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Going Down

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Going Down

By Ann Somerville

For those dear friends who stopped me going under

Going Down

"You can come inside now. She's gone home."

Einan drew in a deep breath of the humid night air before he turned to face his boss, framed in the kitchen's doorway. "Sorry. I...I just forgot. I tried to calm her down and it—"

Lano waved away his apology. "Forget it. I told Jaril twice already to knock off the temper 'round you, but she...well, you know. She just gets riled and then it's duck and cover for everyone."

Einan had to grin. "Yeah."

It hadn't been funny at the time, though. Jaril stomping through the kitchen, throwing down plates and cutlery every which way and cursing over some customer bitching at her about an order, had scraped saw-edged teeth on his talent. Automatically, he'd reached out to soak away some of her anger, forgetting that was the very last thing he could or should do any more—the shock to his empathy had sent him reeling. He'd had to bolt outside before he puked all over Lano's kitchen.

"Biene 'n me can finish up, if'n you like. You been working like one of them machines they build in the factories up in Nordat. You get your supper and hit the sack."

Einan followed Lano back into the kitchen. There were a few dishes, a couple of saucepans left to be done, but he felt so jangly and nauseous....

"Are you sure? I don't mind—"

"Nah. Figure I owe it for inflicting our girl on you. There's still some stew if'n you want something hot."

"Just some bread." The idea of food made Einan's stomach roil queasily. "Any of those herb rolls left?"

"In the breadbin." As Einan slung his apron on the hook, Lano touched his arm. *You get some sleep, you hear? Them dark circles under your eyes are blacker than my frying pans.*

Einan gently brushed away Lano's hand. "I'll try, boss. 'Night."

"Take the blessed bread, for holy Nardi's sake."

Einan made a sarcastic bow, hands together, saluting the god of bounty, but he doubted Nardi gave much of a shit whether he ate supper or not. He grabbed a couple of rolls out of the bin as he passed, just to keep Lano off his back. Who knew, he might even eat them, if he washed them down with some giazio later.

He only lit up after he cleared the yard. Lano was pretty easy going but he disapproved of jetka weed, and there was no point in poking him just because.

The cool smoke kissed his throat. Slowly the click-scratch-chatter of dozens of souls and their troubled feelings, eased back. Not quite to silence, but enough so he could relax his control. His talent felt battered, fraying at the edges. Losing himself in someone else tonight had been a stupid mistake. He just couldn't do that kind of thing any more, and he knew it. He just...kept thinking he'd get better somehow. It'd been nearly a year. It wasn't getting better, and he was a fool to keep hoping it would.

He desperately needed a full night's sleep, especially before Jaril came on duty again, but tonight wouldn't be that night. He'd have to make do with weed and booze, and maybe one of his carefully hoarded pills. He'd only taken five since he'd arrived in Kundo. One day the hospital would stop dishing them out and he'd only have what he'd saved for the very worst nights. He'd manage without, tonight.

The scent of rust, motor lubricant and decay burdened the humid air, overlaying the jaiger shit and drain stink as he walked down to dockside. Two of the sparse lamps flickered, threatening to go out. Kundo was bigger and richer than Minwal on the north coast where he'd spent almost half his life working, but 'The Bird's Nest' wasn't in the wealthy part of the city. The street lighting here was little better than in Einan's tiny two jaiger hometown on the plains.

He walked down to the water's edge. The rising tide slap-slapped against the banks, and pale shapes floated in the oily dark water. His hand shook as he lifted the smoke to take another calming drag of the weed.

Logs, bits of sail — just crap, he told himself. Not drowned bodies.

He stared until the drifting forms made sense, until his nausea eased down and he could unclench his hands. First time he'd come down here, he'd thrown up as a piece of timber floated past. He was getting better, he told himself, if he could come here now

and be rational. A little hand trembling was nothing. The nightmares were just as bad, but he could handle them. Or the *giazo* could.

When he'd faced down his terrors long enough, he turned southwards, towards the old warehouses and tenements. There were more gas and oil lamps than electric down here, pale glows showing in the windows of boarding houses and leaning wooden terraces. Here and there, indigents who skulked in the ruins of buildings, had set fires on the ground or in metal barrels, cast off crates—whatever might make a makeshift fireplace or stove. The ashy, distinct scent of burned houses settled in cool shadows, wherever moisture pooled and trapped it in the timbers and refuse. Better street and house lighting would mean fewer fires, but the comfort of the poorer folk was never much of a concern in the big city, and who cared if the shiftless burned to death?

There was no city lighting at all now, but enough from the moon and the small spill from window lamps for him to make his way along the potholed road. He walked past three men cooking something—he really didn't want to know what—over a small fire in a tin, out front of a closed down store. He resisted giving them the lecture about safe handling of open flames in an urban situation. Not his job any more. Not his concern. All he cared about was that the men's curiosity didn't turn hostile.

They were bearded and elderly, dressed in heavy, greasy coats despite the oppressive heat. A distinct smell of urine and rotten food floated around them, barely covered by the smoke and the roasting meat.

One of them raised his bottle in salute as Einar walked past. Einar reached into his pocket and found the end of his packet of weed, tossed it at the man along with an almost empty box of papers.

The guy caught it and grinned. "Thank'ee, thank'ee kindly. Want a slug?"

"No, thanks, the weed's fine." He had another full bag in his pocket. What he'd given away would give them all a few welcome puffs, or one of them a long, luxurious smoke. "Evening to you all."

They mumbled back in a friendly way, and Einar walked on, surprised a little at his gesture. He didn't have money to burn, not with the tiny invalid allowance his only income on top of bed and board at Lano's. But at least he had that bed and board. These ones didn't. "Full employment" the governors claimed. Yeah—if you weren't sick, crazy, drunk or too old to work in the factories or the docks, or too proud to beg for

temple assistance. Pride might disappear in the wet season, but for now a free man's fire might offer more comfort than temple charity and lectures.

By day, all that could be seen down at the docks were the boats and the rollo carriages, the urtibes and jaiger carts and the dockers, the traders and the revenue inspectors. But now, in the dark, there were people everywhere, sleepless and peaceless as he was, hunching over fires or lamps, scurrying about from one dark hidey-hole to another, clutching sacks of belongings in one grimy hand, and a rushlight in the other, if they had nothing better to see by.

He was the only one out for a walk, without purpose. The only one who didn't look as if he belonged here. But appearances lied. Only Lano's kindness and the scraps of Einan's sanity, divided him from the desperate men living among the litter and the ruins, the flotsam of a booming urban economy that fell through the cracks, unwanted.

A powerful gas lamp flared blue-white to his left. Were the Corps down here again? He'd heard their bells a few times over the past weeks. But it wasn't a corpsman carrying the light, but a civilian, holding it at shoulder level as he talked to two men. The guy was so tall that though the lamplight illuminated the hair of the men he spoke to, his own face was in shadow. Wearing a tabard—a temple worker, then, though Einan couldn't read the insignia. Strange he was alone. Einan had seen temple workers around Kundo a few times and they were always in teams, same as in Minwal. But he was doing what they all did—handing out food and flasks of clean water, mouth moving in prayer or lecture.

The homeless men would welcome the food, and the clean water was a bare necessity. But no one chose to live like this if they had realistic alternatives, and telling them off for using booze or weed to ease the pain, was just insulting. Einan'd had his fill of sermons from well meaning do-gooders determined to impose their values on him.

He blew a plume of smoke in the general direction of the busybody, just because, and strolled off before the man spotted him and decided to come save *him* instead. He couldn't detect any emotions from the three of them, with his talent muted right down because the jetka had him in an almost placid state, nice and numb. He should go back to his room while it lasted.

From a safe distance, he stopped and turned to look back at the temple guy. He was still talking, his companions wolfing down the food and nodding. Who knew what he was saying to them. They weren't paying much attention but probably figured it was

only polite to listen, since he'd brought supper. Einan couldn't scrape up the interest to care.

The numbness wore off before he got back to his airless, stuffy room behind the restaurant stores, but now, close to midnight, the scratching of other souls had died down as their owners went to sleep.

By the light of his little kinetic lamp, he stripped off and washed his face and neck under the pump out the back, wondered if he could manage another day in his shirt or if he should break out a clean one. Still bare-chested, he went back to his tiny room, carefully leaving the door unlocked. Low ceilinged, and barely big enough for a narrow bunk bed and a shabby chest of drawers, it had been a tool and junk room until Einan had answered Lano's call for a kitchen hand.

To Einan, this bare, isolated shed was worth more than gold. He'd tried a boarding house for a few days, but other people's troubled emotions constantly scraping on his empathy had been torture. He'd fled, preferring to live on the street. Lano hadn't hesitated when he learned Einan was sleeping rough, telling him he could live on the premises in exchange for wages. Lano had given him a haven.

But his dreams followed him wherever he lay his head, and his walk hadn't brought him enough distance from his thoughts. So he split the seal on a new bottle of giazo, and gulped back some of the raw spirit, coughing at the burn. It tasted like piss, but the looseness in his bones and head was worth it. A ketiz pill washed down with it would make him mellow, smooth it all out, but he didn't need that yet.

He swallowed another mouthful of booze and wondered if he should eat. He hadn't eaten since noon. He should be hungry, but he wasn't. He pulled the squashed rolls out of his pocket. The bread's herby aroma smelled rank, and forcing himself to take a bite made him gag. He shoved the rest of it into his tin. He'd toss it out for the birds tomorrow, maybe. *More charity from the hopeless*, he thought, sneering.

He reluctantly turned off the little lamp, telling himself the door was unlocked, the river downhill with no rain forecast, and there were no hills here to slip. He was safe. No one was in danger, and no one needed him. He forced himself to think about...yeah, temple boy. Man, really. Big guy, built like a shitting urtibes. Two urtibes, stacked one on top of the other. Not the usual temple milksop. Someone made to work hard, build big—not mouth platitudes at drunks, preaching to hobos.

For once, the distraction worked. His drifting thoughts let the booze and exhaustion and the end of the weed in his system tug him down before the other demons could catch him and tear him to bloody shreds.

The only disadvantage of working for a kindly man was that Lano insisted he took the statutory day off, whether Einan wanted it or not—and that he also go out for some fresh air. With Lano's telepathy, there wasn't even an option of lying to him about it.

"You're always telling me to get some sleep too," Einan grumbled as the old man stood in his doorway with a determined expression on his lined features.

"Yeah. But you get enough time for that. You just ain't using it. Go smell the flowers or something."

"It's high summer, Lano. The flowers died weeks ago."

"Then get a suntan. Don't want to see you back here before sunset. Shoo."

There was no arguing with him, so Einan left. Lano was right, of course. He needed fresh air, but more than that, he needed to get away from this part of town. The people here were too desperate and poor. He needed to feed on something a little more nourishing.

Kundo—a city full of incomers, immigrants from Darsino, farm boys hoping for more than they'd get on the family farm, women looking for second chances, men looking for quick cash and a ticket home, eventually—offered lean pickings for an empath hungry for human contact. None of these people had quiet spirits or happy souls, and felt like an acid bath on his talent. He needed more.

He walked a mile south and finally stopped in at a civic park he'd discovered on his first week at Lano's—a large field with a few straggly trees and grudgingly planted flower beds. Last week, there'd been families playing, eating picnics, enjoying themselves. But the temperature had climbed, and now the brown-grassed space was empty, the flowers all wilting in the sun. The only people around were drifters like him, taking what shade and ease they could find under the trees. He needed more than them, today.

So that left the monthly baby blessing at the temple of Mother Nenin. It hadn't been his first choice because he'd been brought up not to mock the gods. He might be an atheist in all but name now, but he couldn't help being a respectful one. Still, he

wasn't too picky to use the gods to find some peace, since they'd been kind enough to destroy it in the first place.

At the temple, the carefully arranged flowers drooped sadly in the heat, but the priestesses and their acolytes had done clever things with ribbons, brightly coloured inspirational drawings and embroidered banners. The really old temples were on the north side of town, miles away. This was a new timber building, hastily knocked up to serve a growing population. Sitting at the back, fanning himself with a devotional text and passing for a worshipper, Einar couldn't help assessing its fire hazard potential, noting the exits and water supplies. He'd tended to the aftermath of three fatal temple fires, and worked with pyros to douse a half dozen more before they got out of hand. Timber buildings and oil lamps were a bad mix, and pretty flags, covered in holy words or not, just made the fires love temples even more.

He shoved thoughts of flames and ruins and burned bodies out of his mind before they destroyed what he wanted to achieve. No point coming to a temple of a goddess he didn't believe in, just to let his imagination run amok same as it could in Lano's spare room.

He let his control relax, extended his talent to the young families, all eager for Mother Nenin to protect their new offspring through the first five perilous years of life, and to show friends and relatives how perfect and special their babies were. He sensed the infants first, all bright and untainted, wonderfully alive and simple in their greedy happiness, pushing away the images of babies whom he couldn't sense, drowned and suffocated. Given his druthers, he'd sit and watch babies all day. But that tended to give a body a reputation and make the mothers worry, so he didn't. Except for here where anyone could look, and a few, like him, could soak up the healthy, joyful emotions of innocents.

The parents were more complicated. Mothers proud, anxious, nervous. Fathers proud too, but worrying with a more distant focus, as if their minds, lacking the distraction of a child at their breast, weren't just on their families—maybe on jobs or money or housing. He tried not to concentrate too much on the adults, but he couldn't help catching the flavour of their thoughts as he sifted through the crowd. He preferred the children's minds instead. Some of the siblings were bored or grumpy, some fascinated by the ritual, and one little girl had burst in tears because the priestess' headpiece frightened her.

Easy emotions, sustaining. Einan had tried to explain it once to a school friend. The best he could come up with was that it was like taking a really deep breath after recovering from a cold, feeling in perfect health, his soul less damaged, even for these fleeting minutes. Life and food to any empath, especially the broken ones like him.

Tucked in the corner as he was, no one paid any attention to him. As his insatiable talent took what it needed, his attention wandered, automatically assessing the crowd as he was trained to do and couldn't stop doing even now.

This wasn't a wealthy temple. Best clothes were painfully well pressed and cleaned, shabby but spotless. Children wore hand-me downs, and shoes polished almost beyond what the leather could bear. Bringing a child for blessing was respectable and right, and the poor of Dindornes always tried to be both. Their gods didn't spare them for it, though. Einan knew that personally.

His eyes drifted from the assembly to the temple inhabitants. Three priestesses, as many acolytes, a male attendant—a small enough number for a temple this size. There was an infirmary attached, and bound to be a school, so there had to be staff and volunteers there too. He wondered—

He frowned. There was that guy again. The big one. Einan stared, wondering how he'd missed someone that size. The fellow had to have been there all along, pressed against the wall, black curly hair tidily slicked down, a clean green tabard over what seemed fairly ordinary work clothes. He wasn't part of the ceremony—he just seemed to be watching, like Einan himself.

But he wasn't enjoying himself. From what Einan sensed, once he focussed attention on the man, he was doing anything but. Waves of sadness washed outwards from him, muted by the joyful emotions of the others, yet unmistakable. And now Einan had identified the source, unavoidable too.

All the placid good feeling building inside him, disappeared in seconds. Curse the bastard! Now he just wanted to leave, walk away from this borrowed unhappiness, but he couldn't without making it obvious. The ceremony had reached the quiet bit with the anointing, so all he could do was sit and grit his teeth. Who was this man, to sit there and destroy his damn tranquillity like that? If he hated the baby blessing, why inflict it on himself like this? If a body didn't like kids, a temple of Mother Nenin was a stupid place to come.

As if he sensed Einan's hostility, the man glanced his way, grimaced, then silently rose and slid out the side door, unnoticed by the priestesses, ignored by the assembly. Was the guy an empath too? And what had caused such intense, pure sadness? Nothing like Einan had ever felt before—none of the sharpness of grief or anger, just a long, low tone of sorrow, striking painful harmonics in Einan's soul. His departure left behind the brighter emotions of the children and families—but now they felt hollow, tinny and meaningless, tinkling silver bells against the deep resonant chime of misery.

Now Einan felt slightly disgusted at himself, living vicariously through the rich lives of others when his own was so empty. As soon as the anointing ended, he made his own discreet departure.

Damn that man! Okay, sure, he had to be pretty miserable to emote like that, but finding a little serenity was so bloody hard these days. Ketiz made Einan feel dead and cold, the weed was bad for him and so was the booze—places like the temple were the only safe alternative, but now that was spoiled too. Screw it!

Escaping the temple, he slouched along the road, hands in his pockets, scuffing the dust as the midday sun beat down on his unprotected head. It looked like the advice he'd been given at the hospital might be his only choice after all, but isolation? For a year or more? He'd die and that was the plain truth. Even the pain of sensing the negative emotions of temple guy, or the hobos down at the docks, was better than starving for the feel of a human soul against his. He had a greedy talent, and it gave him no peace at all.

He kicked a pebble and it bounced off the rim of a jaiger cart, parked in front of a stable. They said it was empathic overload, but he had his doubts about that. Corpsmen went crazy from time to time, empaths or not. He'd just been unlucky to be hit by that bullet, was all. Even if he was right, the hospital couldn't help crazy any better than they could overloaded empaths. He was still screwed—looking at a life on the dole, or crawling back to his father.

He glared up at the cloudless, unforgiving sky. He'd never be that desperate, no matter how bad things became. Pa'd told him not to darken his door again and by holy Wen, Einan wouldn't until they dragged him home in a wooden box or Pa took back those shitty words of his. The sun would go out before that happened, of course.

And now he was thinking about his family. Terrific. Damn and blast that temple guy!

He walked off his bad temper eventually, though it took a few miles and painful blisters on his feet before he did. He returned home after sunset just as Lano had insisted, ate supper for once, and managed to sleep with only a swig of the giazio for insurance. He grudgingly admitted to himself that Lano might just have had a point about the days off. Ironically, if he'd not been in such a foul mood, he might have easily fallen into depression instead. Maybe he should have gone back and thanked priest boy, instead of cursing him.

He didn't thank the guy for his blisters the next day, but the restaurant was busy enough to distract him from his woes. Too footsore to walk off his insomnia that night, he climbed up on the restaurant's rickety roof to smoke his weed, making sure to keep well away from the windows of Lano's apartment. Lano had raised a family, buried his wife from there. Now it was just him, Biene, his widowed daughter, and Jaril who kept things running. Oh, and Einan too, though the business kept him running more than the other way around.

Staring across the low roofs of the dock district up to the twinkling lights of the inner city, he wondered how his old team were doing. He hadn't passed on his new address to anyone, not even to his Ma—wasn't sure how long he'd be staying here, or if he even wanted anyone to know how far he'd sunk. The smarter ones on the team—those who'd tried and failed to help him deal with all the shit—might think to write to the hospital, but he doubted it. He doubted they gave him much thought these days. The corps was so overworked and understaffed, they didn't have time to wonder about the fate of one of their own who'd left, however unwillingly. He missed the people, missed the job. But crying over it was just a fool's waste of watery tears.

The heatwave continued. It felt sometimes like it'd never rain again. Not a cloud crossed the sky, and the dust blew in every crack and open window. It made people fractious, and the farm boy in Einan's soul couldn't help worrying about whether it was the start of a drought or just an overwarm summer before the autumn rains. He didn't like to think of the rains much, but a shower or two, a brief storm, sure would be welcome around about now.

Despite the heat, work stayed busy. Lano even started to make noises about taking on more staff, another cook, a third waitress. Einan wasn't sure he was too happy about that idea. If they were people like Jaril, angry and jagged of spirit, he couldn't stay. But

he said nothing to Lano, because it wasn't his place and it wasn't fair. If things didn't work out, he'd move on. This wasn't his home. He only called two places 'home' and neither of them were in this city.

Kerne night rolled around and as usual, the kitchen was flat out. The last working day of the week, and pay day, when men without homes and kitchens of their own, splashed out a little on a good hot meal, some of Lano's best jilaj, and Biene's excellent berry pies. A few brought booze with them, though it was illegal and Lano tried to discourage it as best he could. Never threw a body out though, because like he said, better they drank and ate in company, than drank alone and got mean and moody with it. Einan, who was mean and moody enough without the booze, had to agree.

Working with hot water in this weather was a trial, for sure, forcing Einan to work bare-chested under his apron out of sheer self-preservation, and even then, he had to stop every few minutes to go outside, wipe his face and neck and breathe a little, though it was hardly any cooler out than in. The heat wore on Biene's placid temper as much as Jaril's more prickly nature. Both of them were soaked in sweat, hair curled and plastered to their faces as they brought in their trolleys of dirty dishes, frowning and unable to muster the energy for the usual banter, weary irritability a test for Einan's empathic control.

The temperature affected appetites too, going by what was left on the plates Biene and Jaril hauled back. Easy to sympathise with the ragged men coming in from hard jobs to eat, and going home to stifling clapboard rooms. If only it'd rain....

"Should serve half, charge double," Lano grumbled, wheeling a dish trolley out back to him, and putting a pan on the drainer to be washed. "If'n I had one of them fancy new coolers, I could sell salads and cold meat, but I ain't got room for that."

"Working men want a hot meal, even in this—"

Einan heard the scream at the same time he sensed the sharp thrust of anger and fear from someone—Biene? Lano rushed out, Einan hot on his heels, and found Biene fighting off two burly drunks, Jaril, spitting and cursing, being restrained from helping her by a third man. One of the guys holding Biene had a hand over her mouth, cruelly clamping it shut, and the other had her blouse open and a knife to her bra strap.

Lano yelled, but Einan didn't hesitate—the guy wanted to hurt someone, and wouldn't listen, he already knew that. He grabbed a saucer from the nearest table and skimmed it at the man with the knife, hitting him on the forehead and dragging his

attention away from Biene. Lano whisked up their old fire extinguisher, pumped it and aimed it right in the eyes of both Biene's attackers. They yelled, dropped her, and she bolted. Einan chucked a saltcellar's contents at the man holding Jaril, forcing him to let her go, and to turn on Einan instead.

"Get the maintainers!" Einan bellowed at Biene's back. Lighter and fitter, he easily dodged the aggressor's charge, and tripped the guy, sending him headlong into the corner of the table. Then the other two roared and attacked.

The *mêlée* was brief, but far too exciting. The four old customers who'd been cowering in the corner away from the three hulking drunks, did their best by throwing plates and salt—one managed to hurt himself trying to fling a chair—but they had little effect on the brutes. In the end Einan's feet and strong hands, and Lano, wielding the extinguisher like a maniac, were what managed to bring the bastards down to the floor, groaning and holding various injuries, too hurt and drunk to keep up the fight. Jaril found some rope from out back and when Biene returned from pressing the alarm, she and Jaril took great relish in tying their attackers up with very little mercy at all.

By the time the local CPC crew and two Maintainers finally arrived, Einan and the others were down to treating the injuries of guilty and innocent alike. He'd already bandaged the worst cuts, applied cold compresses to broken noses, rinsed damaged eyes, and supported an old customer's probably broken wrist in a sling.

The corpsman who came over to check out the wrist, noted the professional job. "You're trained?"

"Ex-Corps." Einan nodded at the men tied up in the middle of the room. "Those three are trouble—keep 'em in restraints, will you?"

The man nodded. "Will do. You didn't leave much else for us to fix," he said, grinning.

Einan managed a slight smile, and gladly surrendered the scene to the paid pros. He staggered as he straightened up, the hate and anger from the thugs, fear and other turbulent emotions from the customers and the two women, hitting him like an avalanche.

"Hey, you—need to ask you some questions."

He grabbed a counter top and peered at the Maintainer with his officious notebook. "Yeah?"

"Your name?"

"D-Derzo Einan. Work here."

"And you saw—"

One of the men snarled abuse at the corpsman treating him, spewing out his rage and frustration, and Einan's gorge rose as his talent drowned in the ugliness.

"Sorry. Excuse me."

He pushed past the officer, stumbled out the back and threw up until he was dry heaving, hurting himself with the raw effort to bring up non-existent stomach contents.

Some time later, he felt something cold on the back of his neck, a reassuring hand on his shoulder. *Easy, easy, there, boy.*

Th-they done?

Just hauling the worst of 'em away now. Appreciated your help tonight, boy. Biene too.

Einan stood, his vision briefly blanking out, but Lano's wiry hand under his elbow stopped him falling. The old guy helped him over to the woodpile to sit, and took the cloth from Einan's neck.

I just did what I was trained to, is all.

Maybe so, but me and mine is grateful. We're in your debt.

Einan shrugged off the careful grip, and wiped his face with his sleeve. "No debt. I...uh...think I need to—"

He bent and puked again, then held his gut. Damn it, he hated the dry heaves.

"You get along inside, boy. You want someone to sit with you or something?"

Einan shook his head. "No...just need to be alone." He stood up, swaying. Would he make it to the shed? He'd die trying at least. "See you in the morning," he slurred.

"No, you take the damn day off, and the next, if'n you need it. Son, you ain't looking too good. You sure you don't—"

"I'm fine," he snapped, lurching away. Even Lano's kind concern scraped at him. He had to get away from people.

Back in his room, he didn't even hesitate. He fumbled the drawer open and shook out one of the pills, washing it down with three big gulps of giazio. He didn't want a chance to think, or to dream tonight.

But as soon as he lay down, the dark closed in and his heart started to race. Even through the growing haze of the sedative, he knew what that meant, knew that he couldn't fight it. Turning his little lamp on, seeing the windowless walls looming over him, only reminded him he was inside, that he could be trapped.

He surged up, staggered for the door and his boots, grabbing the bottle of giazio and his shirt. He dragged in lungfuls of humid air, shivering in the still oppressive heat. He had to get away...somewhere...not here....

He walked shakily down the street, shirt still in one hand, bottle in the other, trying and failing to subdue the panic in his head, the churning in his gut. The pill had only made his thoughts fuzzy, so he couldn't think, couldn't...escape. Couldn't sense anyone, like death surrounded him. He gulped down more giazio and stared up at the moon, straining for some relief to his fear.

He sank down onto a hay box outside a store. He wasn't sure where he was, but then he didn't much care either. The air felt heavy, like a blanket over him, suffocating. Only the bite of the booze seemed to offer him a space to breathe, so he drank more of it.

Gradually the desperation faded, hopelessness replacing it. He was a failure, a disappointment, just like Pa said. He'd left his family to follow a dream that was ashes now. He couldn't even deal with a simple brawl without losing it. He may as well be dead for all the good he did anyone.

He scooped some water from the trough next to the hay box, splashed himself to cool off. He wiped his face with his shirt, thought about putting it on but then figured it was too much trouble. Who cared anyway? Pretending to be respectable, when he was just the same as all the other crazy drifters.

"Evening, friend."

He blinked up, eyes watering at the sudden flare of brightness. "Who're you?"

"Troé Thalem."

Einan took another swig and looked into the dark, away from the annoying lamp.

"Never heard of you."

"I know. You're hitting the drink mighty hard."

"Any business of yours?"

"Only that it's late, it ain't a good part of town, and you don't live down here."

"Well, you're wrong." He glanced back, saw the green material, looked up into a broad, chiselled face and dark eyes. "You! Priest boy!"

"I ain't a—"

"Screw you. Don't need temple interfering...bugger off!" He swayed to his feet, brandished a fist in the general direction of his tormentor. "Don't need *you!*"

“Easy, friend—”

He found his fist trapped in a huge hand. That infuriated him. “Leggo!” He swung the bottle with intent, but it was blocked. “Bastard! Leggo!”

“Calm down, friend, I don’t want to—”

But the appeasing words meant nothing to Einan, rage roaring through him, burning away the hopelessness. How dare this fucking priest lecture him! He launched himself at the stranger, swinging wildly, kicking and punching in pent-up fury and frustration.

The guy didn’t fight back, which just made him madder, but the more Einan hit and swore, the more he seemed to be entangled and enveloped in a pair of beefy arms, until he was completely trapped.

“Leggo. Please. Let me go. I can’t...I can’t be...please. Please!”

“I can’t, friend. I won’t hurt you. I’m just going to see you home.”

Einan stared up into implacable, solemn features. “Got no home....”

And it must have been about then he passed out, because he didn’t remember a damn thing after that.

He woke to unfamiliar light sending stabbing pain into his eyes. He groaned and flung an arm across his face, realising that he wasn’t in his little room. The bed was far too comfortable for a start, and the sheets smelled too floral.

“You awake, son?”

“Lano?” He uncovered one eye and found his boss leaning over him, radiating concern and no small amount of relief. “Where—”

“My place. Over the shop,” he clarified. “Biene and me figured you wasn’t safe to leave on your own, so we had the big fella carry you up here. How’re you doing?”

“Big fella?” Einan groaned again. Oh yeah. The big guy. “From the temple?”

“That’s the one. Carried you up here like you was made of feathers. You been out a whole day. We was pretty worried. Nearly called a medic when we couldn’t wake you up, but he said you was just drunk, and to let you sleep it off. You okay now?”

“Not really.” He tried to sit up, but his arms felt like they were made of dough. “This is your bed?”

“Nope. Biene’s. She slept on the sofa.”

"Hell. I'm sorry, Lano. I just...." He closed his eyes. Just when he thought he could sink no lower....

"Don't you fret about it, son. You done us a favour night before last, and that's the reason you was all of a doodah over things. I know you ain't a drunk."

Except when I am. "Help me up, Lano, please."

The old man let him sit. Einar's stomach gurgled unpleasantly. Between it and his head, he thought food was a very bad idea, but when Lano offered him some jilaj, he figured he might keep it down.

Lano went off to boil the kettle, while Einar took stock and wondered if he'd just blown his situation here. Lano was being pretty nice about things, but at the same time, having a drunk living on the premises was a risk, and he had his daughter to think about too.

When Lano returned and handed him a steaming mug, Einar had his apology all ready, but Lano dismissed it.

"Look here, young fella. I know you got your troubles, and I know you ain't found your peace yet. But I ain't throwing you out over a little thing like this when it was us that give you the reason in the first place." He laid a hand on Einar's shoulder. *Talents stick together, boy. Could be me going crazy, easy as you. You didn't ask for this. You done good work for me and Biene. We'd like to see you come through this.*

I don't think I can, Lano. I...I can't even go to sleep at night, thinking the walls are going to fall in on me.

Lano nodded. *That landslide, I know. Seen your memories. Scares the hell out of me just seeing it second-hand. It'd be crazier if you wasn't a little crazy on account of it. You just got to give it time, boy. You're an honest soul, a good worker. I trust you. You found safe harbour here, long as you need it.*

Einar patted the old man's leathery hand and felt like bursting into tears from embarrassment and gratitude. "You've done more for me than my own kin would."

"Not so sure about that, but thank'ee. Now drink that jilaj and when you're feelin' up to it, you go on back to your place. You think a window'd help? We could put a window in, real easy."

"Don't want you to go to any trouble, Lano."

"No trouble, son. When you move on, when you get your head screwed on right, then I can use it for the next fella. Should've done it sooner." Lano squinted and scratched his head. "Know anything 'bout putting windows in?"

Einan laughed despite himself. "Not a damn thing, but I can learn. Thank you, Lano. I owe you and Biene."

"Enough of that. We're quits, for now. Just get back on your feet and let my daughter have her bed back."

Lano left him alone then, to drink his jilaj and contemplate the mess he'd made of himself. If priest boy—damn, what had he said his name was?—hadn't brought him back, Einan could have found himself in a lot worse trouble, or even ended up dead from the combination of the sedative and the booze.

Half an hour later, as the sun was setting, he managed to make his way down the narrow stairs and across the yard to the pump. He desperately wanted a bath but asking Lano to use his would have pushed kindness too far. He drank as much water as he could manage, washed his upper body as best he could, and promised himself a trip to the public bathhouse tomorrow. And a visit to the public laundry too. He stank to high heaven, and he might have been brought low but he still had a tiny amount of pride. Being dragged home like a stunned jaiger over the shoulder of some temple busybody was as far as he was prepared to sink. He needed to get himself together. The booze wasn't an answer, and he had enough problems without it.

He lay down on the bunk, tired despite being out of it all day. The bottle of giazio hadn't made it home with him. Probably just as well. He looked at the bottle of pills and then shoved them back in the drawer. He'd make do without, tonight at least.

He woke from a relatively dreamless sleep with a headache, and a real appetite for once. Biene was in the restaurant starting the early preparations, and grinned to see him up and about. She insisted on cooking him a proper breakfast and watched him eat it, drinking a mug of jilaj to keep him company.

"You're still looking a bit pale there, Einan."

"I'm fine. Embarrassed but fine. One question—how did that fellow know where I lived?"

"I don't know," she said, frowning. "He just turned up and banged on the door. We was still cleaning up after...well, you know...and said he'd found you passing out on the street. Pa was just worried about getting you all tucked in and safe. The fella

wouldn't stay to be thanked. He just told us to let you sleep it off and then he ran away. Do you know him?"

"Seen him around, that's all. Never spoken to him."

"Lucky it was him and not a ripper. You got to be careful round here, Einar. It's not a good area."

Her motherly concern bit a little on his abused senses, but he appreciated the thought. "I know. It was stupid of me. I'll make it up to you."

"You already did. I nearly wet myself when those guys grabbed me the other night. You and Pa wading in was the best sight I ever seen. It used to be a lot safer round here. I was telling Pa, maybe we should think about selling up, getting out, but he says he's too old for a change like that now. What do you think?"

He looked at her worried, middle-aged features, and thought he was the last person on the planet to offer advice to anyone. "I can see your point, and his. I don't know, Biene. All I know is that I'm glad you're here right now, because you've been the saving of me."

"No, that's the big fella," she said, chuckling. "Don't mind me. I get worried about things and then they blow over. That business was the only problem we've had in a good long while, and you were here to help."

But I might not be next time, he couldn't help thinking. He just smiled and finished his breakfast, and wondered how long he could drift like this, beholden to other people's charity. It sure wasn't how he'd expected to end up, that day he'd hopped on the road wagon heading east for his medic training, and the big career his father hated so much.

He gathered up his soiled clothes and walked down to the laundry where a sweaty, overworked laundress emerged from her steamy lair, took the clothes and twenty ret off him for the fee, and promised the clothes would be clean and dry by the end of the day. Ten ret bought him a scrub, a long hot soak and a shave at the bathhouse—and another two ret got him a much-needed haircut. The fashion nowadays was for longer hair but he'd been in the Corps too long for that to feel right and besides, it was too damn hot.

Clean, groomed, sober and shamed, he walked up to the temple of Mother Nenin, determined to make his thank'ees and take his licks. He remembered being pretty mean to his saviour, and that wasn't right. The man had done him a favour when another

might have left him in his own vomit or stolen his wallet. A little humble gratitude was the least he deserved.

Einan couldn't help a slightly uneasy feeling of blasphemy as he walked into the shrine. In answer to his question, an acolyte pointed silently to an elderly priestess before continuing with her brass polishing. Einan approached the priestess, smiling politely.

"Excuse me, holy mother."

Her beaded headdress jangled cheerfully as she bowed her head. "Welcome, my son. How may I help you?"

"My name's Derzo Einan and I'm looking for someone I think works here, or maybe worships here regularly. A tall man, very well built. Dark hair, eyes. I saw him at the baby blessing a week ago."

"Oh yes, brother Thalem. You're a friend of his?"

He winced a little. "Not really, but he did me a favour and I wanted to thank him. Does he work here?"

"Yes, he does. Come with me."

She moved gracefully, as if on oiled wheels. Einan felt like a clod next to her slim elegance as they passed along a wooden boardwalk from the temple proper into a large yard, planted with young trees. To one side stood an infirmary, patients outside in chairs, attended by medics and acolytes. To the other lay other buildings whose purpose he couldn't puzzle out, until she took him inside, and then he realised they were workrooms and classrooms. A kitchen and dining area too—so this was where the staff who worked here, lived, or at least took their breaks.

She led him through this structure and through to the other side, into another, more ramshackle yard full of old equipment, tools and timber in the process of being made into furniture and shelving.

And there he was, even more enormous than Einan remembered, massive shoulders barely reined in by the straps of simple dusty blue overalls over a long-sleeved shirt.

"Brother Thalem, you have a visitor."

The man jerked upright in surprise, blinking at Einan and the priestess. "For me?"

"This is the person to whom you referred?" the priestess asked Einan, frowning.

"Yes, ma'am. You, uh...brought me home the other night," he said to the man.

"I remember."

The lack of welcome and the flat emotions threw Einan a little. The man wasn't displeased to see him—more like it meant nothing to him at all.

The priestess smiled. "Well, then I'll leave you two to chat. Good day to you, brother Einan. Blessings upon you."

He bowed politely and waited until she'd glided away before turning back to his rescuer. The man was working on a set of shelves and seemed almost to have dismissed Einan from his thoughts. Not exactly gracious, Einan thought, but then he was the one in debt here.

"I, uh...wanted to thank you."

The man glanced at him, then resumed his chiselling. "No need."

"Of course there's a need. You probably saved my life. You think that's worth nothing?"

A pulse of guilt suddenly struck his talent but Einan couldn't figure that at all. Why would this guy feel guilt over what he'd done?

"It's worth something but you don't need to thank me. You don't owe me nothin'."

The man had a strong Darsini accent, like Lano's. Einan wondered how long he'd been in Dindornes.

"I owe you thanks, at the very least."

"Not to me."

"Because I disgust you?"

The man shook his head a little as if the idea was ludicrous. "Disgust? No. I ain't disgusted at what other people do. You don't need to thank me. I don't deserve it."

"You saved my *life!*"

"Not really. But you're sure gonna kill yourself if you keep drinking that way. Worse'n that, you can kill someone else."

Einan bridled. "Keep your preaching to yourself, temple boy."

The man gave him a sour smile. "I ain't preaching. I ain't fit to. Now if'n you're done, I got work needs doing. Excuse me."

Then he picked up the shelves—a piece nearly as tall as Einan and probably almost as heavy—like they weighed nothing, and walked off towards one of the workshops Einan had passed on his way through.

Einan didn't attempt to follow. Who the hell was this guy and where did he—

Ah, piss it. He'd done what manners demanded, and the fellow didn't appreciate them, or his gesture. Einan had better ways to waste his time than grovelling to someone who didn't care what he did.

He stalked back through the utility building, across the courtyard, intending to cut across the corner and avoid going through the temple again. But he was out of luck—the old priestess lay in wait for him. He could hardly barge past her.

She smiled serenely as he pulled up in front of her. "Ah, brother Einan. Leaving so soon?"

"Yes, holy mother. Uh...he didn't seem to want to talk to me."

"No, I suspected he wouldn't. I was just about to have some yito tea. Would you like to join me? My sisters have been baking and though I say it myself, we make some excellent cloh tarts here."

It was the last thing Einan felt like doing but his upbringing and the remnants of his own decency make it impossible to refuse. So he accepted with a pretence of enthusiasm and followed her along the boardwalk to a pretty, private garden behind the temple. She motioned him to a little wooden table and asked him to sit. A young acolyte rushed up and Einan's hostess requested refreshments.

Then she gave him a bright smile that didn't quite reach her grey, intelligent eyes. "I haven't introduced myself. I'm Sister Hikeri. You're not from Kundo, brother Einan? Your accent speaks to me of the plains."

"Yes, I'm from Lutal. Near Lutal. My family farm there."

"And what brings you to this city, my son?"

Nosy old bag, he thought uncharitably, though he smiled politely enough. "I was in the Corps—Civilian Protection Corps, I mean. Stationed up in Minwal. I uh...left recently, and came here."

"Looking for work? And what do you do?"

"I trained as a medic."

"Ah. So you're looking for work in the hospital? Or perhaps you're attached to one of the temples."

"No."

She arched an eyebrow at his curt answer, but said nothing. The acolyte arrived then and laid a tray with teapot, cups and plates on the table, before blushing and bowing. Sister Hikeri thanked her and the young woman rushed off again.

"Honey in your tea, brother Einan?"

"No. No, thank you, I mean."

"You don't have to be so formal. I'm aware I'm being terribly nosy."

"Yeah. You are. Why?"

She smiled and poured him a cup of tea, handing it to him. "Let's just say I'm interested in anyone interested in brother Thalem, that's all. You're the first person to come to visit him in the five years he's worked for us, and I'm curious as to how you two met."

"He found me in a drunken stupor on the street and dragged me back to where I'm staying before a ripper found me or I choked to death. No mystery, holy mother."

"Except as to *why* you were in a drunken stupor in the street. You hardly seem the type, brother Einan."

"Forgive me, holy mother, but you don't know a thing about me."

"Not quite true. But do tell me if I'm offending you."

It was on the tip of his tongue to do so, but something in those grey eyes—a challenge, a little gentle mockery, even—and not sensing any actual malice, held him back and softened his sarcastic tone. "Not yet, you haven't."

She laughed and took a sip of her tea. "So, will you satisfy my unseemly curiosity? Why were you drunk?"

"If I tell you, will you tell me why your friend Thalem's such an ungracious ba...man?"

Her smile slipped a little. "It's for him to share his secrets, not me. People come here for sanctuary, brother Einan. We rarely have anyone apply here who isn't suffering in some deep way. Brother Thalem's been here for some time, and doesn't wish to leave. Perhaps you can imagine why that might be."

Einan recalled the man on the day of the baby blessing, and that pure, deep sadness. "He's suffered a loss. He's grieving."

She inclined her head. "Yes. As to why and who over, that's for him to divulge. But whatever he said or didn't say to you, don't take it personally. I've never met a man with less harm in his soul. He just...finds people a trial, that's all."

"I know what that's like," Einan muttered, sipping the fragrant tea.

"And would this be a reason for your temporary intemperance?"

"In a way. I'm suffering from empathic overload. Or so they tell me."

She nodded. "Ah. One of our dear sisters is an empath. She's told me much about this difficult talent. There's no treatment, I understand."

"None that works. At least, not for me. So it's booze and pills and jetka weed until I can stand to be in my own head, and I stop seeing—"

"Seeing?"

"Dead...dead babies." He set the cup down, and even though it was a bright, hot day, the anguish of grieving families crushed him in the grey cold mud that surrounded him, suffocated him....

"Brother Einan? Are you all right?"

"No," he said, picking up his cup and gulping back his tea. The hot liquid helped him to come back into his own head. "No, I'm really not. Sister Hikeri...maybe this isn't a good idea."

"I don't wish to hurt you. But it seems to me you should have someone you can talk to. Do you?"

He shrugged. "Sort of. My boss is a telepath, so he knows about it. Couldn't really help knowing about it."

"No other friends? And your family?"

"No one."

She pursed her lips. "Unfortunate. A very great burden to bear on your own."

"No one else needs to. I'll be all right."

"It helps to have friends to shoulder some of that burden along with you."

"Thalem let anyone share his?"

"Sadly no. I'd advise him the same as you, though. Brother Einan, this temple exists to serve and help those who are suffering or fallen on hard times." She laid a slim-fingered hand on his. "If you need a friend, there's a temple full of them."

He pulled his hand away. "I don't need anyone."

"If you say so. Just remember that you can call on anyone here if you do want help, at any time of the day. Don't wait for someone to pick you up off the street next time. If you want a place to drink, be safe—even a place to hide and be alone—the temple can give you that."

Einan stood. He'd had enough. "I shift for myself and always have. Good day, holy mother. Thanks for the tea."

He turned and walked out, crossing the courtyard and cutting through a small gap in the fence. Interfering old goddess peddler. 'A temple full of friends'? A temple full of interfering nuisances, more like.

He hitched a ride on an urtibes cart going north through the city, and walked the last mile to the hospital. He'd registered with them but hadn't set up a proper appointment to review his medication and he wanted to make sure he wouldn't run out. To his surprise, he was told if he could come back in two hours, there was a cancellation with the doctor he needed to see, and since he didn't have any other plans for that day, he agreed.

He didn't hang around the hospital the whole time—too many upset people projecting too many painful emotions, and the reminder of his Minwal training depressed him. Instead he walked around the inner city, somewhere he'd only passed through on his arrival.

It was a weird and humiliating experience. People had once admired him as a brave member of an essential service. Now they looked at his worn, patched clothes and troubled eyes, and only saw a drifter, an indigent, maybe even a ripper. Women avoided his gaze, pulled children from his path, when once they'd have held them up to wave at him, and tell their sons and daughters they might grow up and be part of the Corps too. Men, who in former times, would have shaken his hand in gratitude for the good work he and his teammates did, scowled at him, and pushed past him ostentatiously, making it clear he wasn't welcome.

Eventually he gave up, bought a pie from a vendor, and sat in a park to wait out the time. His career was over and he didn't need reminding of that.

Doctor Pielan was a fussy, impatient little man with thick glasses and an irritated high forehead. Einan's medical history had finally been sent down from Minwal, and the doctor made it clear he thought Einan had been overmedicated.

"The correct treatment for empathic overload is isolation. Drugs do absolutely nothing for it."

"Tried isolation. Couldn't handle it," Einan said, keeping his expression impassive, not reacting to the man's generalised short temper. It wasn't aimed at him.

“Well, that’s too bad, young man, because the drugs will kill you if the overload doesn’t.”

“I’m managing okay. I’ve got a job.”

The doctor peered at him over his glasses. “Nightmares? Memory attacks? Insomnia? Unreasonable terrors? Any of that?”

“Some,” Einan admitted reluctantly.

“And what are you taking with the ketiz? No, don’t tell me—alcohol and jetka, right?” He sighed. “Look, your records indicate you’re a medic and an intelligent man. You know this isn’t an answer. Isolation is the only scientifically proven cure we know of. You have to grit your teeth and endure it. At the end, you have a very strong chance of regaining a normal life.”

“Doc, I came close to trying to kill myself after just a week. I won’t survive a year or more. Please—I’m holding on. Doing okay. Give me a chance. Just a little more time on the ketiz. If it doesn’t work in a month, six weeks, I swear, I’ll try it your way.”

Pielan frowned, pursing his lips. He looked over Einan’s notes while Einan fidgeted.

Finally, he lay down his pen. “All right. I’ll write a script for one month. After that, no more. I should really have you forcibly admit—”

“No! No, please, doc, I’m not crazy! Please!”

“In holy Rai’s name, will you calm down? This isn’t convincing me of your sanity, you know.”

Einan forced himself to breathe more easily, and unclench his fists. “Please. Don’t punish me because I did my job too well.”

“No one wants to punish you, Sar Derzo. Believe it or not, we’re desperately trying to help you. Overloaded empaths are a tragedy. My colleagues in Minwal have written to the main researchers on this subject in Pindone and Darsino, even to the Weadenal. In a month, it’s possible we may have more options. Isolation would put you that much further ahead in your recovery.”

“I can’t...I just can’t. I need people. I feel like I’m starving to death without ‘em.”

He felt a wash of sympathy from the man, even though his expression remained merely annoyed. “You wouldn’t be, of course. However, I’ve already agreed. You come back here in a month, or I’ll have a warrant executed to bring you back. It would be irresponsible of me not to.”

"I get it."

"And leave your new address. I'll be writing there to check it's real, so don't lie to me. I take my responsibilities seriously, Sar Derzo. You should have come here before now, but now you have, I intend to see you through this, one way or another."

He made himself smile. "Thanks, doc."

"Hmph. At the very least, minimise your emotional stress, keep away from people who upset you, though I doubt you need me to tell you that. And lay off the alcohol and the weed. If you *must* use them, only one or the other, and not with the ketiz. You know as well I do what the risks are."

"Yeah, I know. You think those researchers might have a better idea what to do with me?"

"I truly hope so, Sar Derzo. It's a damn shame this has happened to you, and I want to see you healed and back in a productive life. But you must cooperate with me."

"I will, I promise. Thank you."

Pielan waved him away, but Einar sensed his pleasure. It was something of a surprise to find a complete stranger so determined to help him. Two in two days. Three, if he counted the nosy Sister Hikeri. A lot of goodwill, and unexpected.

The day was still young by the time he hitched a lift back to his side of town, and collected his laundry. Back at the 'Bird's Nest' he insisted to Lano he was fine and wanted to work—needed to work. Fortunately it was a quiet night, Jaril wasn't on, and a whole day's enforced rest had done him good. A rather drastic way to obtain it, but whatever worked.

He wondered how he could abide by Doctor Pielan's insistence on him laying off the booze and drugs, and still sleep at night. He suspected he couldn't, and that the doc hoped he'd realise it sooner rather than later, sneaky sod. Well, he wouldn't give in, and that was that. Isolation wasn't the answer.

But determination wasn't enough to stop the walls closing in, especially as he hadn't replaced the giazo. The doc hadn't forbidden walking, at least, so he headed out.

Without the jetka weed buffer, the neighbourhood seemed grittier, smellier, grim poverty more oppressive. He almost headed back, but he knew he wouldn't sleep, and lying on his bunk and letting his imagination go wild wouldn't be any better than this. So he kept going, more aware than usual of the danger he was in, and wondering how the hell he'd avoided being ripped, walking around here in a weed haze. The fight in

the restaurant should have been his warning that the dangers that Biene warned about, were real enough.

But no one attacked him, or paid him much mind, and his thoughts were too busy for him to be starting at shadows. He'd been feeling almost optimistic after seeing the doctor, but now, left too much to his own thoughts, gloom descended with every step further into the docks. Doctor Pielan was determined to help, but the solution was worse than the illness. But what alternative did he have? If he wanted to leave Kundo, he either went further south to Harzin—and this time, without his medical records—or he went home, and even if he could stomach his father's smugness over his failed career, his mother's pity and anxiety would kill him.

White gas light caught his eye just the same as it had over a week ago, and he knew who it was even before he put the lights and shadows together into a coherent whole. Thalem, that was his name. Talking to a group of drifters crouched around a fire. He was handing out blankets, ridiculous in this heat, though if it rained, the temperature would drop fast, and a nice bit of wool between your bones and the ground, never went amiss. One of the drifters pointed Einan's way, and before he could drop back into the pool of shadows, Thalem turned and shone the lamp towards him. Einan could only smile and wave, and curse the nosy drifter.

Thalem finished his conversation and stood up unhurriedly. Einan was uncertain what he should do, but walking away was cowardly, so he stood his ground, wondering if the guy would even speak to him.

The man walked over. "Evening, brother. Did you want to talk to me?"

"Uh, no. I just...was walking. You come down here every night?"

"Try to. People rely on me. I don't like to let them down."

"But you work on your own? What about the rest of the temple volunteers?"

"I ain't here for the temple. I come here on my own account." Einan silently pointed at the tabard. "Oh. It just lets people know what I am."

"But the temple provides the food and stuff, right?"

"No."

Einan frowned. The guy radiated...sadness. Almost constantly. Why?

"I wish you'd let me thank you. I don't like being in debt."

"You ain't. I got more people to talk to—you can come along, but I don't want to keep them waiting."

He hoisted the huge pack he carried up onto his massive shoulders. He didn't seem to care if Einan followed him or not. He didn't seem to have much in the way of manners at all, however kind-hearted he was—but Einan didn't have much else to do, and wasn't sleepy, so he trailed after the big guy and his heavy load, figuring any ripper looking for prey would take one look at the man mountain and get the hell out of there.

Thalem didn't go far. He stopped by a shed at the back of a store, tapped three times. The door creaked open, and the flare of a small oil lamp peaked out. He spoke to the unseen resident and handed over what seemed to be everything in his pack. As soon as he had, the door closed again. Einan couldn't hear anything said, but he sensed several souls—sensed fear, gratitude, uncertainty. At least one of the people inside was a child.

Thalem walked back, the empty pack dangling from his huge hands. "All done. Don't like to keep them waiting. They got two young'uns."

"In there?" Bad enough that adults had to live like this, but children too?

"Had some bad luck. They just need a bit of help to get back on their feet." He lowered the lamp so his face was in shadow again. "I was gonna go back, 'less'n you need me."

"No, but I just...have you got five minutes? I'd like to explain about the other night."

"There ain't no need—"

"A man could take offence at you dismissing his attempt to be nice, you know. If I was the hot-tempered sort."

More guilt from the man, and then he shrugged. "Sorry. We can walk back a ways to your place if'n you like."

"See, that's something I want to talk about. How did you know where I live?"

Thalem was clearly waiting for him to get moving, so Einan started to walk back towards the restaurant.

"Well?" he prompted.

"People seen you around, seen you at that restaurant. You stick out. You ain't one of theirs."

"Neither are you."

"More'n you."

Einan almost wanted to shake the guy. “Look, I just wanted you to know that I don’t usually get drunk and cause a nuisance. I’m not going to kill anyone.”

“Good. Alcohol leads to sin.”

“I already told you, I don’t want you to preach at me. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Thalem stopped and stared at Einan with big, serious dark eyes. “A killer. The drink led me to sin and murder. Don’t want no one else going that way.”

“Murder? Who did you kill? Not a child, surely?” Despite himself, Einan stepped back as guilt and misery poured off his companion. “Father Rai, that’s why you were at the baby blessing—”

“No, not a child. Not exactly, though I ruined two little lives. I killed their Pa. The drink led me to sin, and damned me. It ruins people. It ruined me.”

The pain from the other man robbed Einan of breath, hit him like a fist to the heart. He had to get out of here.

“I...I’m sorry—”

He turned and fled, gasping over the tightness in his chest, the waves of sorrow threatening to drown him, swamping him, pressing him down....

When he’d run far enough that he could no longer feel Thalem and the panic eased, he stopped and puked up the little supper he’d managed to eat earlier. Then he leaned against a store wall, and tried to regain his sense of self. Gods, how could the man stand that? Living like that?

But when he calmed down, got his stomach and his breathing under control, he realised how cruel he’d just been. Thalem had to be mortified, maybe even furious at his rudeness. Einan walked quickly back along the road, hoping to find the guy, but he’d gone.

Damn it. He spat to clear his mouth, and swallowed down the end of his nausea. He had to sort this out. Even if Thalem had told the literal truth, no one deserved to be treated like they sickened people.

He made his way back to the restaurant and reluctantly took a pill. Trying to do this on his own wasn’t working too well, and it was only day one.

Biene and Lano both said he should take another day off, but he didn’t have anything else to do with his time, and unless he was all jangly from something else,

their emotional output didn't hurt him. If he kept busy, he wasn't too bothered by the patrons.

But he was free until he started work in the afternoon and he had something he needed to do.

Back to the temple again, but this time he didn't ask to speak to Thalem, fearing a repeat of his reaction the night before. Instead he asked for Sister Hikeri, and after a short wait in the private garden and a nice cup of yito tea served by a pretty young acolyte, the priestess glided across to him, smiling as if she'd only been waiting for him to arrive for her day to be complete.

Einan stood to be polite but she waved him to sit.

"Brother Einan, I'm so glad you came by again."

"Thanks for seeing me, holy mother. I, uh...need a favour. A big favour. About Thalem."

She folded her elegant hands. "I see."

"I ran into him last night, and he started to tell me about his past—you know about that?" She nodded. "Don't know the details because, before he could tell me, he kinda knocked me out with his emotions. Too strong. I had to leave before I passed out, but now he probably thinks I hate him or something."

"Oh dear. And you would like me to...?"

"Explain to him? He won't know I'm an empath or anything, and I sure don't want to hurt his feelings. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course. He's not here now—he works as a handyman and one of our pensioners needed some urgent repairs—but I'll speak to him as soon as he returns. He'll understand, my son."

Einan sagged in relief. "Sorry to ask, but...he just emotes really powerfully."

"His sorrow and guilt *are* powerful, as you've sensed."

"Is it true? Did he really murder someone?"

"Not exactly, though in his mind it's as black a crime as anyone could imagine." She sighed a little. "Since he'd have told you himself but for your unfortunate reaction, and since I believe you should know, I'll tell you. He was born in Darsino, near Arbin. His father was an abusive alcoholic, and Thalem left at quite a young age, fleeing to Kekwe to live with relatives of his mother and become apprenticed as a carpenter. Unfortunately, he began to drink, and though he didn't drink at work, he spent his

evenings drunkenly wandering the streets. Being the size he is, that made him something of a target, I understand.”

Einan nodded. He’d seen it before. The bigger the guy, the more likely he was to be challenged by someone smaller, looking to prove himself. “He got into a fight?”

“As I understand from the police reports he gave me, he was lying on the ground, extremely intoxicated, and was challenged by a group of workers for being a dirty drunk. He became angry and retaliated—one of his punches knocked a young man out cold, and killed him almost instantly.”

He drew in a shocked breath. “That’s not murder.”

“No, it’s not. The law said it was manslaughter, to which he pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to six years in prison, released after four on parole. As soon as his parole expired, he emigrated. That was seven years ago.”

“But...it sounds like it was an accident.”

“To me also. The worst part of it was that the widow and their two small sons appeared at his trial. It had a profound effect on him, and he’s decided to spend the rest of his life atoning for his sin.” She shrugged. “I’ve told him many times the gods don’t demand such retribution, but he says it’s nothing to do with them.”

“He says the temple doesn’t provide the food and stuff he distributes.”

“We do—but he buys it from us.” She saw his disapproval. “It’s not like that, brother Einan. He wanted to work for us for free—the law forbids it. So he gives away his salary as goods to the poor. He buys what he wants to give away from us at the wholesale price we pay for it. He won’t allow us to give him anything, though we’d gladly do so. He’s most stubborn on that point. Believe me, I’m no happier about it than you appear to be, but when a soul is so troubled, I can’t force him to stop doing what gives him the slightest peace—especially when he does much good for our homeless population, and they accept him. If it weren’t for the fact Thalem’s clearly no happier than he was when he first arrived, I’d applaud what he does. But I know he grieves and is ashamed, and we’re powerless to help him. Truly, he’s one of my failures,” she said, her mouth turned down as she bowed her head. “People come here to find peace, but there’s none for him.”

“I don’t think it’d matter where he was.”

“Perhaps not.” She looked up. “So, you see, he won’t be angry with you. He believes in forgiveness for everyone but himself.”

"It's not for me to forgive him." Einan remembered how he'd swung at the guy in his drunken state. "Hell, it could have happened to anyone. Me, even."

"Sadly true. That's not to say it wasn't a tragedy for the young man and his family, but he wasn't the only victim."

It *was* a tragedy—for all of them. "I appreciate you telling me this."

"You're welcome. But are you going to share your own history with him? To explain your reaction?"

He gave the woman a narrow-eyed look of suspicion. "This where you 'apologise' for being nosy again?"

"I will if it makes a difference. He doesn't need to know, nor do I." She smiled serenely. Annoying, the way she did that.

"I...I was part of the team who responded to that landslide in Gurde last year. During the floods. We were already in the area, shoring up a water reservoir, when our team's telepath heard about the slide from a telepath living in the town. Our telekinetic flew everyone there within an hour of the thing happening, but it was still too late. We...uh...we dug, cleared mud, pulled bodies out of the water all night, me, two dozen of our team, townsfolk, everyone. Worked like fu...hell, because we knew there was more water coming down the pipe. We were half done when we had to clear—flood came, wiped out what we'd done, swamped more houses. We didn't save anyone."

He covered his mouth with his hand, nausea rising as he saw the cold, pale, mud-spattered bodies in his mind's eye again. "A hundred...a hundred and fifteen people. Thirty children. Three newborns and their mothers. I—"

He choked, his vision blurring over. "Not one," he whispered. "We tried so fucking hard."

He dimly felt her hand on his shoulder as the shudders racked him. Those tiny, perfect little babies. Fathers screaming their grief as they pulled their wives, their little ones from the mud, realising there was no hope. The rows and rows and rows of children, women, old men, fathers in the prime of life, laid out on wet ground under a grey, raining sky. All caught by a massive flow of water and suffocating mud as they lay in their beds, unsuspecting and helpless.

"Brother Einan? You're not there any more. You're here and safe. Look at me, Einan."

He obeyed, blinking in the hot sunshine at Sister Hikeri's blurred face. "I keep seeing it."

"Yes, I know. Be with me now. Feel my hand. Feel the warmth of the sun. You're safe."

Her murmured words was kind, her concern real and comforting. He clung to it and let it drag him up from the mudslick of his memories. "I'm sorry," he managed to say.

"Not at all. I'm the one who pushed. Here, wipe your face."

She handed him one of the spotless napkins the acolyte had brought out with the tea, and he mopped at the tears and mess, though he used his own handkerchief to blow his nose.

Eventually he straightened up and cleared his throat. "I, uh...don't usually do that to people."

"I assure you, I'm not offended. Or surprised. What a dreadful experience. Harmful and sad even for those without your talent. Were the others on your team affected?"

He nodded. "We all had to take leave. A couple got moved onto other teams, non-responder work for a bit. They tried that with me but the damage was too much. They tried everything—drugs, rest, isolation—but finally they said that was all they could do. Gave me a pension, told me to take a walk."

"And told you it was empathic overload."

"What else could it be?"

"I don't know what they call it, Einan, but I've met other people who've suffered from a very similar condition, who aren't empaths. The empathy makes it worse, but it doesn't cause it. Of that, I'm certain."

"Doesn't help me though, does it." He looked at her again. "Anything help those other people?"

"Time. Prayer, for those who take comfort in it. Friendship. Safety. And rest, though not for all of them, I have to say. Different things help different people. You're a man of action. I sense you like to help people. I think having a purpose would help."

He waved his hand across the garden towards the workshops. "Like him? Running charity drops?"

"Perhaps you're not quite ready for that." She took his hand again. "Brother, I know you rejected my offer the other day as that of a busybody. But let me make it again. You have friends here. Support here. Those who'll listen. My sister the empaths will talk to you as long as you need it. You don't need to be of our faith to accept."

"You know...about my faith?" *Or lack of it*, he amended to himself.

"Many who come through difficult times, lose their belief in the gods. The gods aren't offended. We are but frail humans. I offer what we have not from the gods, only in their name. We're just people, brother Einan."

The warmth of her sympathy nearly had him breaking into tears again.

"I...uh...maybe."

"Good. Now, let me offer you some more tea before you go on your way."

Einan felt weirdly calm when he left the temple. By rights, he ought to be cranky and looking for something to ease his nerves, but inside his head, in his heart, everything was quiet. Even his memories seemed to be lying low. Strange. Sister Hikeri had no medical training at all—had been a teacher on the outside before joining the temple once her children were grown and married, her husband having died when she was only in her twenties—but she had the same reassuring manner some doctors had, some of the better medics. He believed her when she said he could recover in time, when he hadn't believed Doctor Pielan, though no doubt the doc was sincere.

Thalem's story was a distraction of sorts. It made a kind of sense, if you accepted his version of what happened. But to Einan, the guy was taking it too hard. He'd done his sentence, taken his licks, and it wasn't like he could bring the dead man back to life. It was like he was still in prison, scared he'd lose control. Maybe he figured he'd end up like his Pa.

He had to try and speak to him again. Letting the priestess do his dirty work was cowardly and he still owed the guy. Now Einan knew about Thalem's past, the thing about drinking made sense. Einan had made assumptions, insulted the man and hurt him. Thalem had suffered enough without that.

They were busy in the restaurant, but it rained while he was on shift—only a heavy shower, but the cool change and fresh air that followed it was like a year added to his life. These rains, falling in the hot weather, felt very different from the destructive

cold season downpours that brought floods and death in their wake. Summer rain to him meant life, and that, he couldn't get enough of.

He could have gone to sleep, probably, but he just wanted to breathe a little before he went to bed. A window—something else he needed to organise. He knew sod all about installing window frames.

Thalem was a carpenter. Perfect excuse to strike up another conversation. Now, if Einan could just not puke this time....

He let his talent do the stalking that night, relaxing his control and letting his power spread out, over the confused fearful, anxious minds of the indigent population, the anger of arguing men, the rare contentment of a child dozing in the arms of a parent, probably too young to realise how desperate their situation was.

Until he found it—the deep, pure note of Thalem's ever present sorrow. So strange that it wasn't tinged by weariness or resentment, or anything remotely self-centred. It was like he grieved for the whole world, and not the loss of a single man who didn't know enough not to taunt big-muscled drunks in the street.

He found him near the shed where the little family had taken refuge.

"How long will they stay there?" Einan asked, not bothering to explain his presence.

Thalem seemed unsurprised at his arrival. "The father's looking for another job. Can't get a room without a job, hard to find a job without an address. Sister Hikeri told me to tell 'em to give the temple as an address. He's seeing a foreman tomorrow. Just gotta keep 'em safe until he gets something."

"I'm glad. You've done good work here."

The guy's eyes shifted. "Sister Hikeri explained. I weren't angry or nothin'. I could tell it was something bad."

"Yes, but it wasn't anything you *did*. I wasn't disgusted or angry...you know anything about empathy?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Sister Hemana's an empath, but she ain't talked to me about it. It's kinda rare, ain't it?"

"Yes. It's a difficult talent. You didn't do anything, I swear."

"So long as you're okay. Didn't meant to cause no offence over the drinking neither."

"She explained to me about...why that's a thing for you."

He just shrugged. "I can't help it. I sees someone heading the way I was, I have to say, maybe you should stop and think. Don't do no good, though. Better to know why they drink, and stop that."

"Do you know why you used to?"

He actually turned away from Einan then, the lamp dangling uselessly from his hand. "Didn't know no better way, is all. Made me feel...made me not feel. A man died cos of it."

"It wasn't murder though—"

Thalem whirled, so much anger in his dark eyes that Einan took an instinctive step back.

"I *killed* him. I wanted to kill him. At least, make him shut up! He was coming out with this shit and all I cared about was making him stop! Then he died! That's murder!"

"But—"

"Two little boys lost their father cos of me and my pride! Sobbing and crying, and asking their Ma where their Pa was and would he come back, and I was stood there, alive, while she had to tell them he weren't. She hates me and she's got the right of it! I hate me. Stupid, stupid..."

He shook his head and then hung it low, eyes hidden by the night, but Einan knew they were full of tears.

Einan rubbed his chest—the pain of Thalem's emotions took a lot of absorbing. But knowing what caused them, rationalising, helped him get on top of it, though the effort nauseated him. "People make mistakes, Thalem."

"And I'm paying for mine. I'm gonna pay for the rest of my life. I swore—" He swallowed. "When I got out of prison, I found work easy enough—always work for a chippie—and I saved all I could. When I done the parole I wrote to her, the wife, sent her everything I saved and said I wanted to make amends, try and support them. I'd do anything to make up for what I done. She, uh...sent back my letter and the money, said I made her sick and she wanted nothin' from me, that her boys'd know who killed their Pa and never forgive me. All she wanted was to never see me or hear from me again, or her boys to even cross my path. So I left. Was all I could do. All I can do is try and...." He waved his hand distractedly. "Not hurt no one no more. Don't know what else to do."

The sorrow emanating from the man was strong enough now that Einan had a headache trying to fight it, but he swore he'd pass out before he walked away this time. What Thalem needed was what he'd never have—absolution. Einan understood why the wife was too angry to offer it, but not offering it, not accepting the attempt to make reparation, meant nothing positive could come from her husband's death. He wondered if she'd ever change her mind. Probably not. Some people held powerful grudges over far smaller crimes—just look at his own father.

"What you're doing is admirable—"

"Don't want to be admired. Don't want to be thanked. Don't want to be happy or content. I don't *deserve* it. Why don't people understand that?"

"You can't tell people how to feel, Thalem. It's not right to even try. Those kids, that family in the shed there—you want their parents to tell them, oh, don't be grateful for the blankets and food, it's only Thalem who gave them to you? You think it's right to teach children not to say thank you for good things?"

"I don't deserve—"

"That's not the point. It's about respecting yourself, and respecting the gift. You saved my life, and I'm grateful because my life's worth something to me. Understand?"

Thalem nodded. "Didn't mean no offence."

"I know. But if you give, you have to learn to accept thanks, or the person who receives the gift feels unvalued and angry. Like their gratitude's worthless."

"I get it." He shifted uneasily. "Uh...you know, it's kinda late. You should be getting on home."

"What about you?"

"Oh...I'll just walk for a bit. Check out who's around, see if anyone needs anything."

"Then I'll come with you, if you don't mind. I don't sleep much these days."

"Me neither."

They fell into step, Einan matching Thalem's longer stride without difficulty, Thalem's lamp illuminating the wet road. What meant relief from the heat for most of the city, meant misery and an uncomfortable night for those without roofs, though Einan saw fewer people out and about. Those who'd remade their fires, huddled under suspiciously clean blankets.

"You've been busy," he said to his companion.

“Always more needs than I got stuff for. Mostly I try and get ‘em to head on up to the temple, but people’re proud, or they don’t like solid roofs.” He glanced sideways. “You know what that’s like, I think.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Heard about Gurde. Bad business.”

“They were all dead before we got there. Even if we’d been right there in the town, they’d have died. We couldn’t...just couldn’t...”

Thalem’s big hand landed carefully on Einan’s shoulder. “You done what you could. You should be proud.”

“Maybe I don’t think I deserve that feeling either, Thalem.”

Thalem hesitated, then nodded. “I get you.”

They walked for an hour, wandering up and down grimy streets, past rows of dilapidated buildings, Thalem occasionally nodding to people he clearly knew well, though there were few enough around. As they walked, Thalem made the odd comment here and there about who they’d seen, or passed, in his deep, rumbling voice. He wasn’t much of a conversationalist but he made no demands either, and his company felt oddly soothing. Einan had grown used to the constant note of sorrow emanating from him, and could now easily absorb it. It would be a different matter if Thalem became angry or upset again, but for now, he was no burden.

Close to midnight, just as Einan was about to suggest that he should go back, he found himself in the lane beside the restaurant.

“Your stop,” Thalem said with a slight smile.

“Thanks. Uh...I actually wanted to ask a favour. I wondered if I could trade you some hours of labour for it at the temple.”

“I’d do it for nothin’—”

“Uh uh, you don’t accept charity, neither do I.”

Thalem shrugged. “Okay. What d’you want?”

“A window in my room. I, uh...you know, the roof coming down thing. I have nightmares about being trapped. My boss thought it might help.”

“Sure. I can do that. I get a day off, day after tomorrow. Suit you?”

“Perfect. Lano’ll pay for materials and provide lunch, and I’ll owe you a day. No arguing.”

There was almost a smile on Thalem's wide mouth. "Yer too smart to argue with. Evening, Einan."

Einan waved him farewell and watched him walk off, solid as a tree, a cartload of sorrow on his massive shoulders. A fine figure of a man, for sure, but even more screwed up than he was. Damn shame.

He shook his head and went to his room. For once, he slept soundly, without drugs. All he had to do was get through another month, doing the same thing, and maybe there'd be hope for him yet.

Lano was happy with the arrangement, and pleased that Einan had made contact with Thalem again.

"Struck me as a good man, that one," he said, after Einan had briefly told him Thalem's history so the old man wouldn't be offended by any odd reaction.

"You think the wife should have forgiven him? If it had been your wife or child killed?"

"Weeel, that's the thing, ain't it. Different when it's your own. Can't say as I blame her. Damn shame though. Way I see it, everyone's gotta take responsibility for themselves. He's done it, and made a choice. Seen fellas make worse ones."

"But he's not happy."

Lano tilted his head in a knowing manner. "Not yet. Grieving takes time. You ain't done with yours neither."

Telepaths, Einan thought ruefully.

Thalem turned up bright and early—too early, since Einan was still asleep. As he stumbled in, heavy-headed and tired from a restless night, he found Thalem and Lano drinking jilaj in the kitchen. Lano grinned knowingly, but Thalem merely greeted him with a calm expression, as if being kept waiting was of no matter.

"Sorry 'm late," Einan mumbled, reaching for the jilaj pot and a mug. "Bad night."

"S'okay. I was asking Sar Beron what he wanted me to do."

"Thing is, Einan," Lano said, shoving the pot a little closer, "I got a few little jobs need doing, and me and Sar Troe here was figuring out a way I could pay."

Einan sat down. "You planning to trade my time for his?"

"Nope, 'less'n you wants to. No, I was thinking more about hot food for his fellas, flasks of hot drinks come the cold weather, that kind of thing."

"It'd be easier than trying to carry it all from the temple," Thalem said in his slow, deep rumble. "I'd be obliged to Sar Beron if he'd help."

"S'all good to me," Einan said. It was likely no skin off Lano's nose and he liked the idea of Thalem having another contact—another friend. Lano was kind and wise and didn't judge. Just the sort of person Thalem needed.

The rain of two days before had provided only a small relief to the rising heat. By the time the three of them walked out into the yard, it was hot enough to cook a steak. Thalem was unperturbed, but as Einan sat and watched him efficiently cut a neat hole in the side of the little shed, sweat began to bead on the man's broad forehead.

"Want some water?" Einan asked.

"If'n it ain't no trouble."

Back in the kitchen, Lano made up a jug of cold yito tea and added a few dried niele berries. Einan filled up a big glass and brought it out.

He stopped dead, and swallowed at the sight before him.

Gods.

Thalem had taken his shirt off, tied it around his hips. Man, he was magnificent. The tabard and heavy shirt he habitually wore only showed his bulk. Now he was bared to the waist, the perfection of his musculature, the sheer power of his shoulders and arms under surprisingly unflawed brown skin, were revealed. Einan's mouth went dry with desire that he hadn't felt since before Gurde, what with the drugs, the booze and the crazy doing a good job in castrating him. Thalem was masculinity distilled, and yet so unconscious of it.

Einan handed him the drink and tried not to stare at the way the long neck worked as Thalem swallowed, tried not to want to lick the little bead of tea that escaped and dribbled down the sculpted chin. If there was one thing he was absolutely sure of, mentioning anything of his admiration to Thalem would send the guy running like his heels were on fire. The guy couldn't take a compliment over something as unarguable as saving someone from their own stupidity—it was a cinch that he didn't want to hear that he might be considered handsome.

Thalem had suggested putting in two windows—"give you a bit of air, even when it rains", he'd said, with perfect logic—and made short work of putting the holes and supporting studs in. He deftly constructed two frames, ready to insert, and as Einan

took the cup back from him, Thalem said, "Gonna need the glass soon. You want to go for it, or me to fetch it?"

"No, let me. What do I need?"

Thalem gave him the measurements and the glass grade, and also requested enough putty for the job. He had enough to keep him busy until Einan returned from the glaziers, he said.

Einan went back over to the restaurant to ask Lano for the cash to buy the glass, and found Biene standing on the porch, staring out into the yard.

"Now that," she said in a low voice, "is one beautiful being. Think he likes men or women?"

"No idea," Einan said, wondering that himself. "But I don't think he's looking for anyone right now."

She sighed. "Shame. A big fella like that, clever with his hands...I can think of worse people to hook up with. Reminds me a little of my Aindo."

He handed her the cup. "He's likely to need more of that. Give it your best shot, Biene."

She pulled a face at him, but he noticed she went back into the kitchen to fetch more tea. Who knew? Maybe Biene's kind motherliness was what Thalem needed. If Einan had been ten years older and liked the female form better, he'd have made a run for her himself. She'd had her family. A step family might appeal to Thalem's obsessive need to care for others.

He shook his head at his matchmaking. *Get your own head screwed on right before you go making plans for anyone else, Einan.*

Thalem was up on the roof when he returned with the sheets of glass. "Found a hole," Thalem explained. "Don't want that."

"No. Thank you." The way Thalem and Lano were sprucing the place up, they seemed to assume he'd be around for a while. Maybe he would.

Fixing the glass only took half an hour and then Lano insisted Thalem stop and come in for lunch, out of the sun. To Einan's regret, Thalem had put his shirt back on, but then the sun was vicious.

Biene served them up some egg pie and a fruit and cream dessert that she rarely put on the menu—making an effort for the visitor, Einan suspected. Then she and Lano had to excuse themselves while they attended to the first of the lunchtime customers.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” Einan asked as Thalem set his plate aside and pulled over the cheerfully coloured bowl of dessert.

“Walking, mostly. Too early to do rounds and Sister Hikeri says I ain’t allowed to do any temple work on my day off. ‘Less’n it’s praying and I don’t go in for that much.”

“Oh. I thought you were devout.”

Thalem gave him a wry look. “The gods and me had a falling out about the time my Pa kicked me out. I figured they knew what I was, washed their hands of me.”

“Then why work for a temple?”

“They help the people I want to help. Can’t do it on my own. ‘Sides, they’re good people. Don’t care what they believe. You pray much?”

“No. I had a ‘falling out’ with the gods over Gurde. I don’t know if they exist, but if they can let day-old babies drown in their mothers’ arms, then I don’t want to know about them.”

Thalem nodded. “Way I seen it, if the gods cared, they’d’ve struck me dead before I landed that punch. The wrong man died. I ain’t praying to beings making that kind of decision.”

The logic would probably shock a priest or priestess but Einan was neither, and not inclined to argue when he didn’t care one way or another. He was just sorry that Thalem didn’t even have the comfort of belief.

The man didn’t rush over his meal, and Einan was in no hurry for him to leave. But finally they’d eaten all the food, drunk all the jilaj they could manage, and he had to reluctantly admit that he was due to start work as soon as the lunchtime rush finished.

Thalem nodded and got to his feet.

“When do you want me to pay you back for the labour?”

Thalem shifted on his feet, looking shy. “Uh...Sister Hikeri said you was a medic?”

“Yes, fully trained and certified. Not a doctor, though.”

“If’n I get you the gear, you think you could do some rounds with me? Some of my fellas got terrible feet and such. They can’t afford the doctors or they don’t like the hospital or the temple, or they don’t like to bother no one. I just want someone to give them the lookover, make sure they’re okay.”

“I can do that, so long as I’m not dispensing anything. I might have to tell them to go to a doctor though—there’s a limit to what I can do.”

“I know, but...it all helps. You can start tonight? You don’t have to.”

"No, that's fine. I'll need a standard medical kit."

"Got all that up at the temple. I'll meet you here after your shift. Nine?"

"Thereabouts. I could find you."

Thalem frowned. "How?"

Einan grinned and tapped his skull. "About the only thing this talent's good for."

"Oh. Well, I'll come find you tonight, and you can use your tricks the rest of the time. Deal?"

"Deal."

Smiling, Einan watched his big friend walk away up the dusty road, and only after Thalem disappeared from view, did Einan consider that it'd been the most pleasant, normal morning since Gurde.

That first night, he spent three hours calling in on Thalem's charges, tending to grotty feet, burns that had been left to fester, splinters, cuts, sprains and one undiagnosed broken ankle. Only the fact he had to work the next day made him stop, but he was back out there the following evening as soon as his shift finished.

By then word had already spread, and though he thought he'd had a good impression of how many people lived among the derelict buildings and in the shadows, he realised he was wrong. There were many, many more than he imagined—and many more women and children too. Many of them needed medical attention, their lives made miserable by injuries and ailments of all degrees.

Even with Thalem's constant efforts and the work other temples did from time to time, they were barely touching the problem. But Thalem didn't see it that way. He focused on individuals, and if Einan could stop one hobo losing a toe or a finger, then that was good—even if there were five more they might never see.

"I was like you, at first," Thalem said, as they shared the flask of cold tea Biene had insisted on giving them. "Felt like it was all too much, like I couldn't make no difference. Then I figured that was prideful, thinkin' I was the only answer. I'm just one sinner—even being able to help one more like me, 's more than I deserve. So every time I help someone, 's one more I didn't expect."

"The government should be doing this, not you and me," Einan said, angry at the idea of babies among this squalor.

“Yeah. I don’t know about that kind o’ thing. I just do what I do. You don’t have to. You paid back the hours, and then some.”

“No, I want to. Unless you mind the company.”

“It’s kinda nice. But it’ll make you sick again?”

Einan stared at him in surprise. It was the first time all evening that he’d even thought about his empathy. Sure, he’d registered the emotions of the people they’d met and helped, and Thalem’s sadness was an undertone to everything else, but Einan’s control had handled everything easily and automatically, just as it was supposed to do.

“No, I think it’ll be fine. If it isn’t, then I’ll head off, and come back the next night.”

“You planning to keep doing it?”

“Yeah. I think I am. Why not?”

“Okay.”

He felt Thalem’s uncertainty. Perhaps the guy expected him to do it for a while and give up. Which he might do, he didn’t know. “I’ll do it as long as I can. Won’t promise more, but I won’t leave you hanging, either.”

“Good enough for me. You should get on home.”

“To my nice, new, cool, airy bedroom.”

Thalem smiled rather shyly. “Glad you like it. Glad it helped.”

Einan clasped his shoulder. “It did. Evening, Thalem.”

He relished the normality—or rather, feeling normal, since ‘normality’ was something different these days—all the way back to the restaurant, and though he woke from another nightmare in the early hours, he had to wonder if Sister Hikeri was onto something. Feeling useful helped. The question was—did it help enough?

Easy as that, his new routine solved the problem of what to do with his empty free time. When he wasn’t walking the streets with Thalem, he was down at the temple talking to Sister Hikeri about what work needed to be done with the poor. Funny how those conversations always ended up being about him, though. She was damn sneaky for a holy woman.

Other times, he kept Thalem company on his work rounds—their free days didn’t coincide, but Einan had all the mornings free, and every evening after about nine. On Thalem’s free day, he worked for Lano, or Lano’s friends, who either paid cash or donated goods or services to the poor. One way or another, Einan spent an awful lot of

time with the man, and after a week or so, he felt it doing him a world of good, though he struggled to understand why that should be.

Thalem didn't talk much, didn't ask many questions. He wasn't a worldly man or well-read, though more than smart enough, and quick on his feet when there was a problem to be solved. Just an ordinary man who'd made ordinary mistakes with terrible consequences, and somehow come out of it with his heart pure, if broken. Which made him far from ordinary, actually.

Two weeks after the window installation, Einan received a letter from Doctor Pielan. Not, as he thought, to check that he really did live at the restaurant, but asking him to make an urgent appointment. Pielan would see him on any day he chose to come up, within a range of dates.

Einan didn't know what to make of this, and didn't tell any of his friends for fear of alarming them. He just took himself up to the hospital on his next day off, telling Thalem it was his regular check up, and waited three hours for Doctor Pielan to be free.

The little man was full of suppressed excitement, though nothing showed on his face except his professional mask of mild irritation. He asked some pointed questions about Einan's wellbeing, and his excitement sharply spiked when Einan had admitted how much having a regular activity that took him out of himself had meant to him. Finally, he took off his glasses and looked closely at his patient.

"It seems you might be right after all, young man. I've received some very helpful correspondence from a colleague in Darsino, who's been working with others in the Weadenal. He believes, after reviewing the case notes on you, that you aren't suffering empathic overload at all."

Einan blinked. "I'm not? Then what is it? Can I be cured? Is there like a drug or something they've invented?" There had to be a reason Pielan was almost bouncing out of his chair with energy, however well he concealed it.

"They're calling it traumatic overload, though labels are meaningless, in my opinion. Yes, your empathy had a role to play, but they believe it's just a more extreme form of what they've observed in others, especially soldiers. Unfortunately there's a tendency with empaths—with all mental paranormals in fact—to ascribe any mental derangement to your talent. That's led us astray here, and is what my colleague alerted me to."

"And...can I be cured?"

"I'd say the chances are good that we can make your symptoms manageable. You might even be able to go back to work."

"Really?" Einan leaned forward across the desk. "Just like that, huh?"

"No, Sar Derzo, not just like that. The treatment's long-term and by no means assured. The one thing that won't help is the drugs. I want you to stop using those sedatives immediately."

"Doc, I hardly use 'em, but some nights, I can't sleep—"

The doctor held up his hand. "I know, but they'll interfere with the treatment. I can prescribe some mild sleeping pills and you'll have to endure. You're managing now, you say."

"But I know they're there—"

"Try, Sar Derzo. It's important."

Einan slumped, then nodded. "Okay. So what do I have to do?"

"The treatment is two-fold. One is the gradual dulling of the overactive memories through the agency of one of our telepaths. The second is that you then talk through the experiences with someone, with the idea of helping you make sense of them, make them more manageable. It's a slow process but I've been assured that the Weadenisis have had some astonishing results." He put his glasses back on and pulled his notes towards him. "Now, I see no point in delaying. I've set you up three months' worth of appointments, starting this Kerne—"

"Doc, that's not my day off. It's the busiest day in the week for them. I can't just—"

"Sar Derzo, tell me, which is more important? Your job washing dishes or getting back into your real vocation? Because if you want to be a kitchenhand for the rest of your life, by all means, let's cancel."

The doctor glared at him through his thick glasses, defying him to refuse, genuine irritation behind the irritated expression.

"These people are my friends," Einan said, willing the man to understand.

"They've helped me."

"Then I'm sure they want the best for you. Turn up, or I'll cancel. We have limited resources and many people to use them."

Einan nodded. "Okay. I'll do my best."

"And stop taking the sedatives."

"I will."

"Good day then. Come to my clinic reception on Kerne at ten and you'll be directed where to go."

Einan thanked him and then left. Damn it. Lano would agree in a heartbeat, but that'd leave him stuck. He and Biene had already been so kind to him. Einan hated to ask for yet another favour.

He'd said he'd drop in at the temple, and the day was young so he thought he would. At least he had some possible good news to give people.

Thalem was in his workshop, reupholstering a sofa. He received Einan's news and his description of the problem with his shift, with a shrug.

"Ain't no problem. I can sub for you."

"No, Thalem! You already work too hard."

"Way I figure it, I'm gonna be over there most free days anyhow, and Biene sure makes a nice fruit pie. Washing dishes ain't that hard. Not a day a week."

"I can't let you. It's exploiting your kindness."

"Well now. I see it as a friend doing something for a friend, but if you think it's exploiting...."

He turned back to his sofa, and for the first time since Einan had met him, he detected irritation from the man. Muted, certainly, and mixed with disappointment—but Thalem really was annoyed.

"Thalem, I don't want to hurt your feelings—"

"Then don't." Thalem turned around. "See, me and Sister Hikeri, Lano, Biene, we all want to see you get better, Einan. You're doing it for all of us. Beat this, get back on the job, and no one'll cheer harder'n us."

"I...thank you. From the bottom of my heart." Einan made a little bow. "Now don't insult me by telling I can't do that or you'll hurt *my* feelings, okay?"

Thalem smiled a little. "I figured. I won't. Just let me finish up and we can talk to Sister Hikeri about changing my day off. She won't mind. She let me pick it in the first place."

They found the priestess in her office. She was genuinely delighted at the news. "I know it means nothing to you, but I and my sisters have prayed for something like this, brother Einan. It sincerely brings us joy."

"Your prayers aren't nothing to me. I just...feel a little humbled, that's all."

“As you should,” she chided gently, “when the gods give such bounty. And when their servants do—this Doctor Pielan must be a very good man.”

“Yeah, he is. Cranky, but good-hearted.”

“Better’n the opposite,” Thalem said in his deep drawl.

“Very true, brother Thalem. My only concern is that neither of you overwork yourselves but you’ve been managing things so well that I’ll leave it to you to organise. Brother Einan...if talking helps, and you feel we can be of any assistance...”

“Oh, you can,” he said firmly. “You already have. I’m going to need all the help I can get anyway—the doc wants me not to take any sedatives any more. The nights are going to be rough.”

“We might be able to help there too,” she said. “Insomnia and nightmares plague many of those who live here or who are treated here. Sister Hemana has a deft hand with them.”

It hadn’t occurred to him that another empath could help, but if she was willing to absorb some of the worst terrors.....“Then I might ask for her. Thank you, holy mother.” She bowed her head in acknowledgement. “I guess it’s all up to me, then.”

“And those behind you, wishing you well,” she said.

Thalem just smiled at him. Einan was selfish enough to enjoy soaking up the pleasure he felt from the big man at his change of fortune. If only there was a way to give some good luck back to him. Maybe when he wasn’t crazy any more, he could.

Lano agreed to their arrangement without the least argument. He and Biene both liked Thalem, and though Biene had pretty much given up on any romantic hopes, she enjoyed pampering him as she would have done either of her sons, both married and moved to Harzin. Einan still had a conscience about imposing on Thalem but he had to admit it was an elegant solution. He’d do his best to make it up to the big guy.

The first treatment was just three days later. He’d planned to come back and take over for the evening shift, meet up with Thalem for the rounds as usual, but in the end, it took all he had to get back from the hospital, and crawl into his bed with barely a word to anyone. He slept like the dead until mid-morning the next day. If he dreamed, he couldn’t remember anything about it.

Lano waved away his apologies and just wanted to know how it had gone.

"Hard," Einar confessed. "The telepathy isn't too bad, just left me really tired. But the talking it through thing...I got the feeling the doctor didn't know how it would go either. She let me rest for a while but it still wore me out."

"Bound to be tough," Lano said, nodding sagely. "Our other young fella was worried about you."

"I'll talk to him. Thanks for understanding."

Lano tapped his skull. "It's my speciality," he said with a gap-toothed grin.

Thalem's relief was apparent even to Einar's non-paranormal senses, as he walked across the yard to the workshop. It looked like he'd just caught the man on his way out.

"Hey," Thalem said, overcasually. "Wondered if'n I'd see you."

"I'm fine. Sorry I worried you."

"S fine. Um, I was just gonna fix—"

"Let me come with you, help out."

"You don't—"

Einar fixed him with a glare. "I *want* to. I actually enjoy your company, Thalem. A lot."

Thalem flushed dark red. "I ain't—"

"Thought we had that conversation about not telling people how to feel?"

"Yeah. Sorry. You can come along. I, uh...kinda like your company too."

Einar grinned. "You don't need to sound so unhappy about it. Come on."

The nightmares were maybe a little better after that first treatment, but it was hard to tell. The nights were still the worst, though. He hadn't taken any of the sedatives but he hadn't thrown them away either. The temptation was always there.

It was easy enough when he was with Thalem, or Sister Hikeri, or Lano, to avoid the memory attacks, ignore the unbidden images that haunted him. He'd found ways of distracting himself when he was with people. When he was alone, it all seemed to crowd back in on him, so he avoided it for as long as he could, though he felt guilty about using his friends this way.

The second session went much as the first had done, and with the same result, leaving him exhausted and empty. At least this time Lano and Thalem knew what to expect, so they weren't worried, although Einar, looking at three months or more of this, wondered how he'd cope. Doctor Pielan said that it could take up to a year. The nightmares almost looked appealing compared to that.

The third session didn't exhaust him so much as leave him antsy and tense, full of unwanted energy and unfocused anger. Even walking the four miles back from the hospital instead of hitching a lift on a cart, didn't wear him out. Arriving back after dusk, he pretended to Lano and Thalem that he was tired as usual, and hid in his room, but no way he could sleep. He took one of Doctor Pielan's sleeping pills but they could have been made of bean flour for all the effect they had—hell, they might have been made of flour for all he knew. Pielan was sneaky like that.

He lay on his bunk, arms over his eyes in the still stifling heat, wishing it would rain, wishing that the tiredness in his body would somehow overtake the racing thoughts in his head. The telepathy had been worse than the talking today. The hospital telepath had had him going over the events of that long, cold night and day in Gurde in painful detail—again—and after three sessions doing the exact same thing, he had to wonder what the hell was the point? It was supposed to dull the memories. Didn't feel all that dulled to him. And then the doctor had sat there asking him about the same thing, reading questions off a checklist. She didn't know what in holy Wen's name she was doing, he was sure of that. Maybe if he went to the Weadenal, spoke to the people who'd come up with this treatment, but doing it this way? He felt like some failed scientific experiment.

Eventually he dozed, drifting in and out of waking dreams. The oppressiveness of the humid air grew steadily, until he swore it felt like it would rain inside his room. Both windows were open, but no breeze stirred. The air stank of decay, of death, making him gag on his own breath. He had to get out of here.

He flung open the door. The sky was heavy, moonless. Rain was in the air, and his boots stuck to the mud on the sodden ground. Lano'd be pissed about the mess. They'd tried to clean up after the landslide, but the mud got into everything.

The kinetic storage lamp in his hand was failing. He cranked it up again and thought he'd better to remember to requisition another one from stores. Hard enough to do this job without doing it in the pitch dark, after all.

The street was empty, silent. No jaiger carts—of course, the animals were all dead. He remembered that now. Good job they had a telekinetic to help them clear everything away. He'd just make sure they hadn't forgotten to check any of the houses. He hefted his lamp and ropes, and walked on, boots sticking on every step, making a sickly noise. Suck suck, suck suck.

Suck suck. From behind him.

“Someone there? You need help?”

He turned and lifted the lamp. Couldn't see....

There, beside that ruined house. A woman, soaked to the skin, holding something to her breast, mumbling.

“Are you all right?”

She came closer. Her dark hair stuck to her face, her muddy shoulders. Her thin trousers wrinkled around skinny legs.

“What do you want? I can't hear you.”

“Baby. Lost my baby.”

“You're holding your baby.”

“Not my baby.”

“No, it is. Look.” Einan put out his hand to turn the child's face towards its mother's so she could see, but when he looked, the eyes were gone, like they'd rotted out of their sockets. He flinched back.

The mother didn't seem to realise why, just saying in a monotone, “Lost my baby. My baby's gone.”

Shaking, Einan touched the child's arm—it came away in his hand, putrid and bloated. He dropped it, jumped back. “It's dead. Your baby's dead.”

She stared at him, not even aware of the horror she was holding. “Lost my baby. My baby's gone.” She reached out a hand. The skin was hanging off it, like a corpse left in a river. “Help me. Help me!”

“I can't. I can't.”

He turned and ran, but the mud sucked at his boots, slowing him, and behind him, he heard her running towards him.

He headed up the street, knowing Thalem was there and he meant safety, but now....

More people, walking out of the ruins, drenched, eyes empty. Some holding babies, some dragging older children through the thick, black foul mud. Retching, he averted his eyes from the dead, but now there were more, holding out their hands, begging him to help them, help them find their babies or their sons or wives.

A man staggered into him, vomited up a fountain of mud all down his shirt. Einan gagged. He dropped the lamp and rope and tried to run, but the man had his fingers on

his arm, and wouldn't let go. Einan tried to scream but his mouth filled with mud, choking him on its wet, earthy bulk. He fell to his knees puking, unable to draw breath to yell, his heart hammering, while the man's fingers tightened and tightened....

"Einan! Einan!"

Someone shook him, held him. "Dead," he moaned, sobbing as his knees went out from under him. "All dead...."

"Einan, look at me! It's Thalem! You're safe, man. You're safe."

Einan blinked up at the blurry face above him. *Safe...?*

He came to, shivering, fighting the soft sheets over him.

"Easy, brother Einan," a woman's gentle voice urged. Someone touched his face and he eased immediately.

Empath, he realised, sagging back onto the pillow. Someone using their talent on him to calm him down. "Sister...Hemana?"

"Yes. You're at the temple, and safe. Rest easy, brother."

"T-Thalem?"

"Here." His friend's voice rumbled out of the shadows thrown by the small oil lamp on the table. "You're okay now."

Einan fumbled his hand out towards Thalem, and the big man realised what he wanted, taking Einan's hand in his own huge one. "I'd be dead without you," Einan whispered. "Don't leave me."

"Ain't going nowhere, Einan."

He slumped back, exhausted. Thalem held his hand until the pale glow of the lamp disappeared from his sight.

When he woke the next time, there was light through the windows and a ferocious headache in his skull. He looked around, cautiously because every movement made the hammers behind his eyes set up again like the worst hangover he'd ever had. Sister Hemana dozed, leaning to one side in a chair by the wall. And Thalem was asleep, head pillowed on his arms, lying across the foot of Einan's bed.

He had to be in the infirmary, maybe one of the private rooms they used for the dying. A whitewashed, simple place, with a large window, isolated from the rest of the patients, only the gentle sounds of bells and chanting from the temple drifting in to

disturb the peace. Thalem had brought him here? What had happened? The corpses...none of that could have been real. Had he been sleepwalking, or had Lano summoned help to the restaurant?

He tried to sit up without disturbing anyone, but his slight movement had Thalem jerking upright, alert, in a second.

"It's okay. I'm fine."

"Don't move. Let 'em check you over. You give me a fright."

"Sorry."

Thalem grunted and then stood up, stretching his massive body like a mountain rumbling to life in an earthquake. Then he padded quietly over to Sister Hemana and touched her shoulder.

"He's awake."

Her eyes opened, and then she smiled. "Ah. You're feeling better."

She stood and stepped over to him. Thalem hung back. Einan dimly sensed his concern and weariness, as if through a fog. His talent was dull and stupid this morning.

"Feeling embarrassed and with a headache that could kill a jaiger stone dead. What happened?"

"We're not sure. Thalem found you in the street, incoherent and barely able to stand. When you passed out, he carried you here. You roused several times but weren't lucid. We were most concerned about you. Did you take some medication?"

She probably meant booze or weed, but he hadn't—at least, he didn't remember doing so. "Just a sleeping pill—or did I dream that? Everything after the hospital seems to be off, like I might have imagined it all."

"I see. I think I should fetch Sister Hikeri, and something for your headache. Are you hungry?"

His stomach still felt like it wanted to expel phantom mud, the very idea of food making him ill. "Thirsty."

"I'll bring some tea. Brother Thalem?"

"Staying," he said firmly, taking the chair she'd abandoned and dragging it over by the bed.

She smiled benevolently at him and left.

Thalem stared at Einan, who quailed a little under that fierce gaze.

"You scared the shit out o' me."

"I scared myself. How far was I from the restaurant? And did I turn up there at all?"

"You came in, same as usual. Didn't say much, headed off to bed early, like before. I finished up and was heading back to the temple to get the gear when I heard you moaning. You're lucky a ripper didn't get you."

"Yes." He rubbed his forehead, wishing the pain would let up. "I owe you."

"No, you—"

Einan reached out and grabbed Thalem's forearm. "I *owe* you. Not just for last night...for so much. You're healing me. You've been doing it for weeks."

"Not much healing going on last night."

Embarrassment rolled off the big guy, but Einan was determined to make him understand. "Maybe that was part of the healing. Even if it wasn't, I've been much better lately and the difference is you and your friendship. You've helped me, and I'm in your debt."

"No need to talk about it, Einan. Friends don't have debts." But as Einan held his arm, and stared at him, Thalem gave him a slight smile. "I ain't gonna leave you, though. Don't you fret."

"Thank you. I feel almost like, if you leave me...I'll die. It's weird."

"You ain't in your right head now. Wait till Sister Hikeri talks sense into you."

His insistence made Thalem uncomfortable and there was no point to that. All he knew was that he could be dead on the street, his throat cut, if Thalem hadn't been there, and his presence now was better than a sedative for calming Einan's shattered nerves. The dream still lingered in his brain, sickening him, but Thalem's solidity was a bulwark against the landslides in his memories, his honesty proof against any horror Einan's damaged mind could dredge up.

Sister Hikeri was, as always, a reassuring voice of reason. "The sleepwalking is most likely a side-effect of your treatment as you say, brother Einan, but with your permission, I could contact your doctor and ask if there's anything we can do to help you. In the meantime, I'd suggest that if you find yourself disturbed when time comes to go to sleep, that you come here instead so we can watch you. You should perhaps do that after your future treatment sessions, at the very least."

Einan had no will to argue with her, and if he was going to pull another stunt like that, better that Sister Hemana was there to ease him through it. And Thalem would be reassured too. His friend was deeply anxious about all this, and Einan had very little to offer to explain it away.

He was too debilitated to go to work that afternoon. Without hesitation, Thalem said he'd take over, and Einan couldn't argue with him, having no alternative. He lay in the temple infirmary's comfortable bed, resting, sipping one of Sister Hemana's mysterious potions (which seemed to work, though he had no idea what was in it) and trying to regain some stability.

Sister Hikeri came back at noon to share some tea with him.

"How do you feel, brother?" she asked as she gracefully sat down in the chair beside the bed.

"Better. Not so much as I'm going to fly apart."

"A frightening experience, certainly. But I don't believe it's necessarily a setback. You were warned it would be a long process."

"Yeah. Hard on everyone else though. Hard on *him*." She nodded, understanding. "He's been so good to me."

"It's not all one way, brother Einan. You've been rather absorbed with your own troubles—hardly surprising—but I've been watching brother Thalem since you came into his life and truly, you've done wonders for him."

"Me? He doesn't seem any different."

She smiled. "I wouldn't encourage your friendship if I thought he didn't benefit. He has little experience of relationships. This business has frightened him, but being able to help, has done him good."

"Do you know if he was ever with anyone? In love, I mean."

"No, but then people don't tend to confide that kind of thing to me." Her cheeks dimpled, making her look far younger than her sixty years. "Amazing how simply putting on a priestly headdress bestows virginity on a person, even when they're a mother of three."

Einan grinned. He tended to forget that too. "Honorary hymen?"

"Mother Nenin be praised, it's a miracle."

Despite his headache, he laughed. "You ladies talk like this when you're alone?"

“Oh, brother Einan, you really don’t want to know what women, priestesses or not, talk about when men aren’t around.” Her expression became solemn once more. “The simple answer to your question is that I don’t think brother Thalem is experienced in those kinds of relationships either. I think...it may be a very long time before he’s ready. Before he even realises that he has opportunities.” She looked at him levelly. “He needs friends, more than lovers.”

“I know. I just wondered. Biene’s looking for a second husband, that’s all.”

“Ah.” She raised her eyebrows as if surprised. “I wish her luck and patience, but above all, entreat kindness.”

“She wouldn’t want to hurt him.”

“That’s good because he’s had more than enough to bear.” She laid her hand on his arm. “As have you, brother. I wish you patience as well.”

He didn’t mind her seeing straight through him. She was right, of course. Thalem was nowhere near ready for anything Einan might even hope to offer, not that he was remotely ready to offer a damn thing. He, too, needed friends more than lovers. It just amazed him how rich he was in that way.

Much to his disgust, he slept the rest of the day away. When he woke and found it was too late to carry out the latter half of his shift, and that Thalem had taken over for him again, he felt cranky with them all for not waking him up.

“Brother Thalem insisted,” Sister Hemana said, unperturbed by his bad temper. “And we agreed with him that you needed the rest.”

“So does he. He’s out on the street again, isn’t he? While I’m here like a useless lump.”

“Brother, your task is to heal and so is his, in his own way.”

She laid her hand on his forehead and he felt his irritation leaching away, leaving only peace and calmness in its wake. She frowned briefly as she absorbed the negative feelings, but then smiled. He envied her that exquisite control over her talent, which had once been his as well.

“Rest, take this gift, rise stronger tomorrow. He shares his strength with you so you can do so in turn to others.”

He was too tired, and now too relaxed to argue. He slept right through until morning, and woke re-energised and headache-free. Still annoyed though, but when he

charged over to Thalem's little room, intending to tell him not to cosset him like that, Thalem held up a hand before Einan could open his mouth.

"You're welcome."

Einan, taken by surprise, burst out laughing. "Thanks. You're learning."

"I got good teachers. You okay?"

"Raring to go."

"Then I'll see you tonight." He squinted, worry suddenly rushing from him. "If'n you ain't there, I'm comin' in to look for you."

"Good idea. But I think I'll be fine until the next session."

"We're gonna make sure you are. Lano's pissed with himself. Said he should've kept an eye on you."

"Oh, that's ridiculous. I didn't even realise—"

"You're always telling me not to tell people how to feel."

Einan shook his head. "So I am. See you later." He patted Thalem's shoulder.

"You're a good friend."

He counted it as a victory that Thalem only smiled, and didn't argue with him.

Dr Pielan was there in person to supervise the next session. Einan sensed his profound embarrassment at allowing a patient in such a condition to go home unattended.

"There was nothing about sleepwalking in the notes I received." He seemed flustered by this lack.

"Well, everyone's different. Maybe my empathy caused it?"

"Possibly. We can of course admit you overnight each week," he offered rather stiffly.

"Any reason I can't use the temple infirmary? I know everyone there and trust them. I think it'd reassure them."

"If they can satisfy me their facilities are adequate, then I suppose I can consider it. Tonight, no argument—you stay here."

Einan just smiled and sicced Sister Hikeri onto him. They'd both expected Pielan to make a fuss, so she'd come with Einan to wait out the appointments. By the time he was done with the talking doctor, she was waiting for him, with the temple's little jaiger trap standing ready outside. Pielan was nowhere to be seen.

She put her arm through his, holding Einan up. "Come home, brother. We'll look after you."

Nerves a-jangle, and weary to the bone, he wasn't minded to argue with her, and slumped in the passenger seat as she expertly guided jaiger and cart through the busy streets, ignoring the curious looks her robes earned her.

He slept hard and without incident that night, and when he woke, Sister Hemana calmly informed him that the temple had been authorised to provide his aftercare for the foreseeable future.

"A service we hope we won't have to provide for too long," she added with a wink.

Einan had no idea how long it would take—nor did Doctor Pielan. The doctor didn't even know if he was making progress, though Einan thought, on balance, he probably was. He felt less on the verge of being ambushed by his memories all the time. The real test would come with the autumnal rainy season which he was frankly dreading. He just had no idea how that would go for him, but at least he had plenty of help to get through it.

So the routine became set. Kerne morning he went to the hospital, Kerne afternoon someone from the temple would give Einan a lift, and Kerne evening he slept under supervision. The next morning, he'd eat breakfast with Thalem, and then go back, refreshed and rested, to 'The Bird's Nest'.

Those breakfasts were a welcome break after the mental torment of his treatments. Sometimes Sister Hikeri would join them for a cup of jilaj after the morning prayer service, other times it was just them. It was a time when Thalem relaxed a little, opened up just slightly, just occasionally. Einan cherished those tiny insights into his big friend's big heart, but Thalem remained trapped within the prison of his guilt. The most Einan had was a peek through the bars, now and then.

Just once, a month or so after his sleepwalking (never repeated, to everyone's relief), he won more than a peek. When he crossed the courtyard to the table outside Thalem's little room where they liked to eat their breakfast, Thalem held up a much written over envelope.

"Lano said this came for you yesterday. Thought it might be important."

The hospital? But when Einan deciphered all the scribbles, he realised it wasn't Doc Pielan writing to him. "It's from Ma. Looks like they had a bit of trouble finding me."

She'd written to the base in Minwal, of course, as the last place she had an address for him— with a guilty pang, Einan realised he'd forgotten to send his new details to her—and the base had written to the pension department, who'd sent it to the hospital. Why they hadn't kept it for him until his next visit, he had no idea.

"Ain't you gonna open it?" Thalem asked, reaching for the basket of fruit buns.

"Yeah." But Einan needed a cup of jilaj first.

Thalem watched in silence as Einan read his mother's carefully lettered note. When he didn't offer any report, reaching for the jilaj pot instead, he sensed a sharp burst of concern from his big friend, and looked up. "It's okay. No bad news. My younger brother's getting married. She says she'd like me to come home for it."

"You gonna?"

Einan shrugged. "Even if Pa wouldn't have thrown a fit, the wedding was last week. Her letter took too long to arrive. They don't know what happened, see. So far as they know, I'm still in the Corps."

"Right."

The lack of judgement underlying Thalem's kind concern, prompted Einan to explain. "Pa thought I was going to farm the property, like my brothers. Didn't take it too kindly when I told him I wanted to join the Corps instead. Said if I left, I was no son of his, ever, and never to come home again. Ma...tries to pretend that didn't happen. She's always after me to come on back. It's been fifteen years. You'd think she'd get a clue."

Only she did know. She just hoped. He couldn't really blame her.

"Shame," Thalem said. "The Corps do good work. Got to be someone's son or daughter to do it."

"Yeah. So long as it's not his."

"Did he beat you?"

"Pa? No need. He's got a tongue like a wire whip when he's mad. He's big in the temple of Nardi in Luta. Very hard on the sinners. He's not a bad man, or unkind—but the farm's everything to him. It was his great-grandfather's, and he expects it to be his great-grandson's. I just...didn't see that future for myself."

Thalem nodded. Einan sensed the concern replaced by sadness, tinged a little with old anger. "Your Pa beat you, didn't he?"

Thalem stared out over the sunny courtyard. "Yeah. Fists, boots, belt—what he had in his hand when he was drinking. Ma lit out when she was pregnant with my sister—he was hitting her and she figured he was gonna kill her and the baby. She tried to get me out later, when she was settled, but he wouldn't let her. He threw me out when I got too big to beat up no more. I was fifteen."

Einan exhaled. An ordinary story of misery, but no easier to hear for that. "How old were you when your Ma left?"

"Eight. She just ran out, clothes on her back and her purse was all she had. Weren't planned. I was in school. Got home, she was gone. He told me make the supper and that the bitch was gone. He'd kill her if she came back. Missed her something bad. By the time I got to Kekwe, she'd married again and moved to Pindone. I ain't seen her again. Suppose she heard about what I done."

"She never wrote?"

"She did but Pa tore 'em all up. My aunt told me what happened when I got up to her place in Kekwe. Got a few letters from her before I went to prison. My aunt died while I was inside, and I guess Ma just couldn't keep track of me. Or didn't want to."

"Your father's still alive?"

Thalem looked at him, dark eyes briefly full of anger. "Yeah. Cos the gods don't love us."

He definitely had a point, Einan thought. And maybe Thalem's mother thought her long-lost son had turned out like his loathsome father and wanted nothing more to do with him. If she could see the man he was now...if Thalem could see her again...But it could all go so badly, and that would be worse for Thalem than the situation now.

"Your Pa didn't deserve to have a decent son," he said firmly.

"He didn't get one. You want that last roll?"

Einan put his hand on his friend's as he reached for the basket. "That's *not* what I meant. You're a far better man than he could ever hope to be. You've learned to control your temper, and to pay for your sins. You're loved and valued, and it's an honour to be your friend, Troe Thalem. Now tell me not to say stuff like that and I'll stick a fork in your hand."

"Violence is a sin," Thalem rumbled. Einar pulled a face at him. "I...thank'ee for your kindness, Einar. I'm honoured too."

"That's because we're a pair of honourable men, right?" Thalem laughed a little at the stupid joke. "You walking my way this morning?"

His friend shook his head. "Got to head down to the terraces. See you this evening instead?"

"You can bet on it."

"Gambling's a sin too."

"Yeah, yeah. See you later, Thalem."

Einar walked off, pondering what he'd learned. It was more or less what he'd suspected. He'd maybe found the answer to his own problems. But what could mend Thalem's broken soul?

He shook his head. If he fixed himself, then he might have a chance of fixing others. Until then, he could only offer what Thalem offered him—friendship and kindness—and hope for better things.

He concentrated on his treatment, and getting well, because he was tired of being dependent. His little circle of supporters never resented his neediness, though, and were mindful of potential pitfalls on his account. He quickly discovered they were on alert for the start of the rains as much as he was. As the temperature dropped, and the clouds built, he found himself being invited up to Lano and Biene's place for a last cup of jilaj most evenings. Biene always seemed to be around for breakfast too, and Thalem had time to walk him home, however late it was when they finished up.

The first night of heavy rain, Lano casually suggested he might like to sleep on their sofa, since "that old roof looks like to spring a leak any day soon."

"Lano, I'm okay. I know to ask for help if I'm not."

Lano laid a hand on his arm, and grunted as he verified Einar's words. *I'd be easier if you was up here.*

Einar carefully removed the old man's hand. "I can't sleep up here for the next six months. I'll be fine. And if I'm not, I'll come right on up."

"We don't want anything to happen to you, you hear?"

"Well, neither do I. I'm doing okay, Lano. Thank you."

Lano's anxiety followed Einan out of the kitchen and onto the dripping porch. Staring out into the drenched yard, the rain pissing down in buckets, the temptation to change his mind was very strong, but he just grabbed his slicker, ducked his head, and bolted for the shed.

He couldn't leave a window or the door open, which made the air inside the room heavy and still. The rain drumming on the roof gave him no peace, no place to escape, and in his mind's eye, he saw the river rising, fed by hundreds of streams and drains. Saturating the soil under his room, under the restaurant, removing the support from the stumps and foundations, slipping....

He gripped the bed and tried to choke down the nausea as his heart beat almost to bursting point. Cold sweat ran down his face and sides as he felt the roof caving in, the weight of water in the flooded gutters bearing it down....

But he held on, somehow. Slowly he persuaded himself that the roof was sound, solid, mended by Thalem, who'd never done a bad job of work in his life. Thalem could be trusted. The building was safe, the river too far away and floods unheard of in the docks area.

It took a long time for his heart to ease, the sweat to dry. Finally the rain stopped and he could crack open the door, breathe in the cold, fresh air and remind himself he was alive and well and safe. He wrapped himself in the blankets, and thought about the garden at the temple, and breakfasts with Thalem, until sleep took him away from his imaginings.

He didn't want to wake up, his body heavy and unresponsive. He thought about just rolling over and trying to get some more sleep, but then remembered Lano. Lano and Biene would fret if he didn't show for breakfast, so he hauled himself out of bed, threw on yesterday's shirt and tried to wake up under the pump.

When he stumbled into the kitchen, he found Lano and Biene—and Thalem—waiting.

"Morning," Thalem said.

"Morning. Did I forget we were meeting up?" The night activities had been cancelled by arrangement—he couldn't think why Thalem...ah. "Guys, I'm fine. You don't need to worry so much."

"Good," Lano said, thumping a mug and a fresh pot of jilaj down in front of him. "Drink that, and prove you're fine."

Einan shook his head as Biene and Thalem grinned at him. "I appreciate the concern, honestly but...it's going to be a long rainy season."

"S'all right," Thalem said. "We ain't going nowhere."

"Thalem, darlin', would you like some of my new apple cake?"

"That'd be fine, thank'ee, Biene."

"Huh, new apple cake," Lano grumbled, nudging Einan. "Does she ever break that out for her Pa? Oh no."

"Well, Pa, the sad truth is, I just like Thalem more'n you."

Einan grinned. "Lano, I can probably squeeze you into the shed, if she throws you out in Thalem's favour."

"Easier than throwing *him*, for sure."

Thalem just listened to the teasing with a slight smile. Einan wondered how much more confident he could grow, given time and the right help?

But Thalem wouldn't accept help, as Einan discovered when he turned up a few days later to help with some urgent gutter repairs on the pensioner cottages. As soon as he arrived at Thalem's room, he realised something was wrong. The man was heavy-eyed, clearly tired, and radiating such intense misery that it was almost visible.

"What's wrong?" Einan said, grasping his arm.

Thalem shook him off. "Nothin'. I ain't stopping for breakfast. You ready?"

"I think you should—"

But his friend pushed past him, ignoring his concern and his presence. The rudeness alarmed Einan more than Thalem's emotional turmoil. What had happened?

Thalem said little to him all morning as they worked, patching and clearing gutters that had given out with the heavy rain. Einan occasionally needed his help, which he readily gave, but other than those times, Thalem soldiered on in silence, and paid Einan no mind at all.

Einan was supposed to go back to the restaurant for lunch but he followed Thalem back to the temple. Thalem didn't question that, didn't ask anything at all, but when he returned to his workshop, he glanced at Einan, all the sorrow Einan could feel washing out from him, stark in his dark brown eyes.

"Later," he said, and started to walk off.

"Thalem, wait! Don't you want lunch? I was going to eat with you."

Thalem paused, but wouldn't turn around. "Not today." And then he walked away.

Einan didn't know what to do, but pursuing him didn't seem a good idea. He sighed and walked out to the courtyard, intending to just go back, but then he saw a familiar face, and hailed her.

"Sister Hemana?"

"Hello, brother Einan. You're troubled, I see."

"Yeah. Can't you guess why?"

She frowned, concentrating. "Oh...Thalem."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

"No, I truly don't, but I suppose it must be something to do with why he once drank so heavily. It comes on him every so often—we don't know what triggers it. He won't talk to anyone, or let them help, or explain. The best thing is just to leave him be. He won't be out on the street tonight."

"He didn't tell me that."

She nodded. "No, he probably forgot. I'll tell him that you know. Wait for him to turn up at the restaurant, and don't mention it to him."

Einan stared at the building where his friend was holed up and suffering. "And that's it?"

"Sadly yes. I tried when he first came here—I even eased his pain, once. He refused to speak to me for a month, he was so upset."

"Thalem?"

"Yes. He has his pride, Einan, even if it's just insisting on bearing it alone. I wish...well, you know what I wish."

Empath to empath, he could only send silent understanding. "Me too."

But if his talent couldn't help, maybe something else could.

He decided to bring it up a few nights later. Thalem had resumed his nightly round without mentioning his period of depression, and Einan hadn't pushed. They'd just got on with things as if nothing had happened.

It had rained again, but then cleared, giving Thalem a chance to distribute slickers and flysheets, and vouchers for hot food down at 'The Bird's Nest'. There were fewer

people around now, the colder, wetter weather driving the less desperate and crazy towards the temples, or even the miserly government assistance.

The ones still hanging around were the hard core homeless—either shy of the law or too proud to put their hand out to officialdom for help, or simply too crazy and isolated in their heads to accept even the gentle restrictions of temple care. Even Thalem had trouble with some of them, trying to get through. Sometimes Einan had more success than he did, just by being able to offer the medical help. And sometimes, all they could do was hand out food and blankets and hope they wouldn't find anyone dead next time they came through.

Talking about the weather, and how the real challenges lay ahead, Einan casually turned the conversation to his treatment. "I think I'm finally seeing an end to this. Last week or so, I've felt so much calmer than I expected to, with the rains and all."

"S good, Einan. I'm glad."

Thalem had meant it sincerely when he said he and the others were rooting for him. But now it was Einan's turn to do that for Thalem. "You know, I was thinking about that treatment. Doc Pielan says they thought maybe they could use it for other conditions too."

"Yeah?" Thalem was busy sorting out his pack and replenishing the medical kit. He had his back to Einan and was only half listening.

"Yeah. Like...you and how you feel about the past. Your reaction to your conviction."

Thalem turned, his expression blank, his emotions surging with guilt again. "My *crime*, you mean. You can say it. The murder."

"It wasn't *murder*, damn it! That's my point—your reaction to this, the way you carry it around. It's unbalanced. Sure, you should feel sorry and want to make amends, but you're still a good person."

"Einan—"

"No, don't stop me, Thalem, this is important. If a telepath could ease your memories—"

He stepped back, almost slipped as Thalem suddenly advanced on him, and for the very first time since he'd met the man, saw the potential for killing in his eyes. "I don't *want* to forget, Einan! You ain't listening to me! I don't deserve to forget, I don't deserve to have it easy! Leave off about this, will you?"

Thalem's hands clenched and unclenched. Despite his fear, Einan made himself move forward, almost chest to chest with the big man.

"No. I won't. You're suffering and I wasn't raised to walk past anyone in pain if I could do a thing about it. Why the hell won't you let us help you? Let *me* help you?"

Thalem's fists shook at his sides. "Why won't you leave me be, Einan? I'm a sinner. I deserve everything I get."

"Even friendship? Even more than that? If you get affection and love without seeking them, who are you to say you deserve one and not the other?"

"Leave off, Einan. I don't want to talk about it. My sin's my sin, and what I do about it, it's my choice. Why the fuck do you care anyways?"

"Because I do, Thalem. I care for you. A lot." He grasped Thalem's spasming fists and drew them close. "Maybe more than I should."

He felt Thalem respond. Felt the longing, the need. And then, brutally, the pain and rejection as Thalem shoved his hands away.

"That ain't for the likes of me."

He turned, grabbed the pack and medical kit, and stalked off.

"Thalem!"

But the man didn't turn, or slow down. "Thalem!"

Einan didn't know what to do—if he ran after him, he could provoke Thalem into violence they'd both regret. If he didn't—

Something struck his talent, and he whirled. What was that? Fear suddenly...sharp fear and terror. He sniffed—fresh smoke, growing stronger.

"Thalem! Fire!"

Where? He sniffed again, looked around—Thalem had taken the lamp, so the shadows were deep...except there. Leaping orange and yellow light meant only one thing. "Thalem! Call for help! Fire!"

But Thalem was already running back. "Where?"

Einan pointed at the building. "There. Someone's in there, I can sense them. Where's the alarm point?"

"I'll ring it, you find out who and where. Hurry!"

They ran in opposite directions, Einan to the dilapidated stables where he could see the glow of flames, feel the terror of someone trapped behind them, while Thalem

bolted to the alarm point to press the bell. Einan looked around for anything he could use to carry water but didn't slow down until he reached the building.

"Hello? Who's in there?"

"Help!" The voice was reedy and old, and followed by a harsh cough. "Help!"

He could see it now—at the back of the stable, in a jaiger box. Cracking flames licking the walls, and behind them, an elderly hobo, cringing in the corner. Einan covered his mouth and nose with his arm, and dashed in. He plucked the old man by the sleeve and yanked hard, dragging him out quickly through the flames and into the fresh air, the thick coats they both wore, protecting them.

In the street, the old man collapsed, but he was conscious and breathing—Einan could do no more than he had without equipment. "Anyone else in there?"

"Just me. Fire...just...got out of hand."

He urged the old man to move further away from the stables because they'd be well alight soon enough—he could only hope the Corps would get here soon and douse it. He shouted to see if there was anyone in the neighbouring buildings, but there was no response, though he sensed people were around somewhere.

Thalem came running back. "Done. He okay?"

"Smoke inhalation, but he's all—"

Glass smashed to the ground in front of them, forcing them to jump back.

"Help! Help my kids!" A man up at an upper story window waved an arm through the broken pane. "Help us!"

Einan sensed others now. "There's at least three—no, four—people up there, but we can't—"

"We need to get 'em out," Thalem said, and before Einan could grab him and stop him, he'd rushed into the burning building, arm over his face. The billowing smoke swallowed him up almost instantly.

"Thalem, stop! Damn you, stop!"

But the guy was gone. Einan didn't know what was the best thing to do—rush in and maybe both of them would be lost, or wait for the Corps and tell them what was happening, leaving an untrained Thalem to deal with it without assistance.

The man at the window screamed. "Help!"

"Stay low! Lie on the floor! Help's coming!"

More glass fell to the ground as the man broke more of the panes, and then kicked out the entire window frame.

“What the hell?” Einan shouted, but then there was a figure at the window, climbing down.

“My wife, our baby—help her!”

Screw it! She was trying to climb down onto the low roof of the building next to the stable, but the drop was too great, and she risked killing herself and her child. Einan cast around desperately for a way up....

There. A drain pipe, nice and solid. He ran to it and shinnied up. “Wait! I’m coming!”

At the cost of badly barked shins, he managed to climb up onto the rickety roof, which he doubted would hold him or anyone else for long. The woman was on the ledge just below the window. “Lie down! Lower the baby to me!”

She obeyed, and then, holding the infant by its ankles, held it as low as she could. The only way for Einan to reach it was for her to drop it.

“Let go. It’s okay, I’ll catch him.”

His heart stopped when she released it, but his hands caught the child sweet and safe. A newborn—tiny. He held it carefully to him. “Now you, carefully. Jump.”

“My children!”

The roof creaked. “If we don’t get down now, we won’t get down at all. You two first, the others next. I can climb back for them.”

She jumped, the roofing sagging ominously, then crawled across the roof to him.

“Down that pipe, I’ll hand the baby down.”

She only wore a nightdress and sweater, barefooted, so the climb down was hard on her legs and feet, but she made it. Einan lay flat and hung over the edge of the roof. “Ready?”

He dangled the wailing baby by its tiny heels, over the edge. She was able to reach up—just—and take it. “Get clear, and stay here,” he ordered once they were both safe. “Over there.”

“Obi! And my girls!”

“Over *there*.”

Only when she’d moved back, did he stand and walk gingerly back towards the window. But the man was gone. “Oy! Obi! You there? Anyone there?”

He couldn't sense anyone except Thalem. "Oy! Thalem! Come down!"

He moved closer, but as his foot hit the support closest to the window—the one the woman had landed on—it gave under his weight. He couldn't stand there, which meant he couldn't climb up—and no one could climb down. "If anyone's there, you can't come out that window. Stay there until the Corps come!"

No response. In the distance, he could hear the bells and engines of a responding CPC transport. Should he go in after Thalem, or wait?

In the street, people were gathering. Some hobos, but also one or two ordinary residents, carrying lamps. "Buckets? Anyone got buckets? We need water!"

"I can get them!" a man yelled, and two people rushed off with him.

That decided him. If they could put the fire out below, or contain it, and if the people in the room were still alive, that was the best chance of saving everyone. Stupid impulses like Thalem's would just get him and everyone else killed.

Didn't stop Einan wanting to rush in, though.

He climbed down the pipe. The lower part of the stables was well alight—there was no way anyone could go in there without a mask and bottled air. Where was Thalem? Einan couldn't sense him at all now, but that could be because of all the other people crowding around, anxious, excited and curious, drowning his talent.

People had formed a bucket brigade from the nearest water trough to the stables. He shouted, directing them where to throw the water, but the sheer heat of the flames meant they couldn't do more than damp down the edges. It was a waste of their time, and too dangerous. He quickly called them back. They needed more than buckets.

A loud clanging behind him, the gods be thanked. "Here! Over here! Corpsmen, we've got people inside the building!"

The Corps captain ran to him. "How many? Where?"

"Two adult males, at least two children." The woman, listening anxiously close by, held up two fingers, confirming. "All upstairs, or were." He pointed to the window where the husband had called to them. "I got her and the baby down but the roof's unsafe."

"Right. Bring a line and a ladder! Radio Incident Control and see if they've got a pyro free to help out! Hurry!"

Einan kept out of the corpsmen's way, straining his talent for the unique song of Thalem's presence. Still nothing, and in his heart, with his experience, he knew what

that likely meant. *Should've been me*, he told himself, fists clenched. He was the one with training—he knew his way around in a smoky dark building.

But Thalem could never have crossed that roof to get the woman and baby to safety.

The Corps had a medic with them. Einan pointed out the three rescued victims. The old man was the worst of the three, needing air, but the baby was a concern as well. He helped the corpswoman treat them, and tried to resist the temptation of running into the building to find the man he cared more about than he ought to.

As the medic turned her attention to his scraped legs, a great shout went up. He pushed her hands away, stood and turned—the stables had started to collapse, the Corps driving people back out of the way of the falling timbers and sparks.

But there....

Out of the flames and the smoke, a huge figure appeared, two smaller ones under his arms, a third hanging onto him, staggering forward as if drunk.

“Thalem!”

Einan rushed forward, only to be shoved back by a corpsman. “That’s my friend! I need to get to him!”

The man tried to insist, but Einan, desperate now he’d seen Thalem fall to the ground, simply ducked and shoved and got past, ignoring the indignant cries.

“Medic! A medic here!”

Corpsmen rushed to help, throwing fire blankets over the two men’s smoking coats. The children, wrapped in wool bedding, were blessedly, miraculously alive. They didn’t even have sooty faces as they were lifted out of their protective layers.

“Thalem,” Einan whispered, falling to his knees. “You bloody fool. You bloody hero.”

“Excuse me, sir, you need to get back. Now.”

“Look, I’m a trained CPC medic. Let me help.”

The hand on his shoulder brooked no argument. “No, sir. Step back.”

Gritting his teeth, he could only obey the corpsman’s order, and stand helplessly behind the imposed line as the medic and her assistants worked. More CPC transports and tankers arrived, and now there were plenty to help the injured.

The old man was taken away first. The little girls were declared fit and well, running to their mother, and then watching anxiously as the Corps treated their

saviours. Behind them, the battle to save the stables had already become one to save the surrounding buildings. The perimeter was pushed well back, the two injured men carried out of harm's way on stretchers. Einan watched, his heart in his throat as they were worked on.

Finally, the medic ordered Thalem and the other man to be taken to hospital. The mother and children were bundled into the transport too, having no other home to go to, but Einan was denied a similar liberty.

"If you're ex-Corps, you know the regs," the medic said, but not unkindly. "Go tell those who need to know. He'll be okay, I promise."

"Tell him...tell him Einan said he's bloody proud. And I'll punch him in the nose if he does that again."

She grinned. "Understood. We have to go. You can help keep the area under control. Your friend'll be safe."

Einan could only hope so, as the transport rumbled away, bells clanging to clear the path.

The fire raged on, but the now urgent problem was the mass of people forming in the area, at risk and a serious obstruction. The medic had given the captain *bona fides* for Einan and he'd explained his familiarity with the area, so his assistance was sought for help with the evacuees. The temple was the nearest facility that could house them, and Einan found himself in charge of moving people along the wet streets towards temple staff rushing to greet their guests, bearing lamps and blankets and taking charge of the vulnerable and weak.

Sister Hikeri, oddly dressed in ordinary civilian clothes, gave orders in a clear voice, seeking Einan's advice as to who needed help first. Slowly over a hundred people were herded and organised, and eventually absorbed into the temple compound. Pallets and spare beds were arranged and the temple medics quickly checked over the arrivals. Einan was pressed into service there too, his invalid status of no consequence to anyone that night.

He'd only had time to quickly tell Sister Hikeri that Thalem had been injured, treated and taken to hospital. It was after one in the morning, as he washed up in the infirmary, before he had a chance to have a longer conversation with her.

"I've got to get up there. I need to know how he is."

“Wait, brother Einan. You’ve been under a lot of stress this night. You don’t want to go up there and collapse.”

He stopped. “I’m fine,” he said in surprise. “Worried about him—but fine otherwise. I shouldn’t be.”

She smiled tiredly. “No, you shouldn’t. Let me call the hospital on our radio communicator and find out how he is. You should return home because your friends will worry, and want to know how Thalem is. In the morning, you and I will go to the hospital together.”

“But—”

“My son, I’m exhausted, and you’re injured.” He’d forgotten about the deep grazes he’d got from the roof. He’d had time to wash them and hastily bandage them, and then dismissed them from his mind. “Time to take stock.”

“Call them first?”

“Certainly.”

He had to agree because she was right—she was always right. The hospital told her that Thalem had non-life-threatening burns on face and hands, and smoke inhalation. He was resting, and could be visited in the morning, not now.

“So go home,” she said to Einan. “I’ll arrange a ride for you.” She laid a hand on his forehead as if in blessing. “Get some rest.”

Lano was up—the whole neighbourhood seemed to be awake, judging by all the lights, though the fire was no immediate threat. Einan told Lano and Biene the news, let them feed him jilaj and fuss for a little while, then said, “Look, I just need to get to bed. I’m whacked.”

“Sleep up here,” Biene said. “I’d be easier if you did.”

Lano nodded so Einan said yes. He’d be easier too, he had to admit.

Exhaustion warred with worry and gave him a troubled night, though he slept more than he expected. Lano greeted him in the morning with jilaj and a change of clothes fetched from his room.

“News is full of that fire,” he said. “They had a pyro and ten teams down there, they said. Still took ‘em hours to control it. It’s all out now, thank holy Rai.”

“Thank the CPC,” Einan said, accepting the mug of jilaj. “No words about deaths?”

“No deaths, three injured.”

If it had happened earlier in the year, there'd have been deaths. But earlier in the year, the old hobo probably wouldn't have been in the stables in the first place.

"They mentioned our boy on the radio. Mayor said he's a hero. Deserves a reward."

"He *is* a hero but I'd like to see them try."

Lano chuckled. "Me too. He's stubborn."

"Yeah, he is." Einan wished Sister Hikeri would turn up.

When she did, she still looked very tired, and he doubted she'd been to bed. But a little thing like lack of sleep wasn't going to stop her. Now in her priestly robes, she swept regally into the hospital and politely demanded to see her employee.

They found Thalem and Garte Obi, the rescued father, in a small two-bed room off the main men's ward, Obi's family clustered around his bed. Someone had found them clothes to wear, and shoes—probably the only possessions the family now had to call their own. They all seemed tired, the kids quiet and anxious looking, but no one but their Pa was hurt, and even he seemed more weary than anything else, with no obvious injuries. The baby in the mother's arms, slumbering peacefully, looked completely unharmed. No dead children here.

Sister Hikeri held back to let Einan see his friend first, she said. He walked to Thalem's bedside.

"Hey."

Thalem was awake, weary and pale under the dressings on his forehead, his hands heavily bandaged. He coughed painfully before he answered. "Hey." The deep rumble was now a rasp.

"Don't try to talk. It gives me a chance to chew you out for doing such a stupid thing."

Thalem pointed to the family beside him.

"Yeah, I know. I'd still wring your neck if I could reach that high."

Thalem just grinned.

The woman suddenly recognised Einan. "Holy Nenin, it's you!" She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her cheek. "Thank you, sir. Thank you so much."

His reply was automatic. "Just doing my job, ma'am. You guys gonna be okay?"

"We're alive," Obi rasped. "All that matters."

Einan took a seat next to Thalem, Sister Hikeri at his side, while Obi's wife, Lomet, explained. As she spoke, Einan kept his hand on Thalem's arm, feeling his friend's unease at being the centre of so much attention.

Obi had lost his job because he wasn't fast enough on new equipment and hadn't been able to line up another job immediately. Already in debt, they'd fallen behind on their rent, and been thrown out of their apartment.

"He's got another interview tomorrow," Lomet explained sadly. "Only he won't make it."

"Leave that to me, my dear," Sister Hikeri said. "Give me the details and I'll contact them. I'll also ensure you and your children have somewhere safe to sleep until Obi finds work, so he can concentrate on getting well. As you both can," she said, smiling at Obi and Thalem. "Lomet, why don't you and the children come with me and we can sort a few things out."

Their departure left Einan alone with a dozing Obi, and Thalem.

Thalem shifted uneasily as Einan leaned in. "They keep thanking me," he whispered hoarsely.

"You saved them from a painful death."

"I just done what anyone would've done."

"You were the only one who did. I didn't. I didn't dare. I knew how fucking stupid it was."

"Couldn't let 'em die."

Einan shook his head. The man was hopeless. "They say how long you'll be in here?"

"Couple of days. Off work more'n that."

"You're in pain."

Thalem shrugged. "Burns hurt." He coughed again, long and phlegmy. "Chest too."

Einan put his hand back on Thalem's arm. "Serves you right," he said gently. "You scared the shit out of me."

For a few moments there was silence between them, almost awkward. Einan sensed...yearning, but also wariness. Their last conversation had been angry, and the fire didn't change that. But now he had a second chance. Obi was asleep. They had privacy.

"If you'd not come out...I don't even want to think about what that would have done to me. Thalem...I know what you said before the fire. But I want you to know my feelings are true. They won't change."

"You deserve better'n a killer." Thalem coughed again as he looked away.

"You're right. I deserve someone who saved three people's lives at risk of his own. The debt's paid three times over. Many, many more times than that. We saw people last night even before the fire who are alive and relatively happy because of you and you alone. You're a good man, who's done good things. I know you don't want to hear this, and I know you hate me saying it. But I also know...." He laid his hand on Thalem's heart. "You want more than you have."

A spark of something in Thalem's dark eyes quickly died as he firmly pushed away the longing Einan sensed in him. "Don't des—"

"Yeah, that's just crap. 'Deserve' doesn't come into it or your Pa'd be dead from a painful disease."

He stared at him, concentrating on Thalem's churning, conflicting emotions, willing him to understand.

After a few moments, Thalem's big bandaged hand came to rest briefly on his shoulder. "I ain't ready."

"I know. And...I'm not either, but I know I will be. I've made a decision. I'm going to find out if I'm fit to be reinducted into the CPC in Minwal and ask the doc if I can finish the treatment up there while I recertify. I want to go back to work."

"In Minwal."

"No, *here*. With you. Either in the Corps or working for the temple, or somewhere else. I want to work as a medic because I love it, I'm good at it, and I'm ready to go back to it. Because of you. And I want to help you because I owe where I am to you."

"No, you—"

Einan reached up and touched Thalem's lips. "Not telling me how to feel again, are you?"

Thalem smiled a little under his finger. "Nope. Wouldn't dare."

"Damn right you wouldn't. I'm not asking for a decision. I'm just asking you to wait for me to come back."

"I already told you—I ain't going nowhere." Einan didn't know what to make of that, until Thalem added, "I'll wait for you. Long as it takes."

“And I’ll wait for you, because I believe in you, and I know you’re worth it. If you won’t believe in yourself, believe in me, Thalem. Trust me.”

“I want to. ‘S hard, Einan.”

“Harder than going into a burning building and saving two little girls and their Pa?”

But he knew it was, for Thalem. Thalem’d never had any trouble with physical things. His heart, his emotions, were the landslips for him. “However long it takes, I’ll wait for you.”

“Long as it takes, I’ll keep trying.”

“Let Doc Pielan help you?”

Thalem stared up at him, his emotions raw and painful in his eyes. “Said I’d try.”

Einan smiled, then kissed Thalem’s cheek, careful of the burns. “Thank you.” He didn’t believe in the gods anymore, but he believed in their creation, and he believed in Thalem’s strength.

He laid his head on Thalem’s chest, and Thalem laid his poor burned hand on Einan’s head. “Don’t deserve you, honest.”

The shy, unpracticed hope he sensed in his friend, almost buried under the guilt and worry, struck a sweet chord in Einan’s own soul, and gave him solace. “Too damn bad. You’re just stuck with me.”

“I can live with that.”

Einan grinned to himself. Yeah—he figured he could live with it too. No trouble about that at all.

The end

To read more works by Ann Somerville, visit her website at <http://logophilos.net/>