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With Stars Underfoot

Steve Miller
&
Sharon Lee

Lord of the Dance

It was snowing, of course.

The gentleman looked out the window as the groundcar moved quietly through the dark streets. His streets.

And really, he said to himself irritably, you ought to be able to hit upon some affordable way of lighting them.

“What are you thinking, Pat Pin?” His lady’s voice was soft as the snow, her hand light on his knee. And he was a boor, to ignore her most welcome presence in worries over street lamps.

He leaned back in the seat, placed his hand over hers, and looked into her dark eyes.

“I was thinking how pretty the snow is,” he murmured.

She laughed and he smiled as the car turned the corner — and abruptly there was light, spilling rich and yellow from all of the doors and windows of Audrey’s whorehouse, warming the dark sidewalks and spinning the snowflakes into gold.

“Boss. Ms. Natesa.” Villy bowed with grace, if without nuance, and pulled the door wide. “You honor our house.”

Great gods. Pat Rin carefully did not look at his lady as he inclined his head.

“We are of course pleased to accept Ms. Audrey’s invitation,” he murmured. “It has been an age since I have danced.”

The boy smiled brilliantly. “We hoped you’d be pleased, sir.” He pointed to the left, blessedly returning to a more Terran mode. “You can leave your coats in the room, there, then join everybody in the big parlor.”

“Thank you,” Pat Rin said, and moved off as the bell chimed again, Natesa on his arm.

“Who,” he murmured, for her ear alone, “do you suppose has been tutoring Villy in the Liaden mode?”

“Why shouldn’t he be teaching himself?” she countered, slanting a quick, subtle look into his face. “He admires you greatly, master.”

“Most assuredly he does,” Pat Rin replied, with irony, and paused before the small room which served as a public closet for the clients of Ms. Audrey’s house. Natesa removed her hand from his arm and turned, allowing him to slip the long fleece coat from her shoulders. The remains of snowflakes glittered on the dark green fabric like a spangle of tiny jewels. He shook it out and stepped into the closet.

The hooks and hangers were crowded with a variety of garments: oiled sweaters, thick woolen shirts, scarred spaceleather jackets, and two or three evening cloaks in the Liaden style.

Pat Rin removed his own cloak and hung it carefully over Natesa’s coat. Shaking out his lace, he stepped back into the hallway, where his lady waited in her sun-yellow gown.

He paused, his heart suddenly constricted in his chest. Natesa’s black eyebrows rose, just slightly, and he moved a hand in response to the question she did not voice.

“You overwhelm me with your beauty,” he said. She laughed softly and stepped forward to take his arm again.

“And you overwhelm me with yours,” she answered in her lightly accented High Liaden. “Come, let us see if together we may not overwhelm the world.”

The doors between the public parlor and the visitors’ lounge had been opened and tied back; the furniture moved out of the public parlor and the serviceable beige rug rolled up, revealing a surprisingly wide expanse of plastic tile in a deep, mostly unscarred brown. A refreshment table was placed along the back wall, directly beneath—

Pat Rin blinked.

When not pressed into duty as a dance hall, the public parlor of Ms. Audrey’s bordello displayed certain... works of art... as might perhaps serve to beguile the mind away from the cares of the day and toward the mutual enjoyment of pleasure.

This evening, the walls had been—transformed.

The artwork was gone, or mayhap only hidden behind objects, which, had anyone dared challenge Pat Rin to describe twelve items belonging to Korval that he least expected to find on public display, he would certainly have placed within the top six.

Nursery rugs, they were—the design based upon a star map. Three rugs together formed the whole of the map, the original of which he had himself seen, preserved in Korval’s log books.

One rug had lain on the floor of the nursery at Jelaza Kazone. The second, in the schoolroom at Trealla Fantrol. The third—the third had covered the floor in the small private parlor the boy Pat Rin had shared with his foster-father, Luken bel’Tarda.

And yet on the wall directly across from him—the rug, the very rug, from Trealla Fantrol. And on the wall to his right, the rug from Jelaza Kazone.

Carefully, Pat Rin turned his head, and—yes, there on the wall behind them was the rug from his childhood, looking just as it always had, close-looped and unworn, its colors as bright as—

“Pat Rin?” Natesa murmured. “Is something amiss?”

He shook himself, and turned his head to smile at her.

“Merely—unexpected, let us say.” He waved a languorous hand. “What a crush, to be sure!”

This was not strictly the case. Still, the big parlor was comfortably crowded, the conversation level somewhat louder than one might perhaps have expected at a similar gathering in Solcintra. Bosses of several of the nearer territories were present, including Penn Calhoun, as well as the Portmaster, and a good mix of local merchants.

Across the room, white hair gleaming in the abundant light, his cousin Shan stood in deep conversation with Narly Jempkins, chairman of the nascent Surebleak Mercantile Union.

“We arrive among the last, as suits our station,” Natesa said softly, which bait he ignored in favor of inclining his head to their hostess, who was approaching in a rustle of synthsilk, her pale hair intricately dressed, and an easy smile on her face.

“Boss. Natesa. I’m real glad you could come.”

“Audrey.” Natesa smiled and extended a hand, which the older woman clasped between both of hers.

“Winter has been too long,” Natesa said. “How clever of you to think of a dance!”

Audrey laughed. “Wish I could say it was all my idea! Miri was the one put the seed in my head, if you want the truth. Said she had too much energy and no place to spend it, which I’ll say between the three of us ain’t the usual complaint of new-birthed mothers.”

“Miri is an example to us all,” Pat Rin murmured, which pleasantries Audrey greeted with another laugh.

“Ain’t she just—and your brother’s another one! When I invite a man to a dance and I don’t expect him to bring his keyboard and set up with the band. That’s just what he’s done, though—take a look!” She pointed down the room, where was collected a fiddle, a guitar, a drum set, a portable omnichora — and several musicians wearing what passed for stage finery on Surebleak, clustered about a slender man in a ruffled white shirt and formal slacks that would have been unexceptional at any evening gather in Solcintra.

It had been...disconcerting... to find that Audrey, with the rest of Pat Rin’s acquaintance on Surebleak, assumed that Val Con, his cousin and his Delm, was in fact his younger brother, brought in to care for the transplanted family business while the Boss undertook the important task of putting the streets in order.

As the misapprehension only amused Miri, and Val Con's sole comment on the matter was a slightly elevated eyebrow, Pat Rin gave over attempting to explain their actual relationship and resigned himself to having at his advanced age acquired a sibling.

"For a time, he and Miri sang for their suppers," he said now to Audrey. "Perhaps he misses the work."

"Could be," she answered, as the sound of footsteps and voices grew louder in the hall behind them. She sent a look over his shoulder, extended a hand and patted his sleeve lightly.

"The two of you go on in and circulate. Dancing ought to be starting up soon."

Thus dismissed, Pat Rin followed Natesa deeper into the parlor.

Ms. Audrey's big parlor, already crowded, grew more so. Deep in a discussion with Etienne Borden and Andy Mack, which involved free-standing solar batteries, and the benefits of light level meters over mechanical timers, Pat Rin still registered an abrupt lowering of the ambient noise and looked around, thinking that the promised music was at last about to begin. But no.

It was his mother entering the room, on the arm of no one less than Scout Commander ter'Meulen, dressed for the occasion in High House best, his face oh-so-politely bland, and his mustache positively noncommittal.

Pat Rin, who had all his life known Scout ter'Meulen, could only wonder at the reasons behind such a display—not to mention the why and wherefore of Lady Kareen accepting his arm for anything at all. They were neither one a friend of the other, though it had always seemed to Pat Rin that the greater amusement was on Clonak's side and the greater dislike on his mother's. Surely—

Audrey bustled forward to welcome these newest arrivals, her high, sweet voice easily rising above the other conversations in the room.

"I *knew* you'd turn the trick, Mister Clonak!" she said gaily, patting him kindly on the shoulder. This was apparently a dismissal, as Clonak adroitly disengaged himself from the lady's arm, took two steps into the parlor and was lost in the general crush.

Audrey turned to face Kareen squarely, and Pat Rin's stomach tightened, as he contemplated disaster. Even had he not counted Audrey a friend, he thought, it was surely no more than his duty to stand between her and Lady Kareen yos'Phelium, in the same way that it was his duty as Boss to stand between the residents of his streets and mayhem.

He murmured something quick and doubtless unintelligible to the Colonel and the assistant portmaster, and slipped through the press of bodies, moving as quickly as he was able.

"Lady Kareen," Audrey said clearly. "Be welcome in my house."

It was the proper sentiment, properly expressed, thought Pat Rin, working his way forward. Though what—and from whom—his mother might exact as Balance for being made welcome at a whorehouse—

"Well met, cousin!" Val Con murmured, astonishingly slipping his arm through Pat Rin's. "Where to in

such a rush?”

“If you would not see a murder done—or worse—” Pat Rin hissed into the frigid silence that followed Audrey’s greeting—”let me tend to this!”

“Nay I think you wrong both our host and your lady mother,” Val Con said tranquilly, his grip on Pat Rin’s arm tightening. “Besides, the hand is dealt.”

“You know what my mother is capable—”

“Peace,” his cousin interrupted. “My aunt is about to play her first card.”

“Who speaks?” Lady Kareen’s Terran was heavily accented, but perfectly intelligible; her tone as frigid as the wind in high winter.

It was of course quite mad to even consider that he might extricate himself from the brotherly embrace of one who was both a pilot and a Scout. Nonetheless, Pat Rin took a careful breath to camouflage his shift of weight—and felt warm fingers around his unencumbered hand. He looked down, equally dismayed and unsurprised to see Miri grinning up at him, grey eyes glinting.

“Take it easy, Boss,” she whispered. “Audrey’s good for this.”

He began to answer, then closed his mouth tightly. The fact that this had been planned—that Audrey had been coached on form and manner...

“That’s right,” their host was saying equitably to his mother. “You won’t know that. I’m Audrey Breckstone, boss of this house. I’m happy to see you.”

Not for nothing did Lady Kareen stand foremost among the scholars of the Liaden Code of Proper Conduct. She not only knew her Code, but she practiced it, meticulously Rather too meticulously, as some might think. But there was perhaps, Pat Rin thought now, an advantage—to Audrey, to the house, and to Kareen herself—in an extremely nice reading of Code in regard to this particular circumstance.

It was not for a mere son to say what weights and measures were called into consideration as his mother stood there, head tipped politely to one side, face smooth and emotionless, but surely the unworthy scholar who had studied Code at her feet might make certain shrewd and informed guesses.

Whether Audrey possessed the native genius to have added that guileless, “I’m happy to see you,” to her introduction, or whether she had been coached in what she was to say mattered not at all. That she had uttered the phrase in apparent sincerity placed her *melant’i* somewhat in regard to the *melant’i* of Kareen yos’Phelium. Here was, in fact, a delm—at most—or a head of Line—at least—so secure in her own worth and the worth of her house that she not only welcomed, but was *happy to receive*, the burden of a visit from a high stickler who might ruin her and hers with a word.

Or, to phrase the matter in the parlance of Sunbleak, Audrey had in essence said to Kareen: *I see that you’re armed, and I’m your equal.*

“I am pleased to accept the greeting of the house,” Lady Kareen stated, and bowed—Expert to Expert—which allowed a certain limited equality between herself and her host, and placed a finer measuring into the future, after more data had been gathered and weighed.

To her credit—or that of her tutor—Audrey did not attempt to answer the bow. Instead, she smiled, and offered her arm.

“There’s going to be music and dancing for the youngers in just a bit, now,” she said. “But I’m betting that a woman of good sense would like to have a glass of wine in her hand.”

There was a slight hesitation as Kareen performed the mental gymnastics necessary to untangle this, then she stepped forward and placed her hand lightly on Audrey’s sleeve.

“Thank you,” she said austere. “A glass of wine would be most welcome.”

The two ladies moved off toward the refreshment table as the rest of the guests shook themselves and returned to interrupted conversations.

Pat Rin remembered to breathe.

“See?” Miri gave his hand a companionable squeeze before releasing him, and sending another grin up into his face. “Piece o’ cake.”

“As an author of the joke you might well say so,” he replied, with feeling. “But consider how it might seem to those who had no—”

“Indeed, it was ill-done of us,” Val Con murmured, slipping his arm away. “We had not taken into account that your duty would place you between the two ladies.”

Pat Rin turned to stare, and Val Con inclined his head, for all the worlds like a proper Liaden, and murmured the phrase in high Liaden—“Forgive us, cousin. We do not intend to distress you, but to attain clarity.”

Sighing, Pat Rin also inclined his head, “It is forgotten,” rising reflexively to his lips.

“Next time, we’ll send you a clue ahead of time,” Miri said.

He eyed her. “Must there be a next time?”

“Bound to be,” she answered, not without a certain amount of sympathy. Her eyes moved, tracking something beyond his shoulder.

“Band’s settin’ up,” she said to Val Con.

“Ah,” he returned, and lifted an eyebrow “Cousin, I am wanted at my ‘chora.”

“By all means, go,” Pat Rin told him. “Perhaps Ms. Audrey will induce my mother to stand up with Andy Mack.”

The band played surprisingly well, and in a rather wider range than Pat Rin had expected, fiddle and guitar at the fore, Val Con’s omnichora weaving a light, almost insubstantial, background.

At Ms. Audrey’s insistence, he and Natesa had stood up for the first dance—a lively circle dance not dissimilar to the *nescolantz*, which had been a staple at young people’s balls when he had been considerably younger. He spied Ms. Audrey, with Lady Kareen and Luken bel’Tarda at her side,

observing the pattern of the dance from the edge of the rug. Further on, Clonak ter'Meulen was in animated conversation with Uncle Daav and Cheever McFarland.

At the end of the first dance, he relinquished Natesa to Priscilla with a bow, and started for the refreshment table. He'd scarcely gone three steps before his hand was caught.

"Come," said his cousin Nova. "I claim you for the next dance!"

"Ah, do you?" He laughed, and allowed himself to be led back onto the floor. "Then let us hope the band pities me and produces a less spirited number!"

Alas, his wish had not reached the ears of the band leader, for the next dance was something akin to a jig, requiring intricate footwork which he learned from step to step by the simple expedient of observing Nova and reproducing her movement.

He'd done the same thing many times in the past, of course—a person of *melant'i* would naturally take care to acquire the movements of a variety of dances, so that he might do his proper duty as a guest; however, no one but a scholar of the form could hope to know the intricacies of all possible dances. A quick eye and a flair for mimicry were therefore skills that a young person who wished to move without offense through Solcintra's party season would do well to acquire.

Having survived the jig unbloodied, Pat Rin bowed to his fair partner, handed her off to his Uncle Daav, and turned, setting his sights on a glass of wine and perhaps more discussion of solar arrays with Andy Mack, who he could see speaking with Clonak to the left of the refreshment table.

This time, he was claimed by a smiling Villy who led him back out onto the floor with something very like a skip in his step. At least, Pat Rin thought, the gods were at last kind: It was a square dance, with he and Villy facing off as sides one and two, with Shan and Priscilla taking up the third side and the fourth.

The slower pace was more than balanced by a complex, cumulative pattern of exchanges with one's partner, thus: step forward, touch right hands, step back/step forward, touch right hands, then left, step back—and so on, until the tune turned on itself and one began to subtract a gesture at the exchange, and each dancer was at last back in their place, having regained all that had been given.

The music stopped the instant the second partner pair fell back into place. There was a moment of tension, as if the dancers awaited another phrase from the musicians—then laughter, and light applause. Their little square evaporated, Pat Rin moving with determination toward the refreshment table, Shan and Priscilla amiably keeping pace. He was sincerely thirsty now, and thinking in terms of a cool glass of juice.

"Do you find the party agreeable?" he asked Priscilla.

"Perfectly agreeable," she said, with a seriousness that was belied by the glimmer of a smile in her eyes. "Ms. Audrey said that she meant to host the dance of the winter."

"Which we thought would be no great challenge." Shan continued. "There being so few dances held in the winter. Or the summer. Or the spring, come to belabor it."

Pat Rin considered him. "If you find a lack, cousin, you might host a ball or two yourself."

"Well, I might," Shan allowed. "If it weren't for the fact that the Delm has some foolish notion in his head

about bringing Surebleak up to a mid-tier spaceport, with a timetable of roughly *right now*. Perhaps he's spoken to you on the subject?"

"He has," Pat Rin said, "and I must say that the Delm and I are as one on the matter."

"Well, then, what choice have I—a mere master trader!—commanded as I am by both the Delm of Korval and the Boss of Surebleak? Duty, as always, must bow before pleasure, and so it is that tomorrow I regretfully shake the snow of Surebleak from my boots and betake myself to Terran Trade Commission headquarters, there to enlist their aid in the Delm's necessity. There will be no dances held atyos Galan's house—had we a house, which of course, we don't—until my task is done. Unless, Priscilla, you would care to host a ball or six while I'm gone?"

"I thought I'd go with you, instead," his lifemate replied in her calm deep voice. "To keep you and Padi out of trouble."

This was news. Pat Rin looked up. "Your heir accompanies you on this mission?"

Shan grinned, silver eyes glinting. "Now, pity me, truly. Bearding the Terran Guild is as nothing when measured against the prospect of introducing one's daughter to the intricacies—not to say the politics—of trade."

They had reached the refreshment table. Pat Rin poured wine for the two of them, and a glass of cider for himself, then inclined his head as Shan moved off to answer a hail from Portmaster Liu—and again a moment later as Priscilla was called over to join Thera Calhoon, Penn's lady wife.

Momentarily alone, Pat Rin sighed, had another sip of cider, and closed his eyes. Now that he had extricated himself from dancing, the band was—of course!—playing smooth and undemanding strolling music, the voice of the omnichora somewhat stronger than it had been previously.

Opening his eyes, Pat Rin looked out over the crowded dance floor. Uncle Daav was dancing with Natesa, Nova with Clonak ter'Meulen, and Villy with Etienne Borden. He sipped more cider and reminded himself that it was a boon to be warm in the depths of Surebleak's winter.

"Hey, there, Boss." Miri's cheerful voice interrupted his reverie. "Feeling OK?"

He considered her gravely, one eyebrow up, which only widened her grin.

"You look like Daav when you do that," she said, reaching around him for the cider bottle.

"There's punch, if you'd rather," Pat Rin murmured, and Miri laughed as she poured cider into a cup.

"Think I don't know better'n Audrey's punch?" she asked.

"The wine, then," Pat Rin countered. "It's quite pleasant."

She sent a sparkling glance up into his face. "Oughta be, considering it came out of our cellar." She sipped. "That's good," she sighed, and gestured vaguely with the cup. "Only way we could get Shan to come was to promise there'd be something drinkable on the table."

"Doubtless," Pat Rin said dryly, and she laughed again.

“Cut a fine figure out on the floor,” she commented, her eyes on the languid dancers. “Bet you could dance all night, if there was need.”

It was his turn to laugh, softly. “I hope that I do not shame my host or my lady,” he murmured. “But I have long since given over dancing until dawn.”

“Not quite ‘til dawn, I’m guessing,” Miri said, as the music swept into a crescendo, the ‘chora’s voice suddenly and aching clear. She knocked back the last of her cider and put the cup on the table.

Pat Rin glanced at his cup, finished the last swallow and thought about pouring another before he went in search of Andy Mack, and—

“Over here!” Miri called, and put her hand on his arm.

Pat Rin went still. “What?” he snapped.

“Easy. It ain’t nothin’ more than this special dance Audrey has it in her head we all gotta do together. Family thing.”

“I have already danced—”

“One more!” Villy cried, arriving in a swirl of exuberance. “You have to, sir! You’re the Boss!”

“Ah.” He considered the boy’s flushed face. “How if I appoint Boss Calhoon to stand up in my place?”

“Won’t work,” Mid said. “Penn gets the least bit warm and his glasses fog up on him.”

“Besides not being family?” he asked, but she only grinned, and nodded toward the floor, where stood surely all the members of Clan Koval present at the party, saving herself, Val Con, and Lady Kareen, who was at the edge of the rug, between Clonak ter’Meulen and Andy Mack, her face so perfectly bland that Pat Rin shivered.

“Miri...” he began, but she was gone, walking toward the group assembled in a loose circle at the center of the floor.

“Come on, sir!” Villy tugged his hand. “They’re waiting for you!”

It was on the edge of his tongue to snap that they might wait for him until the snow melted. However, good manners overcame bad grace, and he allowed himself to be led out onto the floor. Hoots and whistles came from some of the spectators on the rug, and Lady Kareen’s face grew blander still.

At the edge of the circle, Villy relinquished his hand, bowed his liquid, meaningless bow, and skipped back toward the refreshment table.

Pat Rin gave a sigh—and another as Natesa came forward to put her hand on his arm.

“A round dance, my love,” she murmured, as she eased him into the circle. “Audrey has asked us most especially to honor her.”

If one’s host desired it, there was nothing more to be said. And certainly he was able for one more dance. Still... He looked into Natesa’s eyes.

“Do I know this dance, I wonder?” he murmured.

She smiled. “I believe you will find that you do,” she answered, and guided him to a gap in the circle between Nova and Priscilla. Having seen him situated, she moved away, slipping into place between Luken and Daav, and smiling at him across the circle.

The drummer beat out a rapid tattoo, sticks flashing, and struck the cymbal a ringing blow, the sound quickly muffled by a cunning hand on the rim.

The room stilled admirably as Ms. Audrey walked out onto the floor, head high, back straight, as proud and as easy as any delm might be within the jewel of her own entertainment.

She raised her hands and spun slowly, showing herself to all gathered.

“You might be wondering,” she said conversationally to the room at large, “why it is that I decided to throw a party in the middle of the winter. One reason is that Miri Robertson over here was getting the silly-stirs, her being a woman who had to go off-world to find enough going on to keep her busy—” She paused to let the general laughter die back, then tipped her head and smiled.

“There’s two other reasons for this gathering, though. And I’m thinking they’re both important enough to want some explaining.

“So, the next reason for the party is that we’re in the middle of a special kinda winter. The first winter in my memory and in all of yours where there ain’t a turf war going on, when the road to the spaceport stands open for its whole length, and where there are not less than five Bosses in this room right now.”

Much shouting, stamping, and whistling erupted. At the edge of the rug, Andy Mack reached out, grabbed Penn Calhoon’s arm and yanked it high into the air. Here and there around the room, the other Bosses were being given similar treatment. The applause ebbed, then swelled again, going on until the drummer rapped out a short, sharp rebuke.

Ms. Audrey waited while the room quieted, then held up her hands.

Silence fell, more or less immediately, and she grinned broadly.

“That’s right. Now, you’ll remember I said *three* reasons and here’s the third—” She turned, bringing the room’s attention to the circle of Korval, standing ready at the center of the dance floor.

“Boss Conrad and his organization are the reason we can have this party, now, in the middle of winter, without worrying we’ll attract the attention of a rival fatcat.” She looked around the room, spinning slowly on her heel.

“Remember this. Remember this night, this party. And remember who made it all happen.”

The room was utterly quiet for the beat of three, then Andy Mack called out from Lady Kareen’s side, “First of many nights just like it!”

“First of many!” The room took up the cry, hurled it against the ceiling, sustained it—

Once again, the drummer intervened. The shouting subsided slowly, and by the time quiet was more or

less achieved, Ms. Audrey was making one of the little group about lady Kareen, her arm tucked companionably through Clonak's, and Cheever McFarland had waded out of the rug-bound observers and onto the dance floor.

It was rare, Pat Rin thought, that one saw Cheever McFarland dressed in other than utilitarian clothing—tough sensible trousers and shirt in neutral colors, sturdy boots, and the inevitable jump pilot's jacket. Tonight, however—tonight, the big Terran positively turned heads as he moved toward their small circle.

The theme was black—a silk shirt so deep that it shone like onyx, with no ruffles or ballooning sleeves which might entangle a pilot, while the trousers were not so tight as to bind, should a pilot need to move quickly, nor the shiny black boots too snug, should a pilot need to run.

Over the shirt was not the usual battered spaceleather jacket but a vest in opal-blue brocade, embroidered with silver rosebuds.

Someone from the group on the rug whistled; Pat Rin suspected Andy Mack. Cheever only grinned his easy grin and raised a big, unringed hand.

“Now, what we're going to be doing here is something like what's called a round dance in Boss Conrad's hometown, and what they called a cue dance back when I learned how, at pilot school. Either name makes sense—a round dance on account it moves 'round in a circle and a cue dance on account there's somebody stands outside the circle, who's got what you might call the big picture, and they're the one responsible for shouting out signals about what steps to dance.” He put his hand on his chest, and the drummer executed a long, showy roll, which got a laugh from those watching, and a grin from Cheever himself.

“Boss Conrad and his kin, they learned round dancin' because where they come from it's what polite people learn to dance. Me, I learned in a piloting seminar because we was bored and needed some legal way to work it off. That being the case, the cues are a little different.

“So, what we're gonna do is show you a round dance like Boss Conrad learned it, and then a cue dance like I did.”

“Where'd Miri learn how?” somebody—Pat Rin didn't recognize the voice—called from the back.

“From the Boss' brother,” Miri sang back. “You?”

The drummer hit the block twice and struck the cymbal hard, to general laughter.

“Any more questions?” Cheever called, and continued without taking a breath. “Fine. We're ready whenever the band gets around to it.”

Immediately, the omnichora launched six bright notes, like skyrockets, toward the hidden winter sky, the fiddle player spun clear around and enthusiastically put her bow across the strings, the guitarist plucked out a quick pattern of sound and the drummer beat the rim, counting out three, six, twelve.

The music shifted, twisted, slowed...

“Bow to your partner,” Cheever directed, against the mannerly rising of “Tiordia's Stroll.”

Pat Rin received Nova's bow, bowing to her in turn. At Cheever's instruction, they joined hands, crossed, turned, and slid two steps forward, two steps right, three steps backward, three left, crossed, turned, and changed partners. Pat Rin's left hand slipped out of Nova's as his right hand met Priscilla's. He and his new partner stepped together, then apart, changed sides and danced four steps left and five steps back, six steps forward, four steps right...

Relaxed and smiling, Pat Rin performed his part in the dance with ease, warmed and oddly comforted by the familiar movements. He did, in that portion of his mind neither attentive to nor lulled by the dance, own himself astonished to find Cheever McFarland so able a dance master. *Truly*, he thought, as he and Priscilla crossed and turned; *there is no end to the good pilot's talents...*

The dance continued its pleasant course, until each dancer had partnered with every other dancer in the set. Perfectly on-cue, he left Luken's side, his hand finding Nova's precisely on the beat. They turned, crossed, and dropped hands to the caller's commands, and bowed, holding it for twelve beats, and straightening just as the last note from the 'chora trembled into silence.

The room was entirely quiet as they straightened, and in that moment, Pat Rin saw his mother, attended now by no one less than Portmaster Liu. Her face was calm, perhaps even relaxed, as if the dance had soothed her as well. She inclined her head slightly in his direction, then turned to address the Portmaster.

A wholly unexceptional procedure, Pat Rin thought, and not at all too much effort to expend for the pleasure of one's host. He was slightly warm, but nothing that another glass of cider couldn't put—

"All right," Cheever McFarland was saying, his big voice shattering the quiet. "That's what a round dance looks in Boss Conrad's old turf. Now we're gonna show you how I learned it. First thing you'll notice is different, is the cues. Pilots, they can't leave anything alone if there's a way to maybe tweak it. Next thing you'll notice is there's some extra bits added in, 'cause pilots tend toward boredom and makin' trouble if they don't have six things to do at the same time."

Pat Rin frowned and turned to cock an eyebrow at Nova, who replied with a bland glance that would have done justice to his mother.

"Last thing," Cheever was saying, "is that pilots? They're competitive. So this dance, it's a kind of a contest, too."

Contest? thought Pat Rin, feeling his stomach tighten. He looked across the circle for Natesa, but she was turned away, watching something in the room beyond.

"Just as soon as the band's ready," Cheever said.

The drummer snapped out a twelve-count, then the guitar came in, followed by the fiddle, the omnichora singing softly in support. The tune was somewhat brisker than "Tiordia's Stroll"—and completely unfamiliar.

"Acknowledge your co-pilot," Cheever instructed, and Pat Rin turned to exchange bows with Nova, who smiled at him.

"Comp—" he began, but—

"Check your board," Cheever called, which Pat Rin's feet somehow knew to be a glide and change sides. "Bring up the screens!"

Warned by the set of Nova's hip, Pat Rin managed to spin as instructed, though raggedly.

"Strap in," Cheever instructed. Nova's hand moved, Pat Rin caught it in his; they turned, separated—

"Lift!"—each danced six steps to their right—"Establish orbit!"—a half turn, so Pat Rin was looking over Nova's shoulder at the starry rug that had covered the floor in Luken's small private parlor in their quarters above the warehouse—

"Outer ring adjust," Cheever said. Pat Rin kept his place while Nova slid three steps to left. His view of the rug was now unimpeded.

"Lay in coords!" Cheever called.

Lay in—

But Cheever was giving the coordinates. Rapidly. Pat Rin focused on the rug—on the *map*—found the first coord, slid forward two steps, located the second, slipped to the left three steps, the third—the third? There!—and forward again, four steps.

"Roll starboard!" came the instruction, and Pat Rin spun to the right with the rest, noting in a sort of mental gasp that the music was moving quicker now, that the 'chora's voice was louder, and the fiddle's entirely gone.

"Lay in coords!"

This time, it wasn't a complete shock; Pat Rin had time to face the map—the less familiar rug that had graced the schoolroom floor at Trealla Fantrol—and focus before Cheever intoned the first coord, then another, and another—a set of six full coordinates this time, and Pat Rin slipped, spun, circled, and lunged as directed, finishing the sequence damp and limp, but oddly triumphant. He hadn't missed a step!

Luken, however, had not had the same good fortune. Pat Rin spied him walking away from the circle, Andy Mack leaving the crowd at the edge of the rug to meet him—then Cheever called them to roll once more and he was facing the map from Jelaza Kazone.

The music was much too quick now, Pat Rin thought, tucking up his lace, and shaking his hair out of his eyes. More a jig than a round dance, which the 'chora gave shape in a continuing twisty flow of brilliantine notes.

Val Con must be ready to drop, he thought—and there was another thought, linked to that—but it was lost in the need to accept the coordinates, and he plotted his course with his feet and his hips, barely registering when Miri dropped out at the eighth coord—and Priscilla, at the twelfth.

The next round came and as he glimpsed the nearest celestial rug, he all but felt the controls beneath his hands; in truth he missed the cabin of *Fortune's Reward*, as he missed the thrust against his back, and the comfort of sitting First Board. The rug was before him, and another as he danced, and the calculations went thus and so and turn and step, and by rights now there should be Jump glare and stars on the screens ahead, and stars behind, with stars underfoot, and a planet to find.

But the dance—

“Orient!” Cheever called, and the four remaining dancers came together in the center, joined hands, ran— *too fast!* Pat Rin thought, with a sudden spike of panic—’round, three times, six—

“Establish orbit!”

As one, they dropped hands, each spinning away from every, two-four-six revolutions, and came to rest, facing—the entranced spectators.

At the fore of them all stood his mother, considering him with a sort of distant interest, as one might inspect an insect.

“Check your board!” Cheever directed, and Pat Rin executed the required glide and change, aware of the weight of his limbs. It was hot, and his head ached, and, really he had every reason to be tire—

The omnichora shouted, notes streaming like lift beacons, and there was Miri next to his mother, and Priscilla approaching—

“Lay in coords!”

There was no map this time. Pat Rin closed his eyes. Cheever chanted the coordinates—a short set of three. Forward, back, turn left—

“Sign your co-pilot!”

Pat Rin extended a hand—and his eyes snapped open in astonishment as it was caught in a warm grip.

“Well done!” Uncle Daav whispered, under cover of the music, and—

“Clear your board!”

The two of them crossed, separated, and came back together.

“Lock it down!”

Natesa’s fingers wove comfortably with his. Shan, on her other side, extended his hand and caught Daav’s free hand.

“Dim the lights,” Cheever said softly, and the four of them walked sedately widdershins, three times, the ‘chora slowing, slowing, almost down to a proper round. . . “Open hatch.”

Obediently, they dropped hands.

“Go to town,” Cheever all-but-whispered, and the four of them turned to face the rug and those watching, as the ‘chora finished with a flurry and a flare—and the shouts and whistles began.

Pat Rin shook his lace out and reached for his glass. With Natesa’s connivance, he’d slipped through the crowd to the back room that had been set aside for the band’s use. Finding a bottle of autumn wine before him, he poured and sipped, and sipped once again before making the attempt to make himself seemly.

The dance—the dance had been an odd thing, to be sure; in memory not nearly so harrowing as in

actuality. Had it gone on much longer, he had no doubt but that he would have joined Luken, Miri, and Priscilla at his mother's side.

He paused, frowning, recalling the moment when he had met his mother's eyes...

"Ah, here he is, keeping the wine to himself!" Clonak ter'Meulen's voice overfilled the little room. Pat Rin sighed, and turned to face not only the portly Scout, but Luken and Daav, and Shan, Priscilla, Natesa, Andy Mack, Nova, Cheever, Miri—and Val Con, green eyes sparkling, the renegade lock of hair sticking damply to his forehead.

"Well met, cousin," he murmured, and Pat Rin held out his glass.

"I thought the 'chora was overextended," he said. "Drink."

"My thanks." Val Con took the glass and sipped; sighed. Pat Rin considered him, doing a different sort of calculation.

"More clarity?" he asked, but it was Miri who answered.

"No complaints, Boss. Sent you a clue, fair and square," she said.

He eyed her. "Hardly in advance."

"But in advance, nonetheless," Val Con said, with a note of finality in his quiet voice. "Come, let us not bicker. There is business to be done—and quickly, so that Clonak is not long kept from the wine."

"That's a touching regard for my well-being," Clonak said, and suddenly pulled himself up straight, looking not so pudgy, nor foolish at all.

"Pat Rin yos'Phelium Clan Korval," he intoned, the syllables of the High Tongue falling cool and sharp from his lips, "has stated in the hearing of pilots and of master pilots not once but several times that he holds a first class limited license under false pretenses. The pilot's solo rating flight was conducted in a Korval safe-ship, programmed to fly, should there be no pilot available. Pat Rin yos'Phelium has stated his belief that it was the ship which overcame the challenges of the pilot's solo, not the pilot." Clonak gave Pat Rin a level look.

"These are serious concerns and the pilot erred not in laying them before master pilots. Therefore, and after consultation, it was agreed that a retesting should be done. The testing is now completed, and I call upon the master pilots present to render their opinions: is Pat Rin yos'Phelium Clan Korval a pilot or does he hold a license wrongly? Speak, masters!"

Daav stepped forward, black eyes serious.

"Though he is perhaps not as conversant with the basic coord book as might be desirable, it is my estimation as a master pilot that Pat Rin yos'Phelium is worthy of the license he carries." He fell back a step, cocking an eyebrow at Andy Mack, lounging against the wall. The lanky pilot shook his head, white hair moving softly across his shoulders, and took a sip of his beer.

"Been sayin' it, ain't I? Boy's a pilot. Tell by lookin' at him."

Shan stepped forward. "It is my estimation as a master pilot," he said seriously, "that Pat Rin

yos'Phelium is worthy of the license he carries." He fell back a step, and Priscilla came forward, then Nova, Cheever and at last Natesa, who made her declaration with the cool, emotionless intonation of a Judge, then smiled at him and stepped forward to take his hand.

"You did well, Pat Rin," she murmured.

"In fact," said Clonak, "he did. I say this as one who doubted the damn' dance would work out at all, but young Shadow carried the day. So." He looked sharply at Pat Rin. "In my estimation as a master pilot, having observed the whole of the testing, Pat Rin yos'Phelium is worthy of the license he carries and I'll thank you to stop doubting yourself, you young whippersnapper! Between you and your lady mother, you're a devil's brew, make no mistake!"

Pat Rin blinked. "My mother?"

"It happens," Priscilla said surprisingly, "that Lady Kareen is, after all, of the dramliza. She appears to have only one talent, which is rare, but not unknown."

Pat Rin looked at her, foreknowing... "And that talent is?"

Priscilla smiled at him. "She may impose her will—to a very limited extent—upon the unwary." Her smile deepened. "And now that you are warned, you are armed."

His mother a *dramliza*? It was only slightly mad, Pat Rin thought, considering the facts of Shan and Anthora in the present generation. But that one talent...

"I think you are saying that it was my mother's influence that kept me from qualifying as pilot?"

"At first, boy dear," Luken said, gently. "By the time you had failed two or three times, you were quite able to fail all on your own." He smiled, sadly. "It was my sorrow, my boy, that I could never allow you to see anything other than your own unworthiness."

Pat Rin blinked against tears; Natesa's finger's tightened around his. "You did so much else, Father..."

A small pause, and then was Val Con abruptly before him, raising his hand so that Korval's ring gleamed. Pat Rin lifted an eyebrow. "Korval?"

"You will," Korval stated, "arrange time to study with Clonak ter'Meulen. You will learn the core coordinates, and such protocols as Scout ter'Meulen finds worthy. You will come to your delm inside of one local year and submit to such verification as may be demanded."

"Ah. And my streets? My duties as boss?"

Val Con smiled, and put his hand on his lifemate's shoulder.

"You'll think of something," he said.

Pat Rin drew a breath—to say what he hardly knew, or perhaps he meant only to laugh. The opportunity for either, however, was snatched from him by Cheever McFarland.

"Right then," the big man said. "Time to finish it up."

The fiddler provided a sprightly, skipping little melody as they filed into the parlor and took up position on a clear space on the rug, Val Con leaving them at the last to tend his ‘chora once more.

Pat Rin stood in the first row of pilots, Natesa on his right, Luken on his left, Daav directly behind. The room was quiet, all eyes on them. Especially Pat Rin saw, were Lady Kareen’s eyes on them, from her position between Audrey and Penn Calhoon. His mother’s face betrayed the faintest hint of boredom, as would perhaps be worthy of an adult who had been teased into attending a gathering of halflings.

The fiddler finished her tune as Cheever McFarland and Miri Robertson stepped up before the rest of them, mercifully blocking Pat Rin’s view of his mother’s face. From behind, the ‘chora began to whisper a faint line of a tantalizingly familiar song. Pat Rin strained his ears, trying to identify the music—then forgot about it as Cheever began to speak.

“I’m going to impose on your patience once more, here, if Ms. Audrey’ll let me,” he said.

In the first row, Audrey laughed, and called out, “It don’t strain my eyes any looking at you, Mr. McFarland! Speak on!”

“Thank you, ma’am.” The big man bent a little at the waist— *a bow*, Pat Rin thought, *Cheever McFarland style*— then raised his voice so that it carried to the far corners of the room—and likely the rooms abovestairs, as well.

“Now, I know you all heard me say that pilots is competitive, and you might’ve thought that just meant that them who missed their steps had to drop outta the dance. But there was a little more to it than that. We was also looking to judge who among the pilots dancing had danced best, according to their level, their flight time, and their training. Miri here—you all know Miri’s partnered with the Boss’ brother, right? And when there’s a question comes before either of them, they got this arrangement where both are understood to answer? Makes the family business run smoother. Anyhow, Miri here’s gonna announce the winner.”

Whistles, hoots, and stamping filled the room. The drum tried to bring order, without success, until—

“PIPE. DOWN!” Miri ordered, loud enough to make Pat Rin’s ears ring—and silence fell like a knife.

“That’s better,” she said, in a more conversational tone. “I won’t take long. Just want to say that it’s the judgment of the master pilots we assembled here to watch that the winner of tonight’s competition is—Boss Conrad!”

More noise erupted, shaking the rugs hung against the walls, and he walked forward to stand between Miri and Cheever. Smiling hugely; Villy danced forward with a bouquet of dried leaves tied with bright ribbons and presented it with a bow.

Pat Rin inclined his head, received the offering, and stood while the cheering went on, his eye inexorably drawn to the place where his mother stood, silent and bland-faced.

She met his eyes, her own as hard as stones—and turned her face away.

Pat Rin took a breath — sighed it out, and looked up with a smile as his lady came to his side.

“Shall we go home, love?” she asked, slipping her arm through his.

He looked into her face, and then around the room, heard the drummer begin his count—and looked back to her.

“I believe,” he said, smiling. “That I would like to dance with my lifemate. There are still some hours until dawn.”

This House

It was spring again.

Mil Ton Intassi caught the first hint of it as he strolled through his early-morning garden—a bare flutter of warmth along the chill edge of mountain air, no more than that. Nonetheless, he sighed as he walked, and tucked his hands into the sleeves of his jacket.

At the end of the garden, he paused, looking out across the toothy horizon, dyed orange by the rising sun. Mist boiled up from the valley below him, making the trees into wraiths, obscuring the road and the airport entirely.

Spring, he thought again.

He had come here in the spring, retreating to the house he had built, to the constancy of the mountains.

Turning his back on the roiling fog, he strolled down the pale stone path, passing between banked rows of flowers.

At the center of the garden, the path forked—the left fork became a pleasant meander through the lower gardens, into the perimeter wood. It was cunning, with many delightful vistas, grassy knolls, and shady groves perfect for tête-à-têtes.

The right-hand path led straight to the house, and it was to the house that Mil Ton returned, slipping in through the terrace window, sliding it closed behind him.

He left his jacket on its peg and crossed to the stove, where he poured tea into a lopsided pottery mug before he moved on, his footsteps firm on the scrubbed wooden floor.

At the doorway to the great room, he paused. To his right, the fireplace, the full wall of native stone, which they had gathered and placed themselves. The grate wanted sweeping and new logs needed to be laid. He would see to it later.

Opposite the doorway was a wall of windows through which he could see the orange light unfurling like ribbons through the busy mist, and, nearer, a pleasant lawn, guarded on the far side by a band of cedar trees, their rough bark showing pink against the glossy green needles. Cedar was plentiful on this side of the mountain. So plentiful that he had used native cedar wood for beam, post, and floor.

Mil Ton turned his head, looking down the room to the letterbox. The panel light glowed cheerfully green, which meant there were messages in the bin. It was rare, now, that he received any messages beyond the commonplace—notices of quartershare payments, the occasional query from the clan’s man of business. His sister—his delm—had at last given over scolding him, and would not command him; her

letters were laconic, non-committal, and increasingly rare. The others—he moved his shoulders and walked forward to stand at the window, sipping tea from the lopsided mug and staring down into the thinning orange mist.

The green light tickled the edge of his vision. What could it be? he wondered—and sighed sharply, irritated with himself. The letterbox existed because his sister—or perhaps it had been his delm—asked that he not make himself entirely unavailable to the clan. Had she not, he would have had neither letterbox, nor telephone, nor newsnet access. Two of those he had managed, and missed neither. Nor would he mourn the letterbox, did it suddenly malfunction and die.

Oh, blast it all— *what* could it be?

He put the cup on the sill and went down the room, jerking open the drawer and snatching out two flimsies.

The first was, after all, an inquiry from his man of business on the subject of reinvesting an unexpected pay-out of dividend. He set it aside.

The second message was from Master Tereza of Solcintra Healer Hall, and it was rather lengthy, outlining an exceptionally interesting and difficult case currently in the care of the Hall, and wondering if he might bring himself down to the city for a few days to lend his expertise.

Mil Ton made a sound halfway between a growl and a laugh; his fingers tightened, crumpling the sheet into an unreadable mess.

Go to Solcintra Hall, take up his role as a Healer once more. Yes, certainly. Tereza, of all of them, should know that he had no intention of ever—he had told her, quite plainly—and his had never been a true Healing talent, in any case. It was a farce. A bitter joke made at his expense.

He closed his eyes, deliberately initiating a basic relaxation exercise. Slowly, he brought his anger—his panic—under control. Slowly, cool sense returned.

Tereza had been his friend. Caustic, she could certainly be, but to taunt a wounded man for his pain? No. That was not Tereza.

The flimsy was a ruin of mangled fiber and smeared ink. No matter. He crossed the room and dropped it into the fire grate, and stood staring down into the cold ashes.

Return to Solcintra? Not likely.

He moved his shoulders, turned back to the window and picked up the lopsided cup; sipped tepid tea.

He should answer his man of business. He should, for the friendship that had been between them, answer Tereza. He should.

And he would—later. After he had finished his tea and sat for his dry, dutiful hours, trying to recapture that talent which *had* been his, and which seemed to have deserted him now. One of many desertions, and not the least hurtful.

Spring crept onward, kissing the flowers in the door garden into dewy wakefulness. Oppressed by cedar walls, Mil Ton escaped down the left-hand path, pacing restlessly past knolls and groves, until at last he came to a certain tree, and beneath the tree, a bench, where he sat down, and sighed, and raised his face to receive the benediction of the breeze.

In the warm sunlight, eventually he dozed. Certainly; the day bid well for dozing, sweet dreams and all manner of pleasant things. That he dozed, that was pleasant. That he did not dream, that was well. That he was awakened by a voice murmuring his name, that was—unexpected.

He straightened from his comfortable slouch against the tree, eyes snapping wide.

Before him, settled casually cross-legged on the new grass, heedless of stains on his town-tailored clothes, was a man somewhat younger than himself, dark of hair, gray of eye. Mil Ton stared, voice gone to dust in his throat.

“The house remembered me,” the man in the grass said apologetically. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Mil Ton turned his face away “When did it matter, what I minded?”

“Always,” the other replied, softly. “Mil Ton. I told you how it was.”

He took a deep breath, imposing calm with an exercise he had learned in Healer Hall, and faced about.

“Fen Ris,” he said, low, but not soft. Then, “Yes. You told me how it was.”

The gray eyes shadowed. “And in telling you, killed you twice.” He raised a ringless and elegant hand, palm turned up. “Would that it were otherwise.” The hand reversed, palm toward the grass. “Would that it were not.”

Would that he had died of the pain of betrayal, Mil Ton thought, rather than live to endure this. He straightened further on the bench, frowning down at the other.

“Why do you break my peace?”

Fen Ris tipped his head slightly to one side in the old, familiar gesture. “Break?” he murmured, consideringly. “Yes, I suppose I deserve that. Indeed, I know that I deserve it. Did I not first appeal to Master Tereza and the Healers in the Hall at Solcintra, hoping that they might cure what our house Healer could not?” He paused, head bent, then looked up sharply, gray gaze like a blow.

“Master Tereza said she had sent for you,” he stated, absolutely neutral. “She said, you would not come.”

Mil Ton felt a chill, his fingers twitched, as if crumpling a flimsy into ruin.

“She did not say it was you.”

“Ah. Would you have come, if she had said it was me?”

Yes, Mil Ton thought, looking aside so the other would not read it in his eyes.

“No,” he said.

There was a small silence, followed by a sigh.

“Just as well, then,” Fen Ris murmured. “For it was not I.” He paused, and Mil Ton looked back to him, drawn despite his will.

“Who, then?” he asked, shortly.

The gray eyes were infinitely sorrowful, eternally determined.

“My lifemate.”

Fury, pure as flame, seared him. “You dare!”

Fen Ris lifted his chin, defiant. “You, who taught me what it is to truly love—you ask if I *dare*?”

To truly love. Yes, he had taught that lesson—learned that lesson. And then he had learned the next lesson—that even love can betray.

He closed his eyes, groping for the rags of his dignity...

“Her name is Endele,” Fen Ris said softly. “By profession, she is a gardener.” A pause, a light laugh. “A rare blossom in our house of risk-takers and daredevils.”

Eyes closed, Mil Ton said nothing.

”Well.” Fen Ris said after a moment. “You live so secluded here that you may not have heard of the accident at the skimmer fields last relumma. Three drivers were killed upon the instant. One walked away unscathed. Two were sealed into crisis units. Of those, one died.”

Mil Ton had once followed the skimmer races—how not?—he had seen how easily a miscalculated corner approach could become tragedy.

“You were ever Luck’s darling,” he whispered, his inner ear filled with the shrieks of torn metal and dying drivers; his inner eye watching carefully as Fen Ris climbed from his battered machine and—

“Aye,” Fen Ris said. “That I was allowed to emerge whole and hale from the catastrophe unit—that was luck, indeed.”

Abruptly it was cold, his mind’s eye providing a different scene, as the emergency crew worked feverishly to cut through the twisted remains of a racing skimmer and extricate the shattered driver, the still face sheathed in blood—two alive, of six. Gods, he had almost lost Fen Ris—

No.

He had already lost Fen Ris.

“I might say,” Fen Ris murmured, “that I was the most blessed of men, save for this one thing—that when I emerged from the unit, Endele—my lady, my heart...” His voice faded.

“She does not remember you.”

Silence. Mil Ton opened his eyes and met the bleak gray stare.

“So,” said Fen Ris, “you did read the file.”

“I read the summary Tereza sent, to entice me back to the Hall,” he corrected. “The case intrigued her—no physical impediment to the patient’s memory, nor even a complete loss of memory. Only one person has been excised entirely from her past.”

“Excised,” Fen Ris repeated. “We have not so long a shared past, after all. A year—only that.”

Mil Ton moved his shoulders. “Court her anew, then,” he said, bitterly.

“When I did not court her before?” the other retorted. He sighed. “I have tried. She withdraws. She does not know me; she does not trust me.” He paused, then said, so low Mil Ton could scarcely hear—

“She does not want me.”

It should have given him pleasure, Mil Ton thought distantly, to see the one who had dealt him such anguish, in agony. And, yet, it was not pleasure he felt, beholding Fen Ris thus, but rather a sort of bleak inevitability.

“Why me?” he asked, which is not what he had meant to say.

Fen Ris lifted his face, allowing Mil Ton to plumb the depths of his eyes, sample the veracity of his face.

“Because you will know how to value my greatest treasure,” he murmured. “Who would know better?”

Mil Ton closed his eyes, listening to his own heartbeat, to the breeze playing in the leaves over his head, and, eventually, to his own voice, low and uninflected.

“Bring her here, if she will come. If she will not, there’s an end to it, for I will not go into the city.”

“Mil Ton—”

“Hear me. If she refuses Healing, she is free to go when and where she will. If she accepts Healing, the same terms apply.” He opened his eyes, and looked hard into the other’s face.

“Bring your treasure here and you may lose it of its own will and desire.”

This was warning, proper duty of a Healer, after all, and perhaps it was foretelling as well.

Seated, Fen Ris bowed, acknowledging that he’d heard, then came effortlessly to his feet. “The terms are acceptable. I will bring her tomorrow, if she will come.”

Mil Ton stood. “Our business is concluded,” he said flatly. “Pray, leave me.”

Fen Ris stood, frozen—a heartbeat, no more than that; surely, not long enough to be certain—and thawed abruptly, sweeping a low bow, accepting a debt too deep to repay.

“I have not—” Mil Ton began, but the other turned as if he had not spoken, and went lightly across the

grass, up the path, and away.

Mil Ton had stayed up late into the night, pacing and calling himself every sort of fool, retiring at last to toss and turn until he fell into uneasy sleep at dawn. Some hours later, a blade of sunlight sliced through the guardian cedars, through the casement and into his face.

The intrusion of light was enough to wake him. A glance at the clock brought a curse to his lips. Fen Ris would be arriving soon. If, indeed, he arrived at all.

Quickly, Mil Ton showered, dressed, and went on slippers down the hall toward the kitchen. As he passed the great room, he glanced within—and froze in his steps.

A woman sat on the edge of the hearth, a blue duffel bag at her feet, her hands neatly folded on her lap. She sat without any of the cushions or pillows she might have used to ease her rest, and her purpose seemed not repose, but alert waiting.

Her attention at this moment was directed outward, toward the window, beyond which the busy birds flickered among the cedar branches.

He took one step into the room.

The woman on the hearth turned her head, showing him a round, high-browed face, and a pair of wary brown eyes.

Mil Ton bowed in welcome of the guest. “Good day to you. I am Mil Ton Intassi, builder of this house.”

“And Healer,” she said, her voice deeper than he had expected.

“And Healer,” he allowed, though with less confidence that he once might have. He glanced around the room. “You came alone?”

She glanced down at the blue duffel. “He drove me here, and opened the door to the house. There was no need for him to wait. He knew I did not want him. You did not want him either, he said.”

Not *entirely* true, Mil Ton thought, face heating as he recalled the hours spent pacing. He inclined his head. “May I know your name?”

“Bah! I have no manners,” she cried and sprang to her feet. She bowed—a completely unadorned bow of introduction—and straightened.

“I am Endele per’Timbral, Clan—” her voice faded, a cloud of confusion passed briefly across her smooth face.

“I am Endele per’Timbral,” she repeated, round chin thrust out defiantly.

Mil Ton inclined his head. “Be welcome in my house, Endele per’Timbral,” he said, seriously. “I am in need of a cup of tea. May I offer you the same?”

“Thank you,” she said promptly. “A cup of tea would be welcome.”

She followed him down the hall to the kitchen and waited with quiet patience while he rummaged in the closet for a cup worthy of a guest. In the back, he located a confection of pearly porcelain. He poured tea and handed it off, recalling as she received it that the cup had belonged to Fen Ris, the sole survivor of a long-broken set.

Healers were taught to flow with their instincts. Mil Ton turned away to pour for himself, choosing the lopsided cup, as always, and damned both Healer training and himself, for agreeing to...

“He said that you can Heal me.” Endele spoke from behind him, her speech as unadorned as her bow had been. “He means, you will make me remember him.”

Mil Ton turned to look at her. She held the pearly cup daintily on the tips of her fingers, sipping tea as neatly as a cat. Certainly, she was not a beauty—her smooth forehead was too high, her face too round, her hair merely brown, caught back with a plain silver hair ring. Her person was compact and sturdy, and she had the gift of stillness.

“Do you, yourself, desire this Healing?” he asked, the words coming effortlessly to his lips, as if the year away were the merest blink of an eye. “I will not attempt a Healing, against your will.”

She frowned slightly. “Did you tell him that?”

“Of course,” said Mil Ton. “I also told him that, if you wish to leave here for your own destination, now or later, I will not impede you. He accepted the terms.”

“Did he?” The frown did not disappear. “Why?”

Mil Ton sipped tea, deliberately savoring the citrus bite while he considered. It was taught that a Healer owed truth to those he would heal. How much truth was left to the Healer’s discretion.

“I believe,” he said slowly, to Endele per Timbral’s wary brown eyes, “it is because he values you above all other things and wishes for you only that which will increase your joy.”

Tears filled her eyes, glittering. She turned aside, embarrassed to weep before a stranger, as anyone would be, and walked over to the terrace door, her footsteps soft on the wooden floor.

Mil Ton sipped tea and watched her. She stood quite still, her shoulders stiff with tension, tea cup forgotten in one hand, staring out into the garden as if it were the most fascinating thoroughfare in Solcintra City.

Sipping tea, Mil Ton let his mind drift. He was not skilled at hearing another’s emotions. But the Masters of the Hall in Solcintra had taught him somewhat of their craft, and sometimes, if he disengaged his mind, allowing himself to fall, as it were into a waking doze — well, sometimes, then, he could see...

Images.

Now he saw images and more than images. He saw intentions made visible.

Walls of stone, a window set flush and firm, tightly latched against the storm raging without. Hanging to the right of the window was a wreath woven of some blue-leaved plant, which gave off a sweet, springlike scent. Mil Ton breathed in. Breathed out.

He felt, without seeing, that the stone barrier was all around the woman, as if she walked in some great walled city, able to stay safe from some lurking, perhaps inimical presence. . .

A rustle of something and the stones and their meaning faded.

“Please,” a breathless voice said nearby. He opened his eyes to his own wood-floored kitchen, and looked down into the round face of Endele per’Timbral.

“Please,” she said again. “May I walk in your garden?”

“Certainly,” he said, suddenly remembering her profession. “I am afraid you will find it inadequate in the extreme, however.”

“I was charmed to see your house sitting so comfortably in the woods. I am certain I will be charmed by your garden,” she said in turn, and turned to place her cup on the counter.

He unlocked the door and she slipped through, walking down the path without a look behind her. Mil Ton watched her out of sight, then left the door on the latch and poured himself a second cup of tea.

By trade, he was a storyteller. A storyteller whose stories sometimes went. . . odd. Odd enough to pique the interest of the Masters, who had insisted that he was Healer, and taught him what they could of the craft.

He was, at best, a mediocre Healer, for he never had gained the necessary control over his rather peculiar talent to make it more than an uncertain tool. Sometimes, without warning, he would tell what Tereza was pleased to call a True Story, and that story would have—an effect. Neither story nor effect were predictable, and so he was most likely to be called upon as a last resort, after every other Healing art had failed.

As now.

Mil Ton thought about the woman—the woman Fen Ris had taken as lifemate. He remembered the impassioned speech on the subject of this same woman, on the night Fen Ris had come to tell him how it was.

He sighed then, filled for a moment with all the grief of that night, and recalled Fen Ris demanding, *demanding* that Mil Ton take no Balance against this woman, for she had not stolen Fen Ris but discovered him. Among tears and joy, Fen Ris insisted that they both had been snatched, unanticipated and unplanned, out of their ordinary lives.

And now, of course, there was no ordinary life for any of them.

He wondered—he very much wondered—if Endele per’Timbral would choose Healing.

Her blue bag still lay by the hearth, but it had been many hours since she had gone out into the garden. More than enough time for a sturdy woman in good health to have hiked down to the airport, engaged a pilot and a plane and been on her way to—anywhere at all.

Mil Ton sighed and looked back to his screen. When he found that he could no longer practice his profession, he had taught himself a new skill. Written stories never turned odd, and before his betrayal, he had achieved a modest success in his work.

The work was more difficult now; the stories that came so grudgingly off the tips of his fingers bleak and gray and hopeless. He had hoped for something better from this one, before Fen Ris had intruded into his life again. Now, he was distracted, his emotions in turmoil. He wondered again if Endele per'Timbral had departed for a destination of her own choosing. Fen Ris would suffer, if she had done so. He told himself he didn't care.

Unquiet, he put the keyboard aside and pulled a book from the table next to his chair. If he could not write, perhaps he could lose himself inside the story of another.

She returned to the house with sunset, her hair wind-combed, her shirt and leggings rumpled, dirt under her fingernails.

"Your garden is charming," she told him. "I took the liberty of weeding a few beds so that the younger flowers will have room to grow."

"Ah." said Mil Ton, turning from the freezer with a readymeal in one hand. "My thanks."

"No thanks needed," she assured him, eyeing the box. "I would welcome a similar meal, if the house is able," she said, voice almost shy.

"Certainly, the house is able," he said, snappish from a day of grudging, grayish work.

She inclined her head seriously. "I am in the house's debt." She held up her hands. "Is there a place where I may wash off your garden's good dirt?"

He told her where to find the 'fresher and she left him.

Dinner was enlivened by a discussion of the garden. She was knowledgeable—more so than Mil Ton, who had planted piecemeal, with those things that appealed to him. He kept up his side only indifferently, his vision from time to time overlain with stone, and a storm raging, raging, raging, outside windows tight and sealed.

When the meal was done, she helped him clear the table, and, when the last dish was stacked in the cleaner, stood awkwardly, her strong, capable hands twisted into a knot before her.

Mil Ton considered her through a shimmer of stone walls.

"Have you decided," he said, careful to keep his voice neutral—for this was *her* choice, and hers alone, so the Master Healers taught—"whether you are in need of Healing?"

She looked aside, and it seemed that, for a moment, the phantom stones took on weight and substance. Then, the vision faded and it was only clean air between him and a woman undecided.

“They say—they say he is my lifemate,” she said, low and stammering. “they say the life-price was negotiated with my clan, that he paid it out of his winnings on the field. They say, we were inseparable, greater together than apart. His kin—they say all this. And I say—if these things are so, why do I not remember him?”

Mil Ton drew a deep, careful breath. “Why should they tell you these things, if they were not so?”

She moved her shoulders, face averted. “Clearly, it is so,” she whispered. “They—he—the facts are as they state them. I saw the announcement in the back issue of the *Gazette*. *I spoke to my sister. I remember the rooms which are mine in his clan house. I remember the gardens, and the shopkeeper at the end of the street. I remember his sister, his brothers—all his kin! Saving him. Only him. My... lifemate.*”

Her pain was evident. One needn't be an empath to feel it. Mil Ton drew a calming breath...

“I am not a monster,” she continued. “He—of course, he is bewildered. He seems—kind, and, and concerned for my happiness. He looks at me... I do *not* know him!” she burst out passionately “I owe him nothing!” She caught herself, teeth indenting lower lip. Mil Ton saw the slow slide of a tear down one round cheek.

She was sincere; he remembered Tereza's report all too well:

This is not merely some childish game of ness, but a true forgetting. And, yet, how has she forgotten? Her intellect is intact; she has suffered no trauma, taken no drugs, appealed to no Healers to rid her of the burden of her memories...

“And do you,” Mil Ton asked once more, “wish to embrace Healing?”

She turned her head and looked at him, her cheeks wet and her eyes tragic.

“What will happen, if I am Healed?”

Ah, the question. The very question. And he owed her only truth.

“It is the wish of your lifemate that you would then recall him and the life you have embarked upon together. If you do not also wish for that outcome, deny me.”

Her lips tightened, and again she turned away, walked a few steps down the room and turned back to face him.

“You built this house, he said—you alone.” She looked around her, at the bare wooden floor, the cedar beam, the cabinets and counter in-between. “It must have taken a very long time.”

So, there would be no Healing. Mil Ton sighed—Fen Ris. It was possible to feel pity for Fen Ris. He bought a moment to compose himself by repeating her inventory of the kitchen, then brought his eyes to her face and inclined his head.

“Indeed, it took much longer than needful, to build this house. I worked on it infrequently, with long stretches between.”

“But, why build it at all?”

“Well.” He hesitated, then moved his hand, indicating that she should walk with him.

“I began when I was still an apprentice. My mother had died and left the mountain to myself alone, as her father had once left it to her. There had been a house here, in the past; I discovered the foundation when I began to clear the land.” He paused and gave her a sideline look.

“I had planned to have a garden here, you see—and what I did first was to clear the land and cut the path-ways...”

“But you had uncovered the foundation,” she said, preceding him into the great room. She sat on the edge of the hearth, where she had been before. Fen Ris had himself perched precisely there on any number of evenings or mornings. And here was this woman—

Mil Ton walked over to his chair and sat on the arm.

“I had uncovered the foundation,” he repeated, “before I went away—back to the city and my craft. I was away—for many years, traveling in stories. I made a success of myself; my tales were sought after; halls were filled with those who hungered for my words.

“When I returned, I was ill with self-loathing. My stories had become... weapons—horribly potent, uncontrollable. I drove a man mad in Chonselta City. In Teramis, a woman ran from the hall, screaming...”

On the hearth, Endeles per Timbral sat still as a stone, only her eyes alive.

“That I came here—I scarcely knew why. Except that I had discovered a foundation and it came to me that I could build a house, and keep the world safely away.”

Oh, gods, he thought, feeling the shape of the words in his mouth, listening to his voice, spinning the tale he meant, and yet did not mean, to tell...

“I built the house of cedar, and laid the beams by hand; the windows I set tight against the walls. At the core, a fireplace—” He used his chin to point over her shoulder. “Before I finished that, the Healers came to me. News of my stories and the effects of my stories had reached the Masters of the Guild and they begged that I come to be trained, before I harmed anyone else.” He looked down at his hand, fisted against his knee, and heard his voice continue the tale.

“So, I went and I trained, and then I worked as a Healer in the hall. I learned to write stories down and they did not cause madness, and so took up another craft for myself. I was content and solitary until I met a young man at the skimmer track.” He paused; she sat like a woman hewn of ice.

“He was bold, and he was beautiful; intelligent and full of joy. We were friends, first, then lovers. I brought him here and he transformed my house with his presence; with his help, the fireplace went from pit to hearth,”

He closed his eyes, heard the words fall from his lips. “One evening, he came to me—we had been days apart, but that was no unknown thing—he followed the races, of course. He came to me and he was weeping, he held me and he told me of the woman he had met, how their hearts beat together, how they must be united, or die.”

Behind his closed eyes he saw image over image—Fen Ris before him, beseeching and explaining, and this woman's wall of stone, matching texture for texture the very hearth she sat on.

“Perhaps a true Healer might have understood. I did not. I cast him out, told him to go to his woman and leave me—leave me in peace. I fled—here, to the place which was built for safety. . . .”

“How did you abide it?” Her voice was shrill, he opened his eyes to find her on her feet, her body bowed with tension, her eyes frantic. “How did you abide loving him? Knowing what he does? Knowing that they might one day bring his body to you? Couldn't you see that you needed to lock yourself away?”

His vision wavered, he saw stones, falling, felt wind tear his hair, lash rain into his face. In the midst of chaos, he reached out, and put his arms around her, and held her while she sobbed against his shoulder.

Eventually, the wind died, the woman in his arms quieted.

“I loved him for himself,” he said softly, into her hair. “And he loved the races. He would not choose to stop racing, though he might have done, had I asked him. But he would have been unhappy, desperately so—and I loved him too well to ask it.” He sighed.

“In the end, it came to my choice: Did I bide and share in our love, for as long as we both remained? Or turn my face aside, from the fear that, someday, he might be gone?”

In his arms Ende le per Timbral shuddered—and relaxed.

“As simple as that?” she whispered.

“As simple, and as complex.” Words failed him for a moment—in his head now were images of Fen Ris laughing, and of the ocean waves crashing on stone beneath the pair of them, of arms reaching eagerly—

He sighed again. “I have perhaps done you no favor, child, in unmaking the choice you had made, if safety is what you need above all.”

“Perhaps,” she said, and straightened out of his embrace, showing him a wet face, and eyes as calm as dawn. “Perhaps not.” She inclined her head. “All honor, Healer. With your permission, I will retire, and tend my garden of choices while I dream.”

He showed her to the tiny guest room, with its thin bed and single window, giving out to the moonlit garden, then returned to the great room.

For a few heartbeats, he stood, staring down into the cold hearth. It came to him, as from a distance, that it wanted sweeping, and he knelt down on the stones and reached for the brush.

“Mil Ton.” A woman's voice, near at hand. He stirred, irritable, muscles aching, as if he had slept on cold stone.

“Mil Ton,” she said again, and he opened his eyes to Ende le per Timbral's pale and composed face. She extended a hand, and helped him to rise, and they walked in companionable silence to the kitchen for tea.

“Have you decided,” he asked her, as they stood by the open door, inhaling the promise of the garden, “what you shall do?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “Have you?”

“Yes,” he answered—and it was so, though he had not until that moment understood that a decision had been necessary. He smiled, feeling his heart absurdly light in his breast.

”I will return to Solcintra. Tereza writes that there is work for me, at the Hall.”

“I am glad,” she said. “Perhaps you will come to us, when you are settled. He would like it, I think—and I would.”

He looked over to her and met her smile.

“Thank you,” he said softly “I would like it, too.”

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