what the Commandant would do if he discovered she was having the baby.

*"Kill us both and make it look like we died in childbirth,"* Pema said grimly to herself.

The thought gave her an angry courage. She took a deep breath, then another. Calling up every last bit of her Pathen power, Pema put herself in a deep, yet wakeful trance. It made the contractions easier to bear, and after a few moments she was calm enough to think clearly. She spoke softly to the son within her.

"I love you," she said, stroking her abdomen and smiling at a brief recollection of the warmth and love in which she and Erik had made the child during their first complete joining. "Now let's see if we can figure out how to get you into this world. You're coming awfully fast, and we don't have much time." Another contraction seized her, then another.

Pema pulled off her soaked prison uniform. She crawled to the cell's tiny sink and washed as best she could. Her body dried immediately in the parched desert air. The contractions seemed almost continuous. Pema was breathing hard, but evenly.

She looked around the cell for useful items and discovered that, by a stroke of luck, the mattress on her cot had been changed while she was in the Commandant's office. She smiled a silent thanks to the second guard, wherever he was.

Quickly, Pema pulled the batting out of the mattress and spread it evenly on the floor next to the cot. Then she paused. She needed to tear the mattress cover. Would the guards hear her? Tentatively, she pulled at a seam. The stitches were poor and haphazard, and the cover came apart noiselessly in her hands.

A tremendous contraction, much stronger than the others, tore through Pema. She had an overwhelming desire to push. It was time. She pulled herself up and crawled over the mattress batting. She gripped the edge of the cot, trying to stay upright with her knees apart so that gravity could be her midwife. It took all of Pema's resolve not to cry out as the birth wracked her body.

After several pushes, the baby's head emerged. With her right hand on the cot to steady her, Pema used her left hand to guide the infant from her body. For an instant, Pema had the distinct sensation that she had reached for her son just like this, in this place, once before. She shook her head and the feeling passed. The baby was premature and small, and with a final, gentle nudge from Pema, he was free.

The new mother sat back on her heels, cradling her son. He was breathing easily and did not cry. The guards were nowhere to be seen.

*"That's another piece of good luck tonight,"* Pema thought. *"Things are looking up."* She smiled at her first-born.

With a small contraction, Pema delivered the placenta and suddenly realized she had a problem. There was nothing safe and clean with which to cut the umbilical cord. Pema waited for the final pulse of the cord. In a few moments, it was still and her son was living on his own.

Quickly before she could think too much about it, Pema bent her head over the

cord, near the end where it attached to her son. She took the cord in her mouth and bit down hard. The membranes were tough and Pema had to bite several times. But at last, the cord was severed. Pema stood and raised her newborn to the dim moonlight of the prison window, then whispered an invocation for protecting life. Under the circumstances, it was the best First Offering she could make. She also sent out a wordless wave of reassurance into the Path, hoping that Erik, wherever he might be this night, would sense that she and their son were still alive.

Pema washed herself and the baby as well as she could in the sink, and then wrapped the child loosely in a piece of the mattress cover to protect his open tissues. Erik had told her that the self-generating body shield would not form until several days after the birth. Pema gently laid her son on the cot so that she could use both hands to quickly hide the baby with the birth remains in a dark corner of the cell. Then she sat down, took the baby in her arms and offered him her breast. To Pema's relief, he took it instantly, his small hands gently grasping her skin as he ate. An hour later, they were both asleep, nestled together on the bare cot.

"Wake up! Captain Guarez wants to see you. Come on, wake . . ." the guard stopped suddenly and gasped at the sight before him. Pema woke with a start and shrank back against the wall. Hot sunlight streamed in through the high window. It was morning.

"You had the baby," the guard exclaimed softly, bending over the cot with a look of joy and awe on his face. "Did you do that all by yourself?"

Despite her desperate situation, Pema couldn't help laughing at his question.

"I have four children of my own," he continued as he stared in fascination at the skinless infant in Pema's arms. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy. My partner is Sanderma," Pema explained. She was touched by the guard's concern, and was relieved that he, too, had children. It made him more a compatriot than a jailer and for the first time in her life, Pema's prejudice against the Abreezi rebels began to soften. This man wasn't a killer, he was a father.

"Come on," the guard repeated excitedly. "Captain Guarez wants to see you."

"All right," Pema replied. "But would you please bring me something to wear first?"

The guard suddenly realized that the woman before him was completely naked, except for the baby in her arms. He sprang back in embarrassment.

"I'm, I'm s-sorry, Ambassador," he stammered, staring fixedly at the floor. "I'll get you something right away." He turned and fled from the cell, leaving the door ajar.

"So, now he's calling me 'Ambassador' and leaving the cell door open. I wonder what's going on," Pema said to the sleeping child in her arms.

The guard returned, out of breath and clutching a clean uniform.

"It's all I could find," he apologized, standing with his back to Pema so she could dress. "Now come on. The Captain is anxious to see you."

Cradling the baby close to her chest, Pema followed the guard to the Command-



ant's office. She used her Pathen powers to search for danger, and was surprised to find none. The guard opened the office door for her and stood back in deference so that she could enter first. Pema strode in as confidently as she could, trying not to remember her previous encounters in this room. A large, steaming breakfast lay on the table to her right. It took all of her effort to walk past the food, continuing on toward the desk at the far end of the room. She did not recognize the uniformed older man who sat behind it. Like the guards, he had the darker hair and complexion of most Abreezis. His bearing gave Pema the impression of quiet competence and unquestioned authority.

"Ambassador Pema." The man did not smile, but his voice was kind. He stood and walked around the desk toward her. Pema stayed where she was, but tightened her grip on her infant. She said nothing.

The man stopped in front of her and bowed.

"Commandant Stassy has been . . . relieved of his duties." The man glanced at the guard. "I am Captain Guarez, and I am here to escort you to my personal battle cruiser. It will take you and your baby back to the capital city. The President is waiting for you there." He paused, and his face softened. "I'd, I'd like to invite you to join me for breakfast before you go. If you want. If you're hungry. The guard can hold the baby while we eat." The Captain suddenly found himself completely flustered. His years of training had not prepared him to deal with a Galactic Ambassador, newly with child, who stood sobbing and smiling in front of him.

"The President will answer all of your questions," said the Captain as he steered Pema to the breakfast table. "I don't know the details of what's happened outside the prison." Pema sensed that it was a lie, and that the rebels themselves must have brought on the overnight change of prison command, since Captain Guarez wore their uniform. However, she was so grateful for his kindness that she didn't question him further. The guard approached her, his hands outstretched eagerly.

"I'll be gentle with him, I promise. I know how to hold a baby," he grinned. "And I'll stand right here where you can see us while you eat."

Pema laughed and deposited her son in his arms. She sat down and Captain Guarez served her, then himself. They ate in silence for several moments. It was all Pema could do to keep from gulping her food.

The Captain laughed as he filled Pema's plate for the third time.

"You were hungry."

"Having a baby will do that to you," Pema smiled, not wanting to spoil the mood by mentioning that the Captain's predecessor hadn't fed her in the three days since her capture. The Captain smiled, understanding what Pema left unspoken. Presently, he touched the transceiver on his sleeve and spoke briefly to the cruiser pilot.

Pema rose and the guard reluctantly placed the baby in her arms.

"Thank you, for everything," Pema said, gently touching the sleeve of his uniform. "What's your name?"

"Binai," the guard answered, too overcome to say more.

"You'll be in the capital in an hour," Captain Guarez informed Pema at the landing platform. "Good day, Ambassador." He paused, and then added, "I'm sorry."

The Captain bowed and turned abruptly, not wanting her to see his tears of anguish for her ordeal. Pema smiled her silent thanks to his retreating form, and then boarded the cruiser for the flight out of rebel territory. She wasn't surprised to see that the second guard was now the cruiser pilot. Pema took a seat behind him, the baby in her arms. The co-pilot handed her a headset so she could talk with the crew and listen to their communications as they approached the capital.

"Battle Cruiser Guarez," said the air traffic controller, "you are cleared into planetary airspace for a priority landing at the Presidential Complex."

A second voice, oddly constrained, came through the headset as the cruiser touched down. "The President sends the joy of her people at your safe return. Welcome back, Ambassador Pema." Mercifully, the voice remained steady. Erik had managed to speak the required greeting according to protocol, but only just. He had almost broken down when he said her name.

Moments later, Pema could see the President and her entourage approaching the bottom of the ramp. A cloaked figure walked with the group. Since Erik wasn't an assigned ambassador to this mission, he shouldn't have been included in the official welcoming party. Pema silently thanked the President for allowing this small breach of protocol, but knew that she now would have to make it through the stiff Abreezi greeting process before she could speak to him.

As Pema stepped through the open hatch of the cruiser, she suddenly realized that she was about to greet a planetary president with nothing on but a worn prison uniform, and with a baby in her arms.

"Why couldn't we be in some nice, relaxed place that doesn't live and die by protocol?" Pema asked the sleeping child. She laughed, straightened up into her most stately pose, and started down the ramp.

Pema approached the Abreezi President and managed to make a formal bow, despite the child in her arms.

"I bring you greetings and joy from my people for your safe return and for the birth of your son," the President began in the required formal manner. The woman had regal bearing, but Pema detected the smallest twinkle in her eyes.

"Thank you, Madame President. I gratefully accept the greetings of your people," Pema replied, doing her best to adhere to the necessary formality when all she wanted to do was collapse in Erik's arms. She didn't need the Path to sense his intense impatience.

"It is my duty to report to you on the results of your diplomacy," the President continued. "As you know, the war is over and both sides have agreed to all of the terms which you helped them negotiate. Further, the rebels have delivered to me, in person this morning, a formal apology for the murder of the negotiators and for your

own capture and confinement. It was an unfortunate mistake." The President paused. "The apology was delivered by the former Commandant of the prison."

Pema bowed, trying not to smile. She could only imagine the scene when a furious President informed the Commandant that the war was over, and that the treaty had been signed and transmitted, all before he killed four negotiators and took a pregnant Galactic Ambassador hostage. The temper of the Abreezi President was known to be formidable. It wasn't likely that Commandant Stassy would be a free man any time soon.

"We will begin discussions with the rebel diplomats tomorrow regarding their re-admission to the planetary union," the President continued. "All of my people are glad to begin reunification. Your work here is done, Ambassador Pema. I release you from your assignment." The President bowed and gestured a dismissal to her attendants. After they were gone, she stepped closer to Pema and spoke softly so that only she and Erik could hear.

"You did that admirably, Pema, especially considering the condition you're in. I must admit I've never been greeted by a diplomat in a prison gown."

All pretense of formality had suddenly vanished. The President laughed and gave Pema a warm hug. "But now it's time for another, more important reunion. You and your family will be my guests at the Complex for as long as you like. A team of doctors is standing by to examine you and your baby. After that, you will be left alone in special quarters that only I, and a few trusted aides, have access to. You won't be disturbed, and my staff will get you whatever you need. You have saved our people, Pema. We are all at your service."

Before Pema could respond, the President turned and walked away. Pema tried to say something to Erik, but his kiss was making it impossible for her to talk.

They stood silently on the landing platform for a long time. Erik held Pema and the baby in his arms, and the pain of their separation slowly subsided. Erik wept quietly, his tears mingling with Pema's hair. He had stayed without sleep for three days in the Complex control room, waiting for word from Pema's captor.

Someone coughed softly behind them. They turned and faced a dark-complected man with short, kinky hair and boyish features that seemed perpetually excited. He wore the requisite Abreezi caftan, but it appeared that he had hastily put it on, and in a manner that indicated he was not a native of the desert world.

"Excuse me, Ambassador Pema. I'm Doctor Bec. I don't mean to interrupt, but we should probably have a look at you and your baby. You've been through a lot, and shouldn't be standing out here in the heat. Would you and your family please come with me to the medical unit?" He gestured toward the Complex.

"You can be there while we examine them," the doctor added to Erik. "I did my residency with the healers on Sanderam, so they assigned me to be the pediatrician for your son. Another doctor will examine Ambassador Pema to make sure she's all right after her . . ." he hesitated, "after the birth, I mean." He turned away and led them to the Complex.

"The Abreezi are all completely mortified that a Galactic Ambassador was taken hostage and imprisoned on their planet," Erik whispered to Pema. "They don't know how to talk about it yet."

"I don't know how to talk about it yet," Pema answered with difficulty. Her body was beginning to register the pain of the past few days and she swayed with a sudden, intense weariness. Erik caught her and lifted her and the baby in his arms. He followed Doctor Bec to the medical unit. Once inside, he laid her carefully on an examination table and Doctor Bec gently took the baby from her. Erik pushed back the hood of his cloak, removed his gloves, bent over Pema's head and began to stroke her hair. She gave him a tired smile and closed her eyes. After a few moments, she felt him back away.

"Ambassador Pema." A gentle voice that Pema recognized spoke to her from above her head.

She gasped, but kept her eyes closed so that the reality wouldn't crush the dream. It couldn't be. Surely he was dead by now. He had been extremely old, or so it seemed to Pema, when he had been her doctor as she was growing up.

"Doctor Zant?" Pema asked hesitantly.

"At your service. I couldn't very well refuse when the President of Abreez asked me to treat the ambassador who had just ended their civil war." The doctor paused. "You're all grown up, Pema."

"I'm so glad it's you," she said, opening her eyes to the tall, white-haired man above her. "It was . . . hard."

"I know. Let's start with the birth. I'm going to begin my exam while you tell me how you managed to deliver a baby all by yourself in a prison cell. When did your contractions start?" Doctor Zant asked, gently removing Pema's prison uniform and beginning his examination.

"Last night." She told him how she made a nest from the mattress batting, and how she had given birth on her knees on the floor of her cell. Pema hadn't intended to tell the doctor every detail, but the story poured out of her.

"I know this sounds crazy," she added with a tired laugh, "but there was even a brief moment when I felt as though I had given birth just like that, in that place, once before."

Erik stepped closer to the side of the table and nodded in understanding. "It's not crazy," he assured her. "My people call it the 'already seen.' Since we met, I've had it a few times myself, although I can't remember the exact situations now."

"Yes," Doctor Zant added, "it's rather common in humanoid species, especially during times of stress. It's been documented for centuries on several worlds, but no one has come up with a good explanation for it." He removed his hands from Pema's body and stood up.

"What happened here?" he asked, lightly touching the reddish welt on her face.

Pema winced and reached for Erik's hand. She knew that what she was about to say would hurt him even more than the story she had already told.

"Commandant Stassy hit me when I refused to become his personal ambassador," Pema said quietly. She focused on the doctor, knowing that if she looked at Erik, she wouldn't make it through the explanation. "I fell to the floor and the guard helped me back to my cell. That's when my water broke and the contractions started."

"No!" Erik's angry cry startled them all. He bent to Pema's hand and kissed it, shaking his head and whispering "No, No," in anguish through his tears. He had kept his composure through the three days of waiting, even when Doctor Zant had brought him the news early that morning of Pema delivering their son prematurely in the prison. The doctor needed to know what type of pediatrician to send for. The message from the guard had not specified the species of Pema's baby. By his look, if not his words, Erik knew that Doctor Zant wasn't sure whether he and the pediatrician would be performing examinations, or autopsies.

Erik had restrained his agony then. A vague feeling that he could not define gave him hope that Pema and the baby were still alive. But now, the pain of Pema's story and his own anxious waiting broke over him. The medical team stood in awkward silence, not knowing how to offer comfort to the distraught diplomat.

"Ambassador Erik?" a voice asked tentatively. It was Doctor Bec. "Ambassador Erik, I've finished examining your son. He's fine. Really strong for a preemie. Would you like to do First Touch?" The doctor gave Erik an encouraging, almost pleading look and offered the son to the father.

"Do you know how?" Erik released Pema's hand and faced the doctor.

"I did lots of First Touches when I was on Sanderm," Doctor Bec nodded with an eager smile. "Here, I'll hold him so you can do it." He spread the fingers of one hand under the baby's neck and head, and the other under his hips and thighs. As if making a sacred offering, Doctor Bec raised the child to the level of Erik's chest. Pema, Doctor Zant, and the rest of the medical team watched in fascination.

Erik took a deep breath, and then another. An expression of peace slowly came over his face. Pema smiled. She knew that expression. It marked the beginning of a joining. "*They do that with their children?*" she wondered to herself. Erik glanced at her and smiled.

He took his son's tiny hands in his large ones.

Immediately, the child's forearms disappeared into his father's hands. Erik bowed his head and closed his eyes. He touched his son's forehead with his own and tenderly made a surface joining, just a millimeter deep, across the baby's brow.

"We welcome you into the living universe, to love and be loved, to teach and be taught, to create and be created, and to be called . . ."

"Binai," said Pema, not missing a beat in Erik's cadence.

Erik opened his eyes, disconnected from his son and took him in his arms. A rush of protective love, coupled with quiet joy, nearly overwhelmed him as he gazed down at the tiny being.

"Thank you," he whispered to Doctor Bec.

The doctor was grinning so broadly he couldn't speak.

Doctor Zant turned to Pema and helped her into a new set of robes that Erik brought. "Despite that breakfast you had, you're suffering from malnutrition. Also, the birth and feedings have severely dehydrated you. I'd like you to sleep here for the rest of the morning so I can monitor you. Then you and your family should rest completely for at least a week before you go home." The doctor paused. "You may swim in the pool outside your quarters, but only if you feel up to it. Since all three moons will be full tomorrow night, I guess I'd allow a walk along the beach." He added with a smile, "I heard you wanted something like that. But only if Erik thinks you're strong enough."

"I don't know. Full moons are always trouble," Erik answered, completely failing to look as serious as he sounded. He carefully handed his son to the pediatrician, picked up Pema from the examination table and cradled her while Doctor Zant applied a sedative that put her immediately into a deep, healing sleep.

That evening, Pema and Erik sat by the pool eating dinner. Their rooms were open to the night air. Binai, his tiny stomach round from his own meal, slept in a crib just inside the door, next to the bed.

Although the afternoon had been a relaxed time of reunion, there was a tension now that Pema and Erik were alone. Pema absently pushed the food around her plate. She made only small replies to his efforts at conversation and wouldn't look at him. Erik watched her anxiously. Finally, Pema gave up trying to eat. She put her arms on the table, leaned her head into her hands and cried quietly.

"I was so frightened," she said softly through her tears.

Erik stood and moved to Pema's side of the table, then lifted her in his arms. She felt small and fragile, and he held her tightly against him as he sat down in her chair. He had heard the facts of Pema's capture and imprisonment, but only now did she allow him to see the emotional toll she had endured. Pema sobbed uncontrollably, curling herself into him and talking in gasps.

"I was all right until he hit me." Erik stiffened. "Then the baby started to come and I knew that if the Commandant found out, he'd kill us both and make it look like we died in childbirth. So, I was quiet. I put myself in a Pathen trance and I was very quiet, even though the pain was terrible. Every moment, I thought the guards would come, find me, and take me away. But they didn't. They didn't," Pema repeated, suddenly realizing that the guards must have been involved in the removal of Commandant Stassy, even as she was giving birth to her son.

"It happened so quickly," Pema continued. "Then the baby was born, and I didn't care what the Commandant might do because I had our child in my arms. He was Sanderma, just like we planned, and I knew I'd get to name him. I couldn't think of a name, so I bathed and fed him. After that, we must have gone to sleep and the guard came, and sometime in the night a miracle must have happened because he took me to Captain . . . Captain Guarez who said I could leave."

Pema finally paused for breath. The torrent of the story drained out of her. Erik felt her relax, even though she was trembling and still crying softly. He held her

tightly. The mother of his first-born. The ambassador who had ended a planetary civil war, and then given birth, terrified and alone, in a prison cell. The woman he loved so much that the thought of losing her these past three days had given him the most horrible, hopeless, empty pain he had ever known. Erik was desperate to say something, but found no words within him.

They were silent for a long time. Then, Pema sat up and kissed him.

"Please tell me I'm safe," she whispered.

Erik rose and carried her inside. He understood that what she needed tonight was not pleasure, but reassurance. With the utmost care, he removed Pema's robes, and then his own. He held her tenderly as he gave her a soft and lingering kiss that demanded nothing except that she take refuge in his love for her. Then, he began a joining with measured slowness. He wanted every cell in Pema's body to feel safe.

As the joining progressed, Erik used his self-healing capability to repair the minor damages that remained in Pema's tissues from the birth. She felt her pain dissolve in his warmth as she relaxed into him. He held his own urgent need for her in check so that their internal movement would begin only when she was ready.

Pema elected to create a subtle wave. It was the most profoundly soothing motion Erik had ever experienced, and they both abandoned themselves entirely to the comfort it offered. The joining reached their shoulders just as the first shudder of release washed over them. Pema was surprised that Erik stopped the connection there.

"No farther?" she asked with a puzzled look when they had regained their breath.

Erik hesitated. "The truth is that I really don't want to be in your brain right now, Pema. There's a lot going on in there, and I don't know if I'm ready to be that close to what you've been through." He was prepared for her to refuse him tonight for his honesty, even though he desperately wanted to continue comforting her, and himself.

Pema smiled and closed her eyes, then resumed her previous movement. Relieved and grateful, Erik returned her gesture with a deep kiss and felt the tumult of the ordeal begin to subside, at last, in both of them. They stayed joined until midnight when Binai awoke to be fed, and then rejoined completely until morning. When they awoke, still within each other, they realized that they had slept for the first time as one being.

The next evening, Pema got her wish. She walked along the beach with Erik beside her, the baby in his arms. When they reached a sheltered spot, they swam in the warm surf as the full Abreezi moons rose over the water.





## - 4 -

# Triumph

The forest world of Kala took Pema's breath away each time she and Binai accompanied Erik there for the trade talks. Snow-capped mountains punctuated the verdant landscape. An abundance of lakes, rivers and spectacular waterfalls dotted the countryside. The planet was famous throughout the galaxy for its agricultural products, especially its wines.

Unfortunately, Erik had time to enjoy none of it during almost six years of sporadic visits. After a promising start, and several significant agreements, the mission had recently floundered. The trade negotiations were at an impasse regarding the establishment of a Kalan free trade zone. More and more worlds had become interested in the zone and were sending observers to the proceedings. They were not allowed to participate, since the negotiations were only for the Kalan worlds. However, the observers now outnumbered the negotiators. Trying to keep one group quiet and the other group focused on the talks was driving Erik and his team to distraction. Finally, he decided that the observers just might be the key to breaking the stalemate. It was a risky decision, and the team held its breath as Erik announced the plan to the assemblage one morning.

"Would you like to join us?" Erik inquired to the gallery of observers.

"What are you doing?" the Kalan lead trade representative hissed angrily.

"Well, you haven't made any progress in weeks," Erik replied in exasperation. "You're arguing over differences that are meaningless. So, how about doing something really bold? How about opening up the free trade zone to the whole neighborhood? They're obviously interested, or they wouldn't be sitting here every day listening to you bicker."

The Secretary of the Trade Commission gasped. It was as though Erik had just opened a room filled with untold riches, all for her. Expanding the trade agreement to a hundred more worlds would redound to the Secretary's credit and would assure

her status with the trade merchants for the rest of her life. It didn't matter that Erik and his team had come up with the idea. She was the one who would implement it, and then reap the rewards.

"Ambassador Erik," the Secretary said, barely able to contain her excitement, "that is a brilliant idea." She turned to the gallery. "We will restart the negotiations in five days with all of the worlds who have observers and negotiators here. I guess we'll need to find a large room." She turned back to Erik. "You will return to assist us," she commanded.

"Yes, Madame Secretary," Erik bowed, trying not to smile at her pomp. "*The more they trade, the less they fight*," he added to himself in consolation.

"Well, I have to agree with her. That *was* a brilliant idea, my love," Pema laughed as he told her and Binai the story the next morning. Mother and son had stayed home on Sanderm this time so that Pema could help Secretary Kannan interview a slate of prospective new ambassadors. Erik had boarded the shuttle for home as soon as the recess was announced. He longed for the calm sanity of his family after the frustrations of Kala. He had walked in just as Pema and Binai sat down to breakfast.

Erik held his son on his lap as they both ate. The boy finished quickly, gave his father a hug and ran out the door.

"The negotiations at the diplomatic compound are much more exciting to him than we are these days," Pema shrugged with a smile. Binai was a couple months short of his fifth birthday, but was already fascinated by the compound and in awe of the ambassadors. Most of them indulgently allowed him to watch the proceedings, sensing that he would choose to continue his family's long line of diplomatic service. The boy understood little of what he saw and heard at the compound, but he was learning quickly.

Erik leaned his head into his hands, too tired to finish his meal. An idea had formed in his mind during the shuttle flight. He wasn't sure how Pema might react, and he knew he wasn't awake enough to discuss it now. Pema stood behind him, slowly massaging his neck and shoulder muscles. His exhaustion was beginning to worry her. She could feel this morning that his self-generated shield had weakened considerably. She almost didn't need the Path to reach through it.

"Would it help if we moved to Kala until you finished the negotiations?" she asked, sliding her fingers under the left scapula and carefully massaging the ribs in back of Erik's heart. She felt his shield respond as it tried to push her away from that vital organ. The pulse slowed, calmed by her familiar touch.

"How do you do that?" Erik asked in undisguised amazement.

"Do what?"

"Give me exactly what I want when I need it most. I spent the entire shuttle flight wondering how to ask you if you'd mind moving to Kala for awhile."

"How long do you think we'll be there?" Pema asked, not answering his question.

"There may be over a hundred worlds participating in the talks. It will take a while to reach consensus with that many participants. The rules of the Trade Secretariat don't permit majority votes except in rare circumstances." Erik paused while he made a calculation. "The original talks produced some good agreements that this expanded group can use. So realistically, I think we'd need to be there for six months. I'm sure that Secretary Kannan would be happy to add you to the mission. She's wanted to do that for some time now anyway, but she needed you here more."

Erik looked up with a sigh as Pema lightly rested her hands on his shoulders. The thought of leaving this haven that he and Pema had created gave him a wistful feeling. He hoped that not too much time would pass before they were home again. "We can leave almost everything here except for our personal belongings," he continued. "The apartments at the diplomatic compound in the capital are quite comfortable and they have everything we'll need. But this is still home."

"Yes, it is," replied Pema, removing her hands from his body. "And we'll be back. Now, go to bed and get some sleep," she ordered.

"Only if you come with me," he grinned, lifting her in his arms and carrying her up the stairs.

Three days later, Erik sat in the office of their apartment on Kala, preparing his notes for the resumption of negotiations the next day.

"Are you and Binai going exploring?" he asked, noticing that Pema and the boy were dressed to go out.

"Jorn gave me the name of a Pathen master teacher who lives up in the foothills," Pema replied. "Since we're going to be here for a while, I thought perhaps he'd take us both for more training." She leaned across the desk and kissed Erik lightly. He sensed her trepidation about meeting the new teacher, and he gave her and Binai a hug of encouragement as they left the apartment.

Pema and her son took a land shuttle into the thickly forested foothills. After a few wrong turns and some backtracking, they came to a secluded clearing with a small, compact dwelling surrounded by a well-tended garden. Pema had the distinct impression that the clearing could only be found by those who had a good reason for being there.

"Master Bespe," she bowed in formal greeting to the tall, balding man who opened the door of the cottage. He had an air of hardened strength and power that was belied by his pale, almost translucent complexion.

"Ambassador Pema, Binai," he responded with a calm and penetrating gaze. Pema felt that he was looking right through her and that he instantly knew everything about her. There was nowhere to hide from that look, and it took all of Pema's courage to maintain eye contact. After a long moment of silence, he added, "Please come in."

The master gave Binai several small tasks to determine the level of Pathen training the boy was ready to receive.

"Object manipulation is good, but your concentration could use some work," he

said, leading Binai to the garden at the side of the cottage. "I want you to build a column of leaves as high as the fence, and keep it there as long as you can."

"But it's windy," Binai objected.

"That's why you'll need to concentrate," the master replied. He knelt in order to be at eye-level with the boy. "You've learned the mechanics of the Path very well, Binai, but you're not feeling it. A Pathen's power comes more from sensing what's going on, rather than from knowing how to do something. Try to become the wind," he suggested.

Binai frowned, but sat down on the grass and went to work.

"That will keep him frustrated for awhile," Bespe said to Pema.

The master led her back indoors and motioned her to a chair. He stood in front of her and locked his eyes into hers. Pema found herself unable to look away, although Bespe's gaze was almost painful in its intensity. He established a mind-to-mind connection with her and began a probe of her Pathen capabilities. He hadn't asked her permission for the connection, as was customary, and she felt herself resisting, afraid of what he might find in her. She had never had a complete stranger so deeply and forcefully in her mind.

After what seemed like an eternity to Pema, Bespe finished his probe and sat down in a chair facing her.

"How long have you had the single-strand connection to your partner?" he demanded.

Pema gasped. She didn't recognize the term, but she knew exactly what he meant. No one else had detected it, not even Secretary Kannan, but this master had found her secret in just a few moments.

"About five years," she admitted, realizing that it was useless to concoct any sort of story with Bespe. "Erik is Sanderma, so he has a body shield. We. . .touch a lot," she continued self-consciously, "and I discovered after a while that it's easier to get through his shield if I maintain a very faint Path connection to him all the time." Pema paused. "I never use it to read his thoughts or manipulate him, Master Bespe," she added defensively. "The connection is too weak for that. Although, if he's feeling very strongly about something, I can usually sense what it's about through the strand."

"I have two things to say about that," Bespe replied with an odd mixture of reproach and admiration. "First, and regardless of your intentions, it is a serious breach of Pathen ethics to connect for so long with another sentient being without their knowledge. You must tell Erik immediately. You can keep the strand only if he agrees. I will know if you still have it, and if you don't tell him about it, I will." Pema flinched at his harsh tone.

"Second, you have been doing for several years what most Pathen masters spend decades trying to learn. Some of them never get it as well as you already do. Single-strand connection is a very subtle and valuable skill, Pema. With it, you will learn to forge connections with many aspects of the universe and better understand and com-

municate with the myriad worlds around you."

"Expansion," Pema interrupted with a sudden insight. "When I made the choice between expansion and integration, I noticed that I could reach out to things and feel them. It's hard to explain."

"I know," Bespe replied, his tone much softened. "You are experiencing the dropping away of your personal boundaries. Your concentration and understanding of the Path as you know it are excellent, Pema. Jorn taught you well. If you are willing to open yourself further, I can help make single-strand connection and other aspects of the Path more accessible to you."

Pema gathered her courage and looked directly into the master's eyes. "I am afraid of you, Master Bespe," she admitted. "You can see into places in me that I'm not sure I'm brave enough to face, now or ever. I'm torn between wanting to be open to them and learn from them, and terrified of what they might reveal. Some of Jorn's tests were bad enough."

"Honestly spoken, Pema," the master nodded approvingly. "I was Jorn's teacher, so I know what he put you through and what choices you made," he added, smiling slightly at her surprise. "Now, connect with me," he ordered, his voice hard and insistent.

"What do you mean?" Pema asked, taken aback by his sudden change of tone, and fearful of what his request might imply. She knew that Bespe wasn't evil, but he seemed dangerous, and his cottage was in an isolated location.

"Do not *ever* make an assumption about my motives again, Pema," Bespe replied angrily. "The only thing you have to fear in this house is yourself. Now, make a single-strand connection with me through the Path. You need the practice."

Pema swallowed hard at the reprimand, closed her eyes and reached out to Bespe using only her concentration. She traveled the Path to him, leaving in place a faint trace as she retreated, just as she had done with Erik that night long ago on Abreez. But there was an immediate difference in the two connections. Because Bespe was a willing participant in the strand, Pema found that she could draw directly on his strength. Her terror at the dark places within her receded slightly.

"The more we connect to our surroundings, the more we can use the energy of the universe to help us," the master said, his gentle tone returning. "The dark places won't be so dark, Pema, if you allow others to help you hold the light."

"Please teach me," she whispered.

"Of course. Now, let's go rescue Binai. He figured out the wind a long time ago."

After putting their exhausted son to bed that evening, Erik and Pema sat in the polished wooden chairs at the dining table, sharing a glass of Kalan wine. They had sent the rest of the furniture out to be reupholstered with a softer fabric, which would be more comfortable for Erik and Binai. Erik sensed that some revelation was coming from Pema about the visit with the new master. He waited patiently for her to find the words, but she chose a different route.

Closing her eyes and touching him lightly, Pema followed the single-strand connection from her heart to Erik's and showed it to him in the Path. "I'm sorry," she whispered, keeping her eyes closed. She didn't want to see his hurt and anger when he learned of her prolonged and covert intrusion. She offered no explanation for what she had done. Her action had been inexcusable, and now she simply wanted to regain his trust. She began to erase the strand.

"Wait," Erik said, covering her hands with his. Pema opened her eyes and saw in his face an expression she hardly expected, one of relief and newfound strength.

"One day in our future, Pema, if we decide to do so, we will join permanently. A full body and brain joining with no disconnection, even when we die." Erik smiled slightly. "Other than making children, Permanence is considered the deepest and fullest expression of love and commitment that my people can make. But it's also a fairly traumatic event, even when both partners are Sanderma. Many couples never do it. They just don't know each other well enough, and the thought of learning to live as one being is too challenging for them." Erik paused. Pema saw tears in his eyes.

"I have wanted children and Permanence with you ever since we met," Erik confessed softly, "and I am grateful that you were willing to make a Sanderma child first. But I realize that you might not be so willing to accept Permanence. You're not Sanderma, and even though you are now accustomed to our regular joinings, it may be difficult for you to accept one that is irreversible. But now you've shown me that we have been connected in another way for a long time. I'm grateful that you showed me the strand, Pema, so that now I can participate in it, too." He reached up and touched her face. "Leave the connection in place. The more permeable we become to each other, the easier it might be for us to discuss Permanence when the time comes."

There was so much emotion in the moment that Pema was having trouble breathing. Unbeknownst to Erik, she had made her decision about Permanence long ago. Today's events had simply confirmed it. Finally, she managed to speak.

"That's the second time you've questioned my ability to accept a joining, Erik," she began in mild reproach. "I can assure you that when the time comes for Permanence, we won't need to discuss it unless you're still having doubts. I give my consent now, without reservation or hesitation." She kissed the hand on her face. "I love you, Erik, and I can't imagine dying in separate beds."

Erik closed his eyes, humbled by the magnitude of the commitment that Pema was willing to make about their future. Her rebuke forced him to acknowledge that his doubts were not about her, but about himself. He knew that they would not attempt Permanence for many years, and that by then he, too, would be ready. Yet, Pema's commitment had already made a difference. It eased one of Erik's most paralyzing fears, that of dying alone and unconnected.

"I need your Pathen eyes and ears in there this morning," Erik said to her at breakfast the next day. "Some of the new negotiators are from worlds that aren't ready or willing to be part of the free trade zone. To be honest, in a few cases I ques-

tion their motives for being here. I doubt that it's peaceful trade they want. I need someone to tell me who should be in and who should be out. I can't probe two hundred delegates and manage the negotiations at the same time."

"Can I come, too?" Binai pleaded.

"Yes," Pema smiled at his eagerness. "Your father and I have agreed that you will alternate between watching the negotiations and continuing your Pathen training. The three of us will go to the negotiations one week, and then you and I will go to Master Bespe's the next week for as long as we're here."

Later that morning, Pema and Binai settled into the gallery of a small, separate building on the grounds of the Trade Secretariat. The negotiations had moved there in order to accommodate all of the delegates. A stir went through the room when the negotiators realized that a Pathen Ambassador would be observing them. They watched closely to see what sort of greeting Pema would receive from the Trade Secretary.

"I welcome all of you to the Kalan Free Trade Zone expansion talks," the Secretary began. "The Sanderma facilitators," she nodded in Erik's direction, "will provide instructions in a few moments. I would also like to welcome Ambassador Pema as the only registered observer to these negotiations."

Pema bowed to the assemblage. She had put herself into a light Pathen trance, both to block out some of the noise of a hundred conversations, and to more easily analyze developments as they occurred. She noted that some of the delegates were not pleased that she was the only observer allowed in the room. On the other hand, no one seemed to mind that Binai was there.

*"Perhaps they believe that a child couldn't possibly have any influence on the proceedings,"* Pema smiled to herself.

The Trade Secretary took her seat and Erik moved to the dais.

"So that you will have a place to start your deliberations, the eight major topics of past trade negotiations within the Kalan system are projected," Erik said, motioning to the walls. He read each one aloud. "Agriculture and Textiles, Communications, Services, Intellectual Property and Copyrights, Product Standards, Financial Services, Tariffs and Subsidies, Dispute Settlement."

Erik paused to give the delegates time to read the projected topic summaries. "You may select the area that is of most interest to your world," he continued. "As soon as all of the recognized worlds have chosen a topic, the full text of each existing agreement will be projected. The eight committees will then expand and refine the specific definitions and agreements to meet the needs of all of the participating worlds."

Erik motioned to his team, all of whom were now from the Sanderma diplomatic corps. The scope of the negotiations had changed significantly since Erik took Bikan's place on the mission, and the Galactic Ambassador's office had wanted a patient, knowledgeable team on Kala for the trade zone talks. Impressed with Erik's expertise and demeanor over the past six years, they had turned to Sanderma to provide the

facilitators for the expanded negotiations. Secretary Kannan was pleased and honored that her staff was involved in this important effort at interplanetary peace.

"The facilitator for each committee has the voice key for the projection," Erik continued. "To minimize the formation of factions within the committees, only the facilitators are allowed to make changes to what you see on the walls. You must reach consensus as a committee before the text can be changed. When you're ready with a complete draft for your topic, let me know and I'll schedule it for a full hearing."

Erik reached into the Path and turned off the projections. He wanted the delegates' full attention for what he was about to say next. He glanced at Pema, and then began in a slow, deliberate tone so that no one would mistake his intent.

"You will note that I said 'recognized worlds.' Not all of you will be permitted to participate in these negotiations for the free trade zone. Some of your societies are not ready, or are not willing, to embrace the principles that are required for free trade." He paused. "Therefore, only one factor will be used to determine whether you will be allowed to stay for these proceedings. That factor is standards-before-status." Several of the negotiators groaned. One picked up her belongings and walked out. Undeterred, Erik continued.

"In case you missed the Secretariat's numerous briefings and communiqués about this policy, let me be very clear about what it means. Genuine free trade is possible only among societies that operate according to three basic principles: tolerance of others, the rule of law, and free movement of their people. Worlds that do not yet meet these standards, or that have demonstrated a refusal to meet them, will not be granted the status of qualified negotiators for these proceedings."

Erik waited patiently for the reaction of the delegates to subside. He sensed that most were pleased with his decision to limit the negotiations to worlds that were ready and willing to participate in open trade.

"You will have the rest of the day to present your world's evidence of these standards to myself, to another facilitator or to the Trade Secretary," Erik continued. "By this evening, you will be notified as to whether you are staying or leaving. Delegations that are staying must be ready with their choice of committee topic by tomorrow morning. Worlds that have not yet met the standards, but wish to do so, may apply to the Secretariat for technical assistance and training. We look forward to your participation in future negotiations."

After dinner, the facilitators, Pema, Binai and the Trade Secretary reconvened to decide on the status of the delegations. Erik sealed the negotiation room to prevent any eavesdropping on their deliberations. He and the other facilitators removed their hoods and gloves, relieved to be out of them after the long day and knowing that Pema and the Secretary were accustomed to the Sanderma appearance.

Erik activated a projection. The words "In," "Not Ready," and "Rogue" appeared on three separate walls.

"Well, that's what they are," Erik laughed at the group's reaction to the third



category. "I couldn't think of another short term to describe those worlds that deliberately ignore the standards and enslave their own people. Now, who's willing to start?" He wanted a volunteer to put up a draft of the three lists so that the group would have something to work from.

"We want to see Ambassador Pema's lists," said one of the facilitators cautiously. He was hesitant to admit that they all knew why Pema had been in the room that day. "She probably had the best perspective, since she could watch all of them. We only talked to about fifteen or twenty each." The Secretary and the other facilitators nodded in agreement.

"All right," Pema laughed. She glanced to Erik for permission to state a rule of order. He nodded his assent.

"Please let me put up all three of my lists before you start discussing them," she requested. "Now, let's begin with the easy group, the delegations that aren't going to be here." She turned to the wall labeled "Rogue." Pema read the names of the worlds that she had put in that category, and then those in the other two, adding brief commentary where she felt it would illuminate her decisions.

Three hours later, the lists were complete. There had been some debate about a few of Pema's choices, but most of her recommendations for status remained where she had placed them on the lists. Binai had watched, fascinated, throughout the evening, but now was asleep in his mother's arms. The Secretary excused herself so that she could begin notifying the delegations of their status. Erik said goodnight to his team, and walked back to the apartment with his family.

As the negotiations progressed, the weeks apart became increasingly difficult. When Erik, Pema and Binai were at the proceedings together, there was always a lively discussion after dinner. But during the weeks that Pema and Binai were with Bespe, the two returned to the apartment each evening quiet and exhausted. Binai clearly thrived on the training, even if it made him too tired to do anything but crawl into bed as soon as he and his mother returned home. His skill with the Path improved noticeably with each session.

Pema was having a harder time. Erik felt that he did nothing on the nights during those weeks except hold her while she cried. She also wanted to join more often, but not for pleasure. She was terrified now to be alone, even if just across the bed.

"He's making me look in some deep and frightening places," Pema finally explained after three months of training with Bespe. "Memories of the fire, jealousy of my baby brother, guilt at being the only survivor, anger at moving so often and not having a real home to grow up in." She paused.

"Then, recently we've reached the bigger issues. Those tests that Jorn gave me about death and expansion were nothing compared to this," she sighed wearily, reluctant to say more. She didn't want to drag Erik into her darkness.

"Would it help if I came with you?" he offered, to Pema's complete amazement and relief. "The negotiators have made excellent progress. I was thinking about giv-

ing them a break anyway. I'm sensing that most of them would appreciate a trip home right now. I'll give them a month off, and the three of us can spend it together at Bespe's, if you think he'll agree."

"I'll ask him tomorrow," Pema replied. "Thank you," she added with a smile that Erik hadn't seen in weeks.

Two days later, Pema and Erik sat with Bespe in the cottage. Binai was outside, hard at work on the day's lesson. Bespe had just completed his probe of Erik's Pathen skills. They weren't as extensive as Pema's, but they were more deeply rooted. It was clear that Erik provided the anchor, and Pema the energy for their partnership. Together, they had a stronger combination of skills than either had alone, and they were doing a good job of transferring their talents to their young son. Bespe was pleased with their commitment to the Path and to each other, and he listened intently to their reason for wanting to spend their vacation with him. When they finished their explanation, the master sat silently for a moment. He then announced his plan.

"Your task while you're here will be to bring some light to the dark places within each of you. If you can learn to use the Path and each other for that, then it won't be so frightening." He paused. "You will also have taken another preparatory step toward Permanence." Pema and Erik glanced at each other. No secret was possible in this cottage it seemed.

"What do you want us to do?" Erik asked.

"I want you to spend today with your son. He's not going to see you for awhile, so give him your full attention now."

"Where are we going?" Pema asked.

"Only upstairs, but you'll be there alone and connected in a deep Pathen trance until you come out of it."

"How long will that be?" Erik asked.

"As long as it takes," the master replied cryptically.

Pema and Erik took Binai on a hike in the foothills that afternoon. They each held one of his small hands as he walked happily between them. In the evening as they put him to bed, they told him that Master Bespe was going to give them some training, and that they wouldn't be able to see him for a while.

"It'll be all right," Binai said sleepily. "We're a family, so he'll let you come back." Pema and Erik smiled at the reassurance of his simple logic.

Bespe met them as they closed the door to Binai's room.

"Follow me," he said, starting up the stairs. Pema and Erik exchanged an apprehensive glance. They hadn't expected to begin that evening.

Bespe led them to a small loft in the attic of the cottage. The room was bare of furnishings, save for a large comforter spread out on the floor.

"I won't be giving you many directions verbally," Bespe said. "Training at this level is mostly done through the Path. But let me explain briefly what's going to happen." He sat down on the floor and motioned for them to do the same.

"The whole point of this exercise is for you to learn to face the dark places in

yourself, and others, without becoming overwhelmed. You must learn to distinguish that which is dark from that which is evil. Not all darkness is bad, and some of it, like winter, can lead to vigorous new beginnings. I will teach you to touch the dark places and to distinguish the useful from the harmful. Then, I'll show you some ways that you can support each other using the single-strand connection that you already share. If you do these explorations together in the future, it's unlikely that either of you will feel the debilitating terror that Pema experienced these past few months."

"That would be good," she said softly.

"As soon as you're ready," the master continued, "I will do the trance for you so that it's deep enough. Then I will connect with your minds to give the instruction. When I feel that you're stable, I will leave your minds and this room. You can stay together as long as you need to make the learning a part of you. Don't worry, I'll take good care of Binai," he smiled.

Bespe paused, and then gave them a kindly look. "It would help if you were completely joined for this so I would only have to give guidance in one place, and so that you will develop a shared set of skills and understanding of each other. But, it's your choice."

A pang of shyness and embarrassment passed briefly between Pema and Erik. Even though they wouldn't be joining for pleasure this time, they still felt odd about doing it while someone watched. Having an Observer was one thing; having someone in the same room and in their minds while they were joined was another matter entirely.

"We might as well," Pema said wearily. "You know everything about us anyway." They undressed and lay down on the comforter, and Erik joined them.

"I love you," he whispered in support and encouragement as he eased his head into Pema's.

Bespe tenderly covered their combined form with their robes to keep out the chill of the mountain evenings. Then, he connected with their minds. Throughout that night and into the next day, they received the master's careful instruction. When he was finished, Pema and Erik began to touch their dark places. It was an agonizing and terrifying effort, difficult to face in oneself, and heart wrenching to watch in the other.

Despite his sheltered and secure upbringing, Erik faced inexplicable fears of being abandoned, especially when he wasn't feeling particularly competent about what he was doing. The fear contributed to a related anxiety about deep intimacy. Could he do it right? Right enough so that Pema would stay with him?

Although he was able to successfully and happily join with her, they both knew that Erik worried about Permanence. What if he wasn't able to accomplish it? What if one of them died first in their combined state? Only a few Sanderma had entered Permanence with a member of another species, and Erik knew that the burden of success or failure fell solely to him.

Or so he believed. Following Bespe's instructions, Pema did not judge Erik's fears, although she was amused by his anxiety. Erik was one of the most competent, patient and caring people she had ever known. Besides, given what had happened to her own childhood family on Abreez, Pema felt that he wasn't the one who should be worrying about abandonment. So, to help him, she let him feel all of the confidence that she had for him as a partner, a father and a diplomat. She reminded him that his choice to be a partner meant that he was never alone, and that his doubts and fears were proof of his humanity, rather than of his inability.

For two days, Erik resisted Pema's complete acceptance of him. But in the end, it was obvious that her patience was going to outlast every possible objection he could raise. With her help and support, Erik finally realized that his struggle was all about accepting himself, and he surrendered. Pema loved him, and he now felt that he was worthy of that love. She was his for the rest of their life, and she had already given him her commitment for the ultimate act of intimacy, Permanence. That was all she could do. He would have to address the rest of the darkness himself, but it had already lightened considerably. He filled their combined form with his love and gratitude for her.

Then, it was Pema's turn. Erik was stunned when she showed him the bottomless pit of hunger that she always felt. It had nothing to do with food, and everything to do with an acute craving for connection that was almost painful. Pema had been on her own for so long as she was growing up that she had come to believe that help simply wasn't available. If she wanted anything done, she had learned long ago that she would have to do it herself. It was a lonely independence that made her starved for connection, but skeptical of partnership. It took Pema more than a day to face the truth and make the difficult admission to her life partner. She waited for his anger.

"So what do you need me for?" Erik asked in her mind. She was grateful that his tone was testing, but not irritated. It was clear that he already knew the answer and was waiting to see if she could touch it for herself.

"You are the lesson I most need to learn," Pema replied. "You are proof that the universe will provide help and connection for me. But I need to ask for what I want, and recognize the response when it comes. I've had many teachers, but they gave me lessons, not equal sharing of a life together. I never had a partner until I met you. I think we're happiest and most connected when I can say what I need from you, and what I'm able to give to you. The hunger goes away then."

"That's when I feel the closest to you," Erik acknowledged. "I will always try to give you what you need if you just let me know what that is. Even with the Path, I can't always read your mind, so you have to tell me what you want. What I want is to please you, both because I enjoy your fulfillment and because you then become receptive to my own needs. It's a wonderful cycle when we can do it. I love you so much, Pema." He sent a wave of reassurance and desire through their combined form and felt her relax in its warmth.

Slowly, they learned to invite the darkness in and give it the attention it wanted,

without becoming overwhelmed by it. "Lean your heart into it," Bespe had suggested. When they tried that, Pema and Erik found, to their surprise, that the dark places often contained useful seeds that blossomed into creativity, passionate caring and new perspectives.

Bespe left the room at the end of the first day, and their minds at the end of the third. Pema and Erik then spent another four days exploring within each other and practicing the skills the master had taught them. They disconnected on the evening of the seventh day, but stayed in the loft talking quietly. Erik leaned against the wall and held Pema in his arms.

"I'm sorry that you had to be frightened for so long before we did this. I didn't know how to help you, Pema. But the real truth is that I was afraid that if I tried, it might open up my own dark places. I've always told myself that I'd deal with them sometime, but I've never had the courage, or the skills, until now."

"And I'm sorry that I withdrew," Pema replied. "Everything seemed so hopeless, and I didn't know how to ask for your help. Now, I do. I'm grateful that you were willing to do this with me, Erik." She turned in his arms and kissed him. "Let's sleep joined."

"You don't look any different," Binai said to his parents as they all sat eating a huge breakfast the next morning. Pema and Erik had partially disconnected once for water, but otherwise had taken nothing during their week in the loft. Despite Binai's assurance about their appearance, the experience had deeply affected them both, and their relationship. They left Bespe's cottage the next morning with their partnership immeasurably strengthened, unaware that their exploration of the dark places had also been their final test for masterhood.

Pema, Erik and Binai spent the rest of their vacation roaming the spectacularly beautiful landscapes of Kala's rugged mountains and valleys. They timed a visit to the coast so that they could swim at a beach at moonrise. When they returned to the negotiations, the more perceptive delegates knew that something momentous had happened. But the threesome would only say that they had learned and seen many things during their time away.

Two months later, Pema and Binai returned early one day from Bespe's cottage. He was leaving on a trip to visit several of his students, including Jorn on Nyta, and he carried with him Pema's greetings to her first teacher. As she and Binai entered the apartment around midday, they found the unusual sight of Erik lounging in the atrium. He looked exhausted, but at peace.

"We can go home," he announced, grinning happily.

As a result of Erik's patience and persistence, one hundred forty-four neighboring planets had agreed to become part of the Kalan free trade zone. It was a stunning diplomatic achievement.

The next evening at a lodge in the mountains above the Kalan capital, all of the Foreign Service Corps gathered for the treaty signing. Foreign Secretary Kannan arrived from Sanderm, aglow with pleasure that it was her diplomatic team that led

the effort to ensure peaceful trade in this part of the galaxy. Even Bikan was there, now a Pathen master teacher, but still interested in the outcome of what had originally been his own diplomatic mission. He and Erik embraced as brothers, all jealousies long forgotten. Then he and Pema spent a quiet moment together. She allowed him to make a brief mind-to-mind connection with her, and they enjoyed seeing the success and contentment that their choices had given both of them.

Bikan and Binai warmed to each other immediately, and the older man entertained the younger one through the long signing ceremony. From Binai's perspective, the evening wasn't nearly as exciting as the negotiations had been, and he was sad that his training with Master Bespe was now apparently over. As the festivities came to a close, Pema and Erik exchanged a smile when they noticed that their son had fallen asleep in Bikan's arms.

After the signing ceremony, Erik carried Binai up the stairs to their rooms at the lodge. Pema tucked him into bed, and then sat by Erik on the rug in front of the fireplace. It was a cool night in the mountains.

"You did it," she said softly in admiration, beginning a slow massage of his exposed tissues. Erik said nothing. He breathed deeply, sensing the arousal that she was causing in both of them, and wanting to make the moment last as long as possible before he took her into him. Pema knew that this night was his, and she felt a delicious rush of anticipation for anything he might want to do.

When she finished the massage, Erik held her face in his hands and met her eyes for a long moment. He then kissed her until they both gasped for breath. With a light, sensual touch, Pema stroked his arms, and then interlaced her fingers with his in the traditional Sanderma gesture that he taught her when they became bonded. It meant that she wanted to be joined with him.

Pema couldn't remember that they'd ever had a joining quite so intense as the one that developed over the next several hours. They remained connected through the night, silently creating the most intimate and exhausting pleasure they had ever known. Their joy was an acknowledgement not only of Erik's achievement, but also of their utter sense of completeness with each other.

As they begun to disconnect just before dawn, Erik finally spoke. Pema had done all that he'd asked, and more, during the night. Her combination of surrender and participation had been exquisite, and Erik had never felt so fulfilled. He hoped the day would come when he might create the same celebration for her, but now he wanted her to consider one last request.

"It's been over five years since we had Binai, Pema. Let's make the girl as soon as we move back to Sanderma." Now that the long effort on Kala was over, Erik wanted another child to hold, teach and love. The experience of being a father to Binai had been profound, and Erik was eager to repeat it. He hoped that Pema would agree.

"Let's make her now," Pema countered with a soft smile. She was just as ready to be a parent again.

Erik had almost finished the disconnection. He kissed her, and reversed it. As soon as they were sure that the embryo was safely implanted, he disconnected and carried Pema to the bed, tucking her in gently.

"Sleep," he said softly, stroking her head in thanks and awe for the night she had given him, and for the new life within her. "I'll take care of Binai."

"Now you look different," the boy said as he and Erik brought Pema her breakfast later that morning.

"I am different," Pema laughed, moving over so Binai could snuggle beside her while she ate. "Are you ready to have a sister?"

"Today?"

"No, when you're six."

The family spent the rest of the day on a hike through the foothills, knowing that it might be their last excursion on Kala, perhaps for a long time.

At a private farewell dinner for the Sanderma delegation that evening, Secretary Kannan offered a toast to Erik for his efforts as lead facilitator of the trade talks. She noticed that Pema raised her glass, but did not drink from it.

"The Kalans will have your head for that, Pema," the Secretary laughed as they stood together waiting for dinner to be served. "That's some of their prized wine."

"I'm pregnant," Pema confided.

"You drank the toast at the signing ceremony yesterday," the Secretary said, her eyes narrowing.

"I wasn't pregnant yesterday," Pema replied, trying unsuccessfully not to blush.

"I'm so glad we Sanderma can't do that," Secretary Kannan laughed, touching Pema's scarlet face. "Congratulations to you both," she added.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, Erik and Binai were eating their first breakfast in the house after the move back to Sanderma. Pema lay on the couch, too nauseated at this early stage of her pregnancy to even look at food. A courier knocked on the door. Erik rose to answer it and returned holding a small parcel.

"It's for you," he said to Pema, reading the ornate script on the outside. "Who uses paper for messages anymore?" he laughed as he handed the packet to her over the back of the couch. Pema sat up and opened the note. A heavy card, covered with the most beautiful calligraphy she'd ever seen, fell into her lap. She read the curly writing twice, and then sat staring out the window at the garden, too overcome by the message to speak.

"What is it, Mom?" Binai asked.

Pema turned to him, tears in her eyes.

"A day I thought might never come. It's from Jorn. He wants to do my Pathen master transmission next week." She did not add that the note also contained a message in Bespe's hand that said, "Well done, Master Pema. You are settled in

darkness, revealing light."

Erik walked slowly around the couch and stood in front of Pema. Lowering his eyes, he carefully made the formal Pathen bow of deference to her, and then knelt at her feet. He did not touch her. For the first time in their relationship they were no longer equals, and Erik felt the difference keenly, not quite knowing what to do. He realized that he had always assumed that they would become masters together.

"The choice to be a partner and a master comes true for one of us," he said softly. Binai watched, transfixed by this unaccustomed formality between his parents. They were usually relaxed and affectionate with each other, and with him. But now, he sensed a sudden distance between them, and it frightened him.

"Erik, please get up," Pema said, flustered by his act of submission and acutely aware of the effect it was having on their son. But instead, Erik took her hands and kissed them. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her fingers for several moments in a poignant acknowledgement both of his love and pride in her, and his sense of loss at something he could not name.

"Congratulations," he whispered. "I wish I could be there to see it."

By tradition, the master transmission was a private ritual between teacher and student. Pema would go to Nyta alone.





# - 5 -

## Masters

For the third time in her Pathen training, Pema knelt before Jorn. They had not seen each other in over five years, yet the master did not speak when Pema arrived at the glen on Nyta. He simply motioned her to the familiar spot in the clearing and she followed him hesitantly. Was she ready to be a master? What test was he about to give her to make sure that she was? She'd already met dogs, butchers and winged beasts that wanted to tear her apart. Was she going to be blind again? And how long was this going to take? She missed Erik and Binai, and ached for their familiar presence.

So Pema was surprised when Jorn simply knelt, took her head in his hands and put his forehead gently against hers.

Immediately, a delicious sense of warmth and expansiveness washed over her. She had heard that the mind-to-mind transmission from teacher to student was a magical experience, and now she knew why. Their minds were linked, and Jorn was allowing Pema to feel the complete confidence that he had in her skills and her partnership. His approval and congratulations poured into her.

In Jorn's thoughts, Pema saw and finally understood the sequence of events that had brought her and Erik together. He had been tested because of her, and she sent a silent wave of gratitude to him through the Path. She also learned that their work with Bespe had been the deciding factor for the masterhood that was now imminent for both of them. The vow that they made at their Bonding Ceremony had come to pass. They had worked deeply on their partnership and had become masters in the process. Pema basked in Jorn's wordless praise. This final step that she had feared so much, turned out to be so easy. She became the Path and it became her. She was a master.

After several moments of floating pleasantly in each other's minds, Pema felt Jorn withdraw suddenly. She realized that her teacher was speaking to her, but his

voice was indistinct, as if from a great distance.

"Pema. Pema." Jorn was holding her shoulders and shaking her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Pema came slowly out of her reverie. She felt as if she were rising from the bottom of a bright, warm lake and she wanted to stay there.

"Pema!" The urgency of his voice finally brought her back.

Pema looked up at Jorn and gasped at what she saw. Tears were streaming down his face and he was sobbing with great, ragged breaths. He was more upset than she had ever seen him, but whether from anger or sadness, she could not tell. His expression frightened her.

"Jorn, what's wrong?" she whispered.

"Why didn't you tell me that you're pregnant?" he demanded.

"Well," Pema floundered, "I didn't know it mattered."

Jorn probed her through the Path as his eyes searched her face. Pema knew instantly that he was assessing the truthfulness of her statement. She struggled to stay open to him, to show him that she had nothing to hide, but the intensity of his probe was making her anxious. In all their years of study together, he had never examined her thoughts as thoroughly as he did now.

In Pema's mind and through the Path, Jorn saw and felt only her bewilderment and concern. She clearly did not know what she had done. Relieved that there had been no premeditation on Pema's part, Jorn finally released her mind and her shoulders. He took a deep breath, sat down on the ground, and then was silent for a few moments.

"Pema, do you know what a bornmaster is?" he asked, and then answered his own question. "No, you probably don't. They are very rare. We usually don't have to worry about female master candidates becoming pregnant, since they have chosen not to have partners."

Pema said nothing, but sat beside her teacher and took his hand.

Jorn spoke slowly. "When you become a Pathen master, Pema, you are changed permanently. I'm sure you can feel it. The Path is now a physical part of you, and all of the skills you've learned over the years have become embedded in your body." Pema nodded absently, wondering what this had to do with her pregnancy. She was tired from the ceremony and wanted to lie down and sleep. She felt for the daughter within her, as she knew Jorn had done moments before. The embryo was viable, and nothing seemed to be amiss.

Jorn felt Pema's concentration slip away. He grasped her shoulders again so that she had to face him.

"Master transmission changes you permanently," he repeated, gripping her so hard that she winced. "And if you're pregnant, it permanently changes your unborn child. At the moment of transmission, the child, too, becomes fully aware of the Path, and fully endowed with all the skill and power of a master. Your daughter will be born a Pathen master, Pema. She is one now."

Pema was surprised at this development, but she didn't see the harm in it. Many Pathen became masters. There wasn't an age requirement, and some masters had even been partners at a previous time in their lives. It seemed to Pema that the only peculiarities in this situation were that her daughter hadn't chosen to be a master, and she would undoubtedly be one of the youngest ever made.

"Well, she won't have to take any tests," Pema offered with a small laugh.

"Pema, this isn't funny." Jorn was losing his patience.

"All right," she replied in weary resignation. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand why this is such a problem. Please tell me exactly what it means that my daughter will be born a Pathen master."

Jorn continued. A tone of gentle sadness replaced his irritation.

"Pema, your daughter now has all of the power of the Path within her. But she doesn't have any of the experiences or tests that will temper her understanding and use of that power. She will be able to use the Path from the day she's born, but will have no sense of right or wrong about what she's doing."

Jorn paused. "If you and Erik had done this deliberately, Pema, the consequences would be severe for both of you. Conspiring to create a bornmaster is one of the most heinous crimes in the Pathen code of laws. You would not be allowed to keep the child once she was born, nor would you be allowed to make any other children. Your partnership would be dissolved."

Pema sat stiffly upright, suddenly afraid. "But we didn't know about bornmasters," she replied softly, fighting back tears. The thought of having this family taken away from her was more than she could bear.

"I know, and I will testify to that fact with the Pathen Council. Bornmaster births must be registered, and the Council will conduct an inquiry." He took her in his arms. "I bear some responsibility for this, too, Pema. When you decided to become a master as well as a partner, I should have informed you about bornmasters. And, I should have checked for a pregnancy before I began the transmission. But it didn't occur to me to do so. We didn't expect you and Erik to make your second child until some time after you returned from Kala. That's why you received the note about your master transmission the day after you came home. We thought we had time to make you a master before you made the child."

Pema was too distracted to wonder who the *we* was, and how they knew about the children that she and Erik planned to make.

"So, what do we do now?" she asked with a sigh. Jorn gently released her.

"You and Erik must be diligent in working with the child while she is developing within you. I also suggest that we speed up Binaï's Pathen training so he can assist. You're going to need all the help you can get to teach your daughter good from evil. The dark temptations of the Path will try to win her over. And since she's only a baby, they might succeed. The work that you and Erik did with Bespe will be invaluable now. You two will need to get into your daughter's dark places before something else does."

Pema waited tensely, sensing that the worst was yet to come. Jorn paused, and then continued in a low voice, almost as if he were afraid that the forces of darkness could already hear him.

"It is imperative that you instill a sense of right and wrong in your daughter from the beginning, from *now*, if you can. Bornmasters don't have tests to pass or fail, but they do have a Project. You must make sure that hers is a Project of good, Pema. A bornmaster who selects a Project of evil cannot be stopped except by another bornmaster. And there aren't any of those alive that we know of, except for your daughter. The only other hope in such a case is that they have the bornmaster life expectancy."

Pema shuddered. Could the child within her, created in such celebration and love that morning on Kala, really turn to evil?

Belatedly, Jorn's last statement registered on Pema's consciousness.

"What about their life expectancy?"

"The shock to an unborn child from the master transmission is enormous. A side effect of this is that it causes rapid and premature aging." Jorn hesitated. "Bornmasters usually don't live beyond their twelfth year. They are like a lamp lit too early that goes dark before the dawn."

Pema made no reply. In utter pain and desolation, she stood and walked slowly to Jorn's hut. She lay down in a sleeping alcove, her face to the wall. Great sobs shook her body. Jorn followed her inside and sat silently beside her, hoping that his presence might comfort her. But, he knew there was nothing more he could say for now.

By the next evening, Pema still hadn't moved. She had eaten nothing, and Jorn could not persuade her to talk, or even turn over. Her night had been wracked with terrible dreams in which she did all sorts of awful things to her daughter. The nightmares always ended with one horrible death after another for the child. Pema was more depressed than she had ever been on Kala. She had neither the will nor the energy to pull herself out of it, and Jorn could not help. He did not have Bespe's skill with the dark places, and he was hampered by his own guilt in not discovering the pregnancy before it was too late.

"Pema?" It was Erik's voice.

"What are you doing here?"

"Jorn is worried about you. He asked me to come. Binai's here, too." Erik touched her arm, but she pulled away and retreated deeper into the alcove.

"Pema, please," Erik pleaded. "Jorn told me what happened. We'll figure it out. She will be all right."

Pema turned slowly to face him.

"She will not be all right. She *is* not all right. I've killed our daughter, Erik," Pema said, forcing her eyes to meet his. She was prepared to receive his condemnation. It couldn't possibly be any worse than her own. "Jorn says that she may turn to evil and that she will die before she has a chance to really live. 'Like a lamp lit too

early that goes dark before the dawn,' is the way he put it."

Too swiftly for Pema to protest, Erik picked her up from the alcove and sat on the floor, cradling her tightly against him. Pema resisted him stiffly for several moments. How could he still want her after the terrible thing she had done? But, his embrace was persistent. She moved her head against his shoulder and he met her with a long kiss that he refused to release until she acknowledged his love and acceptance. Then, he moved his hand to her abdomen and caressed it in small circles.

"Jorn tells me that we must do all we can to keep her from evil," Erik said softly. "It seems to me that the best way to do that is to show her how much she's loved, and how much we and Binai love each other." Pema nodded and he felt her relax at last. "By the way," he smiled, "congratulations on becoming a master."

Erik reached behind him, took a package from the table and handed it to Pema. She sat up in his lap as she unwrapped the covering, gasping at what she saw. Inside was a master outer robe made of a strange, dully-lustrous material. In the commotion of the ritual gone awry on the previous day, neither Pema nor Jorn had given any thought to the required change of robes. Pema ran her hands gently over the fabric. It was cool and soft, and seemed able to soothe her just by its touch.

"What is it?" she asked in awe.

"It's called silk. Jorn told me that the thread is actually made by a worm, if you can believe that." Erik frowned, trying to remember something else about the fabric. "I don't recall where he said it comes from."

"It's beautiful," said Pema softly, still stroking the robe. "Thank you." Erik gave her a deep kiss of congratulations and rocked her gently in his arms.

In the morning, Erik awoke alone in the alcove. The hut was empty, but there was a new master outer robe carefully folded on the table. Erik smiled. He hadn't anticipated this outcome when Jorn hastily summoned him to Nyta, and he suddenly realized that the delay between Pema's ceremony and his own was due solely to the requirement that only one student at a time could receive masterhood. If Pema's ritual had happened as Jorn planned, Erik would have received the invitation to his own master transmission as soon as Pema was finished with hers.

"The choice comes true for both of us," Erik whispered softly to himself.

He took the robe as he went outside and saw Jorn and Binai in the clearing. Then he saw Pema. She was wearing the new silk robe and Erik had never seen her look more powerful, nor more at peace. Being a Pathen master had given her confidence, and being a partner had given her fulfillment, just as she had predicted when she told him her story by the river long ago. Erik was awed by the sense of utter calm that now emanated from her. He stopped and made a bow of deference to the two masters before him. Pema did not return the bow, but there was a barely-perceptible twinkle in her eyes. Erik handed the robe to his son, grateful that Jorn had allowed a variation in the ritual so that Pema and the boy could attend.

Erik moved in front of Jorn. He knelt, bowed his head and closed his eyes. After a brief pause, hands lightly embraced his skull, and then a forehead touched

his. Pema's hands. Pema's forehead. Jorn was allowing her to do Erik's master transmission. Through their mind-to-mind connection, they met in that boundless space that Pema had experienced the day before, and Erik felt the Path become part of his being. Today, the space was not empty; a third master was there. Pema and Erik slowly and carefully let their daughter feel the fullness of their love. After a time, a small echo of that love emanated hesitantly back to them.

Jorn asked Binai to put the new robe around his father. Instead, the boy carefully draped it over both of his parents. They understood immediately that the gesture represented his urgent desire for the distance between them to dissolve. Pema disconnected her mind from Erik's, completing his master transmission. She kissed him lightly. Then, with smiles of reassurance, they took their son in their arms. The boy grinned back in undisguised relief.

After a breakfast celebration for the new Pathen masters, Erik and Pema took Binai on a long hike to the narrow river valley where they had met. Taking advantage of a brief break in Nyta's perennial mist, Pema sunned herself on a rock while Erik and Binai swam in the stream. Later, as the boy napped under the trees, Pema and Erik joined briefly and quietly in a shallow pool. Erik was careful not to include Pema's womb in the joining. They drew strength from each other for whatever might come with their daughter. It was good to be one again.

At dinner that evening, Binai surprised them all by being the first to speak about the role he wanted with his bornmaster sister.

"I'm going to stay here with Jorn and become a Pathen master," he announced. "I may be only five, but I can tell that you're all really worried about Lit, and I want to learn how to help her."

"Lit?" the three adults asked in unison.

"Well, that's what you keep calling her. You say that she's 'Like a lamp, Lit.' I figured it was her name," Binai explained.

"It is now, I guess," Pema laughed. Erik nodded in agreement.

Jorn spoke. "Thanks to Bespe's training and your own work with the boy, Binai has a good chance of becoming a Pathen master by the time he's eight. As long as he's diligent and committed, that is." Jorn looked sternly at the child and then turned to Pema and Erik. "And that will be just about the time you need the most help with Lit. 'Terrible twos' takes on a whole new meaning with a bornmaster."

"It's your choice, son," said Erik.

"Just promise me one thing," replied Binai. "That you will come back for my master transmission." He turned to his mother. "It was just amazing when you did that to Dad this morning."

They all laughed. Then, Erik and Binai cleared the remains of the meal while Pema and Jorn stepped outside into the evening air.

"Thank you, Jorn," Pema said quietly, laying her hand on his arm. "You have saved my family this day."

"And you and Erik must save it on all future days," he said with a laugh, not

willing to let the ease they had felt during dinner dissipate just yet. "Now, go to sleep and *don't dream*," he commanded.

Pema laughed and went inside.

\* \* \*

Pema and Erik returned to Nyta several months later for Lit's birth. They wanted to deliver their daughter in a familiar place that was a nexus for the Path. They also wanted Binai to assist with his sister's birth. Jorn sent for Bespe and Doctor Bec as soon as Pema's contractions began. They arrived in the early evening, finding her exhausted and breathing with difficulty.

"Binai was so quick," Pema gasped, "but this child is fighting me. I can feel her anger. This is taking too long. I can barely maintain the trance against the pain." She cried out as another contraction seized her.

Jorn, Bespe and Erik exchanged a worried glance. Binai held his mother's hand.

"We need a shield," Bespe said to Jorn, "so that nothing can get in except what we allow." Jorn nodded in agreement.

"What's a shield?" Erik asked.

"It's a barrier in the Path. A curtain, if you will," Bespe replied. "It's not exactly ethical. The Path is supposed to be open and available to all. But under these circumstances, we can't afford to have any evil find out there's a new bornmaster to be subverted. Jorn and I will make the shield. We need you to do a mind-to-mind connection with your daughter to keep her stable."

"Before she's born?" Erik asked skeptically.

"Yes. It would be better if you and Pema could do it together, but she's in no condition to help."

"What should I do once I'm in her mind?" Erik asked, not liking the idea of intruding into his daughter's thoughts as she was being born. "And how do I get there? I can't exactly touch her head at this point. Joining doesn't work with a being who's inside another being, and we haven't been using a mind-to-mind connection to work with her, since we can't touch her head yet. Pema has a single-strand connection to both of us, and we used that to enter the baby's mind and the dark places as she was developing."

"I'll do the connection for you," Bespe replied. He put his hand on Erik's shoulder in reassurance. "You'll be doing the same thing that you and Pema did together with the child, only now you'll be doing it by yourself directly in her mind without the single-strand. Don't try to fix the dark places. The child will resist and they will become stronger. Just lean your heart into them, as you and Pema learned to do with each other. Show your daughter that you love her and that you have confidence in her ability to make good choices." Bespe turned to the pediatrician.

"Doctor Bec, please keep the child as still as possible once she's born. We will all be working very fast to stabilize the Path within her. I'll let you know when it's



safe to do First Touch." Doctor Bec swallowed hard and gave Bespe a nervous smile.

The master leaned over Pema and stroked her head. She had never felt such tenderness from the crusty old teacher. He touched his forehead to hers and strengthened her trance. Pema's breathing eased.

"What should I do?" Binai asked, sounding very young and very afraid.

Bespe knelt beside him.

"Just hold your mother's hand and do whatever she asks. The rest of us need to concentrate on your sister, so your mother is your responsibility." Binai nodded his head solemnly, pleased at the important duty he'd been given, and relieved that he could focus on something known and safe.

"Now!" Pema's voice startled them all.

Bespe quickly made the connection for Erik and his daughter, and then he and Jorn created the shield around them all. Erik felt a moment of confusion as he tried to communicate with a being who was in the process of birth. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, relieved that there were very few dark places in the child's mind. The work he and Pema had done with the fetus as it developed seemed to have succeeded. As he and Pema had done together countless times, Erik now bathed his daughter in wordless feelings of love and support. He was delighted when some of the feeling came back to him from her, even as the birth proceeded. When he opened his eyes, his daughter was before him.

Doctor Bec held the thin, bald baby in a gentle, yet firm embrace to keep her still as Bespe had ordered. Despite the circumstances, the doctor was grinning excitedly. Birth was simply the most wonderful experience in the universe as far as he was concerned, and he never tired of welcoming a new life.

"Let me see her," Pema asked weakly.

Bespe nodded and Doctor Bec carefully raised the baby into Pema's field of vision. Erik felt a flash as the eyes of Pema and their daughter met for the first time. The newborn's look seemed to say, "Mother, I haven't yet decided between good and evil."

"I love you," Pema said softly. Her daughter's expression relaxed and Erik released his connection with her mind. Pema fed her newborn, and then both of them slept curled together as the others sat protectively around them.

"Good morning," Erik smiled, bending over Pema in the alcove the next day. He had been holding their daughter for the past two hours, waiting for Pema to awaken. "I can't believe you both slept through the night. That's a good sign."

Pema sat up slowly and Erik placed the child in her arms. After feeding her, Pema dressed and went outside with the baby. Bespe, Jorn and Doctor Bec were seated under a tree. Erik held Binai in his lap. Jorn reached into the Path and moved a small bench into their circle so that Pema could join them. She sat down gingerly.

"What's the verdict?" she asked. Her confidence in dealing with her bornmaster daughter had weakened considerably with the strain of the birth. What Bespe said next didn't make her feel any better.

"Your daughter is very angry, Pema, probably from the trauma of becoming a master in your womb. Until she has the words to express her feelings, it's going to be difficult to help her deal with it. It would be best if you and Erik gave her your full attention and did not resume your diplomatic duties until Binai returns home." He paused. "I have taken the liberty of making that request on your behalf to Secretary Kannan, and she has agreed to give you both a leave of absence."

"Do you have any good news?" Pema asked, not caring that her irritation showed in her voice. As usual, Bespe was making unilateral decisions about her life.

The master surprised Pema by getting up and kneeling in front of her. His eyes asked for permission, and she nodded her assent. He took her head in his hands and with the utmost care, connected their minds. Pema gasped softly. Bespe loved her deeply. Not like the love that she and Erik shared, but the love of a teacher for an exceptional student. Pema had barely heard one word of praise from Bespe in the months she had trained with him on Kala. Now, he flooded her with his approval and respect.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be," he said in her mind before releasing her. Aloud, he addressed the group.

"To answer Pema's question, there is quite a bit of good news about the baby. As Erik discovered, her dark places are minimal. This, without question, is due to the work that he and Pema did with the child while she was developing. The best news is that none of the dark places contains evil, and our shield successfully prevented any penetration by those forces. As long as there are always at least two masters around for a while to keep the Path from overwhelming her, the child will be fine and will tend toward goodness."

Bespe paused, and then addressed Pema and Erik. "That doesn't mean you can relax. It will be much better when Binai is a master and can help."

"Oh dear," Doctor Bec interrupted. "In all the commotion, we forgot to do First Touch." The group laughed and stood so that Erik could perform the ceremony. Binai proudly announced his sister's name, and then Erik tenderly cradled his daughter in his arms for the rest of the morning.

The next evening, Pema and Erik thanked the masters and Doctor Bec, and then kissed Binai good-bye. They were grateful for Bespe's intervention that would allow them to give Lit their complete attention in the coming months. As they boarded the shuttle for home, they were surprised to discover that the old master had given them one more gift. He had arranged for them to have a stateroom on the shuttle so that they could have some privacy from the other travelers. The narrow, rectangular room held two reclining chairs, a portable crib, and a small, round table. Pema secured Lit in the crib, and then sank into one of the recliners.

"Tired?" Erik asked, stroking her head.

Pema looked up at him with a soft, drowsy smile and nodded.

"Can I hold you?" he asked softly. She reached her arms upwards and wrapped

them around his neck as he lifted her from the recliner. He sat down and stretched out with her nestled against him. Erik bent his head to kiss her, but she was already asleep. He watched her peaceful face and felt her soft body through her robes, then fell asleep with his lips in her hair.

Well into the night, Pema awoke and carefully extricated herself from Erik's embrace. She didn't want to wake him, but it was time to feed Lit. She tenderly lifted her daughter from the crib and stood gazing out at the stars as she nursed her. Pema stroked the baby's tiny head, and the infant's small, warm hands alternately grasped and released her mother's skin as she ate. During the feeding, Pema sent a gentle wave of love through their single-strand connection, and was relieved that the child was calmed by both her physical and Pathen touch.

The baby was hungry and Pema was full, and the feeding took longer than expected. As Pema returned her sleeping child to the crib, tiredness overwhelmed her and she felt her knees give way. She reached toward the bulkhead for support, but it was Erik's arms that kept her from falling. He had been awake and watching for several moments. The intimate scene of his woman and child filled Erik's eyes with tears of gratitude for a fulfillment deeper than he ever dreamed would be his. Whatever might come with their daughter, Erik knew that he and Pema could face it together and succeed.

"You should sit down when you feed her," he said softly, supporting Pema's body against his. "Come back to sleep." Erik had removed his robes. He wanted to join with her for the rest of the night so that his strength could replenish hers while they slept. He stretched out again on the recliner and reached up to receive her. Pema removed her robes, but kept them around her shoulders so that they would serve as a blanket over their joined form. Then, she lay on Erik's body and felt them melt together as they went back to sleep.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe it's that time already," Erik said as he read the card inviting them to Binai's master transmission. Lit had almost reached her second birthday. On the whole, the child and her parents had enjoyed two stable and uneventful years. Pema and Erik each had a single-strand connection to her, through which they poured a constant stream of communication, guidance and love. Their own strand had become stronger as they learned to care for their special child together. Only on those rare occasions when Lit and her mother were alone did the girl deteriorate into tantrums and angry tears.

Binai greeted his family with shouts of enthusiastic welcome as soon as their shuttle touched down on Nyta. He had grown considerably since they last saw him at Lit's birth, and it was obvious that he would inherit his father's height. At eight years old, Binai was already even with Pema's shoulders. He immediately took Lit from his mother and proudly carried the child as if she were his very own precious

possession.

"You've done well," Jorn nodded approvingly to Pema and Erik. "Lit is much more stable than we could have expected for a bornmaster at this age."

Pema laughed in good-natured irritation. "Who is this 'we' you keep referring to, Jorn? You did that when you told me that 'we' hadn't expected us to make Lit until after our return from Kala."

"You're right, Pema. I'm sorry for being so cryptic. Specifically, the 'we' is Bespe and I. More generally, it is all of the Pathen master teachers who know and care about you, including Bikan and Secretary Kannan."

"Secretary Kannan knew I was pregnant," Pema suddenly remembered.

"Yes, but she didn't know that your master transmission was imminent," Jorn replied, "and Bespe was away and didn't see you between the conception and the time you left Kala. He would have known immediately." Jorn shrugged and smiled. "Even among Pathen master teachers, communication isn't perfect."

He paused, and then added. "But you're also wondering how we knew that you planned to make a second child. Two children is the typical pattern when members of different species become partners. They almost always want one of each." He smiled kindly. "Don't worry. We aren't reading all of your thoughts, and we don't know your future in any sort of detail. That's obvious, or we wouldn't have made the error that we did with Lit. It's just that the more one knows about the Path and how to use it, the more one is able to anticipate how the connections may play out."

They had reached the clearing. Pema reached out to take Lit from Binai.

"No, Mom, I want her with me," the boy said. "I wanted to become a master for her, and I want her there at my transmission." He gave his teacher a beseeching look. "Please, Jorn?"

"It would probably be good for both of you," Jorn assented. "I'll connect with her and then we'll both do your transmission. She's a master, so she's qualified to be there, even if she is only a toddler." He nodded to Erik and Pema. "You may observe the ceremony."

Jorn took Lit in his arms as Binai knelt. Erik and Pema stood hand-in-hand and watched in fascination as Jorn gently made a mind-to-mind connection with their daughter. After a few moments, he knelt and began the ritual for Binai. When it was over, Pema and Erik carefully and lovingly put a new outer robe around their son. Then he and Jorn stood, and five Pathen masters embraced in the clearing.



# - 6 -

## Lit

As long as two or three masters were around to keep the Path from overwhelming her, Lit was a loving and reasonable child. But on the rare occasions when only she and her mother were together, all of the girl's anger seemed to spill out. Pema's master skills alone were no match for the unrelenting and intense presence of the Path in a mind and body that didn't yet know how to deal with it. Jorn and Bespe came often to Sanderm to give additional training to Pema, Erik and Binai, and Secretary Kannan gave them lessons as her busy schedule permitted. But Lit's family simply couldn't learn quickly what the child had absorbed in just a few moments long before her birth. The pain and memory of that violation fueled an anger that was directed almost exclusively at the person who had unwittingly caused it.

Pema worked patiently with her daughter, but it was time for the child to begin dealing with the fact that she was a bornmaster. So, one afternoon shortly after Lit's third birthday, Pema decided that it was time for a change. Erik and Binai were on a quick errand to the diplomatic compound, and Lit had just given her mother a particularly vicious kick to the shins. Pema knelt and grasped her daughter firmly by the shoulders, her face directly in front of the child's. Lit's body was just beginning to lose its baby fat, and her light, wavy hair was becoming straighter and darker. An ancient wisdom and a young trauma alternately played across her face. At this particular moment, the trauma was winning the endless battle.

"Why do you do that, Lit?" Pema asked. Her tone was insistent, but without anger.

"Mommy hurt Lit. Lit hurt Mommy." The child's simple logic chilled Pema to the bone. She decided to take a chance.

"Show Mommy how she hurt you."

"No-o-o." Lit tried to pull away, but Pema tightened her grip.

"I love you, Lit, and I really want to know how I hurt you. Please show me."

"H-how?" the child stammered, now frightened by something she didn't yet have the words to express.

"You and Mommy are Pathen masters. We can put our heads together and then you can show me what Mommy did to you. It won't hurt again, I promise," said Pema with more confidence than she felt. She leaned her head gently against her daughter's.

"I want you to think about how I hurt you, and when you're ready, just tell me. Then I'll be able to feel it, too."

"All right," Lit said reluctantly. Her small, warm hands clutched Pema's arms.

The child closed her eyes, and then said, "I'm ready, Mommy." She paused. "I love you, too," she added in a quavering voice, as if in apology for what was coming.

As quickly as she could, Pema established a mind-to-mind connection with Lit through the Path, just as she had with Erik at his master transmission. She knew this was a risky and intrusive process, even between adult masters. Becoming entangled in someone else's thoughts could have unforeseen consequences, especially when the unordered mind of a child was involved. Pema and Erik never tried a mind-to-mind connection after that first time at his master ritual, preferring instead the more stable Sanderma joining that included the whole body along with the mind. But Pema and her daughter weren't Sanderma. They couldn't join and they needed a solution. This seemed to be the only way.

Several things happened at once, too fast for Pema to manage them all in the connection. First, she had a sensation of a dark, warm, watery place with a loud drumbeat, clearly Lit's memory of the womb. Then, there was a blinding flash, followed by the most horrific pain Pema had ever known. Every cell in her body seemed to explode with the full force of the Path. Immediately, everything went dark.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Lit wailed, tugging at the limp form on the floor. "Mommy!" She screamed so loudly that Erik and Binai, returning from the compound, heard her before they had even reached the garden gate. With a worried glance at each other, they ran to the house.

"Lit, what happened?" Erik asked, kneeling beside Pema's body. His daughter couldn't answer him; Lit was hysterical. She had spent most of her young life wanting to hurt her mother, and now she had. The child was inconsolable with the sudden realization of what she had done. Binai quickly wrapped his sister in the firm embrace that he always used to soothe her when the Path overwhelmed her. He sat on the floor with his back against the couch, cradling her and rocking gently. He focused on the girl to keep his attention away from the frightening sight of his unconscious and ashen mother on the floor before him.

Pema wasn't breathing. Erik quickly reached under the neck of her robes and joined his hand to her chest. Using his self-healing capability, he strengthened her faint heartbeat and felt her lungs take shallow breaths. He touched her through their single-strand connection, but there was no response.

"Call the healers. Now!" he ordered his son. Still holding his sister, the boy

rose quickly to comply.

Pema slowly opened her eyes. She wasn't sure where she was. She hadn't been able to make an orderly exit from Lit's mind, and she thought for a moment that she might be on Nyta, especially since Jorn was standing at the foot of the bed. Was this the day of her master transmission? When she found out about the catastrophe she'd caused by being pregnant during the ritual?

No, there was Binai, clearly much older than he'd been at the time. There were two other Sanderma in the room that Pema didn't know. By their dress, they appeared to be healers. Erik was sitting on the bed holding Pema's hand. He looked frightened and angry. Pema turned her head and gasped at what she saw. On a cot to her left, Lit lay motionless with an intravenous line in her arm. The child was gray and breathing unevenly.

"I killed her. Again. Didn't I?" Pema asked dully, barely able to speak through an excruciating headache. Sparkles of light danced in front of her, and there was a stabbing pain behind her eyes. A wave of nausea, caused by the headache, rolled through her.

"No," answered Jorn, "you probably saved her by sharing and releasing some of the pain and anger she feels. You've made your daughter face up to what she is, Pema, and you've shown her that you love her regardless of what she is or what she does. But this isn't over yet, and we all need to figure out what to do next for both of you. First though, we need you to tell us exactly what happened yesterday afternoon. Whatever possessed you to try an unassisted mind-to-mind connection with a bornmaster? You do not yet have the skills to absorb that kind of energy by yourself."

"You and Bespe let Erik do a connection with her when she was born, so I figured I could handle it, too," Pema countered angrily. She paused and her voice softened as she gazed at her daughter. "I wanted to know what she felt. I wanted to experience for myself how badly I'd hurt her and why she was so angry with me. And I didn't know how else to do that except to get into her mind and feel her memory of it." Pema started to cry. "I just wanted to understand her and help her if I could."

"You never should have attempted that by yourself, Pema," Erik said sharply. "Bespe did the connection for me at Lit's birth, so I never experienced the full force of her . . . condition. Couldn't you have just waited until Binai and I returned? We would have helped you."

"No, you would have stopped me," she replied angrily, pulling her hand away from his. Erik realized she was right, and his expression softened. "I didn't want her short life to be filled with such pain. And I honestly didn't think I could put up with eight or ten more years of that behavior. Not if I could do something to help us both." Pema paused and turned toward the cot. "Why does she have an intravenous line? Can't you just apply whatever medication you're giving her without being so invasive?"

"Your daughter was so hysterical that she began vomiting uncontrollably," one



of the healers answered. "We had to get her calmed down and re-hydrated. She's getting a mixture of a mild sedative and re-hydration fluid, and the fluid must be administered in a steady flow. The solution is at room temperature, which lowers her body temperature. That's why her skin looks like that." The healer paused. "We don't have much experience with skin, but the rest of your daughter's body is responding to the medication."

"What happened to her after I fainted?" asked Pema.

"Dad and I found her screaming and crying," Binai answered. "She thinks she killed you, and she's very, very sorry for all the times she's hit, kicked or bitten you in the past three years. I'll bet she won't do that again."

"Tell us what happened in the connection, Pema," Jorn urged.

"I felt it. I felt what she experienced at the moment of my," Pema corrected herself, "of *our* master transmission. To me, it was just the Path becoming one with my body. But she was a three-week embryo and it tore her apart in an instant. Every cell screamed as the Path overwhelmed her, and then everything went black. I remember, Jorn, that when you told me about the consequences of being pregnant during transmission, I felt for her and she seemed fine. She wasn't fine. She was unconscious from the hell I'd just inflicted on her."

"Stop it, Pema." Jorn was irritated. "You didn't know about bornmasters. Your action wasn't deliberate, and there are several of us who share the responsibility for what happened."

"But I ruined her life, nonetheless, and now mine, too. I can never face her again, now that I know what she's been through and that there is no hope for her to have a better life."

Jorn and Erik exchanged glances.

"There is a possibility," Jorn said hesitantly.

"Oh?" Pema replied, clearly without interest. She closed her eyes and wished they would all go away so that she could be miserable by herself. She turned toward the cot and sent a gentle wave of love through her single-strand connection to her daughter. There was only a faint response from the other end, but at least it wasn't the usual stream of anger. Pema vaguely heard a debate going on around her.

"It's never been tried on someone so young," one of the healers was saying.

"But it may be Lit's only chance for a normal life," Erik pleaded.

"What are you talking about?" Pema asked, annoyed.

"A Forgetting," said Jorn. "I'll use the Path to remove part of Lit's memory about the master transmission. She'll still remember it, but I can soften her recollection of the pain."

"Isn't memory manipulation illegal for Pathen?" Pema asked, turning to face him.

"So is creating a bornmaster," said the second healer, instantly regretting her words.

"She didn't do this intentionally," Jorn said wearily. "If you can't be helpful,

then please leave."

"I'm sorry, Master Jorn. I will help," the healer replied softly.

"I must get permission from the Pathen Council to do a Forgetting. They have an office at the diplomatic compound, so it shouldn't take long. The original memory must be recorded first." Jorn glanced at the unconscious form on the cot. "That might be difficult."

"Then take mine," said Pema. "I now have the same memory. And, by the way, anything you do to my daughter, you will do to me as well. We are partners in this, more than you can possibly imagine. So, you'd better get permission for two Forgettings. I give my consent for you to do it to both of us." She shot a warning glance at Erik. "Don't object. You have no idea what we're going through. If there's a procedure that will make Lit and me have a better relationship, then I want to have it done to me, too."

"I wasn't going to object," Erik said softly. "I think you've been a wonderful mother to her, and you're incredibly brave." He smiled slightly, trying to give her a reassurance that he didn't feel himself. He didn't have much confidence that anything would make his daughter less angry, or his partner less guilt-ridden.

"All right," Jorn nodded. "Binai, come with me please." Jorn gestured toward the healers, "You two can leave for now. Take the child off of the intravenous line before you go." The healers complied and left.

Erik lay down beside Pema and took her in his arms.

"I'm sorry that I was angry," he said. "I thought I'd lost both of you and I didn't know what to do. I was afraid, and I took my fear out on you. That was wrong."

Pema said nothing. She turned toward him, curling herself within his protective embrace. She was exhausted and angry, and the headache was getting worse. Still, she didn't want to reject him again. She knew that they were both doing their best in one of the most difficult moments of their parenthood. Erik felt her love and forgiveness, and drew her close.

Jorn and Binai returned in the afternoon, permission scrolls and a small, flat device in hand. They found all three occupants of the bedroom asleep.

"Pema." Jorn shook her gently. "We can do it."

Pema stirred, and both she and Erik opened their eyes.

"Can you sit up?" Jorn asked. "Lean against the wall."

Pema slowly did as he asked. Erik sat up and moved to the end of the bed so that Jorn would have room to work.

"I'm going to record the memory first. I need you to think about it, just like you asked Lit to do. Then, I will establish a mind-to-mind connection with you. This," he held up the flat device, no larger than his fingernail, "will record what you show me." Jorn stuck the device to the middle of his forehead.

Pema nodded. She closed her eyes and swallowed. "Ready."

Jorn took Pema's head gently in his hands and put his forehead against hers. He stiffened in pain, and his hands tightened on Pema's head. Erik looked around for

Binai. The boy had picked up Lit and was cradling her in his arms. Erik couldn't tell who was comforting whom in that pose.

Jorn was breathing in great gasps, his face contorted in agony. After several moments, he released Pema's head and leaned back. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Now you know," she said softly.

Jorn nodded and removed the device from his forehead.

"We'll have to do it once more for the Forgetting," he said. "This time, Pema, just start the memory and then back away from it, if you can. The best way to think about it is to watch me work on your memory, like it was a painful shoe that I was making more comfortable."

Pema closed her eyes again. "Ready," she whispered.

This time was much different. It was pleasant to have Jorn in her mind again. She always liked it when they were connected. There was something so calming and reassuring about his presence. This time, he seemed to be sanding or buffing something. After several moments, he finished whatever he was doing and left her mind, taking the headache with him. Pema wasn't quite sure why he had been there, but she was suddenly too sleepy to ask.

Jorn and Erik gently rearranged Pema on the bed so that she was lying down. Her breathing was deep and easy, and an expression of peace was returning to her face. Erik kissed her softly, and then covered her with a blanket.

"Now for Lit," Jorn said. "You can hold her while I do this, Binai, but please sit down on the bed so we'll all be more comfortable."

"How will you find her memory?" Erik asked.

"With a child, it's much easier. Even though she's a bornmaster, she doesn't yet have all of the defenses that we adults use to hide from our memories. It should be close to the surface, since it was the last thing she was thinking about. Besides, now that I've experienced the memory in Pema, I know what to look for."

Jorn sat on the floor by the bed and repeated the Forgetting, this time with the child. He easily accessed her memory of the master transmission, and then removed just enough of it to take the edge off of any future recollection of the pain.

"Now what happens?" Erik asked when Jorn finished with Lit. Binai put the sleeping child back on the cot. Her body was relaxed and she was breathing more easily.

"Pema and Lit still have the memory of the moment of their master transmission, but the excruciating pain is now gone." Jorn paused and shook his head. "It's hard to say what effect this will have on them, but Lit probably won't be as angry and aggressive toward Pema, and Pema won't be so hard on herself for what happened. You must do nothing to find out what they remember and what they don't. It will only confuse them. I suggest that you follow their lead. They may be a little dazed for a while. They have both lost two days, and neither of them will remember anything after Pema's attempt at the mind-to-mind connection. They may be a little

surprised that they're getting along better," he smiled.

Jorn was right. In the morning, Lit's anger was gone. She crawled out of her cot and snuggled between Erik and Pema.

"Good morning, Mommy," she said as she stroked Pema's face. Pema gave her a bemused smile, and then glanced at Erik. Hadn't they gotten out of bed once already this morning? She shook her head to clear the confusion.

"Good morning, Lit," she laughed, taking her daughter in her arms.

The odd feeling that something had happened faded quickly. Lit flourished, seemingly unaware that anything out of the ordinary had been done to her. She returned to sleeping in her own room, and her days and nights seemed calmer. She and Binai became closer than ever. He taught her how to use the Path constructively, and they created games with it that only masters could play. Binai even took her with him when he went to watch the ambassadors practice their negotiations at the diplomatic compound. One master was now usually enough to keep her steady.

But a darkness haunted Pema. Before the Forgetting, she had patiently worked with her daughter. Now, she clung to her. Erik often caught Pema looking at the child with a pained sadness that froze his heart. Several weeks after the Forgetting, Erik decided that it was time to discuss the situation. As he held Pema in his arms in the garden one evening, he questioned her gently.

"Pema, you've been sad and tense with Lit lately. It's not like you." He kissed the top of her head. "What's going on?"

"She's going to die, Erik," Pema replied in mild annoyance, feeling that she shouldn't need to remind him of that fact. "Every time I look at her, all I can see is the life she's not going to have."

"So you're just giving up on her?" Erik challenged. He turned Pema in his arms so that she had to sit up and face him. "That's not like you, and it's going to be hard to do that for eight or ten years, don't you think? What kind of life will both of you have if you do that? You're better than that, Pema."

"I know, I know," Pema answered wearily. "But when she dies, so does our family, Erik. Have you thought about that? Binai won't have children because he chose the master path. Our lineage ends with Lit. Since we don't have any siblings ourselves, we're it. The end of both families." Tears rolled down her face and she hung her head. Pema then added softly, "I can't believe that a love like this is just going to fade to nothing."

Erik sat still, stunned by Pema's words. He had never thought about it in those terms. She was absolutely right; it couldn't end like this. Why hadn't he seen this before? He took a deep breath. There was only one possible solution. Erik smiled with delight at the thought and slipped Pema's robes off her shoulders.

"An Assarian girl or a Sanderma girl?" he asked. Pema gasped, and then hugged and kissed him through her tears.

"Assarian," she whispered as Erik brought their bodies together.

They made the child first, and then made love half the night, almost more from

relief than pleasure. Now, perhaps, their family would live beyond the two of them.

Erik and Pema didn't want to make any mistakes about this pregnancy, so their first order of business the next morning was to inform their master teachers about the embryo they had made the night before. Secretary Kannan sent her congratulations, along with a diplomatic assignment for Erik that would take him to a nearby system for the next two weeks. Jorn's message said that, since Pema was already a master, there would be no trauma this time. Bespe asked Pema to bring herself and her children to Kala as soon as possible.

"You have much that you can learn from each other," he said as they sat with him in the cottage a few days later. "Regardless of how much time Lit has left, your lives will all be fuller if you accept each other as teachers. I would like to show you how to do that."

He turned to Pema. "Lit's access to the Path is beyond anything you will experience in your lifetime. In a sense, she was an empty room at the master transmission, and the Path had more space to move in. You already had life experiences that blocked and prejudiced you in certain ways. And you already had a family. Your choice to be both master and partner meant that you would never have as much access to the Path as someone who chose," he gestured to Binai, and then to Lit, "or was made to be only a master." Pema nodded in understanding. She had known that she would never be a master teacher. She didn't want to be one.

"But you can still be your daughter's teacher," Bespe continued. "She has a wealth of Path access, but very little idea of what to do with it. I will show you how to help her and how to learn from her. You've already made a single-strand connection with her. That was wise. It will enable you to detect any attempt by the forces of evil to make contact with her." Pema gave him an anxious look.

"Don't worry, I'll show you what to do about that, too." Bespe smiled, and then turned toward the boy.

"Binai, you've made an excellent start with your sister. You have shown her how to use the Path in ways that she can understand at her age." Lit was beginning to squirm. "Why don't you two go out in the garden and play some of those master games for a while? You can teach them to me later."

When they were gone, Bespe spoke to Pema in a low voice.

"Until Lit makes her choice for good or evil, your major task will be to keep the harmful forces away from her. Your Pathen skills are more extensive than Erik's, so you will be your daughter's best defense." He paused, and held her gaze with his. "Pema, tonight after the children are asleep, I will show you some of the evil that uses the Path for its own ends. You will need to know what it looks like and how to deal with it. It will take me most of the night to teach you about it, and then you can practice while I take care of your children. You can stay here as long as you need to learn the skills that will help you and your daughter."

"But what about my other daughter?" Pema replied nervously. "Let's not do anything that will harm another child in my womb."

"One of the best defenses against the dark forces is a shield," Bespe calmly replied. "Jorn and I made one around all of us when Lit was born. Since you need to know how to make them anyway, we'll start tonight by creating a very secure shield around your unborn daughter. Nothing will get through, I promise," he added, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder.

After Pema put her children to bed that evening, Bespe led her to the loft. It was several frustrating hours before she could make an impenetrable shield to Bespe's satisfaction. Just before midnight, she finally had one in place around her second daughter.

"Now comes the hard part," Bespe said in her mind.

Pema suddenly felt several friendly beings around her. They complimented her on her skill with the Path, and shyly asked if she would come with them. Pema agreed, and followed them into a place that appeared to be a small village, although its outlines were indistinct. The beings inquired politely about Pema's family, and asked about their health, their Path training and where they were. They were pressing a bit too close to Pema, so before she answered their questions, she took a step back to give herself some room to breathe. As she did that, the beings reached for her.

"No," she said evenly.

The beings weren't friendly anymore, and they swarmed over Pema so quickly that she had less than one heartbeat to make a decision. She couldn't fend off all of them, so she used her powers of expansion to make herself too diffuse for them to hold onto. It brought back an unpleasant memory of the first time she'd had to use expansion during the test on Nyta. The beings vanished.

"Well done, Pema," Bespe said quietly. "Now, tell me what you learned."

"I was surprised that they weren't dark, and that I didn't sense the evil within them until it was almost too late," Pema replied slowly. "I was drawn in by their friendliness."

"That's an important lesson, Pema," Bespe replied. "Evil's greatest trick is to convince you that it doesn't exist. You chose the right way to deal with it in this case. You didn't give the evil anything to hold onto. There are other options. You used a different strategy once before."

Pema sat up on the comforter and searched her memory. Suddenly, she knew.

"Commandant Stassy," she gasped. Bespe smiled and nodded at her insight.

"You defied him, which in that case was the right thing to do. Expansion would not have helped. Neither would the third option, compassion."

Pema gave him a quizzical look. "Compassion for evil?" she asked skeptically.

"Evil is a failure of love, Pema," Bespe explained. "Sometimes, if the evil isn't well-formed yet, you can invite it in just enough to find out where the love is lacking and what it needs. It may simply be acting out in a harmful way because it wants your attention. Sometimes, just noticing it is enough to make it go away." Bespe rose to leave. "Keep practicing," he said as he left her alone in the loft.

Pema lay down and closed her eyes. Throughout the night, she was confronted with what seemed like an endless stream of evil. Sometimes, she defied the dark forms and stood her ground, or actively disarmed or pursued them with her Pathen powers. Expansion worked again a few times. And once or twice, Pema invited the darkness in and discovered that it was only a confused request that was angry because it wasn't being heard.

Near dawn, Pema opened her eyes. She was exhausted, but could feel that her new skills had become part of her being. She took several deep breaths, then stood and turned toward the door.

It wasn't there.

"You're not going anywhere."

Pema spun around. A cloaked figure stood opposite her. Why hadn't she been able to sense the intruder? It stood right where she had been lying on the comforter.

"You've done well, *Master Pema*," the figure said with a contemptuous laugh. "But your skills are no match for the powers of darkness. Bespe's feeble games taught you nothing. You have made the mistake of allowing me in tonight, and I accept your most generous invitation."

The figure made a mocking bow of deference, and then suddenly grabbed Pema with unseen hands, sending icy tendrils through her body. Pema quickly tried expansion, but nothing happened. It was too late for defiance, and compassion clearly wasn't the right course of action with this creature.

"We knew that a bornmaster had been created," it continued as it explored Pema's body with its frigid touch. "But we couldn't find her until you found us tonight. You have betrayed your daughter, Pema. She and your unborn child are now mine, and I will destroy Binai and Erik as soon as I'm finished with you. It will be quicker for them. They don't have your strength. But Bespe needs to learn a lesson about real evil, and you are going to help me teach it to him. I will enjoy watching you die and then seeing his surprise when he discovers that one of his best students was killed in his own house."

The being wrapped Pema in its cloak. It reached for her womb, and the shield she thought was impermeable dissolved instantly at the creature's touch. It gave the embryo a chilling caress, and then moved upward. There was a sudden, excruciating pain in Pema's chest. The creature lifted her off her feet and threw her against the wall of the loft. She slid in a heap to the floor. The entity watched for several long moments, enjoying the agony in Pema's crumpled form. Then, using the Path to maintain its grip on her, it collapsed her left lung and reached for her heart.

"Bespe!" Pema screamed, gasping as blood trickled out of her mouth. "Bespe!"

She searched wildly for her teacher in the Path, and sent her scream down the single-strand connection that they shared.

"Please help me," she pleaded to the absent master with her final breath. It was the last thing she remembered.

Voices. Children's voices. Pema slowly opened her eyes. She heard her

children's voices outside the window, and realized that she was lying in the guestroom of the cottage. Bespe stood leaning against the door. He moved to sit beside her as she awoke. Pema cautiously took a breath, expecting to feel pain at any moment on her left side. She was surprised that both lungs filled fully and easily. There appeared to be no memory in her body of the night's events. But her mind remembered.

"My daughter . . ." she said weakly, putting her hand on her abdomen.

"Is fine," Bespe concluded the sentence. "As are Erik, Lit and Binai."

"What was that?"

"The fourth option, and something you're still not very good at, Pema. Asking for help. It took you much too long to make your appeal. I almost had to intervene, and then you would have failed this most important lesson. The shield you made around your unborn child is still intact and was impermeable. The shield you felt dissolve was one that I put there to see if you would ask for help if the test reached that point. Unfortunately, it did. Your daughters were never in danger, but you nearly let that thing kill you, Pema."

"I know," she shuddered. "I thought that there was no one there to help." She paused. "I often feel that way."

"If you persist in that belief, then you may truly lose Lit to evil, and you may lose others that you care about. You will never have the skills to deal single-handedly with most of what's out there, Pema. No one does, not even Pathen master teachers. You must learn this lesson." Bespe's tone was both commanding and pleading. "A heartfelt appeal to the universe, regardless of how hopeless the circumstances seem, will always bring a response." He took her hands in his. "You must believe that, Pema."

"But what if there's no one around to respond?" she countered. "It was convenient this time that you were in my mind and just downstairs, wasn't it? Suppose I'd been alone in the desert. I mean, in the forest," she hastily corrected herself.

"Something would have come to help. It always does. You may not know what or who it is, but you will know the result. If you ever need help with Lit, or anything else, something will be there if the situation is beyond your skills."

"It wasn't there on Abreez," she replied angrily, her eyes flashing.

Bespe gave her a puzzled look. Pema was usually more adept than this at dealing with her anger. Whatever it was, it must be deeply rooted within her to cause this kind of response. What was he missing? Bespe momentarily considered doing a probe, but decided that it would only upset her more. She'd had enough intrusion during the night.

"You didn't need help with Commandant Stassy. Defiance was the right strategy against his evil, and it worked."

"Not then," Pema said wearily, closing her eyes. "When it killed my family."

"An errant missile killed your family, Pema," Bespe corrected her. He suddenly understood her reference to the desert, but was still puzzled by the depth of



her anger. The sadness behind it should have dissipated during the Ashes Ceremony when Pema released her family's echo in the Path. "There was no evil behind the missile, only the misguided actions of civil war. There was nothing you could have done to stop it."

Pema opened her eyes and sat up. Bespe took her protectively in his arms.

"You did the right thing with Stassy's evil because you were sure. You belatedly did the right thing with the cloaked evil last night because you weren't sure, but you were sincere in your request. That's all it takes. Just do it sooner next time. Evil has a hard time with sincerity, and with heartfelt desires for good. If that's what you teach Lit, then she will make the right choice."

"I can teach her that," Pema replied, her confidence returning. "By the way, what day is it?"

"The next day," he replied with a gentle smile. "It was just one, long night."

Pema and her children stayed another week with Bespe. Pema found that she and Lit easily fell into a pattern of teaching and learning. The girl would show her mother some new feature of the Path, and Pema would figure out how to use it and then teach the skill to her daughter. Binai often participated, and sometimes he and Lit would conspire to show their mother some particularly complex or vexing part of the Path. They would giggle while she struggled to understand it. The lesson she gave back to them usually had a puzzle for them to figure out. The children might be better with the Path in the abstract, but their mother had a storehouse of life experiences to tease them with.

On their last day at the cottage, Bespe had them all practice creating shields. He suggested that they teach the skill to Erik when he returned home from his assignment.

"Why do we have to learn this?" Lit asked with a child's impatience at a game that's too easy. She had finished her third shield while Pema and Binai were still working on their first. "It's boring."

Bespe laughed as he gently stroked her head. "Because you never know when you might need one."



# - 7 -

## Parents

The open space on the first floor of the house had been turned into a delivery room. Doctor Bec and an obstetrical healer relaxed on the couch while Binai and Lit hovered nearby. They were too excited to sit down. Erik and Pema were walking in the garden. The exercise alleviated the discomfort of the early contractions.

"We're going to have a baby," Erik smiled at her softly.

Pema looked at him, but her attention was focused inwardly and she didn't reply.

"Oh, you're in a trance," Erik said. "Can I connect with you?" For the first time, he would be in mind-to-mind connection with her for the birth of one of their children. Almost as soon as they had made the child, they had decided to be connected during her birth. It was one of the many pleasures of being both masters and partners.

"Yes, but make your own trance first to block the pain," Pema replied somewhat distractedly. The contractions were becoming stronger.

After a few moments, Erik leaned his head against hers, and Pema felt their minds come together. They walked on in their slow circumambulation of the garden. Suddenly, Pema gasped and bent over.

"What was that?" Erik asked. He, too, had felt the change in the latest contraction.

"I need to push. It's time."

They returned to the house, and the healer helped Pema out of her robes and onto the delivery table. Erik straddled the table and sat behind her.

"I'm right here," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her to keep her upright so that gravity could do its work. He was fascinated with being able to share this experience so closely with her.

Pema was perched on the end of the table. She was breathing hard, but regular-

ly, from her trance. The obstetrical healer crouched in front of her, ready to guide the child from her body. Binai and Lit stood nearby. The girl alternately stared in fascination, or hid her face in her brother's robes when the scene became too intense. Doctor Bec stood behind the healer.

With a final push, Pema delivered her daughter. The placenta followed immediately. Erik disconnected from Pema's mind and moved so that she could lie back. The healer placed the newborn face-up on Pema's abdomen, and Erik cut the umbilical cord. Other than being slightly purple, the baby was alert and breathing easily. Her head was covered with dark, curly hair.

"Where did she get that?" Erik asked in amazement, stroking his daughter's wet head.

"Certainly not from your side of the family," Pema laughed, still slightly out of breath.

"Are you ready for First Touch?" Doctor Bec asked. He loved this particular ritual, and was delighted that for the third time, he would get to hold an offspring of Pema and Erik's for the ceremony. Erik had chosen to call his daughter Metta, a name more ancient than even the Sanderm language. In a forgotten tongue, it meant 'loving kindness.'

Pema fed her newborn, and then handed the baby to Binai. He and Lit sat on the couch, closely examining and exclaiming over their new sister, who waved her tiny hands at their faces. Erik carried Pema to their bedroom so that she could rest. He returned downstairs to thank Doctor Bec and the healer, and to help them take the birth equipment out to the land shuttle. He then went into the kitchen to make lunch for his family.

While Binai and Lit ate downstairs with the infant, Erik set a tray for himself and Pema in their room. She sat up as he served her. He gave her a lingering kiss of thanks for a profound experience that he had never expected to witness so closely. Then they ate in silence, enjoying the warmth and fulfillment of parenthood that passed wordlessly between them. When they finished eating, Erik briefly joined his hands to Pema's body so that his self-healing could repair the birth wounds. She lay down again, and he covered her with a blanket. Exhausted by the birth, Pema was instantly asleep.

"A message arrived from my parents while you were napping," Erik informed her that afternoon. "They send their congratulations on Metta's birth, and they'd like to meet their grandchildren. And you, too, of course," he added with a grin.

"They're back?" she asked. Erik's parents had been on an extended assignment as roving ambassadors to several remote diplomatic outposts. They had left Sanderm ten years ago, just after Erik's eighteenth birthday. He had accompanied them as far as Nyta, where he disembarked for what he believed would be his first lessons with his new teacher. Instead, the journey ended with his Becoming, and his Bonding Ceremony with Pema.

"Yes, they're home," he replied hesitantly. Pema sensed that there was more to

the answer, but their newborn needed her attention, so she didn't pursue the conversation.

A few mornings later, as Pema sat on the couch feeding Metta, there was a knock on the door. The rest of the family was in the garden playing Pathen master games, so Pema covered herself and got up to answer the door. A slightly odd-looking Sanderman in a white inner robe stood on the threshold.

"Good morning, Pema," the visitor said with a warm smile. "We're Erik's parents. It's good to finally meet you in person."

Pema gaped, all protocol suddenly forgotten.

"You're, you're *permanent*," she stammered.

"Yes, we are," the parents answered, smiling at her consternation. "May we come in?"

"Of course," Pema replied, recovering her manners and bowing a greeting. She led them to the garden.

Pema experienced a pang of envy as she watched the reunion between Erik and his parents. It brought back a dim and pleasant memory from her own childhood, although she and her parents had never greeted each other quite like this. No one spoke. Instead, the joined being put their arms around their son. He leaned his forehead into theirs. They made a surface joining, and then he made a mind-to-mind connection. It was a poignant moment of reunion, and Pema and the children watched in awed silence.

For the rest of the day, Erik's parents frolicked with their grandchildren, obviously satisfied and delighted with the partnership and the family that their son and Pema had created in the past ten years. There was a deep, calm ease between Erik and his parents that the years of separation had not diminished, and Pema drew some comfort from watching them together. She knew that she would have had the same relationship with her parents, had they lived.

As the extended family got to know each other through the day, Binai and Lit adjusted quickly to two grandparents in one form. But Pema found herself glancing often at the joined being. She was intensely curious about their Permanence. Towards evening, the older couple sat with Pema on the couch as she nursed Metta. Erik was putting the other two children to bed.

"Would you like to see how it feels?" they asked Pema. They sensed her curiosity, but there hadn't been much opportunity during the day to speak with her alone.

"I'm sorry," she replied, "I know I've been staring at you. I've never seen a joined being up close for this long before, and I'm wondering how you . . . negotiate your lives, your life." Pema's voice trailed off in confusion.

"That's understandable," they smiled kindly.

"How, how would we do it?" she asked, trying not to seem too eager.

"You are a Pathen master, Pema. We are not, but we will allow you to do a mind-to-mind connection with us, as Erik did this morning. You can do one briefly now, just to satisfy your curiosity," they smiled, "and we're willing to spend more

time with you and Erik together to help you with your own decision about Permanence."

"All right," Pema agreed, electing not to tell them that the decision had been made. They would find out soon enough when they all got in each other's minds.

Pema finished feeding Metta. Then she and Erik's parents moved to chairs and sat facing each other. Pema laid the sleeping child on their lap and gently took their head in her hands. They surprised her by doing a surface joining with her forehead, and for a moment, Pema struggled not to break down. She had never joined with anyone but Erik, and now the same love and acceptance that he gave her flowed to her from his parents. It was a long-forgotten feeling and Pema sat breathing deeply, allowing parental love to wash over her once again. Then, carefully and respectfully, she initiated the mind-to-mind connection.

Erik stood transfixed by the scene before him. He had finished putting Binai and Lit to bed, and had returned downstairs to find Pema and his parents in a joined connection. He hadn't expected this development quite so soon, but he sensed that a gentle, mutual exploration was underway before his eyes. In a few moments, Pema and his parents separated. A wordless glance of gratitude passed between them. Then the joined being stood up, handed the baby to Erik, bowed a silent goodbye and left.

"What was that all about?" Erik asked in amazement, sitting down with Metta in the chair his parents had vacated.

Pema closed her eyes. It was a long time before she answered. How could she express all that she had felt and received from the joined being? They had been partners for thirty-five years and had given each other their promise of Permanence the day they bonded, just after each had come of age. Pema hadn't thought it possible, but she had experienced them in a partnership more loving and committed than her own. Pema looked into the joined being and glimpsed the future that she and Erik would share. It left her speechless with gratitude and longing.

"Now I know why you are the way you are," she finally said. "Your parents are extraordinary, Erik. And so are you." She stood and kissed him and their daughter, then silently climbed the stairs to bed.

"They've been home for a year," Erik told her the next morning. "They asked for my permission when they were on their way home from their diplomatic assignment. They entered Permanence right after that, and then started Seclusion."

"There is so much I don't understand," Pema replied. "Why did they need your approval for Permanence, and what is Seclusion?"

"Permission of the immediate family is preferable before a couple becomes permanently joined," Erik explained. "But if they have children, then permission is required. You might imagine how disconcerting it would be, even for an adult child, to suddenly have both parents in one being without any warning. And the procedure still carries some risks. Nowadays, the preparation is extensive, and at least one Observer is with the couple at all times during the actual joining. But things can

still go wrong, and it's best if the children know what's happening, just in case."

"I didn't think about it like that," Pema admitted.

"Seclusion," Erik continued, "happens for one year after Permanence. The couple curtails their social activities and does not work during that period. They may see their family and their Observer, but that's all. During that year, they are expected to focus solely on their relationship and on learning how to live as one being. My parents didn't ask to see us during their Seclusion because they knew we were all consumed with getting Lit through a difficult period. They wanted to make sure that they were stable themselves before they met us so we wouldn't have to take care of them, too. Their Seclusion ended the day before Metta was born."

"They have such a feeling of contentment and peace," Pema sighed. "You can see it in their face and in their mind."

Erik's parents visited often in the months and years after Metta's birth. Binai badgered them for stories about their adventures as ambassadors to faraway worlds. He would sit with them in the garden, listening to their tales for hours on end. As he grew older, they often took him with them to their work at the diplomatic compound.

The older couple also had a calming effect on Lit. Even though they were not Pathen masters, they seemed able to reach the child on a deep level. They soothed her fears about the dark and evil forces that haunted her dreams.

Over the years, Lit had become progressively more stable, especially during the day. By the time she was eight, she rarely needed the presence of another master to steady her, and most often it was Binai who was immediately there with help and support. But there were many nights when Pema and Erik held their daughter while she screamed, unable to wake her or get into her mind when the dreams seized her.

One morning, after a particularly rough night, Erik's parents sat in the garden holding Lit on their lap. Pema and Erik lay stretched out at their feet, exhausted. Four year-old Metta sat between them, quietly watching a storyscreen about a magical healer. Binai had recently moved to the diplomatic compound. His parents had given him an apartment there as a coming-of-age gift. Before he left, Pema showed him how to make a single-strand connection to Lit so the two could still be connected, now that Binai wasn't home as much.

"I get so scared," Lit said, snuggling deeper into the comforting embrace of her grandparents. "I don't know if the evil bad thing is really trying to get me, or if I just imagine that it is." Her lips started to quiver. "I wish it would go away." Tears rolled down the child's face. Pema closed her eyes. She had felt a wave of quiet desperation through the strand that she shared with her daughter.

"That's a very grown-up analysis for an eight year-old," her grandparents said with a kindly smile. They paused, and then turned the child in their arms so that they could face her squarely.

"Lit." The tone of their voice in just one word made Pema and Erik sit up. "Lit, moment after moment, the universe gives us the opportunity to do the right thing. It

is up to us to decide how we will respond to that gift."

It was a steep lesson for someone so young. Lit's parents and grandparents sat motionless, sensing that this might be a defining moment for the powerful, yet inexperienced Pathen before them.

Lit crawled slowly out of her grandparents' arms and walked a few paces away from her family. Her light brown hair fell softly to her shoulders, and her thin body was beginning to show faint signs of womanhood. Being a bornmaster had aged her face and bearing, but at this particular moment she looked especially small and vulnerable in her too-large master robes. She stood with her back to her family for several moments. The silence was becoming unbearable.

"You mean I have a choice?" Lit finally answered, her voice barely above a whisper. She did not turn around.

"Yes," her grandparents replied. "Will you make the choice for good or evil, Lit?" They paused, and then continued with a slight edge in their voice. "We and your parents will love you regardless of the choice you make. But know this. If you decide for good, we will support you with all our power. If you decide for evil, we will defy you to our deaths and beyond, if necessary."

Lit hung her head, and then slowly straightened up, turning to face them. Using her bornmaster power, she gently established a mind-to-mind connection with the three adults in front of her. They did not object, sensing that she was asking for their help and support for what she was about to say.

In a slow, measured tone, Lit spoke her answer.

"I will *never* make a choice for evil," she intoned, focusing on a point above the heads of her parents and grandparents. They had the distinct impression that she was addressing some unseen entity that hovered there. Pema wondered if it was the cloaked evil from Bespe's loft. As if in response, the figure materialized between Lit and her parents. The creature turned to Pema.

"Now we finish this," it hissed softly. "She's mine, and as soon as I have her, I'll make sure that I kill you faster this time."

Pema felt a constriction in her chest. She glanced quickly at Erik. She had told him about the experience in the loft, and he could sense what was happening to her now. He reached out and gently joined the fingers of his left hand to Pema's throat so that his self-healing capability could counteract the creature's pressure on her lungs. Together, they sent a heartfelt plea for help into the Path.

Almost immediately, there was a momentary and subtle shift in the visible light, as if something had blinked. Erik's parents and Metta sat frozen in the same postures they had been in just before the figure appeared. The morning breeze died, and nothing stirred. It was suddenly very quiet in the garden, and Pema and Erik realized that something was suspending time so that the three masters could deal with the evil in front of them before it spread to the rest of the family and, perhaps, beyond. With an anxious constriction in their hearts, they also knew that this was the moment of choice for their daughter.



Tightening its grip on Pema, the creature turned to Lit and took a step toward her.

"Bornmaster," it whispered.

Lit stood her ground as the creature reached for her.

"You may take over my dreams, but you will *never* take over my life, or my family," Lit declared defiantly.

The figure hesitated. In that instant, Lit reached out and grabbed its cloak. She gave it a furious tug and it came away in her hands. There was nothing beneath it. Pema and Erik sensed a momentary struggle, and then Lit's expression softened. The cloak disappeared, and Pema gasped a full breath. Erik disconnected his fingers and stroked her neck to calm them both. Metta and Erik's parents moved again and Lit released their mind. Keeping the connection with her parents, she took a few steps forward and knelt beside them. They took her joyfully in their arms.

"That thing has been trying for a while now to force me to choose my Project," she said. "That's why the nightmares have gotten worse lately."

"What is your Project, Lit?" Pema asked aloud. Silently, she poured her love and praise into her daughter through their connection. Erik did the same.

"I don't know exactly," Lit replied. "But my heart tells me that it will be helping you and dad in some way." Lit smiled and shrugged. Now that she had faced down the nameless terror, she was beginning to relax.

"I am not aware that your mother and I need help," Erik laughed, relieved, "but that sounds like a good Project to me."

Lit grinned and rose to her feet, releasing her parents' minds as she did so. She stood taller, and her robes appeared to fit her body for the first time in her young life. She picked up her sister and held her in a gentle embrace, and they all knew that the gesture represented Lit's urgent need to be close to someone who was warm, loving and safe.

"Can we have lunch?" Lit asked, turning to her grandparents and sounding very much like a child again. "I'm hungry."

Erik's parents left after the meal. Pema was attentive, but quiet for the rest of the day. As she and Erik undressed for bed that evening, he asked softly, "Do you want to sleep joined?" He was hoping that Pema would agree. He wanted to know, on a deep level, what she was feeling about the day's events. Pema closed her eyes and nodded her assent. She settled into a comfortable position on her stomach and Erik carefully lowered his body into hers.

Lately, they had been sleeping completely joined on most nights. They had discovered long ago that they often awoke with a common understanding or feeling if they slept as one being. On this night, Erik experienced the profound relief that Pema felt about their daughter's choice, and the lessons they had all learned at Bespe's cottage. Using the help of others, they had defied an evil power, and Lit had made her decision to live a life of good.

In Pema's body and mind, Erik also discovered that Lit's choice had healed the

last open wound between mother and daughter from the trauma that had forced Lit to become a Pathen master far too soon. For the first time, Erik fully understood what Lit's tortured childhood meant to his life partner. He was relieved to see that Pema had forgiven herself for her unwitting part in the creation of the bornmaster. It was a night of the deepest emotional exploration for Pema and Erik since their training with Bespe. They joined again completely the next night to continue sharing their relief and joy at their daughter's decision.

But as Erik disconnected them the following morning, Pema moaned in pain and leaned her head into her hands.

"I hate that," she said softly.

"*What?*" Erik asked in stunned disbelief. In all their years of joining, not once had Pema ever complained or expressed any displeasure about their time as one being. Erik knew that Assarians expressed intimacy differently, and they had used that form many times, especially when Pema was too pregnant for a regular joining. But until now, she had always been a willing and passionate participant in the Sanderma form. Whether for pleasure, mutual support, or to make children, their joinings had always brought a deep fulfillment for Erik. It was an unpleasant shock to discover, only now, that Pema felt differently. Erik sat on the edge of the bed, not sure what to say, or do, next.

Pema got up without responding, and without looking at him. "I need to get breakfast for the girls," was all she said.

It was a busy day. Binai was going on his first assignment as a junior member of a diplomatic team. Lit left the house early to help him prepare, and to see him off from the diplomatic compound. Pema, recently appointed as the senior advisor to the new Foreign Secretary, had a full calendar of issues to resolve with various delegations. Metta and Erik spent the day at home. He was teaching her the Pathen object manipulation exercises, and he was delighted that she had her mother's ability to do them quickly and accurately. They were so absorbed in the lesson that they didn't realize until mid-morning that Pema had left the house without saying goodbye.

Dinner that evening was a quiet and tense affair. Lit and Metta exchanged worried glances. Their parents weren't talking, and the girls had never experienced so much silence and avoidance. Finally, Lit decided to try a mind-to-mind connection. She was blocked with such cold, immediate finality by her mother that it made her gasp.

"Do not *ever* try that again without my consent," Pema warned.

"Yes, Mother," Lit replied softly. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to help."

The evening wore on. After putting the girls silently to bed, Pema went outside and sat in the garden. A darkness that she hadn't been able to touch, even during Bespe's training, engulfed her. She dimly remembered that she should ask for help, and she put a vague appeal into the Path, more from habit than conviction. The only person she knew to ask for help was the same person who caused her pain with eve-

ry disconnection.

"Will you come to bed?" Erik asked hesitantly from the doorway, well after midnight. Pema closed her eyes at the agony she heard in his voice, knowing that she was about to make it worse.

"I don't want to join," she said.

"Don't want to join, or don't want to be in the same bed?" Erik asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Both," Pema replied. She stood and walked past him into the house. "I'll sleep in Binai's room." But sleep eluded her on that night, and for several agonizing nights thereafter.

"Thank you for coming," an exhausted Erik greeted his parents a few mornings later. "Did you get Bespe's message?"

"Yes," they replied. "Please take the girls for a walk so that we can speak with Pema alone."

Erik helped his daughters into their robes and the threesome left. His parents found Pema asleep on a bench in the garden. They sat down beside her and waited patiently for her to awake.

"Good morning, Pema."

Pema rose and bowed her greeting, but said nothing. They motioned for her to sit beside them.

"Pema, when was the last time you were home?"

"I am home," she replied wearily, wondering what was behind their question. "This house is the only real home I've ever known. Everything I love is here."

"So, you're not planning to leave it?"

"No. Why would I do that?" On a hunch, she added, "Why are you here?"

The parents took a deep breath. "Master Bespe asked us to come. He said that he couldn't help you, but that perhaps we could. We're not sure what he meant."

"Your questions suggest otherwise," Pema countered, but her voice was kind. She had been more relieved to see Erik's parents than she was willing to admit. At least someone who loved her hadn't left her. "If you're asking when I was last on Assar, it was almost thirty years ago." She paused. "For the Ashes Ceremony for my family."

"Then you did say good-bye to them?"

Pema turned away. It was a long time before she answered.

"No, I didn't. I scattered their ashes, but I never said good-bye to their echo in the Path. I haven't let them go." It was the first time that Pema had ever admitted her failure to properly release the family of her childhood. It was a serious lapse, and they all knew it.

Erik's parents took her in their arms. "Why didn't you say good-bye?"

Pema hung her head and did not reply. The older couple rocked her gently and stroked her head. It was more parental compassion than Pema could bear, and she began to cry quietly.

"Pema, we love you very much. You have made a home with our son that has given both of you happiness and fulfillment, and you have welcomed us into it without hesitation." They paused. "We can never replace the parents you lost, and we wouldn't presume to try. But we would like to help you let go of that family so you can return to this one."

"Will you come with me?" Pema asked through her tears.

Two days later, she stood with Erik's parents overlooking the narrow mountain valley on Assar where she had scattered her family's ashes.

"This was my parents' most treasured place," Pema told them. "They met at the resort in the valley when they both were on vacation from diplomatic school one year." She sighed and looked around at the steep, forested hillsides. A distant waterfall silently filled the stream below. "They always thought we'd come back to live here as a family. I always thought . . ." her voice trailed off.

". . . that they would come back," Erik's parents softly finished her sentence.

Pema sank to the ground. She was too sad to even cry, so she closed her eyes and surrendered to the darkness. She sat motionless for a long time. At one point, Pema thought she heard a faint gasp from Erik's parents, but she was too consumed with her own pain to wonder what had startled them. There was nothing in this part of the Assar wilderness that would harm them.

At last, the words began to come.

"When Erik and I were studying with Master Bespe on Kala, Erik showed me his fear of being abandoned. I must admit that I was somewhat amused by it. He was the one who'd had parents and a stable home to grow up in. Of the two of us, I certainly had the better excuse for worrying about being left by those I love."

Pema paused, and then continued softly. "I do have that fear. But it is so deep; I've hidden it so well from myself that I couldn't begin to see it until there was nothing else in the way. Until last week, I was consumed with keeping Lit stable and away from evil. I had an excuse not to start looking at my own dark places again. But after you helped Lit make the choice for good, my last remaining defense was gone. Erik and I joined that evening, and I showed him how relieved I felt about Lit's decision. We slept that night and the next, deeply entwined in each other's thoughts and feelings. You know what it was like. It was heaven. And then one morning, as we disconnected, it was back. That terrible feeling that someone I love was leaving me. I couldn't stand the pain and I didn't want to go through it again."

Pema's breath was coming in short gasps. "I told Erik that I hated it. But it wasn't the joining I hated; it was the disconnecting. And then I made it worse. I told him I didn't want to join anymore. It was a lie. What I didn't want was to disconnect anymore. I love Erik more than my life, but I don't know what to do about the way I feel," Pema ended in a whisper.

"So you left him, to some extent, before he could leave you or be taken away from you," the parents offered gently.

"Yes, I suppose I did," Pema replied, surprised by the truth of their conclusion.

"Why can't you tell Erik this?" they asked, and Pema heard tears in their voice.

"In all our years together," she replied softly, "Erik has never once done anything to hurt me during a joining. How can I possibly make him understand, or even believe, why disconnecting is so painful for me now?"

"Show me," Erik said, using the same challenge that she had given him on Nyta long ago. His voice was hoarse with unreleased tears. It had taken all of his effort not to cry out as Pema told her story.

She gasped and opened her eyes.

"How did you get here without me detecting it?" she asked in astonishment as she rose to her feet.

"I made a shield with the Path. It wasn't a very good one, but I guess you were too upset to notice," he replied with a wan smile.

Pema stepped hesitantly toward him. He moved to embrace her, but she slipped through his arms and knelt at his feet.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I wanted you here, but I didn't think you would come after what I did to you. To us."

"We'll leave you two alone," the older couple nodded kindly.

Erik removed his robes and cloak. He spread them out on the ground, and then sat down on them.

"Come." He held his hand out to Pema. "We'll do it just like Bespe taught us when we looked at the other dark places."

Pema hesitated. She desperately wanted to do as he suggested, but she wasn't sure that she had the courage to face what had driven them apart. It was a dark place that she hadn't been able to explore before, even with his help. Erik felt her hesitation and the reason behind it. Then, for the first and last time in their life together, he made a mind-to-mind connection without touching her, and without asking for her consent.

"Use my strength, all of it if you need to," he said in her mind. "I want you back, whatever it takes."

Pema closed her eyes. She removed her robes and followed Erik's outstretched hand, then lay unmoving on his cloak as his body joined hers.

"I have never once had any desire to live apart from you, Pema. You know that. Why are you so afraid that I'll leave you?"

"Because I'm at my best when I'm with you. I like myself most when I'm with you." Pema paused, and then continued with a pained slowness as she felt for the words. "We have a wonderful life together, Erik, but I'm afraid that if I let myself enjoy it, then I'll be punished. You, and everything else, will go away."

"Why do you deserve to be punished, Pema?" he asked softly.

"Because I couldn't stop it. They all died and I couldn't stop it, and then everything was taken away," she replied in quiet agony in his mind. "So I withdrew from you before I could be punished again. Before it could all be taken away again. Your parents were right. I left you before something could take you away from me. I

wasn't going to be abandoned again," she added with a trace of defiance.

Pema paused, and Erik felt her torturous effort to reach the bottom of the dark place. He held her tenderly within him, giving her both the space and the support that she needed. He could sense that she almost had the answer, but he knew that the last step to find it would be the most difficult. Her words came with excruciating slowness.

"If I were good enough and did everything right, no one would leave me. I'm afraid that I'll do something wrong, and you'll be gone. I believe that I cause the abandonment that happens to me. It's a vicious cycle that I don't know how to get out of."

There was a long moment of silence before Pema continued. "But who is leaving and why are they going? It can't all be my fault, can it? What you do with your life is not mine to control, and I wouldn't want to do that. It would only drive you away. So, am I just standing still while everyone else moves? Am I really being abandoned, or are other people just getting on with their lives? Somewhere within me, I must have the capacity to trust myself without needing others around to tell me I'm a good person. You wouldn't be able to cause the feelings of goodness within me if they weren't already there, at least in some small measure."

Pema stopped, oddly relieved at the sudden insight. She had just discovered the difference between needing to be with others for her own sense of self-worth, and wanting to be with them for who they were. Only in the former could she feel abandoned.

Erik felt a lightness beginning to creep in at Pema's edges, and there was a flicker of new possibilities for how she perceived herself. Her words were a stunning and courageous acknowledgement of an old problem, and Erik was awed by her willingness to face this darkest fear. She was the deepest, most thoughtful person he had ever met, and he reveled in the knowledge that her depths were his to explore for a lifetime. The thought filled him with a sudden and intense desire to take her right then, to flood her body as well as her mind with his passion, to show her that he loved her and wanted to be with her because of the sensitivity and insight that her dark places gave her. But he knew that she wasn't ready to turn their joining into a celebration just yet.

"Let's say good-bye to them," he suggested softly.

It was difficult to cry during a joining, but Pema sobbed within their combined form. This time, it was not a cry of sadness, but of relief and release. She felt Erik's need for her and the reason that drove it. He loved her because of what she was, not in spite of it. Pema let him breathe for their combined form, and gradually she became calm enough to find the echo of her family in the Path. Steadied by Erik's love and support, she said good-bye to her parents and brother.

"We never left you, Pema."

It was not Erik's voice.

"Disconnect," she requested. "Slowly, so I can show you what I feel when you

do it."

Erik complied, even though he already knew what she would find.

"It's gone," Pema whispered. "The feeling that you're leaving me is gone."

"But it also doesn't feel like we're completely disconnected, does it?" Erik asked. This was new territory for him, too. They were finally resolving a fear that they both shared.

"No, it feels like," Pema searched for the words, "it feels like the space that holds us just got bigger." She paused, and then nodded with a smile, as if to herself. "I thought that my family had left me and that I had caused it, or at least failed to prevent it. I believed that you might do the same and that somehow, it would be my fault. But now I see that there's nowhere to go. It's all right here. We're all right here. There is no *there* for anyone to leave me and go to." She thought for a moment, and then added softly, "The only person who ever left me was me."

"Well, don't do it again," Erik grinned. "I like having you here. Now let's go find my parents. It's getting late and we need to get home to the girls."

They found the older couple enjoying the sunset on the deck of the resort. They allowed Pema to do a mind-to-mind connection so that she could show them what happened, and give them her love and thanks. After dinner, Erik's parents left for Sanderm to take care of their granddaughters. During the meal, they had surprised Erik and Pema with a gift of a week at the resort.

"Do you want to sleep joined?" Erik asked as he and Pema settled into their lamplit cabin that evening. His voice was tense with desire, but he thought that Pema might want to rest first after the day's ordeal.

"I want to join, but I don't think we're going to get much sleep," she replied, dropping her robes and pulling him down with her onto a thick rug in the middle of the room. "And we may still have a problem disconnecting," she teased as he brought their bodies together.

"Yes, we might," he gasped as she firmly stroked a sensitive place within them. The celebration that Erik had wanted had begun. He had waited a long time for the right moment to return what Pema had given him nine years ago on Kala. This night, he surrendered with utter joy to her every request, met her every need, and felt his own fulfilled tenfold. Pema's ability to know exactly what would arouse or soothe them next was unbelievable, and Erik kept them joined through the night and into the next day. He had missed her so much. Almost as much as she had missed him.





## - 8 -

# Partners

As soon as Lit had made her choice for good, the Pathen Council requested that Pema and Erik allow their daughter to work at the Council office in the diplomatic compound. A registered bornmaster was a rarity, and the Council wanted to study and learn as much as possible from Lit in the time she had left. She had skills and access beyond that of any other living Pathen, and the Council wanted to determine if her knowledge could be made available to the general Pathen community.

Pema and Erik informed their daughter of the Council's request, and told her that the choice was hers to make. They wanted her to have the opportunity to direct some part of her life, since so much of it was already controlled by the enormous and unrelenting presence of the Path within her. They also confided to her their concern that the Council might treat her as a research subject instead of the unique person that she was.

"Do you really think that anyone besides you, Binai and Metta could tell me what to do?" Lit asked with a laugh. Her parents shrugged and smiled. The Council was going to have its hands full if it thought that it could manipulate the life of a bornmaster.

After a week of debate and discussion, Lit agreed to the Council's request. Her parents were amazed and relieved when she informed them that she had accepted the offer only after the Council agreed to grant her the position of Pathen Master Teacher. With Binai's help, Lit had negotiated a role for herself in which she would set the agenda for the research that would be done on her. Her job would be to teach the Council what they wanted to know about her, rather than have them study and probe her.

From the first day, she flourished in her new position, and was delighted to be working so near Binai. They often met for lunch in the compound cafeteria, and Lit would usually have dinner and a relaxed evening of conversation with him in his ap-

artment before returning home. He kept a discrete eye on how the Council worked with her, just to make sure that they didn't take advantage of her youth. But Binai conceded to himself that such a scenario wasn't likely. His sister was savvy beyond her years.

With two of their children now more or less independent, Pema and Erik accepted an increasing number of diplomatic assignments to other worlds. They almost always went as a team. The experience of being at the negotiations on Kala had taught them that they worked best when they were together. One of them would become the expert on the subject of the mission, whether it was trade disputes, cross-world labor negotiations or peace treaties, and would act as advisor. The other would facilitate the discussions and manage the process of creating the agreements. They usually took turns playing the two roles, although Pema was better at getting warring factions to cooperate, and Erik was more patient in working through complex issues that required long periods of negotiations.

Their expertise was much in demand, and Secretary Kannan and her successors struggled to ensure that Pema and Erik had enough time away from their work to attend to their family, their partnership and their Pathen master studies. Sometimes they took Metta with them on assignments, but the girl showed little interest in travel and the diplomatic life. Most often, she was content to stay with her grandparents on Sanderm. Her parents wondered what work would eventually call to her. It was clear that she wasn't going to be an ambassador.

Pema and Erik had been partners for almost seventeen years. They felt closer than ever, and even without being in Permanence, they often felt and thought as one. The sharing of work and parenthood gave a satisfying rhythm to their lives. They did not avoid the fact that they would soon face Lit's death, but otherwise, their days and thoughts were without care, and their nights were still filled with passion and with sleeping as one.

So the message that arrived for Erik one morning could not have come as a more unpleasant and disruptive surprise.

"It's from the Home Secretary. It says that, in recognition of my Pathen and diplomatic accomplishments, and my success at partnership, I have been offered a Second," Erik muttered. He kept his eyes downcast, and so missed the lightning calculation that crossed Pema's face.

"What is the process?" she asked evenly. She was curious about how second partners were added to relationships on Sanderm. The people of her own homeworld practiced monogamy, but she knew that was not typical of many societies in the galaxy.

"The potential Second spends five days with the family, and then the partner makes the decision."

"Who is she and when will she be here?" Pema's voice still carried only calm curiosity.

"Her name is Tetra. Her first partner was killed in a shuttle accident. They had

a son who is a little younger than Binai. He lives at the healer school. She will arrive tomorrow." Erik knew that he was rambling on to avoid an uncomfortable silence, but Pema was listening attentively. He was puzzled by her lack of reaction. She treated him no differently than usual until the woman arrived the next day.

Erik introduced Tetra to his daughters as a guest who would be staying with them for a few days. Pema was relaxed and cordial with the woman. Both in Pema's behavior, and through the Path, Erik could detect no emotions other than those that she was displaying. Her lack of any negative reaction sent faint warning signals through Erik's consciousness.

After putting the girls to bed that evening, Pema returned downstairs. Erik and Tetra were sitting somewhat apart on the couch, talking quietly. Pema calmly faced them.

"The guest room is all ready for you," she said, looking at both of them. "Good night." She turned and climbed the stairs to bed.

Erik was stunned. There was no mistaking Pema's open invitation for him and Tetra to spend the night together in the guest room. Did Pema want that? Did he? After a few moments, Erik said goodnight to Tetra as graciously as he could and followed Pema up the stairs. He undressed, lay down beside her, and then reached hesitantly for her . . . and gasped. His hands had encountered not Pema, but a shield around her. She had used the Path to make it and it was impermeable, just as Bespe had taught her.

"Until you make your decision about the Second, you will not touch me," Pema said softly and firmly from the darkness.

In the morning, Pema greeted Tetra kindly, and inquired about her needs and how she slept. The woman was a Pathen partner and healer, and she had a warm, calm demeanor that invited friendship. She and Pema enjoyed an easy conversation while they made breakfast together. They liked each other, despite the awkward circumstances.

"Lit and I will be at the compound today," Pema announced when the meal had ended. "Metta has a vaccination appointment this afternoon. Please get her to it on time." Tetra offered to give Metta the inoculation herself, and Pema quickly agreed. The six-year-old warmed to the woman immediately, and with wide eyes, asked Tetra if she used magic to cure sick people, as a character in one of her storyscreens had done. The woman laughed and promised the child that she would tell her all about being a healer.

On her way out the door, Pema kissed Erik lightly and bowed to Tetra. She was again giving them an opportunity to be together without her. Erik's discomfort grew. Tetra was a thoughtful, intelligent Sanderman who would obviously make an excellent partner for him, and Erik found himself attracted to her for reasons he could not explain.

Pema came home that evening with the news that she would be on a short diplomatic assignment to a neighboring system for the next two days. She planned to

return on the evening before Erik would have to make his decision about Tetra. They would be alone together for two nights without Pema.

While Erik put his daughters to bed, Tetra sat with Pema as she read the briefing book for her trip.

"What are you feeling?" Tetra asked softly when Pema finished the document.

"No," Pema replied firmly, but kindly. "We can talk about anything else except that. My feelings are not important to this situation. We can discuss them after Erik makes his decision, but not now."

"He loves you very much, Pema."

"He has a great capacity for love," Pema replied softly, "perhaps enough for both of us."

From behind the door of his daughters' room, Erik listened intently to the conversation downstairs. He closed his eyes at Pema's words and a tear rolled down his face. Of course her feelings were important to him. Of course he loved her. Why had he started the Second process? Why was he attracted to Tetra?

"I hope you both find the answers you seek," Pema said as she left the next morning. Erik detected only sincerity in her words.

A delay in the shuttle service slowed Pema's return trip, and she did not arrive until the morning after she had planned to be home. She walked into the house as Erik and their daughters were finishing breakfast. There was no sign of Tetra. Erik's tentative, silent bow of greeting told Pema what the decision had been. He was more relieved to see her than he dared show, especially since her shield was still very much in place. He had worried that she might not come home after her trip, and that she might leave him before she even knew of his decision.

"Please take your sister and play in the garden," Pema directed Lit when the meal ended. The girl gave her parents an uneasy glance. Her bornmaster senses had detected the shield around her mother, and Lit knew that there was another shield around the house that the others apparently hadn't noticed. Nor did anyone else seem to realize that Pema was seriously ill.

Lit hesitantly approached her mother and laid a hand on her arm. Pema jumped and struggled not to withdraw from her daughter's touch. The child had reached through Pema's shield as if it wasn't there. Lit was usually very careful not to use her bornmaster skills on the other members of her family, and Pema doubted that any of them had suspected Lit could penetrate shields.

"How did you do that?" Pema whispered.

Lit looked annoyed. Her mother's question wasn't relevant to the current situation, but she decided to answer it anyway.

"When Master Bespe taught us to make Path shields, I figured out how to get past them. I'm the only one of us who can make shields that no one can get through." She paused. "I want to help save you. Please." She gave her mother a frightened, pleading look.

"Not this time," Pema replied with a soft smile, stroking her daughter's head.

"I can do it myself. I'll be all right. Now, please take Metta outside to play."

The girl complied with a stiff nod of her head. Lit couldn't make sense of what was going on, and she was too frightened to ask any questions. The events of the past few days, and especially those this morning, had left her confused by a series of incidents that she couldn't piece together with a coherent explanation, and her parents obviously weren't going to discuss it with her now.

Pema and Erik faced each other across the dining table. Erik started to speak, but Pema motioned him into silence. Holding his eyes with her own, she slowly and deliberately dropped her shield, and Erik immediately sensed the terrible calculation that she had made five days before. It was much worse than simply leaving him. If he had decided to accept Tetra, Pema would have killed herself. She was very sick, even now, although whatever was tearing her apart seemed to have stopped, at least for the moment. Erik saw that Pema had kept her shield when she returned home so that he would have been unable to attempt to save her if his decision about Tetra had been different.

The shock of Pema's determination sent a wave of desperation through Erik. In all their years together, this was the first moment in which he truly and completely understood what their life together meant to her. In her eyes and through the Path, Erik saw that Pema believed they were already one, with or without Permanence. His own belief system should have made him skeptical of the idea, but Erik was surprised that a rather large part of him suspected that Pema was correct.

"I should have sent her away immediately," he said softly.

"You never should have started the process at all," Pema countered with an icy calm. "You are the other half of me, Erik. I would give up my life before I would give you up to someone else. You know that is what I feared most, that you would be taken away from me. Sharing you would be almost worse than having you leave me." Her voice trailed off in a whisper, and she struggled not to cry.

Erik winced, suddenly remembering the scene almost two years before on Assar, and realizing that he had re-opened a wound that they had worked so hard to heal. He started to speak, but Pema raised a hand to stop him. "Do not tell me that the Second process is a Sanderma custom that you had to obey. No one forced Tetra to come here. You didn't refuse the five-day period, yet you could have. I need to know why."

Erik closed his eyes at the harsh truth of her words. He could not explain his desire for Tetra. It filled a need in a dark place that he could not touch, and that Pema wasn't likely to help him explore, given the circumstances.

"What happens now?" he asked softly, opening his eyes but keeping them focused on his hands. He fully expected her to ask him to leave.

"Your parents will be here momentarily to take the girls for a few days. Then, Jorn and Observer Tansik will arrive to help us determine if we can save our partnership."

"Your shuttle wasn't delayed, was it?" Erik asked with sudden insight.

"There was no assignment at all. Your parents were kind enough to let me spend the last three nights with them, since it was too painful for me to be here," Pema answered, with no apology for her prevarication. Erik's parents had welcomed her and listened quietly while she spoke with restrained anguish about what was happening at home. They suggested that she also seek counsel from her Pathen teacher and Observer, and offered their home as a place where all of them could meet to discuss the situation.

During her stay with Erik's parents, Pema learned that both of them had been offered Seconds before they became permanent. Each had refused to even consider adding someone else to their relationship, and had stopped the process at the beginning without even going through the five-day period. While the older couple was careful not to take sides in the current Second situation with their son, Pema sensed their dismay at this turn of events.

"How can we help you both?" the parents had asked her earlier that morning in a discussion that also included Jorn and Observer Tansik.

"I'll go back home as soon as we're finished here," Pema replied. "I would like you to come to the house later this morning and take the girls for a few days." She turned to Jorn and the Observer. "Then, I would like both of you to come and help to determine what happens next."

Pema's choice of words startled Jorn unexpectedly. "Help whom?" he asked cautiously.

"Whoever is there," she answered softly, meeting her teacher's eyes with a direct gaze that confirmed his suspicions.

Jorn grabbed her by the shoulders, suddenly realizing that her emotional distress might not be the sole cause of her pain. "Where's the capsule, Pema?" he demanded.

"I already took it," she replied calmly. "If Erik has accepted Tetra, I'll be dead before any of you arrive at the house."

"Pema, no . . ." the Observer groaned softly, bowing his head.

"What did you take?" Jorn asked frantically, noticing that her body was warmer than usual through her robes.

"An immune destabilizer. My immune system now thinks that my body is a foreign organism, and it is destroying it."

"Are you in much pain yet?" the Observer asked, gently pulling her away from Jorn's grip and enfolding her in his arms. He wanted so much to touch her, both to offer comfort and to assess how far her self-inflicted illness had progressed.

"The emotional pain is far worse than the physical pain will ever be," Pema replied defiantly. She didn't want Tansik to see how much his embrace had affected her. That was the way that Erik held her, the way that the only man she ever wanted held her. And it was quite possible that she would never feel his touch again.

"Don't give up yet," the Observer whispered, caressing her lightly and kissing the top of her head. Pema and Erik were the couple that Tansik cherished most in his

duties. He had seen their improbable, cross-species relationship grow and become stronger year after year, and their current crisis was an unexpected blow. Tansik believed in his heart that a failure of their partnership would also be a personal failure for him.

"Isn't there an antidote?" the parents asked, breaking Tansik's reverie. Pema tried not to notice the agony she heard in their voice.

"Yes," the Observer replied, "but only the infected person or their siblings can produce one that is genetically compatible." He paused and looked at the woman in his arms. "And you don't have any living siblings. You've planned this well, Pema. Would I be correct in assuming that we are also blocked from contacting Erik and trying to influence his decision?"

"Yes," Pema replied. "There is a shield around the house. Until I know whether Tetra is staying or leaving, only myself and the four people in the house can get in or out. No one else, and no communication, will get through."

"Why, Pema?" Jorn moaned with a sad, defeated shrug.

Pema smiled wanly at the Observer and stepped away from his embrace. She sat down slowly in a chair. A pensive look came over her face, and her eyes seemed to focus on something far away.

"I don't know how to explain this, and I know that Erik won't believe me, which is why I need to let him make his decision without any interference." She paused, and took a deep breath. "I know, I *know*, with more certainty than I've ever felt about anything else in my life, that Erik and I are supposed to be each other's only partner until we die. If anything or anyone comes along and changes that, then this life isn't what it was supposed to be, and I might as well end it and start over again."

Pema was focused inwardly, not seeing the others around her. She did not notice that the Observer was watching her closely as she spoke. His expression had relaxed momentarily into one of understanding, shaded with a touch of relief, as if the answer to an unasked question had suddenly been revealed.

"I believe you, Pema," he said softly. She looked up quickly, surprised by something in his voice, but his face had resumed its previous look of worried urgency.

"So do we," the parents whispered.

"Well, I suppose it's possible," Jorn added in irritation. "But I'd rather not lose the best partner and master I ever made, just to test a theory."

"It's time to find out," Pema replied with determination, getting up and moving toward the door. She looked back and the others saw the tears in her eyes. "I'll see you all shortly." As the door closed behind her, the others could hear a faint whisper from her.

"I hope."

\* \* \*

Now, the parents had come and taken Metta and Lit away with them. Jorn and Observer Tansik were standing in the open space with Erik and Pema. Although they were greatly relieved to see Pema alive, the gravity of the situation still showed on their faces.

"You will start the reconciliation process by asking one question that you most need your partner to answer," Jorn directed. "Let us know when you are ready."

After a long, uncomfortable silence, both Pema and Erik had formulated their questions. Jorn indicated that Pema would ask hers first.

"In what ways have I failed you so that you would even consider taking a second partner?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Failed me?" Erik floundered. "Pema, you have fulfilled my life beyond my wildest dreams. I don't want any partner but you, ever." Erik fell silent. He didn't know what else to say. He was genuinely confused about his attraction to Tetra. Pema studied him for a long moment. He felt her probe him, searching. Then she withdrew the probe and her expression cleared.

"You wanted to know what it would be like to have a partnership with another Sanderman, with one of your own, and to have joinings that weren't so much work." Pema paused, struggling to hold back her tears. "You're still worried that you won't be able to accomplish Permanence with me, and you want to be with someone who doesn't have the different boundaries of another species getting in the way all the time." Pema stopped speaking. She was so hurt, and she had no will to say anything else.

A look of relief crossed Erik's face. He was grateful that she had been able to touch what he could not. Gathering all of his courage, he met her sad, defeated gaze.

"Yes, I wanted that just once, but most of all I wanted it with you. I never joined with her, Pema. Tetra left this morning before I could tell her my decision. She sensed that I never wanted another partner." He was telling the truth, and they all knew it.

"What is your question, Erik?" Jorn asked.

"What is my punishment to be?" Erik replied softly.

Pema could not reply, but Jorn responded by addressing the idea that he knew had just formed in her mind.

"Because you chose expansion, Pema, your boundaries are already partially dissolved. It is possible," he glanced at the Observer, "to remove them and then alter your psychophysiology so that they will not re-form." He paused. "The procedure will not harm you, but it will change you. Strictly speaking, you will no longer be an Assarian. And it is irreversible, perhaps beyond this lifetime, so consider carefully before you decide."

Pema looked at Observer Tansik and held his gaze to show him that she understood the implications of what she was about to say.

"I agree to the procedure," she said in a calm, steady voice.

Erik was suddenly frightened by something he could not name. He had a vague



idea of what Pema had just agreed to, and he started to protest. Pema silenced him with a glance. Observer Tansik bowed in response to her decision and helped her take a large comforter from a side closet. As they spread it on the floor of the open space, Jorn turned to Erik.

"You wondered what your punishment would be, Erik. It will be to watch while Pema's boundaries are removed and she is altered so that they will never form again. You are about to get what you wished for."

Erik gave him a puzzled look. "How could that be punishment?" He paused, sensing that he was missing something. "You aren't going to hurt her, are you?" A hint of panic crept into his voice. The other three gave him a look that clearly conveyed their impatience with his inability to grasp what was about to happen.

Pema and Observer Tansik stepped onto the comforter and removed their robes.

"I've produced the antidote," Pema informed him. "The toxin has been neutralized and it won't infect you. My immune system has returned to its normal function."

"That's good, but I would have taken care of it myself if it had come to that," he replied with an expression that Pema couldn't quite read. He seemed to be smiling quietly to himself, but only the corners of his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

"How could you do that?" Pema asked. "You're the one who told Erik's parents that the antidote could only be made by me or my brother. That's true, as far as I know."

"We Observers can do some limited manipulation of biochemistry if it becomes absolutely necessary, but only if we're joined to the afflicted person," Tansik replied. "You're not the first heartsick partner who's tried to poison herself, Pema. I wasn't sure that you would end up at this solution, which is why I didn't offer to make the antidote with you at Erik's parents' home. I knew that you were determined to kill yourself if Erik accepted Tetra, and I would not have stopped you if that had been the case." Tansik's expression did not change, and Pema sensed that her question had not touched the real reason behind the enigmatic, knowing twinkle in his eyes. She was mildly surprised, and curious, about why he would not have tried to prevent her suicide. They silently held each other's gaze for a few moments.

"Give it up, Pema," the Observer said softly. "I won't tell you."

"Tell me what?" Pema demanded.

"Why I said that I believed you this morning. You were right, you were so incredibly right, but you don't know why and I won't tell you. The answer would reveal the reason behind all partnerships that are like Erik's parents', yours and Erik's, and mine. You're not ready to hear that reason yet, so just enjoy the story."

"What story?" Pema asked, bewildered. The Observer shook his head and smiled.

"Let's go to work on your boundaries," he said, gently taking her head in his hands and establishing a mind-to-mind connection to steady her for what was to come.

Tansik knelt on the comforter as Pema lay beside him, trembling slightly as she interlaced her fingers with his outstretched hands. The Observer carefully aligned his body with hers, and then joined them completely with a graceful, fluid movement that was both expert and effortless. He was through all of Pema's boundaries in a single heartbeat.

Erik's shocked and angry leap toward them came an instant too late. Jorn held him tightly.

"You no longer have any say in this matter," Jorn said softly. "She is allowing herself to be made into what you said you wanted."

Erik screamed, and then sobbed uncontrollably in Jorn's arms, terrified at the course of action he had set in motion, and unable to tear his eyes away from the agonizing sight of Pema joined with someone else, someone whose skill far exceeded his. He clung tightly to his teacher, whispering Pema's name over and over again, and trying to sense what was happening through their single-strand connection.

Pema was having a much more pleasant experience. She was floating in a being of unfathomable knowledge and compassion. She learned that Observer Tansik was permanently joined with a male partner, and that they had taken the extraordinary step of entering Permanence just after their Bonding Ceremony. But the other man had died within them years ago. After his death, Tansik had become a Pathen master and then an Observer, fulfilling a promise that he and his partner had made to each other in the event that one of them died first. He was deeply committed to helping other couples experience the fulfillment that had been, and still was, his. Tansik's understanding of partnership eclipsed Pema's so completely that she simply lay within him in awe, unable to move or speak.

The Observer gave Pema time to adjust to his presence while he used his self-healing capability to repair the remaining damage from the immune destabilizer. Then he gently erased her boundaries. Over the course of the next two hours, he accessed each of the seven portals of inner energy that were characteristic of Pema's species, and carefully reconstructed them so that they could not close periodically and form barriers within her. Pema and the Observer were both surprised that the portal at her heart was already permanently open. She experienced no pain as Tansik worked within her, and at the end of the procedure felt as though she were now in a state of constant, mild expansion.

Never had she experienced such bodily peace, and never had she been less sure of where the edges of her self were. It reminded her of how she felt when she swam in the buoyant waters of an ocean. The Observer sent a wave of congratulations and reassurance through their combined form, and then disconnected from her. He donned his robes, gently covered Pema with hers, and then addressed Jorn.

"We've done all we can for now." He turned to Erik and sighed inwardly at the fury he saw in the other man's face. Tansik knew that now was not the time to explain what he had done in the joining with Pema. Erik was too angry to hear him. "We will leave, but keep you under observation for a while. Pema's boundaries will

not re-form. You both must use that knowledge wisely." Jorn and the Observer departed.

From the comforter, Pema looked up at Erik with a gaze of such serene openness that it took his breath away. She did not yet have the confidence in her new state to move, so Erik came to her. He tentatively held out his hands, and was relieved when she interlaced her fingers with his. He was completely joined with her before he even understood what had happened. The joining was so easy, and more than fulfilled the one reason he had desired Tetra.

Pema immediately showed Erik the full extent of her experience with Observer Tansik, and emphasized to him that not one moment of passion or desire had passed between them. Erik was painfully aware that he had almost caused the dissolution of their partnership, or worse, and that Pema had given up a significant part of herself to save it. They stayed joined without movement or discussion for several moments.

"Disconnect please," she requested in his mind. Erik complied, and they sat facing each other on the comforter in awkward silence. Erik probed Pema gently. She did not resist.

"You feel that you were forced to give up too much of yourself to save our partnership," Erik said, "and that you had to become the solution for a problem that I caused. You're angry because you believe that I don't accept you for what you are . . . or were." He paused. "Oh . . .," he added softly as a sudden insight overwhelmed him.

When they first met on Nyta, Erik believed that Pema might not accept him because he was Sanderma. Now, he appeared to have rejected her because she was not. But Pema accepted and loved him without hesitation, regardless of what he was. She always had. No wonder she now felt betrayed.

"Yes," Pema whispered, sensing his thought. "You assumed that I could not be what you wanted, so you sought it elsewhere without asking me first. You turned away from the person who loves you the most, and who is most willing to help you. I feel that I had no choice but to accept a procedure that I would have undergone willingly, if you had just asked."

"You would still have had to join with Tansik," Erik replied defensively.

Pema's eyes flashed. She had controlled her anger over the past several days, but Erik's implied accusation was outrageous, considering his own behavior.

"The interpretation of that joining is your problem, Erik, not mine," Pema replied, barely able to keep from raising her voice. "Tansik's partner preference is for men, and he's already in Permanence. He and I have no romantic or erotic feelings for each other, and I accepted his joining for what it was: a psychomedical procedure no different than my visits to other healers." Pema paused and her voice hardened. "*Never* throw that joining in my face again, Erik. It made me into what you want. You were thinking about joining with Tetra for a much less defensible reason."

Erik knew that she was right, and his rage at Tansik evaporated. Pema and the

Observer had joined only to grant Erik's wish. He could hardly condemn them for that.

"Do you still love me?" he asked softly.

"Yes, but I'm not sure that love is enough," Pema answered with a slight quaver in her voice. "I will not re-constitute my shield, but I request that you not touch me."

Erik nodded and closed his eyes to hide his tears of quiet desolation. The one person whom he treasured above all else in the universe had refused him, and it was completely and unequivocally his fault. This time, Pema hadn't left him. He had forced her away by putting someone else between them.

"I love you," he whispered. "Please don't leave. I'm sorry."

Pema had to restrain herself firmly to keep from saying, "Not sorry enough." She got up, donned her robes, and then climbed the stairs to their room and closed the door, signaling beyond doubt that she needed to be alone and didn't want Erik with her.

One of the consequences of being without boundaries was that Pema now had nowhere to hide from herself. In the days to come, she would learn that the calm, joyful core of her being was available and accessible to her all the time, and that other emotions would play only fleetingly on the surface. But for this moment, all she knew was that there was no longer a way to retreat from sadness and pain. She lay in her robes on the bed and cried with an excruciating ache in her heart until, exhausted, she fell asleep.

Three days passed. Gradually, Pema's anger softened and her body adjusted to its openness. She began to see that Erik had made a mistake of knowledge, not of morals. He had not, after all, joined with Tetra, and he had decided to refuse the Second before he knew that Pema was willing to change for him. Pema acknowledged that she had unwittingly made the situation worse when she asked Erik about the process, instead of immediately confronting him about his feelings and needs for a Sanderma partner. How could he not know that she would miss him desperately if he were with someone else? How could he not know that it was important to her that they were each other's only partner?

"Because I never told him," Pema admitted ruefully to herself.

Pema showered, and then dressed only in a white inner robe, the symbol of partnership. She descended the stairs to the open space and found Erik sitting up, but asleep, on the couch. His robes were crumpled, and it was obvious that he, too, had spent the past few days crying in agony. Pema knelt in front of him and waited patiently for him to awake.

"Pema?" he asked softly, opening his eyes and looking at her with a calm, resigned expression. Her choice of clothing caught his eye, and he ran the fingers of one hand lightly along the shoulder of her robe, hoping that he understood her reason for wearing only that garment. She did not pull away at his touch.

"I miss you," she said quietly. "I love you. Promise me that I will be your only partner for the rest of our life. It is very important to me. I . . . I can't explain it."

Pema looked down at her hands. She was afraid that Erik would laugh dismissively if she told him the reason for her request.

But he didn't laugh. As Pema finished speaking, the last vestige of Erik's emotional control crumbled with the realization that she still wanted them to be partners. He took her face in his hands and kissed her passionately, whispering her name and moaning with indescribable pleasure at being able to touch her again. After several moments, he leaned his forehead against hers, but without joining.

"I am *so* sorry," he said, and this time his words conveyed the sincerity that Pema needed to hear. "You are my only woman, ever. You always have been. I am grateful for what you did to save our partnership. I love you so much, Pema." He slipped from the couch and knelt around her, and then kissed her neck and shoulders as he pushed back her robe.

Pema didn't know how they moved to the comforter so quickly. Its soft folds seemed to reach up to accept them as their bodies dissolved together. Erik smiled with delight. He was not yet accustomed to how easy it was to join them now that Pema's boundaries were gone. For a brief moment, he considered asking her if she wanted to enter Permanence right then. But he knew that step was years away, and the thought of doing it now was simply an expression of utter joy at being one with her again.

They shared the tender passion of re-union for the rest of the afternoon, and then Erik disconnected and held Pema in his arms. She had been receptive to him, but there was still a distance between them that he needed to understand. Pema nestled close to him, with her head in the hollow of his shoulder and one arm across his chest. There was a far-away look in her eyes.

"Pema, what's wrong?" Erik asked softly, kissing her hair. Despite her warm participation in their activities of the past few hours, Erik sensed that their partnership was not yet entirely repaired. Pema was silent for several moments.

"I don't know what I am anymore," she finally replied. "I'm not Assarian, I'm not Sanderma. I've given up myself and now I don't belong to any people, just like when I was growing up." She paused, and then added in a whisper, "What am I? Who am I?"

Erik covered her body with his and held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. He wasn't about to lose her again just because she had lost herself.

"Look at me," he demanded, but Pema knew that the harshness in his voice was only there to hold back the tears so that he could speak. As if reciting items from a list made long ago, Erik answered her question.

"You are the only woman I have ever loved. You are the mother of the children that brighten my days and fill our home with warmth. You are a diplomat who has brought peace and understanding to countless worlds and to millions of beings. You are a Pathen master who has triumphed over evil. You are the person with whom I am complete, and without whom I am miserable." He paused, relaxed his grip for a moment, and then held her head and kissed her. "Maybe all of those things aren't

enough to tell you who you are, but they are enough for me. You belong to me, Pema, and I love you."

To Erik's surprise and relief, Pema gave him a radiant smile, and he felt the last of her hesitation dissolve.

"It's enough," she whispered.

And it was. As Erik melted his body back into hers, he discovered that no place within her was closed to him anymore. He found many new ways and places to give her pleasure, and revisited old ones. For the next four days, he made exquisite love to her, shared his deepest thoughts and feelings with her, and slept joined with her. Pema's love and desire for him returned fully, and more. They had never wanted each other as much as they did now, and in the end they knew each other more thoroughly than they had imagined possible.

When their reconciliation was completed, they asked Erik's parents to bring the girls home. In the afternoon, Observer Tansik arrived to check on Pema.

"I'm tired, and feeling a little . . . thin, pulled," she told him, not quite sure how to describe the constant, mild expansion.

"That's normal," he assured her. "There is actually more energy coming into you now that you're always open, but your body hasn't learned how to channel and use it yet. I'm going to check each portal, just to make sure that the openings are clear." He motioned Pema to a chair, unfastened her robe, and then stopped. He glanced at Erik and was relieved to see him nod and smile. Tansik continued, gently joining one hand to the area at the base of Pema's spine, while his other hand supported her on the outside from the back. He worked his way up, nodding with satisfaction as he came to each portal.

"I don't need to check that one," he said when he reached the fourth opening.

"Why not?" Erik asked.

"We discovered that Pema's heart energy portal had already been permanently opened before we started the procedure to open the others," the Observer replied. "Pema doesn't have any memory of how that happened. It may have occurred during some similar work in a previous life."

Erik gave them both a tolerant look of disbelief. The Observer completed his examination and disconnected from Pema's body. He departed, and a long-awaited family reunion began. Metta was eager to tell her parents all that she had learned about healers from Tetra. They were delighted with her enthusiasm for that profession, and were relieved that something positive had come from the Second process.

Lit was more subdued. Her acute bornmaster senses told her that her parents had come very close to ending their partnership. She was greatly unnerved that two of the people whom she depended on for her stability might have separated. While Binai was her day-to-day support, Lit suddenly realized how much comfort she drew from the belief that her parents would always be there for her. She had almost reached her tenth birthday, and she knew that her life would end in just two more years. The thought of spending her remaining time without both of her parents caused an ago-

nizing constriction in her heart.

Pema and Erik sensed their daughter's distress, and in an unusual gesture of complete trust for someone so young, they made a mind-to-mind connection with each other and then with her so that she could understand from both of them what had happened. They held her in a firm, loving embrace during the connection and for a long time thereafter. She fell asleep in their arms, relaxed and secure in the knowledge that they were both there for her, and always would be.





## - 9 -

# Permanence

Pema and Erik stood facing Lit. Almost one hundred guests filled the audience behind her. Friends, Pathen, Erik's parents, and members of several diplomatic corps were all gathered on a warm and breezy afternoon to witness an event that none of them had ever expected to see. Even former Secretary Kannan came out of retirement for the occasion.

It was Lit's Coming-Of-Age Ceremony. She was fourteen, and had lived two years beyond her bornmaster life expectancy. Her guests chatted amiably, and smiled at the pleasant tableau of Erik, Pema, and their three children on the dais in front of the fountain. The Foreign Secretary had lent them the garden of the diplomatic compound for the occasion.

Binai stood at his sister's side. More than anyone else, he had been her helpmate through the years. At his own request, he had become a Pathen master for the sole purpose of contributing to her upbringing, and her stability was due in a large part to his loving and unceasing effort. All three siblings were inseparable, and Metta, now ten, stood on her brother's left with her hand in his. Binai and his father both wore matching master robes for the occasion. Pema elected to wear the silk robe that she received when she and her daughter unwittingly became masters together. It was a symbol of the triumph that today's event represented over that tragedy.

Erik motioned for silence, and then addressed the audience.

"Honored guests, we welcome you to a day and to a celebration that few of us ever expected to see. Our elder daughter has reached her fourteenth year, and today she will come of age and take her full place among us."

Pema took a small step forward. Lit, resplendent in a new set of master robes, knelt and looked up at her mother. They basked in each other's smiles for a moment. Pema reached out and lightly touched the fingers of her left hand to her daughter's face. Then she began the formal greeting as required by the ritual.

"Pathen Bornmaster Lit, your father and I, your grandparents, your brother and sister, these guests, and all of the ancestors welcome you. Today, you will take your full place in the world. We are proud of the child you were, and of the woman you have become. We look forward," Pema's voice faltered slightly, "to the contributions and accomplishments that will be the hallmark of your future."

The ritual required Pema to say the words, but she wondered how much of a chance her daughter would have to fulfill them. Lit felt her mother's hesitation. She smiled encouragingly and whispered, "It will be all right, Mom."

Humbled and strengthened by her daughter's courage, Pema took a deep breath and continued.

"We will now administer the vows of adulthood."

Pema and Erik each placed a hand on Lit's shoulders. Binai and Metta moved to stand behind their sister. Erik addressed his daughter.

"On this day, and for all your days to come, do you promise to not take life, to be respectful and truthful, to not act in anger, and to work tirelessly and compassionately for the benefit of all beings?"

"I do," Lit replied. Then she put her hands on her parents' arms and added, "Thank you for my life." It wasn't in the ritual script, but no one seemed to mind. Several in the audience smiled and nodded approvingly.

"We love you with all our hearts," Pema and Erik said in unison. "Welcome to adulthood."

Lit stood and disappeared into a group hug with her family. Then she turned and strode confidently toward her guests to greet them and receive their congratulations. Pema leaned against Erik.

"She made it," Pema said softly, tears in her eyes.

"Yes, we did," Erik answered.

It was late in the evening before the family returned home from the celebration. Binai gave Lit a long embrace of congratulations, and then bade his family good night and returned to his apartment at the diplomatic compound. Lit and Metta went to their room, hand in hand. The younger child looked up often, just to make sure that her sister hadn't changed too much during the day. Pema and Erik prepared for bed and lay contentedly in each other's arms.

"You added that part about all the ancestors," Erik teased.

"Yes, I did," Pema confessed with a chuckle.

It was an old point of discussion between them. Unlike Sanderm's elected government, Assar was guided by a constitutional theocracy whose leaders shared a spiritual, if not physical, lineage with the ancestors. Erik didn't object to Pema's invocation of the deceased, but he wasn't convinced either.

"That's all right," he continued. "I'm sure no one minded. They were just happy to see Lit make it to the celebration." He paused and ran his fingers lightly down Pema's spine. She shivered with pleasure and anticipation. "How about a celebration of our own?" he added softly, kissing her neck and moving his caress to

the inside of her body.

"Twenty years and three children later, and you still can't wait to get me to bed," she answered with a laugh as he reached deeper inside her.

"You got that right," he grinned, and began to join them for what he knew they both wanted, a relaxed night of slow, deep intimacy. Erik wondered if this would be a night to rival their celebrations on Kala and Assar. As if in response, Pema brought them twice to a shuddering release before Erik had even completed the joining. Her intensely erotic movement in just the right place, and his impassioned kiss in response, indicated that the night might not be as leisurely as they first believed. Erik leaned his head into hers.

"My turn," he said in her mind.

\* \* \*

Shortly after midnight, Lit and Metta were awakened by loud pounding on the front door. The two ran to their parents' room, but the door was closed and there was no sound or movement from within. Lit sensed that something was terribly wrong, but she was confused by the abrupt awakening and by a sudden, cold fear that seized her. For a moment, she wondered if the cloaked evil thing had returned, perhaps with reinforcements. Lit's skills were even stronger than they had been when she and the creature first confronted each other six years ago. She knew that she would be a rare prize for the evil elements of the Path. Was the creature here to tempt her again, now that she was an adult bornmaster?

"I'd rather die," she whispered defiantly to herself, wondering if that was how this night would end. She put an arm protectively around Metta, who looked up at her with wide, frightened eyes. The child was clinging tightly to Lit's sleeping shirt.

The pounding continued unabated. Lit couldn't think with all the noise and fear around her.

"Who is it?" she finally called out in terrified annoyance.

"Observer Tansik. Your parents are in trouble. Please let me in."

Lit tore herself from Metta's grip and leapt down to the entryway. She yanked open the door and the Observer ran past her, taking the stairs two at a time and nearly colliding with Metta in his rush to the first bedroom.

"Call Binaï, quick," Lit ordered her sister, and then followed the Observer up the stairs and into her parents' room.

Lit's relief that the visitor was Tansik, and not something more sinister, was short-lived. The young woman watched helplessly as the Observer worked frantically to disconnect her parents. During the night's joining, a blood vessel had broken in their combined brain. Erik had tried to disconnect and minimize the damage from the stroke, but had lost consciousness before he was able to complete the task. Blood was oozing from the ears of the joined form. Lit felt for Erik and Pema in the Path. She could sense her father's life force, but her mother's was faint. There was now on-

ly an echo of what Pema had been.

Later that afternoon, Erik sat by Pema and held her hand, just as he had every moment since the Observer pulled him from her body. The tissues of Pema's brain had borne the brunt of the stroke, and her life was nearly gone. Erik could not bring himself to leave her. Several eminent healers of Sanderma had struggled throughout the day to save Pema's life, but she did not have self-healing capability, and could not provide the crucial effort that the healers needed from her.

"You must let me re-join with her. Then, my self-healing can take over," Erik pleaded between the sobs that shook his body. Joining his hands into Pema would not be enough this time. The damage was too extensive. Only in a complete connection could his self-healing perhaps have a chance to succeed. But Tansik and the healers refused, knowing that such a joining would likely kill him, too.

In the evening, Erik gathered his children to him. He asked the healers and the Observer to leave. By the look on Erik's face, they knew that he was going to prepare his family for their mother's death, and they left the house quietly. As soon as they were gone, Erik spoke with soft determination to his son and daughters.

"I'm going to re-join with your mother. I'm either going to heal her, or die with her. Will you help me?"

They nodded silently.

"Good." Erik turned to Lit. As a bornmaster, she was the one most capable of carrying out the first part of his request. "I want you to create a shield in the Path so that Observer Tansik and the healers won't be able to tell what I'm doing. Make it look like we're asleep," Erik directed her. Lit nodded, but said nothing. She had already guessed what her father wanted, and why. Then, Erik turned to Binai and Metta. "I'm going to lie down. When I'm ready in the trance, I want you to place your mother face-up on top of me."

"But that's the Permanence position," objected Binai, now startled and frightened. He had suddenly realized what his father was planning.

"Yes, it is," replied Erik. "I don't think there are enough viable organs and tissues to make two separate beings anymore."

Panic now crossed the faces of the children. They were prepared to lose one parent. The possibility of losing both in a procedure that was dangerous, even when the participants were healthy, caused a storm of protest. Their parents were too young to be thinking about Permanence. Older couples, like their grandparents, did that when their lives of individual contribution had been fulfilled. And Sanderma didn't usually join permanently with a member of another species.

Erik raised his hand to silence the discussion.

"We all know that permission from the children is required before parents attempt Permanence. Your mother gave her consent for this years ago. Now I'm asking you." Erik's voice caught in his throat. "I'm begging you to give your permission for us to do this. Your mother will die without it. And without her, I'll die anyway. She is my ultimate partner, and it is inconceivable to me that she and I will

have separate deaths. You must know that." Erik's voice trailed off. He turned away from them, not wanting to see the decision in their eyes.

The silence seemed to last forever. Only Lit noticed that Pema's breathing had quickened slightly. On that faint hope, Lit's hesitation dissolved and she began the shield. As she did so, Binai touched his father's shoulder and Erik turned to face him. In an unusual gesture that conveyed all of the children's emotions, Binai tenderly joined his forehead to his father's. Sanderma children didn't often initiate a joining with their parents. It was a poignant moment of support.

"Do it," Binai whispered before disconnecting.

Erik could sense that Lit had already started the shield. Such love he felt for them all! But he had no time to waste. Permanence required a deep trance, usually aided by Observers. But now, given the circumstances, Erik would have to prepare quickly and alone. Binai lifted his mother from the bed, and he and Metta cradled her against them. Erik lay down, comforted by the warmth of where Pema had lain.

"Keep Observer Tansik away as long as you can," he urged Lit. "Under no circumstances allow him to disconnect us."

Lit nodded, but said nothing. She was already deep into the shield, creating it as fast as she could. Conversing with her father would be a waste of precious energy.

Just after midnight, they were ready.

With a tenderness that Erik could feel even through his trance, Binai and Metta carefully laid Pema on his body.

"We will see you as one," they said softly in the traditional farewell to a couple entering Permanence.

Erik closed his eyes and nearly cried out at the suffering that he felt from Pema. He searched wildly for a place, any place that was stable enough within her for him to begin the healing. After several moments, he found a small core protecting their single-strand connection. It wasn't much, but Erik was surprised at the strength and determination in that small seed.

"I was hoping you'd come to rescue me." It was Pema's voice, but from where? Erik was sure she hadn't spoken. The coma was too deep and the stroke had left her without the capability of speech.

"Pema?" Erik asked aloud, hesitantly.

"We haven't much time, my love," she answered. Her voice was in his head. Erik was stunned. Despite her near-death state, Pema had managed to create a mind-to-mind connection through the Path.

"Do our heads first and then I can help," Pema urged.

Erik wondered what she was talking about. Her head was where the most damage was. And the head was always, *always* the last part of a joining, especially the joining that was going to be permanent.

"I'm going to die if you wait much longer. If we don't get my head healed soon, the rest of my body isn't going to matter. Do the joining. *Now!*" Pema commanded sharply. Her annoyance startled Erik. She wasn't afraid to die, but she was plenty

irritated that his inaction might bring about that result.

Erik grasped Pema's head and body in his hands, aligned them as best he could to his own, and pushed hard. He had never forced any part of a joining with her before, and he couldn't believe that their Permanence was beginning with such a desperate violation.

Erik's heart sank. He knew immediately that the task was beyond him. There was too much damage in Pema's tissues and the rapid joining was out of control. The noise and commotion in Erik's head overwhelmed him, and he felt veins and arteries breaking everywhere. He had a sensation of falling, like that time so many years ago at the rock face on Nyta. As darkness enveloped him, his last impression was of being bathed in a not-unpleasant warmth that he knew was blood.

*"Erik, my love, you worried that your forced joining had violated me,"* Pema thought to herself. *"What will you think of the violation I'm about to commit? I'm glad you aren't awake to witness this. We'd both die before I finished the explanation."*

During their night of celebration on Assar, Pema had attempted to widen their single-strand connection. In doing so, she unwittingly entered a part of the Path that contained a direct connection to the Sanderma self-healing mechanism. Apparently, the Sanderma didn't know about it, perhaps believing that self-healing was inherent in their species and unrelated to the Path. Pema could find no evidence that the connection had ever been used, and she had been too distracted by their passion that night to show Erik her discovery.

A discovery that she hadn't thought much about, until now.

The chaotic blood flow that Erik feared was just what Pema needed. She was going to use the Path to access Erik's self-healing capability from within their joined form. She would use it and their blood to keep alive the parts of their bodies that were still usable. She wanted to give Erik as much living material as possible to work with once he regained consciousness and began their Permanence.

Pema took a deep breath to focus her concentration amidst the pain. She quickly composed the most sincere and heartfelt appeal she had ever made and sent it into the Path. Then she accessed Erik's self-healing mechanism through the connection and went to work.

"They're asleep," Metta informed Observer Tansik at the front door. "My father was exhausted by the strain of the stroke. My mother is still breathing, at least. Binai is in the kitchen making us some lunch. We'll call you if we need anything." She finished quickly, closing the door.

Metta didn't know how much longer Lit's shield would allow her to lie effectively. She and Binai had both stretched the truth to the Observer and the healers several times that morning. It was especially important not to have anyone go looking for Lit. The bornmaster was hidden in a corner of the bedroom, completely consumed with the concentration required to maintain the Path shield.

The partially-joined form of Erik and Pema lay on the bed, weak, but alive as far as the children could tell.

"They're getting dehydrated, but they have no way to drink yet," observed Binai three days later. "We're going to have to let a healer in, Met, to give them liquid intravenously."

"Oh, great. Then we can add hostage-taking to the list of crimes we've already committed," moaned Metta. "Let's see . . . we've used an unethical Path shield to block medical staff and an Observer. We've allowed an attempt at Permanence without an Observer's knowledge. Either of those will get us a sanction from the Council or the Home Secretary, or both. If we let the healers in, Binai, we can't let them go. They'll tell."

"Well, there's plenty for them to do. I don't see that we have much choice. Mom and Dad have made so much progress. We can't let them die now. And I'm worried about Lit. She's fading. I don't know how she's stood the strain of keeping the shield together this long."

Binai had already tried once to join his hands to Lit and use his self-healing to strengthen her. But she had refused the connection. At this point, even help was a distraction she could not afford. The shield required every last bit of her concentration and Pathen skill.

Metta called for a healer, with instructions to bring re-hydration equipment. The man was one who had tried to help their mother just after the stroke, and he arrived so quickly that Metta and Binai suspected that he had been waiting just beyond the garden gate. As the healer entered the bedroom, Binai closed the door and stood in front of it, an action that was not lost on the healer. One glance at the bed confirmed his suspicions.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Then he saw Lit, ashen and motionless in the corner. "And what is *she* doing?" A bornmaster in a trance was a frightening sight. The healer didn't like seeing someone so young under so much strain.

"We're giving them a chance to live," Binai replied with more conviction than he felt. "But the healing isn't complete and they're becoming dehydrated. Please help them."

The healer said nothing, but approached the bed. He took a long time examining the partially-joined form. Then he turned to Binai and Metta to give his report.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but there's actually a chance they might succeed. I know it's impossible, since your mother is not Sanderma, but it appears that somehow they're both working on the healing. Their vital signs, at least those I can find at the moment, seem to be stable and strong. They have repaired or discarded most of what was damaged by the stroke, and the permanent joining of their forms is progressing well." He paused. "I will help them, and I will stay until we're sure that they will live . . . or that they won't. You don't need to worry about having to take me hostage," he added with a slight smile.

Binai bowed in gratitude, too overcome to speak. He just might get both of his parents back. That they would be in one body didn't matter. He sent a wordless wave of thanks into the Path. The healer went to work, inserting an intravenous line

into the stable left leg of the joined form.

Two days later, with his parents almost completely joined, Binai finally gave in to Metta's demands and lay down to sleep. He curled up blocking the front door, just in case there were any unexpected visitors. He was so deeply asleep that only when Observer Tansik pushed on his body as he opened the door did Binai have any warning that someone was in the house. He called out frantically to Metta, but it was too late. The Observer bounded up the stairs, Binai close behind him. As they entered the bedroom, they noticed Metta and the healer bent over a small heap in a corner of the room.

Sometime in the last hour, the shield had failed. In a heroic effort to save Pema and Erik, their elder daughter had labored for five days to mislead Observer Tansik and the healers. But the strain of maintaining a shield against the probes of so many skilled Pathen, combined with the life-long strain of being a bornmaster, was too much. Lit was dead.

Tansik knelt by the bed. There was nothing he could do for the bornmaster, but he feared that hers might not be the only death in the room. Was Pema still alive in the being that looked up at him? The gaze that met his was calm, but somewhat unfocused, and Tansik knew from experience that the joined being's attention was directed inwardly.

"I'm here," Pema's voice said softly.

Despite the circumstances, the Observer could not help but smile. When he had last seen Pema five days ago, he hadn't expected to hear her speak again, much less see her alive and in Permanence with her partner.

"Erik, are you finished?" Tansik asked, gently caressing their head.

"Yes, we are one, and the damage from the stroke is healed," Erik's voice answered. Tansik had never before heard a tone of such quiet confidence from Erik. The man had accomplished not only a permanent joining with a member of another species, but had done so unaided and in the midst of a crisis that could have been fatal for both of them.

"You shouldn't get up until your shield regenerates," the Observer directed. "You're going to be unsteady on your feet until you learn how to move as one being, and you might fall and hurt yourself. Jorn is on his way. As soon as Lit's shield collapsed, he sensed what was going on and he insisted that I let him into your Seclusion. He'll be here in the morning. Erik's parents left for an assignment right after Lit's Coming-Of-Age Ceremony, but they'll be taking the first shuttle they can get and will arrive sometime tomorrow." Tansik finally paused for a breath, and then asked, "Is there anything else you would like me to do for you?"

The joined being smiled in astonishment at all that their Observer had accomplished as he rushed to their home. "Take care of Lit," they requested softly.

Tansik nodded and rose to his feet. He walked around the bed to the far corner of the room and carefully extricated Lit's body from her brother's arms. Binai sank to the floor, crying quietly in grief and exhaustion. Metta held him tightly and rocked



his body with hers as she had seen him do so many times with their sister. The healer waited attentively, ready to provide whatever assistance might be needed.

Tansik held Lit tenderly as he knelt beside the joined being. They reached up and stroked their daughter's head, and then took one of her hands in their own. Her skin was still slightly warm, and her hair and robes were dark with the sweat of her exertion, but her face was relaxed. Even in death, a slight smile remained on her lips. Although the strain of the shield had been almost unbearable, Lit had allowed herself to die only when she was certain that her Project had succeeded. Her parents gently kissed her fingers.

"Thank you for our life," they whispered, echoing the sentiment that their daughter had said to them just a few days before.

"I'll be back this evening and will spend the night here, just to make sure that you're stable," Tansik said as he carefully stood up again. "Please stay with them until I return," he added to the healer. Then, the Observer left the room with Lit's body nestled peacefully in his arms.

Binai and Metta silently lay down beside their parents on the bed. The healer made himself comfortable in a soft chair in a corner of the room. The family in front of him numbered five people when he entered the room two days ago. Now they were only three, and the healer was relieved to see that all of them were asleep.

Tansik returned in the early evening and ate a quiet dinner with Binai and Metta after the healer departed. Then the Observer went upstairs and settled himself into the chair in the first bedroom while the other two went to their own rooms. Binai wasn't about to return to his apartment until he had more assurance that his parents were going to be all right as one being.

"Tansik," Erik's voice said softly. The Observer moved to sit by the joined form on the bed. "Pema's frightened and she's becoming panicked," Erik continued. "She's afraid we're having another stroke. She's insisting that we disconnect, but we obviously can't do that."

"Headache?" Tansik asked. The joined form nodded. "Pema," he said, speaking to her firmly and directly, "it's not a stroke. While Erik was able to pick and choose the best parts of each body to make your permanent being, he had to use all of both brains, for obvious reasons. The two sets of tissues are trying to come together in one cranium. This is always the slowest part of Permanence, and it takes awhile. The self-healing mechanism won't help, since there isn't an actual injury. So, until the process is complete, you're going to have a headache."

"All right," Pema's voice said softly, quivering. "But it's very painful, just like the stroke was, and it scares me. I don't want it to kill us."

"It won't," the Observer replied. "I know that this isn't like a regular joining, and that you're frightened. I would have had time to explain all of this to you if the Permanence process had happened in the usual manner, but it didn't. Try to relax into Erik. Let him hold you. And try to sleep, if you can. The headache should be gone by morning."

The joined being nodded and closed their eyes. They turned to lie on their left side, and Erik rocked them gently. He filled their form with quiet love and reassurance, and Pema felt her distress, and the headache, dissolve as they drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

"So what do we call you now?" asked Metta. "Erma?"

"Or Pemik," added Binai.

"How about 'momanddad'?" their parents offered. "You can speak to us singly, if necessary, and we'll answer as such, although we understand that will fade over time. Right now, we're still adjusting to what 'we' means."

They were finishing breakfast outside in the garden. Jorn was with them, having journeyed through the night so that he could be among the first to greet the newly joined being that once had been two of his best students. It was the first meal in Permanence for Pema and Erik, and the first full meal that Binai and Metta had eaten in a week. They almost licked the dishes clean.

The four sat in silence for a moment. Then Binai asked his parents softly, "Did you know about Lit? Before you were done with the joining, I mean."

"We felt her go. It was her choice. She knew that she had already exceeded the life expectancy of a bornmaster. Lit always believed that her Project would be to help us somehow. She was right, in a way that none of us could have foreseen. She died fulfilled and at peace."

Jorn nodded. "Lit knew that if she had given up any sooner to save her own life, Observer Tansik would have tried to disconnect your mother and father, and they both would have died. Don't worry," he added, "the Pathen Council won't press charges about her death. Lit was an adult, and she made an adult choice. Like most bornmasters, she died when her Project ended."

"It would appear that no one is in the mood to press charges about anything we've done in the past few days," Binai retorted with a tired laugh. He glanced at his parents, still not quite accustomed to seeing both of them looking at him out of one face. "The residents of half the galaxy are partying on your behalf. Whether you're one being or two, they're just glad to have you back." He paused, and then added with sudden tears in his eyes, "But we will miss her."

"Yes, we will," his parents agreed. "'Like a lamp lit too early that goes dark before the dawn.'"

Erik's parents came to the house that afternoon. Metta answered the door and her grandparents held her silently for several moments. Then they allowed Binai to do a mind-to-mind connection so that they could understand what happened. They joined their forehead and hands to the grief-stricken young man and stood offering silent comfort. After several moments, they disconnected and went to find the newly-joined being in the garden.

"What's it like to look in the mirror?" they asked with a knowing smile.

"Very strange," the new being laughed in reply as they gave the older couple a long, loving hug.

"If you'd like, we will stay with you for a while to help all of you with the grieving for Lit and with the adjustment to your new form. You've had quite a few changes in your life in the past few days."

"Thank you. We'd like very much for you to stay. Jorn will be here, too. He's about as excited as we've ever seen him. He understands Permanence, but he wants to know how Pema was able to start our recovery from the stroke without her own self-healing mechanism."

"So, how were you able to do that?" Jorn asked the next morning. Observer Tansik had given the new being permission to delay their Seclusion for one more day, so that they could talk with their teacher about their experience. They sat alone with Jorn in the garden. Binai, Metta and Erik's parents were out at the Pathen Council office, officially registering the death of the bornmaster.

"There is a connection to the Sanderma self-healing mechanism within the Path. Pema entered it accidentally a few years ago when she tried to enlarge our single-strand connection."

"Much of the Path remains a mystery," Jorn sighed. "Still, it seems improbable that such a significant connection has gone undetected for so long."

"The Sanderma have been able to self-heal for millennia," Erik's voice explained. "But our use of the Path is fairly recent. It's only been a couple of centuries since the first Sanderman became a Pathen. Perhaps we didn't find the connection because we couldn't see what was right in front of us. It looked to us as though self-healing was just a unique characteristic of our species. I doubt that it occurred to anyone that the Path might be involved. But as an outsider, Pema could recognize the connection. Although a few non-Sanderma have bonded with my people, some even into Permanence, it's a safe bet that none of them were Pathen masters who knew about single-strand connection. It took a special combination of events for Pema to find what she did."

"That seems logical," Jorn nodded. "When you're out of Seclusion, I'm sure the Pathen Council will want to hear all about this. They're probably counting the days until you're available again," he added with a laugh. They chatted amiably for another few moments, and then Jorn wished them well and bowed his farewell.

Pema and Erik were alone for the first time in Permanence. Their Seclusion had begun. They sat quietly within each other, enjoying the feeling of tender completeness that their new form gave them. Never again would they have to disconnect. Never again would they be apart during diplomatic missions. But never again would they kiss, look into each other's eyes, or give birth to a child. They glanced down at their hands and chuckled softly. Unconsciously, they had interlaced their fingers. It was a gesture they had used hundreds of times over the past twenty years to indicate their desire to join, and one that they would never again need for that purpose. The

separate entities of Erik and Pema were gone, but the overwhelming fulfillment, coupled with the relief of having survived the stroke and the Permanence process, more than made up for the loss of self. They were now completely and irreversibly one, just as Pema had always believed they were.

For Pema, the transition to Permanence was more a physical than a mental adjustment. Her thoughts and feelings had been intertwined with Erik's for so long that she had no hidden areas left, especially after her boundaries were removed. But their physical form was now Sanderma, and Pema was fascinated to explore within their open body and feel the slight tingling of their self-generated shield as it wrapped protectively around them. It was a relief to be on the inside of that shield after all this time. Pema wondered how their physical movements and bodily functions would work, now that they were one being. Just getting out of bed and walking downstairs to the garden had taken some negotiation, and breakfast had been almost comical. Pema was left-handed, but Erik was right-handed, and figuring out how to use the utensils to feed themselves had caused much stifled laughter around the table. Pema smiled inwardly, remembering that scene and curious about the ones to come. For a brief moment, she even wondered how they would make love.

"Just like we always did," Erik said aloud, laughing. He could barely contain himself. He was ecstatic at finally having his woman safely and permanently within him. The ultimate act that he had feared his whole life was accomplished. Pema had kept them alive with her discovery, and then he had made two beings into one.

But in the process, they lost a child. Pema and Erik quietly reflected on Lit's life as tears of joy and sadness ran unrestrained down their face. There were so many memories of her to share that they lost track of time, and they were still in the garden when Metta, Binai and Erik's parents returned that afternoon. Binai brought a scroll from the Foreign Secretary for the new being. The message congratulated Erik and Pema on their Permanence, and offered condolences on Lit's death. There was also a request that they take an assignment as the senior advisor to the new Sanderma ambassador to Kala.

"The Secretary is in Permanence, too, so they must know that we can't accept the assignment for another year," Binai's parents objected. "We're now officially in Seclusion, and we can only see Observer Tansik and the family."

"The new ambassador *is* family," Binai replied, grinning hugely at their surprise.

His parents gasped. "That's wonderful, son! But isn't twenty a little young to be leading a planetary delegation?"

"You were nineteen, Mom, when you ended the Abreez civil war," Binai chided.

"I was almost twenty," his mother's voice replied, laughing.

"Besides, I was the only candidate who knew the complete history of the trade negotiations. I have you to thank for that."

"We wouldn't have done it any other way. Please tell the Foreign Secretary that we accept the assignment. When do you leave for Kala?"

"As soon as we say goodbye to Lit. I found out about this mission just before her Coming-Of-Age Ceremony. I didn't want to take attention away from her that day, and then we had the crisis with you, so I didn't tell anyone until now." Binai paused, and his parents saw tears in his eyes. "I was hoping that she would come with me to Kala and that Master Bespe would find some way to keep her alive."

His parents took Binai in their arms. He clung to them tightly as he wept for the sister that was as close to being a partner as he would experience in his life.

The next morning, Binai, Metta, their parents and grandparents stood in a circle in the garden. They each took a handful of Lit's ashes and tossed them into the gentle breeze. Then her parents made a mind-to-mind connection for all of them and they said goodbye to Lit's echo in the Path. Binai left for Kala the next evening, a small packet of ashes tucked safely in a pocket of his cloak, next to his heart.

It wasn't until several days later that the newly-joined being noticed that something was amiss with their younger daughter. They had been absorbed in the instructions and advice from Observer Tansik and Erik's parents on how to live in Permanence. But on the day when the older couple returned to their own home, the door had barely closed behind them when Metta turned on her parents.

"Would you *please* talk to me?" she demanded. "You don't know how scary it is to have everyone leaving. Lit's dead, Binai's on Kala, you're one person instead of two . . ." Her voice trailed off and she started to cry. "I want my family back," she sobbed, clutching their robe.

Her stunned parents took her in their arms and held her tightly, suddenly realizing how much they had neglected her in the past few days. They sank to the floor with her and waited until the sobs had abated.

"We're both still here, Metta," they started to explain. She gave them a look of utter disbelief.

Metta's parents gently leaned their forehead against hers, and then into hers. She gasped. The only time she had been joined like this was with her father just after her birth. Since she didn't remember that event, the experience now was wonderful, and a little terrifying. Her parents gave her a moment to adjust, and then gently established a mind-to-mind connection with her. She didn't understand all that they showed her, but she did understand that she still had two parents and they loved her very much. She also saw something else in their mind.

"You really don't know how to be one being, do you?" she teased them with her discovery after they disconnected from her. "You haven't the faintest idea how to do this. I thought I was having a problem losing Lit and Binai, but you've lost them and yourselves." She paused and wrapped her arms around their waist. "I'm sorry I was selfish. Thank you for showing me what you're doing and that you're still my parents."

"That's about all we're sure of right now," they replied, pleased with her insight and compassion. "Although we knew we'd become permanent some day, we didn't have much time to prepare for the way it actually happened. We're glad you

are here, Metta. If we had to be completely alone while we figure this out, we'd probably go crazy," they added with a laugh, hugging her close and kissing her head.

In the days that followed, Pema and Erik slowly learned to move, eat, think and feel as one being. They provided a running commentary to their daughter on what they were doing, on their mistakes and successes.

Because of the extensive damage to Pema's tissues from the stroke, and the fact that she wasn't Sanderma, the permanent being was more Erik than Pema in substance – but not in thought. Their funniest and most frustrating moments came when Erik tried to act as if their body was still his alone. Pema's gentle, and not-so-gentle, corrections often convulsed them with laughter. Metta couldn't help but join in. She also quickly learned to recognize when they were having a serious, silent negotiation. She left them alone during those times, until they found a solution and moved again.

It was a fascinating tutorial on partnership, and Metta carefully tucked the lessons into her heart. She was patient with her parents, more than living up to the ancient meaning of her name. She noticed that they gradually laughed more and cried less. She wished she could do the same.



## - 10 - healers

Metta sat curled up on the couch with her arms around her knees, staring blankly out the window into the garden, just as she had on most mornings in the month since Lit's death. She missed her sister terribly. With Binai away on Kala, Metta and her parents were alone in the house, unless Erik's parents or Observer Tansik came for a visit. The girl did her Pathen exercises without enthusiasm, and it seemed to her parents that the only subject she had any interest in was the self-healing connection that Pema had discovered in the Path. Metta's curiosity about it was endless.

"We can't tell you any more about the physiology of self-healing and the Path connection," her parents lamented when she asked them about it again that morning. "We wish we knew more about it, Metta, but we don't. It's something we have, not something we've studied. We're sorry."

"Well, where can I learn more?" she asked in exasperation.

"Medical school. Unfortunately, they don't admit ten year-olds." They hesitated. "But..."

"But what?" Metta asked, seeing the glimmer of an idea in their eyes.

"We know that Jorn was interested in the self-healing Path connection we used. How about if you go to Nyta to finish your Pathen training with him? See if he has any ideas about it. Maybe, by the time you return, we'll have something figured out for medical school."

They laughed as their youngest child skipped around the open space. Her long, dark curls were bouncing to the rhythm of her happiness. Sometimes, being ten wasn't so bad. Metta left for Nyta a week later.

\* \* \*



Metta awoke with a start in her sleeping alcove. Jorn was shaking her gently.

"Get up, Metta," he urged. "There's been an accident in the capital. They need you. Take my land shuttle."

Metta dressed hurriedly and sped off toward Nyta's largest city. She reached the outskirts an hour later. Coming over a small rise, she gasped in horror at the scene before her. Black smoke poured from a charred ruin in the distance, and several fires dotted the wreckage. The cries of the wounded echoed eerily through the mist.

Metta got out of the shuttle and ran to a young man who appeared to be in charge, even though he didn't look much older than herself. He was slightly taller and thinner than Metta, and his copper-colored hair lifted gently on the morning breeze. He wore a red medical cape over his white Pathen inner robe.

"Can I help?" Metta asked, panting.

The man turned.

"A Pathen trainee," he said, glancing at her robes. "Good. We could use your skills. What's your name?"

"Metta. What happened?"

"Domestic shuttle with about a thousand people on board crashed into the main power station. We've just started triage. Red flags are dead, green flags are stable, and yellow flags need our help first. If you can get them stabilized, that will hold them until one of the doctors can treat them."

"Stabilized?" Metta asked, unsure about what he meant.

"Yes," he replied with mild impatience. "You know, put your hands on them and use the Path to stabilize them."

"Doctor Fiskos!" The man turned. Another member of the medical team was calling to him from across the field. "Doctor Fiskos, we need you over here right away."

The doctor began running across the field. He turned and called back to Metta. "Just start anywhere you see yellow flags."

Metta surveyed the field, overwhelmed by the carnage before her. She saw five yellow flags clumped a few meters to her right and ran toward them. The flags marked what was obviously a family. Two adults and three children lay on the ground. All except the adult male were unconscious.

"Help them," he gestured weakly to the children.

Metta knelt next to them. "*Put your hands on them and use the Path to stabilize them,*" Doctor Fiskos had told her. What did he mean? Metta reached out one hand and hesitantly laid it over the smaller girl's chest. She put her other hand on the boy next to her. Nothing happened.

"Hurry," the man gasped convulsively. Blood was beginning to trickle out of his mouth.

Metta panicked and stood up, trembling. She looked around wildly, trying to spot someone in a red cape. None could be seen.

"Don't leave us," the man begged. "You know what to do."

Metta looked down into his eyes. She saw the pleading. She also saw his belief that she could help them. She took a deep breath, blocked out the field of devastation around her, and sank down next to the children. She put her hands on them again, but instead of trying to heal them, this time she simply let the Path flow through her. It was a strategy of desperation. She didn't know what else to do.

Immediately, the boy's breathing deepened and color returned to the girl's face. Metta moved to the woman and the other girl, then to the man. She turned him on his side so that he wouldn't choke on the blood coming from his mouth. She put her hands on his back. Slowly, the bleeding stopped. He looked up at her.

"Thank you," he said weakly.

Metta moved to another set of yellow flags, and then to another. Throughout the day, she forced herself to focus on the casualties in front of her. Toward evening, when she finally allowed herself to look up, she was surprised to see that the field had been transformed into an orderly arrangement of medical units. The fires were out and the smoke had dissipated into Nyta's perennial mist. Metta looked down and saw that her robes were caked with dirt and blood. Someone touched her arm.

"Good work, Metta." It was Doctor Fiskos. "Thanks for your help. How about some food?"

Metta suddenly realized that the last time she had eaten was at Jorn's the previous evening.

"Yes, please," she answered, following the doctor into a nearby tent. They both washed their hands and arms as best they could in a tub of water set out for that purpose. Then, Doctor Fiskos motioned Metta to a seat at a nearby table. He returned a few moments later carrying two plates heaped with food. Metta took a few mouthfuls, and then put her head on the table, suddenly too tired to eat. She wanted to talk to Doctor Fiskos, but she had to close her eyes first, just for a moment.

Metta awoke slowly and looked around. It was morning, and she was back in her sleeping alcove. Jorn sat leaning against the wall, watching her with a calm, expectant expression. She sat up and noticed that she was wearing her sleeping gown. The filthy robes she remembered had disappeared.

"It wasn't real, was it?"

"All suffering is real to the beings who are suffering," Jorn replied. "What did you learn?"

Metta sighed, trying to collect her thoughts. She spoke slowly.

"That the place to start any healing is with myself. That even mass suffering can be alleviated by focusing on one person at a time. That just being with someone can be more helpful than trying to cure them."

Jorn smiled broadly. "Come with me." He stood and strode out of the hut.

Metta followed him to the clearing. He motioned for her to kneel. Metta smiled and bowed her head. Jorn put a new inner robe around her, and then a new outer one. He touched her shoulders and head with a Weapon, and then handed it to her.

The master remained silent throughout the ritual, just as Metta's parents had told her he would.

When Jorn finished her Becoming Ceremony, Metta stood and immediately removed her outer robe. She handed it and the Weapon back to her teacher. In response to his surprised look, Metta laughed and gave him a hug.

"I made this choice when I was six years old, Jorn," she explained. "I will be a healer and a partner."

"And you will be late for your Coming-Of-Age Ceremony tomorrow if you don't pack up and leave right now," he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

Metta gasped. It was hard to believe that four years had passed since she left home.

"It's a bit overwhelming," she said to her parents and Binai the next evening after her Coming-Of-Age Ceremony. She had just finished telling them the story of her Pathen test. "My Becoming Ceremony was yesterday morning, I came home last night, and today I'm an adult. Can life be boring for the next few days?"

"Not a chance," her parents answered with a mischievous grin, handing her a decorated scroll.

Metta activated the document and gasped. It was an acceptance letter to the medical school on Pocrat.

"Classes start next week," said Binai. "It's a good thing you didn't unpack," he added with a laugh. "I'll go with you as far as Kala."

\* \* \*

Four days later, Metta watched as Pocrat grew larger through the shuttle window.

"An entire planet devoted to medicine and healing," she thought to herself. "What a gift the Pocratens have given to the galaxy."

One island of the planet was covered with an immense teaching hospital. The low, white buildings went almost down to the water's edge. Across a narrow strait, Metta glimpsed the medical school sprawled along the coast of the mainland, its glass structures reflecting clouds and sunlight after the nightly storm. Metta had inherited her mother's love of oceans, and she hoped that the rocky coastline hid at least one good beach for swimming. The shuttle touched down at the school's landing platform.

Two mornings later, Metta found the room for her first class, a course in basic emergency medicine. The room was crowded with new students. Metta took a seat at the side near the front, just as the instructing physician rapped for attention. The healer wore a Sanderma cloak with the hood back. Her hands were bare, and she wore Pathen sandals instead of the typical Sanderma boots.

"*I guess they're used to seeing the insides of bodies around here,*" Metta thought to herself. She noticed Pathen master robes under the instructor's medical cape.

The room grew quiet.

"Welcome to Pocrat," the instructor addressed the crowd. "I'm Doctor Mayal. If you're Sanderma, it's Healer Mayal. I've been called other things, too, but you'll have to wait until third year for that." A nervous giggle ran through the room. The woman looked imposing, and the new students weren't quite sure how to interpret her levity.

"This is Basic Emergency Medicine," she continued. "A class that the faculty believes you should have first so that you can treat each other after those wild parties that I see some of you have already indulged in." The doctor looked sternly at the group and laughed. "Don't worry, I did a little partying myself when I was a student here, and no one ever gets seriously hurt. Unless someone decides to go swimming at night." Metta squirmed as the doctor's eyes held hers for a brief moment. The rest of the group laughed genuinely this time, relieved that the instructor might not be as intimidating as her reputation had led them to believe. Because of the nightly storms that swept the Pocraten coastline, there was a strict rule against swimming in the ocean after dark. The new students couldn't imagine that anyone would attempt it.

"I tried it a few times myself," the doctor grinned. "But don't tell anyone. Now, I'd like to introduce my assistant for this class. He recently finished his third-year internship in emergency medicine." She motioned to someone standing in the back of the room. Metta turned and gasped. The man was looking straight at her, an amused expression on his face. It was Doctor Fiskos.

"But it wasn't real," Metta said as they sat over lunch after the first class. "How did you end up on Nyta in my Becoming test, Doctor Fiskos?"

"Please call me En," he answered. "Enos Fiskos," he added in response to Metta's puzzled expression. "On my homeworld, everyone has two names. I've learned that it's unusual, but that's how we identify each other." Metta's skeptical look didn't change. Everyone she knew had only one name, and no one had any trouble identifying anyone else.

"Anyway," En continued. "The emergency itself was real, but not as extensive as you were led to believe. The transport didn't crash; it just made an off-field landing. No one died." He paused to take a bite of his lunch. "And, I really was doing my internship in emergency medicine on Nyta. That was my last day before coming back here. We knew you were interested in being a healer, and Jorn said that it was time for your Becoming. So, we combined the medical school admission test with your Becoming test. You passed both beautifully." En gave a slight emphasis to his last word and smiled at Metta with admiration, and something else. She looked away quickly. Metta's body had blossomed early into its womanly form, and she was beginning to sense the reaction of others to something more than just her Pathen skills. En's praise made her face feel hot, and she didn't trust herself to look at him.

Later that afternoon, Metta received a summons to Doctor Mayal's office. The student who delivered the message gave Metta a disdainful look that seemed to say, "How did you manage to get in trouble so soon?"

Metta knocked hesitantly on the office door. The doctor opened it.

"Hello, Metta. Thank you for coming so promptly." She motioned the young woman to a chair in front of her desk.

*"She doesn't sound mad,"* Metta thought to herself.

"I know that you have a particular interest in being here," Doctor Mayal began. "The self-healing connection that your mother discovered in the Path, and that she and your father used so effectively to save their life has caused quite a bit of excitement around here." At the mention of her parents, Metta felt a pang of homesickness. She had been with her family less than a week between Nyta and Pocrat.

"I know you miss them," the doctor smiled kindly, and then continued. "Metta, you have made the choice to be a partner. Therefore, you will not have access to the deeper parts of the Path that you would have as a master. But I can help you with that."

Metta looked quizzically at the woman, not understanding where the conversation was going.

"I'm sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself," the doctor apologized. "Metta, students here usually do not begin their research projects until the third year. But we can't wait that long for you to start working on the self-healing connection. Needless suffering and death will continue if we delay any longer. We've already waited for four years. Now that you're here, we can get to work."

Metta sat tensely. The doctor took a breath and continued.

"The faculty members have agreed to waive or condense several of your classes. You already demonstrated at the field on Nyta that you have the basic skills that we would have taught you in the first two years. Your Pathen training served you well there. You will be assigned to me as my research assistant. We will come up with a curriculum for you so that you can graduate properly, but the bulk of your time will be spent working on the self-healing connection. The sooner we can get that into general use, the better."

Doctor Mayal turned and gazed out the window of her office, lost for a moment in her own thoughts.

"The first thing we need to find out," she continued, "is if the connection only works when a Sanderman is on one end of it, or if other species can use it, too. Is it just a connection to self-healing, or does the connection carry self-healing within it?"

It was clear to Metta that Doctor Mayal had already given considerable thought to how the research should proceed. She was glad that the doctor turned around. That way, she couldn't see the tears running down Metta's face. What could she say to the woman who had just granted her most cherished wish?

"A mere 'yes' might be a good thing to say right now," the doctor laughed, still gazing at the rocky shoreline in the distance.

"Yes," Metta whispered.

"Can you imagine the implications it will have for emergency medicine?" En exclaimed that evening at dinner. Metta had just finished telling him about her parents and about Doctor Mayal's plan. "We can train field medics to use the self-

healing connection and they will make much more progress and save so many lives that are now lost waiting for a doctor."

"Wait, wait," Metta groaned. "We don't even know what 'it' is yet. The first thing Doctor Mayal wants me to do is go home and have my parents do a mind-to-mind connection with me so that I'll understand what they did. Then Doctor Mayal will do a connection with me so we'll both have the same knowledge." She frowned. "Non-masters aren't supposed to do that. But she said it was safe, especially since I'd be doing it with people I know and trust. I've had my parents in my mind before, but never for something as extensive as this is going to be," she added skeptically.

"Don't worry, I'll be right there with you," En said. "Let's go."

On the shuttle to Sanderma, Metta told En more about her parents. She didn't want him to be surprised by two beings in one form.

"Permanence," En mused. "Do you think they'd mind if I asked them how it's going? They're sort of a rare case. Sanderma usually can't or won't join irreversibly with members of other species."

"They're not a case," Metta said testily. "They're people. Please treat them as such."

"You're right, Metta. I'm sorry," En replied, putting his arm around her.

Metta need not have worried. Her parents welcomed En warmly into their home. They were overjoyed to see Metta again so soon, and they eagerly offered to help with her research in any way they could. The topic was of obvious interest to them, too.

The next morning over breakfast, Metta laid out the research plan. She recounted the conversation between herself and Doctor Mayal.

"I need to know what you found, Mom. Also, how you both used it. Anything you can show or tell me about it, and how it works, would be helpful. I especially need to know where you discovered the connection in the Path, so we can find it again."

"That's going to be hard to explain," Pema's voice replied. "I found it accidentally as I was trying to expand our single-strand connection many years ago. It would be better if I could show you where it is."

"I know." Metta hesitated. "Doctor Mayal suggested that a mind-to-mind connection might be the best way for me to get the information. That way, I can understand the self-healing mechanism itself from Dad, and how Mom found and used the Path connection to it."

"That's risky, Metta," they cautioned. "You're not a master, and you will have the energy of two minds coming into you for quite a while. We may not be able to control it long enough so that it doesn't overwhelm you."

"How about if I participated?" En offered. "That way, there would be two minds to receive the information, and the energy would be dissipated between Metta and me. She wouldn't get the full force of it."

"That might work," the joined form agreed. "Then, the knowledge would be in

two places, which seems prudent. This is going to take a while, and none of us is going to want to have to do it again in case one of you forgets something," they smiled. To En, they added, "If we all have enough energy left when we're finished, we'll take you on a brief tour of Permanence."

They decided that the best way to configure their three bodies was to have all of them lie on the floor of the open space. Metta's parents brought out a large, soft comforter. Metta and En lay down on it, forming a right angle with their heads touching. Metta's parents then positioned their body so that their head would touch the other two.

"Bring your research question to mind," they directed. "When you're ready, let us know and we'll begin the mind-to-mind connection. Try to relax. You might find a Pathen trance helpful. You can do that once we've established the connection. It won't get in the way."

For the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, Metta and En received all the information that her parents could convey about self-healing and the Path connection to it. Metta and En discovered that, after the initial uneasiness, it was pleasant to have other loving, caring beings in their minds. Pema and Erik enjoyed reliving the experience of becoming permanent. It also gave them an opportunity to show their younger daughter how bravely her sister had died. They ended by allowing En to briefly examine their internal state as one being.

Metta and En awoke the next morning, somewhat embarrassed to find themselves together in the bed in Metta's old room.

"Why did you do that?" she asked her parents while En showered. "We're not a couple."

"Yes, you are," they replied with a smile. "It's right there in both of your minds."

Metta and En departed that afternoon. For Metta, it had been wonderful to be home, but she was troubled by her parents' discovery about En and herself. They had found so easily what she had denied.

En was quiet, too. He had been allowed to examine a spectacular case of self-healing that saved two lives as one. He had also fleetingly touched a joined being that welcomed him into their heart. As the shuttle approached Pocrat, he turned to Metta.

"I could do this as my life's work, Metta," En said softly, clearly moved by their experience on Sanderm. "To bring self-healing to the medical community and beyond is worth spending a lifetime on." He paused and ran the fingers of one hand lightly down a tendril of dark curls beside Metta's face. Then he took her hand in his.

"Will you do it with me?"

"Yes, oh yes," Metta replied, tears in her eyes. Their kiss lasted until the shuttle landed and they arose to debark.

\* \* \*

"I guess we can postpone the research for one day," Doctor Mayal laughed. Metta and En had just asked her to officiate at their Bonding Ceremony. "But I must admit that it will be difficult to wait to find out what your parents told you."

"Then the sooner we do the ceremony, the sooner we can tell you," En replied with a grin. The grin vanished when the doctor informed them that the ceremony would happen the next morning at the beginning of class.

"In front of all those people?" Metta asked.

"Metta, in a close-knit community like this one, there can be no secrets," Doctor Mayal replied. "There is a rule here that couples must declare their relationship publicly so that our school, and the wider medical community on this planet, will not be distracted by the gossip and games that go on when so many beings live so closely together. It's healthier this way. Trust me; your fellow students will be very happy and supportive."

Metta and En nodded, hoping she was right.

Doctor Mayal conducted the ceremony with brisk efficiency the next morning as Metta and En knelt in front of the packed classroom. Apparently, very few of their fellow students were surprised at this new development. Most of them were Pathen, and had sensed the connection between Metta and En. The new couple had some difficulty concentrating on the instructor's lecture after the ceremony.

Later that afternoon, Metta and En met Doctor Mayal in her office.

"I suppose the easiest way for me to get the information out of you is to do whatever your parents did to get it into you. I imagine it took a while, so standing or sitting doesn't seem to be an option."

"We all lay on the floor," Metta explained, using her fingers to demonstrate the configuration. "En and I put our heads together and my parents gave us some instructions, and then they did the connection."

"All right, we'll do it that way," the doctor replied. "I'm going to record this so that other researchers will have access to the data." She held up a small wafer, and then stuck it to her forehead. "Whenever you're ready."

The three lay down on the carpet, heads touching. Doctor Mayal initiated the mind-to-mind connection.

The next morning, Metta and En awoke in what appeared to be a guest room of the medical school. This time, there was no hesitation about being in the same bed together. They stayed there for the rest of the day. In the evening, Metta composed a message to her parents. The details filled several pagescreens, even though only two days had passed since they had seen each other. She signed the message, "Love from Metta and En."

\* \* \*

In the years that followed, Metta and En, under Doctor Mayal's watchful guidance, succeeded in establishing the existence of a self-healing capability within the Path.



They both did their residencies on Sanderma, and discovered that the Sanderma self-healing mechanism was a piece of the Path, and therefore available to all sentient beings. The careful research pioneered by Metta and En revolutionized not only emergency medicine, as En had predicted, but other healing arts as well.

Metta and En settled on Pocrat, but they often brought their growing family to Sanderma for a visit and to share practices with the Sanderma healers. Amid all of the demands of their research, they somehow found time to have six children. Their first-born, a girl, was named Lit by her father. At a young age, the child made the choice to become a Pathen master teacher in honor of the memory of her bornmaster aunt. As the second Lit grew older, and her skills stronger, she attained a reputation as one of the most accomplished and compassionate master teachers ever known by the Pathen, an honor that frequently brought tears of joy and remembrance to her mother's parents. She became the woman that their elder daughter would have been, had she lived. Of her five siblings, two followed her into masterhood and the rest became partners, eventually having five children among them.

Despite their hectic schedule as the Sanderma Foreign Secretary, Metta's parents always had time to teach and play with their grandchildren. After Pema and Erik retired from the diplomatic corps, they often hosted their great-grandchildren. It was fun to have young people in the house again, and all of those descendants more than fulfilled the connection to the future that Pema had so desperately wanted.

Binai, too, often came to visit. His office and apartment were just around the corner from his parents' home. One afternoon, he walked over with a reprobook that he wanted to read to them.

"Our eyes aren't that bad, son," his parents complained teasingly as they gave him a warm hug of welcome. "We could read it ourselves." They settled onto the couch, anticipating a good story. Binai sat in a chair across from them.

"I know," he replied. "But I think it would be better if I read it to you."



# - 11 - The End

Binai slowly closed the reprobook. He and his parents had paused briefly for dinner after the chapter about the master transmissions. Then, he had finished reading the story to them as the evening sky darkened toward night.

"Is that the end?" his parents asked.

"I don't know. If there's more, the book won't let me see it yet," he replied with a weak smile.

"Well," they sighed, pleased and a little astonished. "It's our life story, that's for sure. There are gaps, of course, but the details are amazingly accurate. It even goes right up to today. We wonder how the author knew what we would say about our eyesight, and that you would want to read the book to us." They smiled at their son. "How did you know that would happen?"

"I didn't write it," Binai replied guardedly.

His parents gave him a puzzled look, and then shrugged. "Well, whoever wrote this knows us well. We had no idea that someone was working on our biography. It's very good. Maybe even a little *too* good. There are some details in it that we don't recall ever telling anyone, or putting in our diaries."

There was a knock on the door, and Binai rose to answer it. A voice asked, "Did you finish reading it to them?"

"Just did," Binai answered. "Please come in."

"Ambassadors Pema and Erik," their son said, using the formal introduction. "This is Professor Istor. He is the director of the Sanderm archives. He has some information about your . . . biography."

"Welcome, Professor," they said as they rose and bowed their greeting to him. "Binai has been reading the book to us. We're flattered that someone thinks our life is worthy of such a detailed re-telling. You are the author?" they asked hopefully, sitting down again on the couch.

The archivist bowed in return. Then, he and Binai sat in chairs facing the joined form. The Professor took a deep breath, glanced at Binai, and then turned a steady gaze on the elderly being before him.

"Ambassadors," he started, and then hesitated. He cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone dry. "Ambassadors, the original manuscript of the book that Secretary Binai read to you today was discovered last year on a now-uninhabited planet on the other side of our galaxy. It was found by the lead archaeologist who is excavating some ruins there, in what appears to have been a town that was a school or a center of learning of some sort. It's a suburb of what had been one of their large, coastal cities. It seems that the people liked to live by the oceans." The Professor paused as Binai held out a glass of water. "Oh, thank you."

"Anyway," he continued. "Most of the planet's humanoid inhabitants died in a great war shortly after the manuscript was written. The rest were killed off by a virus after the medical establishment collapsed. There is plenty of life still there. In fact, the whole planet is flourishing with all sorts of plants and animals, just no people. The place is now an off-world silkworm plantation that is managed from a nearby moon by the Sinosians."

The joined form nodded. "We have a robe from there."

"The lead archaeologist is from your homeworld, Ambassador Pema," continued the Professor. "She recognized enough of the words on some of the pages to realize that there might be a connection. So, she sent the document to the archives on Assar."

"Yes, I know the building," Pema's voice answered.

"Sections of the manuscript were then sent to fifty-one other planetary archives for analysis. That's standard procedure when the authenticity of an artifact is in question. A reprobook of the entire manuscript, the book that your son read to you today, was also sent to each archive." The Professor paused and looked intently at the joined form. They sat with an amused smile on their face, awaiting the punch line of the Professor's very creative story. Why had he concocted such an elaborate epic to explain their biography? Their life wasn't *that* important.

"The archives, including the one here on Sanderm, analyzed the manuscript in the blind. We were told nothing about it," the Professor continued. "We were simply asked to provide a probable date and planet of origin for the document. So, we examined the ink and paper, and analyzed the writing style and dialect against other known works by the same author. We interviewed the lead archaeologist and her entire team, and closely examined their records of the find."

The Professor paused. He knew that they weren't going to believe what he had to say next. He still wasn't sure that he believed it himself.

"Last week, all fifty-two archives completed the analysis and submitted their findings, along with their conclusions. All of the results, including ours, came back with the same answer. The manuscript is authentic. The book that Secretary Binai read to you today was written, probably by a woman, about twelve hundred years

ago on a world far away from Sanderm."

The room was silent. No one moved.

Finally, the joined form spoke. "That's impossible, Professor Istor," they said tensely. "How could someone that far away in time and space know what our life would be like with such accuracy?"

The Professor sighed. "Because she's you."

"What? We're old, but we're not *that* old," retorted the elderly being, but there was more of Erik than Pema in the voice that replied. "We certainly didn't write our own biography and then bury it on some distant planet."

"I'm not saying that you did," Istor replied calmly. "What I am saying is that you have lived a life that was planned a dozen centuries ago."

The Professor knew this was going to be difficult. It was time to show them some concrete evidence. He pulled a repro page from the pocket of his robe.

"On the last page of the manuscript was a handwritten note by the author. Yes, yes," he added, anticipating their objection. "It, too, has been tested and verified fifty-two times."

"What does it say?"

The Professor opened the page and translated the words on it, reading aloud as he did so:

*This is the life I want next.  
I wasn't planning to live again - - no energy for it.  
But a life of love is worth coming back for.*

The professor slowly closed the page and put it on the low table in front of him. "A long time ago, on a faraway world, a woman created a story about a life she wanted. Then, somehow, she found a way to make it happen."

Binai heard a faint gasp from his parents. It was like the sound his mother used to make when she was surprised.

"That's what Tansik meant," Pema's voice whispered.

"Observer Tansik?" the Professor asked with a puzzled look.

"Yes," the joined form replied. "As you know from the story, he was our first Observer. He died a few years after we entered Permanence. That was a sad time," they sighed in quiet reflection. "We lost Bespe and Tansik within a few months of each other. We went to the Ashes Ceremonies for both of them. Binai was still on Kala at the time, and . . ."

"Excuse me, Ambassador Pema," the Professor interrupted. "I don't understand. Tansik died almost forty years ago, so he couldn't have known about the manuscript. When you said 'that's what Tansik meant,' what were you referring to?"

There was no answer for several moments, and Binai and Istor had the distinct impression that an internal discussion was taking place in the being before them. Finally, Pema's voice spoke softly and hesitantly.

"Tansik told me once that there was a reason for partnerships like ours, but that we weren't ready to hear it. He said that we should just enjoy the story."

There was a pause, and then the voice of the joined being continued. "He didn't know about this particular manuscript, but he knew that the reason we lived the life we did was that someone wanted it to happen. He apparently knew that about his own partnership, and perhaps about Erik's parents, although he was not their Observer." There was another pause, and a faint smile crossed the face of the joined being. "We wish that there was some way to let her know that we lived the life she wanted, and that it was wonderful."

"But that's crazy," Binai objected. "It has never been satisfactorily proven that humanoid individuals have multiple lives."

"This manuscript, and your parents' life, might suggest otherwise," the Professor replied gently.

"But if we are her," the elderly form asked, "why don't we remember the author and her plan? Why don't we remember writing the story?"

"Because in the story, you don't remember," the Professor explained. "But she did leave you clues in a few places, probably so that you would know the truth in the unlikely event that the manuscript ever came to your attention . . . or that someone with Tansik's level of knowledge would tell you."

"The 'already seen'," the couple replied, surprised by the sudden insight. "We had it several times. Feeling like we were repeating something, even though we knew that we had never done or said it before. We remember that we talked about it with Doctor Zant right after Binai was born, and . . ."

"Yes," the professor interrupted excitedly, "and the author apparently anticipated that you might discover what was going on. So, she made sure that you wouldn't quite remember how many 'already seen' episodes you'd experienced, and that they would fade quickly." He paused, and then added, "I know this is confusing, but you planned to not remember."

"It's true," they sighed. "Only the incident at Binai's birth is clear in our memory, just like the story tells it. She left us hints, but not enough to cause us to change the life she'd already planned for us. For her. But how did she know it would work? She seems to have had a fairly accurate, if basic, knowledge of the Path. She missed on that part about the single-strand connections. They don't have to be made; they already exist and all you have to do is find them. Other than that, her descriptions of the Path are accurate. She even knew about the self-healing connection when all of the Pathen in our time did not. But it's obvious that her society wasn't Pathen, so how was she able to create our story?"

"That's an interesting question, and your supposition is correct," Istor replied. "The humanoids on the author's homeworld were not Pathen, as far as we can tell. However, from some of the writings they left behind, it seems that a few of them were beginning to have a rudimentary understanding of the Path and its connection through all beings across time and space. Perhaps the author was one of those who

had a glimmer of what the universe is all about. Or perhaps it was a lucky guess . . . but I doubt it. Unfortunately, we'll never know. All of her people killed each other before more of them discovered the Path. It would, of course, have kept them from genocide. No one in their right mind would murder another part of themselves."

"Like the Abreezi," Pema's voice whispered.

"Yes," the Professor replied. "Well, it's getting late and I should be going." He stood and bowed. "This is probably enough for one day." He smiled, but there was a sadness in his eyes.

Binai escorted the Professor out. They talked briefly at the garden gate. When Binai returned to the house, he found his parents asleep on the couch, exhausted from the day's discoveries. For a brief moment, he wondered how many lives were contained in that form. He gently covered them with a blanket, lightly kissed their head, and then retired to the guest room. It was too late to return to his own home.

The next morning, Binai found the body of his parents, still on the couch. Sometime in the night, the elderly couple had died peacefully together, as one.

Later that day, after talking with Metta and En, Binai walked over to the archive building. His parents' Ashes Ceremony would not be until the next evening on Nyta, and he had some time before the shuttle would depart. Though now frail and elderly, Jorn had insisted on leading the ceremony himself, and Binai had gratefully agreed.

Stopping on the threshold of the Professor's office, Binai knocked on the door and went in.

"My parents are dead," he said softly.

"Yes, I know," Istor replied as he gestured to the manuscript spread out before him. "I'm sorry."

Binai sank down into a chair. The wave of grief that he had fended off during the morning rolled inside him, and his eyes overflowed with silent tears. He desperately wanted to believe the Professor's hypothesis.

"I wonder if they met her . . . there," he sighed.

"You're still not getting it," the Professor replied gently. "As your mother learned on Assar, there is no *there*. They were the author. Or she was them. It all depends on how you want to look at it."

"How does it end?" Binai asked, laying his hand gently on the manuscript, as if wanting to feel in its pages the reassurance that he needed.

"When you stopped reading yesterday, only two sentences remained that the reprobook hadn't shown you."

"What do they say?" Binai held his breath.

The Professor carefully lifted the last page from the manuscript and held it to the light. He translated the dialect, reading the faded print slowly as he went:

“The next morning, Binai found the body of his parents, still on the couch. Sometime in the night, the elderly couple had died peacefully together, as one.’ “