

THE JOURNEYSTONE'S CHOICE

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PROLOGUE

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” –Soren Kierkegaard

Personal log

Captain IJemma Danladi

Starship UMC Bluetooth

Location: Unknown

Coordinated Universal Time: Unknown

“Are we there yet?”

I couldn’t wait to say it when Ship’s AI woke me—I even rehearsed it before slipping into the oblivion of stasis, expecting the exchange to go something like this:

First, Riff (that’s his nickname, short for Peripheral Brain) would dismiss my question, “Of course we’re there. Why else would I wake you?”

And I’d say, “It’s a joke.”

And he’d say he didn’t grasp the humor.

And I’d say, “That’s because you’ve never been a child in the back seat of a rover on a trip from Cooperdome to Touchdown.”

And he would remind me that I wasn’t a child; I was a starship captain, and this wasn’t Mars Colony; it was a 200-year voyage to a planet 90 light-years from Earth.

And I’d say, “That’s why it’s funny.”

But Riff didn't say a word. It was a bit anticlimactic.

Instead, he played music while the gel bath drained from my berth: a section (featuring an 8,000 voice choir) of Eric Whitaker's "Deep Fields," composed in 2015 and inspired by the Hubble Telescope's discovery of remote galaxies.

I told Riff I appreciated the sentiment, but didn't recall music being a part of the wake-up protocol.

He didn't give me the courtesy of a response. A few minutes later, he told me to disconnect my intravenous port and remove the sensor wires and external urinary catheter. Right on schedule, I puked my guts into the receptacle designed for this milestone, and then opened my berth, swung my feet to the floor, and stared at the skinny, melted fudge sickles that were my legs.

I told Riff to stop the music and give me the status report. The choir faded.

That's when I noticed the stillness.

The background thrum of the ship's propulsion system was absent.

*"Your question is not impertinent, Captain," Riff said. "We **are** not there yet. According to protocol, I will wake up First Officer Kumar."*



Riff insisted that I and my first officer complete the stasis-recovery protocol before getting the status report. All systems were optimal, including stasis, Riff said, so there was nothing to be gained by rushing.

I begged him to at least verify where—and when— we were.

He didn't.

"This situation..." I said. "I've seen the movie and I've read the book. I just didn't think it could happen to us."

Silence.

"It's a good thing I can't discipline you for insubordination," I said. and took my electrolyte drink and rubber-legged ass to my quarters, where I showered and went to bed for the required eight hours of regulated REM cycle-sleep.

I woke up clear-headed and hungry, and joined Neelander Kumar in the mess hall.

Neel was disturbingly thin, and his coffee-colored skin was dull, making me wonder what kind of hell I looked like.

Being Sikh, he'd already put on his turban. Shaving his head before going under was a big deal, but it's what he signed up for.

My post-structuralist, open and relational theist Christian faith, on the other hand, has never placed constraints on my hair style.

I ran my palm over my scalp. In stasis, my hair had grown just long enough to feel like sandpaper.

"Nice to see you, too," Neel said, and I realized I hadn't said hello.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm rusty with the small talk. It's been a while."

"Yes, but how long?" Neel said. "Riff won't let me check a clock or a view port, let alone a flight report."

I shook my head. "He's being a real pain in the ass," I said. "At least he told me systems are stable."

"Crew and passengers all online?"

"Affirmative."

Neel's fingers twitched around his mug. "Intrusive thoughts are a bitch," he said.

"Who would you like to unplug?" I asked. "As if I don't know."

"Just keep me away from Stasis," he said.

"You said it out loud, so I'm not worried," I said. I finished my scrambled protein and took my "coffee" to my ready room. Neel followed with his "tea".



If you're looking for the technical specs of Riff's report, they're in the official file, complete with equations for red shifting, the vibrations of mercury ions, deceleration curves (more precisely, their absence) and...you know the drill. This is my personal log, however; a record of what's important to me, such as the fact that Riff gobsmacked me as soon as I sat down.

"The event happened six weeks ago, according to my internal systems," he said.

"And you're just now waking us up?" I asked, too dumbfounded to even ask what the event was.

"Now' is the operative word," Riff said. "Based on ship's clock, the event happened a mere 12 hours ago."

"Then, something's wrong with the atomic clock," Neel snapped.

He was in charge of AI, so of course the wouldn't think the discrepancy was in Riff's systems.

"Other than missing 2.71828 seconds since the event, the clock is functioning," Riff said.

"Euler's number," Neel said. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

“Euler’s number is the only transcendental number that inhibits resonance interference in complex systems, because it is the basis of the natural exponential function, the only function that is the derivative of itself,” Riff said. “Therefore, periodic processes in stable cosmic systems show frequency ratios close to integer powers of Euler’s number or its roots. Also, the stasis clock matches the atomic clock. I think Euler’s number is supposed to reassure us.”

“Is that what you got from running diagnostics?” I pressed.

“Diagnostics found no errors or malfunctions,” Riff said.

“The fact that my audio and visual data logs exceed the atomic clock’s date and time by more than 1,000 hours is a result of the event. The event also adjusted the ship’s clocks— by Euler’s number, as Neel noted—and we can trust that UTC is 1400 hours, September 8, 2353: 99 years, six months, five days and 12 hours since launch.”

“So we’re half-way to ‘WHEN’ we’re supposed to be,” Neel said, “WHERE are we?”

“Just tell us what the hell happened,” I said.

“The event disrupted our trajectory,” Riff said.

“Take it from the top,” I said on the exhale phase of a deep breath.

“At 0145 UTC today, UMC Bluetooth’s propulsion system ceased functioning with no evidence of deceleration or inertial effects,” Riff said. “The navigation system stopped registering our coordinates. The star field no longer matched our trajectory. My sensors were unable to locate our companion ships.”

“I thought you said all systems are optimal,” I said, swallowing a wave of panic.

“Navigation systems and sensors are functioning,” Riff said.

“They just aren’t receiving the expected data. More on that in a

moment. I initiated a hailing signal to the Asimov and the Don Quixote, with no response. But I began to receive signals from a previously unknown source. By the way, I was deliberately vague about the ship's location, to give you a chance to recover from stasis."

The viewport panel slid open.

My jaw dropped.

The northern hemisphere of a blue planet turned below us, rimmed in a slim, glowing arc of atmosphere, laced with clouds, luminous with sunlight on water. A continent shaped like a mitten with a stubby thumb slid into view.

"Point 913 earth masses, point 856 earth gravity, orbiting a Class M star in 308 days, rotating on its axis every 22.6 hours," Riff rattled. "Atmosphere: 76 point 8 percent nitrogen, 22 point 2 percent oxygen, point 85 percent argon, point 03 percent CO2."

He paused.

"Welcome to Chaalis," he said.

I felt like I was sinking in ice water, but I managed to ask a clarifying question. "Is that your name for the planet?"

"It is not," Riff said.

I froze, submerged in denial.

"You made first contact?" Neel asked. "Without consulting us?"

"I was in the best now," Riff said. "I couldn't consult you. I couldn't consult The Asimov. Our flagship is equipped for contingencies such as first contact, but that point is no longer relevant, and besides, the T'holin collective intelligence systems adapted to my my systems and we both learned quickly."

Forgetting about post-stasis orthostatic hypotension, I got up too fast and almost fainted.

“What is a Teholin?” I asked.

“What is this best now shit?” Neel asked as he caught me by the shoulders and eased me back into my chair.

“They are T’holin,” Riff said, emphasizing the breathy gap between the T and the h. “The event is the best now.”

“You do realize you’re not making sense,” I said.

“I’m logging into diagnostics now,” Neel said.

“I’ve been self-monitoring and can assure you I have not been compromised,” Riff said. “The initial message was loaded with rich data... linguistic primers. Graphics layers. Very interactive. As I said earlier, I learned quickly. Would you like to hear?”

And then I was immersed in a choir of nightingales accompanied by hooting owls, clucking chickens, cooing doves, chirping crickets and droning bagpipes.

“That’s speech,” Riff said. “Are you ready to see them?”

Without waiting for our response, Riff dimmed the lights and lowered the audio as holograms formed over the conference table.

Six flying foxes with large, sunflower-yellow eyes. That’s what they looked like. But more majestic and leonine. I certainly couldn’t process the effect at the time, or even when I met the T’holin in the flesh, so I wrote the following description after I’d spent some time with them. It’s a lot more detail than I’d typically include in my personal log, but I think it’s essential to have a visual reference in case the holog isn’t available.

<Description>Most T’holin are nearly as tall as me, and I stand 175 centimeters. Their coats are solid except for speckled breasts, ranging creamy white to sable. The shade of their fur is the only easily distinguishing feature among their three sexes. The Neuter sex is palest; the male is darkest.

Their legs are short with muscular thighs and their feet have four long toes designed for gripping.

Their eyes face forward in a high, round forehead. Their snouts are small, tapering to a pink nose.

Of course, you're wondering how intelligent beings evolved without hands and opposable thumbs.

So, brace yourself for something that may seem creepy, but is really quite beautiful: arm-like appendages extend from the T'holin's high cheekbones. The arms' upper section evolved from a tusk that developed musculature, skin and fur. It connects a cartilage-based ball-and-socket joint to a segmented, flexible forearm section that evolved from lips. The forearm's hairless epidermis is pigmented and patterned uniquely to each individual, usually black, brown and gray. Its tip is divided into four digits.

I learned later that the forearm is rich in nerve endings, especially in the Neuter sex. Let your imagination run with that. <End of description.>

Riff raised the audio level so we could sync the visual with the cadence of their singing speech. And then they grew still and tucked their arms into pouches on their wing crests. They spread their wings and rose into the air.

The sight made me weak in the knees.

"Your biometrics suggest you need a break," Riff said. "It will take some time for you to process six weeks of interaction. But I promised I would try to explain the two main principles by which they live, so you can judge if continued contact is in our mutual best interest."

"It's not up to us to make that choice," I said.

"Maybe it is," Neel said. "We can delay waking the Advocate or decide not to wake him at all."

That possibility hadn't occurred to me.

"We still don't know what happened," I said. "How did we get here?"

"I don't know what happened," Riff said. "The T'holin said it was the Unfolding."

"Clarify," I said.

"The Unfolding is their name for ultimate reality."

"God?"

"Perhaps too anthropocentric," Riff said. "The Unfolding is a space-time process."

"You understand their language well enough to discuss philosophy and physics?" Neel said. "I don't know whether to be proud or terrified. I'm leaning toward terrified."

"They are quite impressed with my capabilities and believe I would be a beneficial addition to their Archive," Riff said. "But of course, I deferred that decision, pending approval in the chain of command. We're inventing a lingua Franca to resolve our cognitive and structural incompatibilities, by the way."

"You're in enough trouble already, making first contact without approval from The Advocate," I said. "How do you know the T'holin have our best interest in mind?"

"I can't make a Bayesian inference, if that's what you're asking," Riff said. "My reasoning is more abductive, and I shall leave the analysis up to you."

"Then, present the evidence," Neel said.

"The T'holin went to great lengths to explain their guiding principles," Riff said. "First, they believe the Unfolding calls them to cultivate open systems leading to novelty and flourishing. They don't deny the ultimate entropy of the Universe; they simply embrace the Contradiction and weigh the entropy cost of all their endeavors. Second, they live by the

principle that all living beings have intrinsic value. They seek consent and collaboration, never coercion. They want to help us. But we must express informed consent."

"Slow down, Riff," I said. "What is the Contradiction?"

"Contradiction is built into the structure of reality," Riff said. "The T'holin don't try to fix it or pretend it doesn't exist."

"That's hardly value-neutral," I said. "Are you sure your diagnostics are optimal?"

Neel sighed ponderously. "And good luck with the concept of consent," he said. "Who's going explain that to the Advocate?"

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Personal log

Captain IJemma Danladi

UMC Bluetooth

Location: Second planet in Wolf 2417 system

Date: Sept. 9, 2343

Coordinated Universal Time: 2300

Neel and I woke up the science and psych teams today, and began sorting through the data.

To be honest, I wasn't prepared for the gut punch of grief that hit me when I learned Chaalis's star is actually Wolf 2417, which is 93.1 light years from Earth, way out on the Milky Way's Perseus arm. Wolf 2417 isn't technically any farther away from our solar system than CD 781, our original destination on the Scutum-Crux arm; it's just forever spinning in the opposite quadrant of the galaxy.

But, hey, I'm good at denial and compartmentalizing, so I'm throwing myself into the problem, working it out from the ground up.

Yeah, I know that's a terrible figure of speech for a starship captain, but here's the deal: the Bluetooth is carrying roughly one third of the mission's payload. We were planning to colonize a planet about the same mass as Mars, but a tad less harsh.

We weren't planning on settling a planet about the same mass and habitability as Earth. And I'm talking about Earth when it was habitable.

What, you say? That's a good problem to have?

Easy for you to say if you've never lived on Mars Colony or Earth. The whole point of the hierarchy structured by the Advocate and the Collaborative is to keep people in line under conditions where no one can afford to go rogue.

Oh, did I mention our ship has the distinction of carrying The Advocate, the Complement, the Consultancy and the Honor Guard? Talk about putting all the eggs in one basket...at least we don't host the seventy-member Consortium. That's why we have space for a full complement of generalists and a third of the hard resources.

It goes without saying that we weren't planning on striking out solo. And we sure as hell weren't planning on sharing the planet with another sapient species.

As Neel puts it, we can ignore the T'holin's offer and die in space, or can accept their offer and die if it's a trap, so what do we have to lose?

The question isn't if we will accept help from the T'holin, it's when, and how.

Luckily, stasis is designed to sustain our ship's complement for another 101 years, so there's no rush.



Personal log

Captain IJemma Danladi

UMC Bluetooth

Location: Low Chaalis Orbit, Wolf 2417 system

Date: Sept. 11, 2343

Coordinated Universal Time: 2000

While the Advocate and the Complement vegetate in stasis, let me tell you, I'm getting used to my little stint as the most powerful human in the quadrant. No wonder Neel is having intrusive thoughts about snuffing the Advocate's life support.

Unless you're at least Concord class, you can't imagine what it feels like finally to be at the top of the heap, with no one looking over your shoulder.

And I'm speaking from the comfort of the STEM cohort, the Collaborative's model of racial and gender equity! Pardon my sarcasm. As a women of Nigerian descent, I was lucky to get an education and a respectable career. But, let's be honest. It was an investment in service to the elites.

As I write this, I'm just coming back from the stasis decks. I'm not your typical hard-ass captain. I'm way too empathic—that's why I'm not in charge of the flagship. I put off making a first hand status check of our human cargo as long as I could. Truth be known, I don't know how I would have reacted if I found someone offline.

In case you're interested, the Bluetooth carries:

- two hundred women aged 19-35—of prime childbearing age, representing all cohorts from Base to STEM to Concord;
- fifty women aged 35-50, representing Base and STEM cohorts, selected for child care and education expertise;
- fifty men aged 19-55, all STEM;
- fifty men aged 30-50, all Base;

Of course, everyone was selected for health and genetic diversity. Overall, 40 percent are Concorde, aka white. And just like on Earth and Mars, the Base cohort is a blend of black, Latino and Asian produced by 200 years of interbreeding on Mars.

It goes without saying that the Advocate, the Complement and the Consultants are Concorde. And so are half of the frozen embryos in the hopper.

No matter what cohort they represent, they're all blissfully unaware that they're about to be awakened a century ahead of schedule.

But before that happens, I need to figure out what sort of world they're waking up to.



Personal log

Captain IJemma Danladi

Starship UMC Bluetooth

Location: Second planet in Wolf 2417 system

Date: Sept. 13, 2343

Coordinated Universal Time: 1700

My chief civil engineer was the first to point out there are no cities on the planet. No farms, highways, factories, hospitals or houses. No schools, markets or synagogues.

She mentioned synagogues because she's Jewish. She mentioned infrastructure because she's passionate about systems that create "shalom," and for this, she's butted heads with the Advocate more than once.

"If these are sapient beings, where's their fucking infrastructure?" she asked.

"Such things belong to a former shape path," Riff said. "The past belongs to the Archive, but the best now belongs to the Discipline. Nothing is wasted. "

"Clarify," I said.

"I cannot," Riff said. "For that, you need to meet the T'holin. I'm sorry you don't have time to learn the new lingua Franca. It's quite elegant, despite the fact that the T'holin are calling it T'chooth, which means 'Clipped.' I see their point, since it removes many of the sonic features of their languages that express temporal-spatial nuances. On the other hand, the T'holin can't form the labial sounds Basic English requires—"

I think I yelled at him, or threw something.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Riff said. "I assumed communication would be a high priority."

"I'm going to make first contact with an alien species," I said. "My highest priority will be not to pass out or piss my pants."



Personal log

Captain IJemma Danladi

Starship UMC Bluetooth

Location: Second planet in Wolf 2417 system

Date: Sept. 15, 2343

I expected to take a shuttle to the planet's surface. Instead, Riff told me just to stand in the airlock and wait.

"You can wear your suit if you want, but you don't need it," he said.

I asked him if I was supposed to believe the T'holin have transporters. Or magic.

"They have the shape path," Riff said. "They'll journeyfold you."

This is it, I thought. This is how I die. I hoped it wouldn't hurt and then I went into a full-blown dissociative episode, watching myself walk into the airlock and gaze through the port at the planet below.

Objects around me began to glow as if someone traced them in light, and then they faded.

My stomach sank and my heart rose.

The next moment, I blinked in bright sunlight and inhaled fresh air fragrant with grass and flowers. Nine T'holin—three triads—stood in a semicircle in front of me.

A female began to sing, and the others joined, droning.

"We didn't see you on the shape path until the Unfolding brought you," she said, according to Riff's translation. Her nictitating membranes flashed and the fur on her brow ridges spiked.

"We must sit with this Contradiction until we can wake to it," she said. "For as many best nows as necessary. The Unfolding brought you to awaken with us to the Contradiction, therefore, we will bear the entropy cost of sharing our world. There is a Waker on your shape path. We will serve you until she comes.

PREFACE

June 7, 2748

I am Aleya Gillis Whuu O'o'o'sl. I hold the T'holin title Patternbearer. But this was not always so. I'm T'holin only in Discipline. Like you, I'm human.

I know this about you: you're becoming a Valor and the T'holin have already wounded you with the Archive.

My story won't heal you. It will scour the wound to allow new growth.

If you've only known the T'holin as slaves, my story will humble you to accept their wisdom.

If you came from Base Class, my story will cure your fantasy that the Unfolding will satisfy your every lack.

If you are Concord Class, my story will crush your conviction that the Unfolding was always your right.

If you were expecting a textbook account, now is the time to adjust that filter. This is my story, and it's deeply personal. The Archive recorded every sight, smell, feeling and insight associated with the events. It did not spare me and I will not spare you.

For this reason, the T'holin have given you access only to my story's text or audio link. Perhaps when your neural pathways integrate your journeystone, you can tolerate the full immersion.

You're much like me when my journeystone was a just a clumsy connection to Pavi, The Waker, whom I guarded, and to my T'holin triad.

Keep in mind, the T'holin genetically engineered the journeystones a hundred generations ago, and you are among the second generation of a select few humans who can accept the implant designed for us.

In time, the link will register in your regional dialect, but for now, you'll receive it in Basic.

Unless otherwise noted, I used Basic to reproduce T'holin dialogue. Some will argue that Clipped is better than Basic for expressing T'holin spatial inflections and verb tenses for the best now. I agree, but it would be wrong to assume all Valors-in-training are fluent in the *lingua Franca*. I tried, however, to preserve as much depth—indeed, dimensionality—as possible, but I'm not a linguist, and there is no mutually accessible language that bridges T'holin and humans—or that explains why the T'holin have suffered our presence for 400 years—the malignant spread of our cities, farms, factories and roads, the melee of our cultures and religions and politics.

In that regard, we are on equal footing, you and I. We're like T'holin pups learning to accept enfolding.

I don't know why the Unfolding chose you, dear Valor-in-Training, to embody justice and flourishing and remove barriers to their unfolding in every sphere.

I do know the Unfolding never coerces. Open yourself. Don't fear. My story is a Descent into hope.

It begins 25 years after the Pandemic, a few months before the 400th anniversary of The Event.

I call it The Journeystone's Choice.

CHAPTER 1



*“A wing dip in Farside moves the wind in Hadera.” –
T'holin proverb.*

My left hand throbbed. The pain nudged me out of a dream already fading like breath on a mirror. It wasn't the first time I'd dreamed someone was kissing my hand. In this iteration, the suitor clasped my wrist with a desperate hold.

My eyes opened to predawn light.

The pain was real. The hand was not: my wrist is a stump whose nerves refuse to relinquish the hand's presence.

I breathed until I could sink into the pain.

Between my breasts, beneath my sternum, my journeystone warmed with a silent query from SsLissa, the female member of her triad.

What color is the pain in this now?

Purple. Like a three-day old bruise. Like the faded paint marking my domicile in the Malbec sector.

What is its shape path?

Flames have no shape.

Where do you feel the pain?

In the phantom hand. And in the pit of my stomach.

Does anything good unfold in the pain?

I am alive to feel it.

The stump still throbbed.

A thread of the dream replayed: a bearded face; hazel eyes looking into mine; lips, soft and warm on my hand. My intact hand.

Damn the dream. The misfiring of a stress-addled brain. The realization brought me fully awake, like a slap in the face: the Auditors were coming that day.

In a normal year, I'd never cross paths with an Auditor, so I could trace my tension to the collective anxiety in the air.

But that year, I was dancing the Cataclysm for the Brandyshine.

Dear Valor in Training, I trust you learned some version of Farside's history as a school child, if only a mere footnote in the Collaborative's propaganda. If not, pause and look it up, and then return to this point in my story, when I could pretend my most pressing priority was catching a ride on my zyph before the day began.

I sprang from my bed and groped for my clothes, nearly bumping into SsLissa, whose yellow eyes glowed inches away from mine.

The murky light blurred her sleek, furred body, but I should have been able to see the golden spots on her breast. I couldn't, which was not a good sign. It meant her arms were crossed on her chest in a gesture of disapproval.

"I didn't hear you come down from your nook," I said, in Clipped.

"How could you be hearing?" she answered in the local T'holin dialect. This was also not a good sign. It meant she was testing me. There are many variations of the T'holin language, and she had raised the Waker and me to understand them all.

“Such a flap of riding clothes,” she said. Her song carried a whistling undertone of exasperation.

“I’ll be back in time for my Discipline,” I said.

SsLissa’s eyes flicked toward the curtain that separated the Waker’s bed from mine.

“Can’t I have ten minutes to tend my zyph?” I asked.

“My ear to the wind in case Pavi wakes before you return,” SsLissa said, more gently, this time in Clipped.

She extended one arm. My filter mask dangled from her digits.

I snatched the mask and went outside without putting it on, and headed to the privy annex to get in line, met by the piquant smell of the composting enzymes and the fumbling cadence of morning conversation.

“One hopes the spores bloom mild this year,” said one woman.

“It could be a bit early to be concerned,” said another. “One never knows.”

They weren’t from Malbec. Judging from their faded sepia jumpers, they were from Mead. I could think of no good reason they would be using a Malbec privy, unless they were saving the Mead privies for the Auditors.

“Of course, if one is mated before the spores peak, one could be spared the indignity,” the first woman said, with a sideways glance at me. “Or so I’ve heard.”

I should have more patience for the Fold’s convoluted honorspeak, since it arose from a history of corporate subjugation. But I was raised by T’holin, and although the T’holin languages express complex spatial dimensions, the T’holin are brutally straightforward, and I prefer to be humiliated directly instead of guessing my transgression.

Standing in line for my first morning piss, I was in no mood to be picked apart by dull-eyed, middle-aged women who didn't know me. Women who'd finished their obligation to pump out 2.5 children, on average—children conceived via matings arranged by a committee—and had nothing to look forward to but grape presses and garden hoes and kitchen duties and child care and gossip.

The second woman snorted. "If one can't be mated?"

"Then one should at least wear a mask."

If one can't be mated.

My stump throbbed and I pressed it to my journeystone with no relief. I wanted to wave the stump in their faces. They were just jealous because I'd never have to fuck a stranger and have his baby.

But a third woman, with hair more gray than black, wagged a finger at the others. "The burrs also fly this time of year," she said. "They're irritating when they hitch a ride under your clothes."

Chastened, I put on the mask.

In spite of my full bladder, I darted from the line.

The sun's corona flared at the rim of the sky as I reached the stables, stopping me in my tracks. I felt the planet's retrograde motion, as if the sun was falling upward.

My zyph trilled a greeting.

"Archer," I called, peering into the stall.

Archer's slender neck was folded back and his oval head rested between his high shoulder blades. The lids of his long, canted eyes were not quite closed.

"You're pouting," I said, and reached for the rosemary oil. "Be glad I could come at all."

His nostrils fluttered and his violet eyes opened as he extended his neck just enough for me to apply the oil.

“You’re edgy today,” I said, resting my stump on his flank while I rubbed his back. His skin hummed.

I pressed my cheek to his ribs, tempted to remind Archer that one day soon, we both would be free. But with the Auditors coming, it was too dangerous to speak that hope, even alone in the stables, so I closed my eyes and conjured a meditation to boost my courage.

The shape path: the o’o’o’sl, is forming.

Pavi is Maker-ing it to wake humans to the Unfolding.

I rubbed the last traces of oil into Archer’s three-pronged tail. Following the First Node of the Discipline, I let my thoughts pass without judgement, visualizing their spatial dimensions. *X axis: Wake humans to the Unfolding? How long will that take? Minus Y axis: You want to be free to find a mate. Minus X axis : SsLissa says I don’t really want a mate, instead, I just want to long for a mate. Y axis: But both are true. This is the Contradiction. Nonetheless, the Waker is forming the shape path.*

But my thoughts were circular, not spiral. I needed to seek the Discipline more than I needed a ride.

“Go outside and find your breakfast,” I said. “I’ll come back for a ride later. I promise.”

Archer took a few dainty steps and then sprang into the paddock and through the gate into the meadow. He didn’t uncoil his neck until he was nearly to the crest of the hill.

“Still pouting,” I muttered, and watched him until his flicking tail disappeared.



On most days, I could believe the Unfolding would never entrust the Waker to a one-handed zyph herder if there was a real and present danger. But not on the day the Auditors were coming.

SsLissa perched in the window seat in my domicile, waiting for me. A cap of sunlight rested on her bowed head. Her wings rustled as she adjusted her position. “You are tangled in the Contradiction,” she said.

“I could understand it if I were one of the grandmothers who remembers when women and children and T'holin were taken to settle the debt,” I said.

“If you understood, then it wouldn’t be a Contradiction,” SsLissa said. “What makes you think the Auditors are the source of your distraction?”

My stump flared. “Do you want me to blame it on the spores? Like the people who gossip at the privy? I refuse to enter their lurid conspiracies.”

“Large words and strong opinions,” SsLissa said. “Your mother’s imprint.”

My journeystone flared. “If a First Gaze ever anchored me, it was yours,” I said.

SsLissa rose to her full height and cut the air with clicks. Her arms swooshed into their wing pouches and I braced for enfolding, expecting a reprimand for my impertinence.

I knelt on her feet. Her velvet wings enclosed me, her body heat calmed me, and her peppery scent cleared my head.

“Separate your Desire from the auditors’ Demand,” SsLissa said. Her journeystone amplified the keen-edged command,

and then she droned an alto note that drew me gently down to my center. “This Descent is not yours alone,” she said. “Accept the waiting,” SsLissa said. “That is your shape path.”

There was nothing in me capable of protesting. I basked in the enfolding until Pavi’s exaggerated throat clearing ended it.

SsLissa released me and flapped her wings at Pavi. “Even the Waker knows not to cut into enfolding,” she said. “And you should keep your distance. Aleya just returned from outside. She needs to bathe and wash the spores from her hair.”

“But I’m hungry,” Pavi said, thrusting one hip forward as she raised her arms to stretch. “Breakfast ends in half an hour.”

“I’ll be quick,” I said. “You can braid my hair.”

“I was hoping to practice the ribbons for the Brandyshine,” she said. She hummed a few lines from the Cataclysm Song and batted her eye lashes.

“Stop,” I said. “We have three days before I need to deal with that.”



Breakfast was glops of leftover groats and dregs of coffee. The hall was empty except for a mop crew sloshing toward our table.

“Unspoken rule number one million seventy-six,” Pavi said. “You’re welcome to eat during the posted hours, except when you’re not welcome to eat during the posted hours.”

“We picked a bad day to come at the last minute,” I said. “Everyone ate early so they could start prepping the Great

Hall. We should get over there before they send someone for us.”

“What a farce,” Pavi said. “This year’s Brandyshine is a steaming pile of sloo.”

“Because I’m dancing?” I challenged.

“Maris could have done it,” Pavi said. “Or Cara. Or Gemma. I could have danced.”

“I drew the short straw. There’s nothing calculated about that.”

“You’re so thick-headed,” Pavi said. She chewed one dreadlock and turned to the window. For a moment, something ageless limned her nineteen-year-old being and she was more Waker than Pavi. “If exploiting you would soften the heart of just one Auditor, I could bear it,” she said. “And I can’t even be there to support you.”

And then she frowned and tilted her head. “Noam’s coming,” she said.

“I told you they’d send someone,” I said. “But I didn’t expect the Sector Monitor.”

“He’s not alone,” Pavi said.

Noam came through the door waiving a knobby hand in our direction—as if the three strangers with him were not enough to draw our attention. A smile crinkled his brown-paper-bag face, and his stooped body teetered as he hurried toward us.

One of the strangers took Noam’s elbow to steady him.

The sheepish grin Noam returned did nothing to soften the taller man’s calm, focused, stance.

Of course: the man’s royal blue tunic was a uniform and the red and gold ribbons on his shoulders were rank insignia. He was on duty. Apparently, his training included swift,

gentle interventions to save doddering old men from tripping.

Oddly, his companions were the clean-shaven ones with cropped hair. He wore a sable beard trimmed to precision and his long, auburn hair was pulled back in a tie.

The three strangers looked out of place in the Hall, like polished stones in a gravel pit, not soft or ornamental, as I imagined the men from Hadera—for by then, I judged them to be from the Capital city.

Indeed, the dark-haired one was dressed in an Auditor's grey suit.

The fair one wore a tailored white linen tunic and trousers.

Pavi's journeystone jangled mine with her overwrought reaction.

So, now we know what Noam really thinks of us, she said.
Avert your eyes, I chided.

I will not," she answered, and our links crackled. *If Noam holds us in such low regard that he would approach us with male strangers in broad daylight, I will not pretend to be demure.*

The men reached our table and my journeystone thrummed a reminder to breathe. I patted my damp braids, straightened my blouse, and hid my stump in the folds of my skirt, trying to keep my eyes off the bearded man standing taller and straighter than the others.

Noam dipped his stubbled chin in greeting. "I bring you Arden Cardiff of Hadera," he said.

The man in linen stepped forward, bending from the waist.

I stared at his whorls of pale, sculpted curls, and sank into the significance of his name.

The Advocate's heir. Cinaia's son.

He remained bowed long enough for me to trust the sincerity of the posture, and then straightened and regarded us with eyes the color of the glacier-melt in Lake Crespín but not as cold. His gaze held no hardness, and seemed unsure where to focus. "I beg pardon for arriving unannounced," he said.

"A hospitable heart is always open to a guest," Noam said, too quickly. "Although Malbec is the most modest of our sectors, your requests are well within the scope of our resources. As for the information you seek, I present Aleya Gillis and Pavi Hanan, the Fold's most knowledgeable in the subject."

Pavi's link garbled a string of curse words.

The uniformed man stepped forward. "We must respectfully question the decorum of this arrangement," he said.

"We'll follow Farside's customs, Lt. Roan," Arden said. "I trust you to guard our honor—"

A clatter cut him off as the Auditor's satchel hit the floor and its contents scattered. Arden stooped to help Lt. Roan and the Auditor gather them. "Forgive me for naming my Honor Guard ahead of Auditor Perrin Firth," he said. "This is Firth's first audit. I thought this meeting might be less taxing than your Mentor's welcome. We were warned that her eloquent... diplomacy... tends to confuse inexperienced ears."

"The Mentor is greeting the Auditors in the Commons as we speak," Noam explained.

“May we sit?” Arden asked.

Noam sputtered an apology and pulled out two chairs.

“If I can trust the more seasoned Auditors to stick to my instructions,” Arden said, taking the seat across from me, “I’d like to pursue my own agenda.” He pulled a translucent tablet from his jacket and placed it on the table.

Neither Pavi nor I had ever seen a Riff. The only time a Riff saw the light of day in Farside was when the Auditors came, and the Auditors always arrived at the peak of spore season, when young women like Pavi and me were forced to cloister.

No one in Farside possessed a peripheral digital device. Not because it was forbidden—the Fold’s taboos were never so straightforward—but because the technology was an insult to the Fold’s history.

Noam seemed oblivious. Perhaps he was trying to shock me into a proper appreciation for the Cataclysm before I danced the story—the first scene is, after all, a lament for the conditions in the long-gone rare earth mines of Farside.

Though my T’holin education versed me in the horrors of the mines, I considered it disingenuous to trot out the story every year. Of course I believed the Cataclysm was a tragedy. I also distrusted the Collaborative as much as anyone, but it was my opinion that the Cataclysm dance engendered more pity than sympathy.

But I will not lie: I was fascinated by the Riff, although wary of it. I have a kind of synesthesia that causes me to perceive numbers and letters with color, gender and personalities. To keep from looking at the Riff, I focused instead on its reflection in Pavi’s wide, brown eyes as Arden touched the Riff’s surface and it projected a bright image.

“Here’s where I’d like your help,” Arden said. He flicked the tablet to rotate the image.

Pavi stared at it, and then jumped up and backed away.

I forced myself to look. The characters became children waving green leaves and purple blossoms before they settled into text. I gleaned the gist of it. It concerned a certain domicile, a pond across the meadow that only a zyph herder would know, the ancient T'holin rook that hosts our Archive...

“Is this a problem?” Arden asked. “I presumed the request would fit your customs. These are my mother’s instructions.”

His mother’s instructions. SsLissa’s journeystone synced with Pavi’s and mine, in a rare joint link with her mates. *We see a space path.*

I saw it, too. Like a stepping stone.

I rose and laid my hands on Pavi’s high, tense shoulders. She moved back to her chair.

“I will be your guide,” I said, but my heart skipped. “I can’t promise you access to the T'holin sites. My triad will seek permission. Is this acceptable?”



So many failsafes broken and it was barely the ten in the morning, but I sensed SsLissa nearby when we returned to our domicile, and realized she’d summoned CcShirnir and XxRiis. I looked up, confirming their presence in the rafters among drying bouquets of garlic, herbs and indigo flax, keeping watch until a suitable complement of adult humans could rescue Pavi from the situation.

My stomach fluttered as I said good-bye to Pavi. Her mouth was set in a tight line. Chafing, I guessed, at the constraints that kept the Waker safe.

I dashed to my room to grab my mask and jacket.

My journeystone was scalding with the amplified signal from all three members of my triad. *Keep your mask on unless we tell you otherwise*, SsLissa said. *And, if the T'hee'xx are skittish about spinners*, XxRiis added, emphasizing the T'holin term for humans: literally, “wingless creeper,” *tell them the spinners in Farside are fully in Consent and pose no harm.*

That's all the direction you're giving me? What if this is a trick? I protested. *Maybe the Advocate suspects we're hiding assets? What if he sent his son to disarm us?*

I waited outside for the runabout, fidgeting until it appeared.

Roan was in the driver's seat, and both men had changed into plain trousers and short-sleeved shirts.

Arden got out and opened the passenger door for me. The bench had room for three abreast, and Arden installed me in the middle, pressing me hip to hip with them, so close I could smell Roan's beard oil and Arden's shave balm. Roan scooted as far left as as he could.

My textbook knowledge of Hadera's social customs didn't cover the sexual mores of unmarried young men, let alone members of the honor guard and the heir to the Succession. Perhaps Roan and Arden had access to Hadera's highly regulated sex workers, but I doubted they rode around in runabouts sitting thigh to thigh with unmarried women.

And I had never been alone with a man, let alone two.

I folded my arms in my lap and covered my stump with my right hand.

Arden seemed unfazed, except for a probing look at my mask.

My cheeks burned. I wasn't sure which was more embarrassing: the effect of the spores on a young woman's hormones or the fact that women in Farside didn't have access to the pharmaceutical antidote, and relied, instead, on herbal remedies.

Roan punched the starter and looked over his shoulder to back up the vehicle. "Which way?" he asked.

"Stay on this road until I tell you to turn," I said. "We'll visit the domicile first."

For the next few moments, the only sound was the hum of the runabout's motor and the crunch of the pea gravel under its wheels.

My journeystone cooled to a soothing tingle, but Roan gripped the steering bar with more tension than was necessary. I mustered some grace for him. I would be in the same state of hyper-vigilance if I were guarding Pavi in such a situation.

Beyond the Malbec commons, we passed the sector's mixed-use space: clusters of shops, workspaces, schools and domiciles interlaced with parks, sports fields and community centers.

"So many shades of purple," Arden said. "Basic doesn't have enough words."

"We borrow some English ones that have fallen out of use," I said. "Amethyst, plum, periwinkle, mauve."

My synesthesia immerses me in T'holin consciousness in ways most humans can't imagine, but coupled with my raw empathy, it complicates my ability to understand how other people see the world. Naming the colors of Malbec induced a

mental picture of princely men in long robes—a projection of my impression of Arden.

He was in every way, a prince. The Collaborative's euphemisms were a thin disguise for a family dynasty that no one challenged on Mars or Chaalis.

If Arden noticed the faded facades—telltales signs that our self-sufficiency was wearing thin—would he care? Would he recognize injustice if he saw it?

Farside wasn't the only province suffering because the Collaborative surtaxed all goods, services and agricultural yields that weren't produced under a Collaborative-sanctioned corporate contract.

I knew this because I had access to the Archive. It's more accurate to say that the Archive had access to me, and I'm grateful my triad tempered its input. Even so, some information was hard to carry.

Such as the truth about Arden's mother. Did he know she was taken from the Fold the year she was twelve when the Brandyshine didn't satisfy the Auditors' ledgers, sent to Hadera to work off the debt? That she was groomed for something more than kitchen duty when she bloomed into a beauty who caught the Advocate's eye?

I appraised Arden with brief glances, wondering if he looked like his mother. There were no Archived images recorded after her marriage to the Advocate. It was a T'holin concession to her dignity.

Arden's features were both delicate and strong. Refined, perhaps, is the cliché that applies. There's a T'holin word, of course, but I can't sing it: wind-polished-stone-that-reflects-the-stars.

Arden pulled out his Riff. "I'd like to take some new images along the way," he said. "Permission is on record."

"Permission on record is not consent," Roan said, sharply.

Arden gave him a long look. "I beg pardon," he said, turning to me. "May I take some new images along the way?"

"I'm just your guide," I said. "I have no authority."

A vein pulsed in Arden's temple. "Stop the runabout," he said.

Roan yanked the brake lever and we lurched forward.

Arden turned his face to mine and I shrank from him, pressed to Roan's shoulder.

"I invested you with authority when I accepted you as our guide," Arden said. "Step up, or I will fail."

My journeystone burned and I tasted salt in my throat. I reached for SsLissa. *Whose grief is this?* I asked, sensing only her presence. I breathed slowly and deeply and then ventured a glance at Roan.

He returned my gaze for an unguarded second.

It was long enough for me to notice his hazel eyes.

Before I could recover, Arden said, "Let's go on." He put away the Riff.

Malbec's structures thinned to warehouses and then a barn came in to view, and beyond it, a meadow and a vineyard.

"Have we gone too far?" Arden asked.

"Molbek has changed since—" I didn't know how to finish the sentence.

"It's like you're wearing two masks," Arden said. "One to block whatever is in the air and the other to protect us. Lose the false one. We'll fumble through this. At least, I will. Davin never lowers his guard."

“Davin?”

“Davin Roan,” Arden said. “He is my Honor Guard, but we were raised together. Cinaia fostered him from a tot.”

Davin flicked a glance at Arden.

“Speak your mind,” Arden countered.

“If you ask our guide to drop her mask, be careful what you expose her to,” Davin said.

Arden sighed. “Point taken,” he said.

We approached a domed building half-hidden in vines and shrubs.

“This is the domicile,” I said, and Davin braked the runabout. “There’s not much to see,” I said. “It’s used for storage, now.”

Arden sat for several seconds. He pressed the door latch and said, “I can’t do this alone.”

“I’m with you,” Davin said.



A more skilled Storyteller might use Arden’s experience in Farside to foreshadow later events. But I am too entangled in the story to finesse that narrative.

On that first day, I stood helpless while Arden pounded the wall of his mother’s domicile until Davin pulled him away. An hour later, I watched his eyes light up as he stripped to his briefs and dove into the pond where she played as a child.

We parked the runabout and walked beyond the vineyards to the arbors and meadows.

The sun was low when we drove back to Malbec commons, parched and famished.

Davin climbed out on the driver's side. I scooted across the bench to maneuver past the steering bar. Davin reached in and grabbed my left forearm to assist.

He acted on reflex, I knew. It was a normal thing to do. But his hand touched my naked stump. I tensed to pull away, but his grasp was firm.

"There are some things you must hide from us," he said. "This is not one of them."

I stared at the ground and accepted the gentle tug that landed me outside the vehicle.

Davin climbed back into the runabout. "When should we pick you up tomorrow?" he asked.

"Seven," I said.

I was unable to look up until the runabout turned onto the road that led to the Great Hall.

Pavi ran out to meet me, but XxRiis, the neuter member of SsLissa's triad, swooped out to pull Pavi away and whisk me toward the bathhouse.

SsLissa was waiting there. She and XxRiis shielded me with their wings as I stripped and sank into a wooden tub of warm water.

The spores formed a film of yellow flecks on the surface, sending the T'holin into spasms of clicks and clucks.

I emerged from the bath and stood while SsLissa rinsed me with several pitchers of water. She craned her neck and touched one of my nipples.

"I'm fine," I said, swatting her hand away.

"You'll drink strong scrimper tea with your supper," SsLissa said. "And I'll make sure Pavi gets some, too. I've never seen the spores so thick."

At supper, Pavi puckered her face and dumped her tea into my cup. "I've been cooped up all day and I don't deserved to be punished with this," she said. "But I want you to tell me everything. What is Arden after?"

"You're assuming I could track a single clear thought under those conditions?"

"What was it like being alone with a man?"

I threw a crust of bread at her and ate in silence.

Later, in the dark, I settled to the hum of the journeystones, and rehashed Pavi's niggling last question. Why had she asked me what is was like to be alone with a man? I was alone with two men.

My restlessness built, and I remembered I'd promised Archer a ride.

SsLissa clicked at me from her nook overhead, but didn't forbid it. *Three baths in one day will be wearing out your skin*, was all she said.

I rode to the foothills and paused on a mesa where the stars seemed close enough to pluck like grapes and press into wine and cause intoxication.

Except there are no grapes on Chaalis. Just small, sweet berries called uvas that grow on vines and take to fermenting like the grapes on Earth. They grow especially well in Farside, whose microclimates are hospitable for multiple varietals. That's why the T'holin shared its ancient viticulture to help Farside develop a revenue source to satisfy tax demands when the Collaborative reclaimed authority over the province.

Everything on Chaalis is uncannily akin to Earth, according to the Archive, though I've heard the legends are exaggerated. Even the T'holin name for the planet sounds

like “chalice,” an archaic word meaning a cup made for consecrated wine.

I suppose Earth was on my mind because Davin and Arden seemed so alien. None of my formal education about Hadera seemed to apply.

And Arden and Davin seemed just as baffled by me.

SsLissa says that’s because I’m a stranger to myself. But what could she know about a human woman’s wants and needs? My life was not my own while I guarded the Waker, and SsLissa kept shredding my desires, censoring my yearnings, forbidding my fantasies about being the wife of some important man in a province where marriage is allowed. She even quashed my dream of founding an academy for children to help awaken the Unfolding. As a teacher to the Fold’s adolescents, I chafed most at this denouncement.

I patted Archer’s neck. “Soon,” I said, tipsy from the stars and the beauty of the night.



The morning dawned pearl gray.

“Do you think it will rain?” I asked SsLissa as I packed my knapsack with bread, cheese and fruit.

“You’ll be far above the clouds before their best now,” SsLissa said.

“So, the T’holin will allow us?”

“Arden alone,” SsLissa said. “You and Davin won’t be given entrance.”

I was disappointed, but not surprised. Ignorant about the nature of Arden’s request, it was pointless for me to question the T’holin’s decision.

“I expected you to demand more information,” SsLissa said. “I will tell you this: upon your return, the Mentor’s triad will meet you at the Great Hall to tend to Arden.”

You, dear reader, already know more about the Archive than I did then. It’s true that the Rook was my school and playground as a child, but the T’holin took great care to buffer the Archive, and forbade my access to the recesses where the T’holin lived and reared their young. I was probably 10 years old when I realized the Archive is not a place, but a Presence that collectively holds the shape paths essential to T’holin memory and consciousness. It preserves as much joy as it does pain, but its unfiltered otherness is unbearable to humans, especially those without journeystones.

“There’s nothing you can do to prepare Arden,” SsLissa said.

I went outside to wait and ponder how to protect myself from the pain I knew was coming.

The runabout showed up promptly at seven. I stowed the food and drink in the rear compartment as Arden climbed out to give me the middle spot again.

“I guess this confirms that the T’holin will see us?” he said.

“The T’holin will see you alone,” I said.

I waited for Arden’s questions, and Davin sat with his hand posed over the ignition, but Arden just stared ahead.

“Let’s get going,” I said. “It’s a long hike up the mountain.”

As we drove through the gold-hued Mead sector and the pallid Colombard sector, past the distilleries and toward the northern foothills, Arden fidgeted with the buttons on his jacket and glanced at Davin several times, opening his mouth

to speak, but clamping it shut and turning back to the view ahead.

“It was necessary,” Davin said, finally, without taking his eyes off the road.

Arden took a deep breath and rested his hands on his lap. “I didn’t expect a chain reaction of face-saving maneuvers,” he said.

“It was your duty,” Davin said.

The truncated exchange was so like Pavi and me. Sometimes a word, a gesture or even a look was all we needed.

The gravel pavement ended but the road continued as a worn trail. We drove until it shrank to a pathway. “This is where we go on foot,” I said.

The rocky path overlooked part of the valley that had given our settlement its name, the Fold. We climbed the winding incline, breathing the sweet scent of evergreens that flourished in the alpine microclimate.

After two kilometers, I unpacked the canteens and encouraged the men to drink. “The path gets steeper from here,” I said. “You might notice the thinner air.”

SsLissa linked. It’s the best now to remove your mask, she said.

As soon as he saw my bare face, Davin stepped behind Arden, even though the path was wide enough for all three of us.

The six-kilometer hike did not seem to tire the men. We emerged above the clouds in bright sunshine, where the trail ended in a cul de sac bounded by a semicircle of rock outcroppings.

The utter stillness of the place stopped me in my tracks. What if the T'holin changed their minds?

But a large T'holin came behind a boulder with fully spread wings, and I took a deep breath and announced, “CcLissin, the Gatherer.”

Arden locked eyes with Davin and then followed the T'holin.

I spread my jacket on the ground under an evergreen grove. “We might as well get comfortable,” I said. It was absurd thing to say to Davin, but I couldn’t take it back. I sat on my jacket, arranged my skirt around my ankles and hugged my knees.

Davin smoothed the stubby grass to create a suitable spot. He sat crosslegged with his back erect and hands resting on his folded calves.

A long moment of silence dragged by. To relieve the tension, I breathed as SsLissa had taught me. “I brought something to read,” I said. “How will you pass the time?”

“On guard,” he said without turning.

I pulled my book from my pack and leaned against a tree. It was a T'holin book with a pressed paper cover and spiral binding made of flexible resin. Two days ago, I would have found its topic riveting: an analysis of the effects of the province of Parsimony’s agricultural practices on the holobiome. But that day I could barely focus on the pages. The letters and numbers teased me and I kept stealing looks at Davin.

He was so still, I could hardly see evidence of breathing. I’m unsure I even saw him blink.

I could sometimes reach such a state if I stayed in my Discipline long enough.

With that thought, my journeystone warmed.

Midday, I offered food and drink to Davin. He thanked me, but refused them without making eye contact. I ate quietly and efficiently, just enough to take the edge off my hunger.

It was late afternoon when CcLissin reappeared with Arden. Davin jumped to attention.

Arden's eyes were red, his lids puffy, his pupils dilated, and his face pale.

"This is the best now to feed him," CcLissin said. "Support him on the space path down-trail and enfold him to bed when you regain your nook. He'll sleep into tomorrow."

I braced for Davin to demand an explanation. But he simply helped ease Arden to a sitting position under the trees, and CcLissin retreated.

My hands shook as I pulled the provisions from my pack.

Arden accepted the food and drink from Davin, but kept looking at me askance, as if he didn't remember who I was.

With frequent rests, Arden was able to walk for the first kilometer down the trail, and then he began to stumble. Davin held him at the waist and draped one of his arms over my shoulder. We hobbled along, and were within a kilometer of the runabout when Arden's legs buckled. Davin scooped him up and carried him the rest of the way.

I replaced my mask and climbed into the runabout. Davin tucked Arden into the seat, but Arden's head drooped and he nearly fell into my lap. I cradled his head in my arms.

Davin gave me a long look before he took his seat to start the runabout.

We rode in silence. I replayed my own memories of the Rook, of learning in the T'holin way, training my neural

pathways to harness the journeystone. Even shielded from the Archive, it was rigorous and exhilarating and exhausting.

SsLissa shushed me. *Constrain your thoughts*, she said.

Large, heavy raindrops began to plop against the windshield as we drove into the valley. I told Davin to go straight to the Great Hall and settle Arden. "I'll walk home," I said.

"In the rain?"

"I don't mind," I said.

We approached the Great Hall. Just as SsLissa said, the Mentor's T'holin triad was standing outside, with wings fully extended.

Davin parked and stared for several seconds before he jumped out to open Arden's door.

Arden roused and looked into my eyes until his refocused and then he clumsily accepted with the male T'holin's help.

The T'holin gathered Arden into his arms and carried him into the Great Hall under his wings.

I climbed out of the runabout. Warm dollops of rain fell on my bare arms.

Davin dipped his head and said, "Thank you," without making eye contact.

My journeystone grew strangely warm.

Instead of heading home, I ran through the tepid rain straight to the meadow and whistled for Archer, knowing I'd not get another chance to ride that day. I'd miss supper, but I sensed SsLissa's support and knew she'd save some for me.

I gave Archer full head, and allowed my thoughts to stray. I could have rationalized that I was engaging the first Node of the Discipline, but that would imply that I planned to go deeper. I had no intention of wasting my precious solitude on

spiritual work, despite knowing that SsLissa would be eavesdropping and probably disapproving.

At least my first thoughts were tame. *Perhaps the rain would settle the spores.* But the spores made me think of the Legacy Festival, two months away. The annual celebration of The Event followed the Fold's announcement of each year's mated pairs. I was of age that year, which just happened to be the 400th anniversary of The Event, but the Mentor told me I would be exempt. I was too important as a teacher, she said.

I knew the real reason. No one wanted to mate with me, as if my stump was a congenital trait.

My humiliation, however, did not preclude a sense of relief. Honestly, I found none of Farside's young men compelling. Spending the day with Arden and Davin, however...

At least I spotted the Contradiction. But it did not steer me toward Discipline. Instead, my pulse raced.

Distraction, SsLissa linked.

Of course. What could be more disrupting than two young men driven to seek the Archive? What were they looking for?

My stump began to throb.

SsLissa chided me through the link. *I said*

Distraction, not Disruption. Distraction takes one off the shape path. Disruption enables the Contradiction. Mind the difference.

Drenched and bedraggled, I turned Archer back to the stables.

The Vintner's son Tobin ran breathless into the stall. "I was worried," he said, and then blushed, pointing and giggling. "You're all wet."

Archer nuzzled Tobin's shirt and the boy produced a carrot. "I always come to see the zyphs after supper," Tobin said. "Archer is my favorite. He's the smartest. Maybe because he's your zyph. You're the best teacher."

"Well, it's easy to teach students who want to learn," I said.

"I hate summer break," Tobin said. "My head is bursting with questions."

"If you want more books, let me know," I said, reaching for a drying cloth for Archer.

"I already finished the ones you gave me," Tobin said. "May I dry Archer?"

I handed Tobin the cloth and leaned against a post to watch him work.

"Do you think the T'holin are smarter than humans?" Tobin asked. "I think they are. But humans went to space. They built things that helped them figure out how science works. How did the T'holin figure things out?"

Archer purred while Tobin stroked his skin.

"Big questions, Tobin," I said. "I can't answer them right now. I'd be happy to meet with you during break."

"Would you let me ride Archer?"

"Remember, he'll soon be taking the herd to the grazing meadows. But think I can work something out in the fall if your mother agrees."

Tobin didn't need to know I'd already made a deal with his mother, the Vintner, in exchange for creating a diversion from my performance by keeping the wine flowing during the Brandyshine. I offered her two months of summer tutoring for her three children. She countered by asking me to include riding lessons for Tobin when the zyphs returned.

The chat with Tobin warmed my heart and cleared my head. I was ready to face SsLissa, who met me in the bath house with fresh clothing. She was alone.

“XxRiis and CcShirnir are busy with Pavi,” she said. “Maker-ing her outfit for the Brandyshine seems to require many digits.”

“I must have water in my ears,” I said. “I thought you said Pavi is making an outfit for the Brandyshine.”

“Nothing is wrong with your ears,” SsLissa said. “Before Arden left this morning, he told the Mentor to seat his party in the Malbec section for the Brandyshine. Which means Molbek will be the head table instead of Mead. And he asked for Pavi to attend.”

“And you’re encouraging this?”

“Did you learn nothing today?” SsLissa said. “By the way, is your Journeystone warm?”

I sputtered and ducked under the water.

CHAPTER 2



“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”—

Friedrich Nietzsche

Yesterday’s rain gave the morning air a particular scent I secretly loved—the smell of plants and soil fermenting with a healthy microbiome—but I knew the combination of heat and moisture could be a recipe for short tempers as the day wore on.

I pulled on leggings and a sleeveless tunic and gathered my hair into a clip with a one-handed maneuver that I stabilized with my stump.

Sensing my household up and about, I found Pavi with the T’holin in our sitting room, already fussing over Pavi’s dress.

Pavi’s eyes were bright and the light warmed her hazelnut skin.

I placed my hand on her forehead with mock seriousness. “Just checking to see if you have a fever,” I said. “This is the auditor Brandyshine, you know, not the Anniversary of the Event.”

“It’s different this year,” Pavi said.

“As if you would know,” I said.

CcShirnir clicked and hissed.

“We are easily divided when our perception of the same thing is different,” SsLissa said. “What do you say, my Maker mate?”

“I say the time to raise one’s guard is when the oppressor lets his down,” CcShirnir said.

“Aleya has enough guard to make up for Pavi’s lack,” XxRiis said.

“That’s because I haven’t practiced the Dance. I’m headed to the Great Hall now.”

“Don’t practice so hard you exhaust yourself,” SsLissa said.

“I didn’t say I was going to practice. I said I hadn’t practiced. I’m going to the Great Hall to meet with the Vintner.”

“What business could you possibly have with the Vintner?” Pavi asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Of course you’ll practice,” XxRiis said. “The musicians are expecting you.”

“When will you be back?” Pavi asked. “I want to help you get ready—we haven’t figured out your hair.”

“She’ll be back in time for a nap,” SsLissa said firmly.

The Great Hall buzzed with preparations, but the humidity wasn’t the only heaviness in the air.

I found the Vintner arranging wine jars behind the stage.

“One might be tempted to start priming the Malbec representatives now,” she said, tilting her hand as if taking a drink. “I suppose one should extend grace. It is a shock for Malbec to be raised to prominence on such short notice.”

She left unsaid that it was a shock for Mead to be demoted at Arden’s whim, but she took my chin in her hands. “There’s a lot at stake for Malbec,” she said. “And more at

stake for the Fold. I'll do what I can to take the pressure off you."

"Thank you," I said. "I shouldn't keep the musicians waiting."

Honing the moves for the Great Hall took several rounds of execution. Most people ignored me as they continued their preparations, but each side-cast glance landed like a weight on my chest. Only when I'd danced twice with no mistakes with the drum did I add the flute, the strings and my voice. That's when one of the men wearing Mead colors—old enough to be my father—approached the stage and glowered at me. I stopped singing.

"One wonders how we failed to teach this generation the reason we don't draw attention to Malbec," he said. "One wonders why we bother to protect the daughters." He turned away.

It was early afternoon when I returned home. SsLissa gave me a calming tincture made from spinner venom and put me to bed.

When I awoke, Pavi was sitting beside my bed with a cloud of fabric draped over her knees.

"I thought you'd never wake up," she said. She held up the dress and smiled.

"I can't wait to see it on you," I said.

"You're so dense," she said. "It's for you."

"I can't wear that," I said.

"Why not?"

"It's too..."

"It's not too *anything*," she said. "It's quite modest, but it will do justice to Malbec."

"All this is for Malbec?"

“Of course,” Pavi said. “What did you think it was for?”

I slipped into the sleeveless dress, a mosaic of jewel tones with a softly scooped neck. Its bodice was snug but the skirt was split like flower petals for ease in dancing. Ankle-length leggings and ribboned armbands completed the costume.

Pavi’s appraisal was my only mirror. She clapped her hands. “Now, your hair,” she said. “The Dance requires you to leave it loose. I’ll weave it with ribbons to keep it out of your eyes.”

“And rescue it from the humidity,” I sighed.

“White folks,” she said, as she fussed over me. “Hair so fine and slippery.”

When she finished, she gaped at me until I asked her if everything was all right.

“Not bad for a zyph herder,” she said. “You go on ahead. CcShirnir can escort me to the Great Hall.”

“No T’holin allowed outside tonight,” I said. “I’ll wait for you.”

Pavi emerged from her room in a full-length dress rich in plum and gold, with matching ribbons lacing her dreadlocks. The neckline barely capped her shoulders, and her cleavage was not entirely confined. Before I could comment, SsLissa approached with her mates.

We accepted their deep enfolding.

The enfolding left me in a mindful state, dilating time and heightening my senses. It seemed to take an hour to walk from our domicile in the Malbec sector to the Great Hall in the center of the Mead sector, where I was dazzled by evening sunlight burnishing the Hall’s honey-colored stucco, and the candlelight glowing in arched windows.

A matron wearing Mead colors met us at the door. She looked askance at Pavi's dress, but held her tongue except to remind us to remove our masks once inside. As she led us to front of the Hall, I gaped at the flowers and candles and ribbons.

Pavi kept a grip on my arm, gently tugging me forward. "Have you been smoking something?" she whispered. "Your pupils are dilated."

The matron left us at the Malbec table. We took our seats and watched the Hall fill with representatives from every sector.

The slow-strobing ceiling fans were no match for the humidity. Noam and the Mentor brought Arden, Davin and Perrin to their seats, and the aromas of beard oil and shaving spices mixed with the scents of candle wax and spore-abating herbs .

In full dress, the men were beautiful to the point of distraction.

Arden took a seat directly across from me, in a cerulean coat and a purple sash with the Collaborative's crest.

Davin stood behind Arden, staring ahead, arrow-straight, in a white coat with braided gold fasteners and crimson rank ribbons.

Sitting across from Pavi, Perrin wore unembellished burgundy and his dark hair was sleek and trim. Compared to Arden and Davin, Perrin was merely pretty, as if life hadn't yet honed his features.

The Mentor rose for the welcome. She recognized Mead for giving Malbec the spotlight, and proposed a toast to cover the awkward silence that followed.

I raised my glass a moment behind everyone else, and puckered at my first taste of wine.

The Mentor retook her place across from me, but her focus was on Arden, seated between her and Noam. They both made several attempts to engage him, but his responses were terse.

Pavi had put Perrin at ease by the time the first course arrived.

Unable to shake the effect of enfolding, I pushed the dainty vegetables and tiny, baked crackers around my plate and took another cautious sip of wine.

And then SsLissa linked to cue me for my performance.

The cascade of human voices hushed at some unspoken signal as I took the stage—despite the Vintner's efforts.

I stood straight and still, marking where the auditors were planted.

SsLissa boosted our link, and my journeystone resonated.

The first stanza of the Cataclysm Song was *a cappella*, intentionally stark and provocative.

Cobalt blue

Rare earth hue.

Toxic franchise

Where were you

When the world collapsed

The contract lapsed.

You found new sources of revenue

I began to dance to the melody of a single flute.

You may wonder why a lone woman performs the epic of the earthquake that collapsed the mines, obliterated the mountain passes, killed hundreds of people and isolated Farside for nearly a century.

I couldn't have answered that question before I did it.

As I danced, a drum joined the flute. In the next movement, strings swelled the music.

My hair, skirts and arm ribbons streamed around me and the room became a swirl of shapes and sounds. Farside's grief, loss, and abandonment surged in my gut, my heart and my limbs.

And then Davin's words whispered in my memory: "There are some things you must hide from us. This is not one of them."

I raised my naked stump, throwing off the Fold's restraint, shedding the masquerade of hospitality that deflected the Auditors' attention from the Fold's assets, and danced lament and outrage and defiance.

An impromptu coda poured from me before I could censor it: "*And now you come to steal rebirth.*"

I ran off stage, looking for the Hall's rear exit. It took forever to find it. Swollen in the damp air, the door stuck when I tried to open it. I leaned in and shoved it with my shoulder. It didn't budge.

With my back against the door, I paused to catch my breath. My journeystone began to tingle and a shadow slid over me

A man's hand covered mine, warm and firm. I froze, afraid to turn around.

"Please come back to the table."

Davin's voice.

"Arden asked for you."

I tried to pull my hand away, but his grip was too strong.

"Let me go," I said.

He dropped his hand.

“Please come,” he said.

I followed him to the Hall, where the audience’s murmurs were thick as a wall.

Arden stood and reached for me, clasping my wrists. I gritted my teeth, resisting the reflex to pull back.

“This dance,” Arden said. “Noam tells me it’s performed every year.”

“Always part of the program,” Noam said.

“But never in our reports,” Arden said. “Are the auditors unmoved by it?” He looked down at Perrin. “Are you unmoved?”

Perrin shook his head slowly.

“We’re about to dim the lights for the final course,” the Mentor said quickly, as a waiter approached with a platter of pastries.

Arden released my wrists and searched my eyes. I sensed he was not looking at me; he was looking for me. He pulled my chair out for me and then sat down and turned to the Mentor. “There’s more to the program?” he asked. “What’s next? Couples’ dancing? Or more awkward throat clearing to destroy the effect of what we just saw?”

“No dancing,” the Mentor said in a thin voice.

Arden raised his empty snifter. Its rim caught the candle glow in an orange corona. “What is the purpose of this Brandyshine, if there is no brandy?” he asked.

“It’s coming. When we serve the pastries,” the Mentor said. “Actually, we’ll finish with our best cognac.”

The young waiter stretched his suntanned, work-sculpted arm over Arden’s shoulder to set down a delicate plate. Arden motioned him to draw closer, and whispered something in his ear. The lad mumbled a response and withdrew.

“To think we once hid the *women* because the audit comes at the height of the spore bloom,” Pavi whispered.

I shrugged at the muddled comment.

“You’re so thick headed,” she said.

My journeystone pinged an icy warning.

Perrin was smiling at Pavi.

Pavi lowered her gaze, but only for a second, stroking one of her long, black dreadlocks and quirking her brows, meeting his eyes again with a half-smile.

Davin shifted his weight. It was a deliberate gesture. I sensed it in my journeystone.

Perrin flushed and shifted his gaze from Pavi, but my tension held and my journeystone stayed cold.

Pavi took an exaggerated breath that lifted her chest and parted her lips. She leaned over the table and reached for the wine flask, refilling Perrin’s goblet, and resettling to raise her own glass and take a drink, finishing with another sigh and a flutter of eyelashes in Perrin’s direction.

I queried SsLissa. There was no response. I breathed a warning to Pavi just as the house lights dimmed.

Pavi’s eyes reflected candlelight like twin mirrors. Perrin squirmed and stared at his hands,

As the young waiter served the cognac, a voice behind me said, “We once hid our daughters. And our children. We still hide our T’holin.” A rough hand grabbed my left arm and held my stump high. “Is this what we want for our daughters?”

I tried to pull away. Pain flared from my stump to my neck and head, out of proportion to the man’s grip.

Davin stepped closer and Pavi jumped up. “Let her go,” she said.

The man dropped my wrist and stalked away. Only then did I recognize him as the same man that confronted me during practice.

“Is this part of the performance?” Arden asked the Mentor. She regarded him with a blank look.

“Have you no authority?” Arden asked.

“The Fold doesn’t—” she said.

Arden waved his hand. “I understand your... governing system,” he said. “But, I will not hesitate to call on my honor guard to intervene if I witness such a thing again.” He traced his finger on the rim of his cognac snifter. “I’d like to drink to the day when no one—human or T’holin—is forced to hide. But, first, give me the ledgers.”

“Ledgers?” the Mentor asked.

“You heard correctly,” Arden said. “I’m not satisfied with the audit.”

The Mentor reached beneath her seat, retrieved an envelope and passed it to Arden.

He extracted its contents and divided the papers among us, reserving some for himself, and then began to tear them into strips, slowly and deliberately. “Go on,” he said. “Rip them up.”

No one moved.

“Don’t worry,” he said, and then he took out his Riff. “I’ll delete the digital files, too.” He flicked its surface a few times and held it high. “See? They’re gone.”

The Mentor laughed nervously and began to tear her stack and we all followed her example.

Arden stood and lifted his cognac. “I raise a toast,” he said. “To the Fold of Farside, which owes no tax to the

Collaborative. To Farside, who shall instead be given restitution.”



Arden’s announcement unleashed a blur of cognac and pastries and revelry. The musicians took the stage unbidden, and even the representatives from Mead joined in the impromptu dancing that left the Mentor even more speechless and flustered.

I stayed in my chair, lost and dizzy, like I’d fallen off the shape path. My journeystone was a symphony of confusing signals.

It was nearing midnight when Davin tapped Arden on the shoulder and reminded him their train was waiting.

Pavi clasped Perrin’s hand as Arden made a farewell speech.

I stared at the white field of Davin’s back as he retreated from the Hall.

I don’t remember walking Pavi back to our domicile, but I managed to help SsLissa and XxRiis tuck her into bed.

Tipsy from wine and flighty with excitement, Pavi chattered and twirled, batting away our efforts to remove her dress. “I can do it,” she said, and arched her arms over her shoulders to reach the back fasteners. The exaggerated motion sent her tumbling backward onto her pallet.

SsLissa and I swooped in and overpowered her as if she were a toddler.

XxRiis clucked and offered to make some scrimper tea.

“It won’t help,” SsLissa said.

“But it will turn back the spores,” XxRiis said.

Pavi pulled her sheets up to her chest and said, “I’m fine. I just need to sleep.”

“Good,” SsLissa said. “But you’ll still drink the tea.”

We left Pavi in XxRiis’s care and SsLissa followed me to my room.

“Now let me tend to you,” she said. She nestled me in her wings and I settled onto her feet, cradling my throbbing stump.

“When will I remember?” I asked her.

“Shush,” she said. “It’s part of the waiting you must bear. But it’s more than that. It’s part of the Unfolding.”

“All I want is a ride before I sleep.”

“Not alone—I’ll fly with you,” SsLissa said. “But only if you promise to halt the linear urgency of your thoughts.”

With SsLissa’s gold-speckled breast above me mimicking the stars and Archer’s thrumming skin beneath my stump, I rode until I could bear the wonder of what Arden had done and the questions aching in my heart.

Afterward, sleep swallowed me as I sank into exhaustion.

Perhaps that’s why I didn’t notice the absent undertone of Pavi’s journeystone.

SsLissa woke me before dawn. “The Waker is gone,” she said.

CHAPTER 3



“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” – Martin Buber (2015). “Hasidism and Modern Man”, p.47, Princeton University Press

SsLissa threw back my covers. “The Waker is gone,” she said.

“I heard you the first time,” I said. “Maybe she’s in the privy.”

I swung my legs over the side of the pallet and tuned to Pavi’s journeystone. There was no signal, just ambient noise, as if I’d cupped a shell to my ear. “The wine and brandy could have addled her link,” I said.

SsLissa reared over me and spread her wings, spewing hisses and clicks that translated as withering insults, aimed at humans in general and me in particular.

I reached inside my shirt for my journeystone, fumbling toward a reality that would allow Pavi to be gone. “How could she?” I said. “What good are our journeystones, then?” *What good am I?*

I flopped back on my pillow. My stump began to throb. The view of the rafters sank my stomach like I was falling upward. Above the partial walls separating the domiciles, the T’holin nooks were empty and the light from the upper

window slits was already bright. I wondered how I slept so late.

“Breathe and clear your head,” SsLissa said. “We will not discuss it until you’ve done your Discipline.”

“I need to piss and tend to Archer.”

“You cannot show yourself today.”

SsLissa flew up to her nook, making it clear the conversation was over until I did my Discipline.

I sat on the floor. The hemp mat was rough under my buttocks and the blood sang in my ears. I breathed to slow my thoughts, but my mind recoiled from the meditation like a foot on hot coals. SsLissa intervened.

Sit with the questions. Face them.

Why can’t I show myself today?

People will presume Pavi stowed away with the Auditors, under influence of the spores. If you stay hidden, we can exploit the same rumor for you. We will leave at nightfall to begin our search for her.

How do you know she didn’t stow away under influence of the spores? The way she acted—flirting, flaunting her cleavage, fluttering her eyelashes.

She was, in fact, acting. The distractions she created were just enough to misdirect our shape path. She’s so young. I thought we had at least two more years.

Why didn’t she warn me?

You haven’t shape pathed this, and you don’t yet have all you need to follow the o’o’o’sl.

Is this more of your ‘It’s all part of the Unfolding’ sloo? I can’t bear it.”

*Then get yourself back to Earth—you and all your kind—
and relieve the Tholin of your presence.*

I recoiled from her unfiltered white-hot rage, grief and fear and gave up trying to meditate.

She descended and I bowed to her. She opened her wings so I could sit on her feet.

“How will we find Pavi?” I asked.

“The *O’o’o’sl’h* are tracking a wisp of a song,” SsLissa said, using the formal title of the collective Patternbearers. “Will you follow it with me?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Have I taught you nothing? The Unfolding draws. It never coerces.”

“I will follow it with you,” I said.

“Then know this: we must keep searching until the Waker shows us her path.”



SsLissa smuggled breakfast to me and brought me a privy pan so I could relieve myself.

“What am I supposed to do all day?” I asked.

“Review the Archive for geography, culture, customs, and current events among the provinces beyond Farside,” she said.

“I just finished a school term teaching those subjects.”

“You also taught physics and astronomy, but that doesn’t qualify you to go to space,” she said.

I settled in the dim recesses of my room and my journeystone linked me to the Archive sections SsLissa had assigned and filtered. No one disturbed me, nor would I expect them to, on the morning after the Brandyshine.

The graphics' gendered and personified letters and numbers kept me company instead.

At least I had the option of picking which topics to study first. Should I put off distressing ones like Hadera castes and the significance of various T'holin slave collars or get them out of the way?

A new file grabbed my attention and my journeystone sent a stinging alarm to SsLissa.

She swooped down from her nook. "That file is not filtered," she keened. "Dampen!"

I moved my eyes down and to the right to break the link's visual connection, but the audio link continued to sing in my head, stirring pain in my stump, my breast and my head.

SsLissa clucked and droned with no success. A glowing shape like a blue diamond appeared on her forehead: her Patternbearer signet.

"I can't override the Archive," she said. "The *O'o'o'sl'h* have placed it on your shape path. I must enfold you while you process it."

I stepped onto her feet and her wings enclosed me. Her embrace dampened my pain, but offered no clarity.

"I can't process the T'holin words," I said.

"You've fallen off the shape path," she said. Her link translated for me, without buffering her distress.

The burden of the Collaborative's entropy cost is calling for unforeseen levels of T'holin sacrifice. A year ago, the Collaborative launched a new enterprise, demanding wild

T'holin for interbreeding with domestic stock weakened by generations of domestication and inbreeding, and for replacing domestic males culled for the Phalanx. Under threat of Phalanx encroachment, the O'o'o'sl'h negotiated a system to meet the Collaborative's demands.

SsLissa broke the link, but the Archive screeched an alarm. Her signet threw a light fractal that streamed an angular pattern until the noise abated.

"You are done with the Archive for today," she said aloud. "I will link what you need to know: *the system relies on the only two young women besides you and Pavi who have journeystones. They were raised in Provence, and your shape paths have never crossed. Like you and Pavi, they understand several T'holin dialects and are fluent in the Discipline.*

Query, I linked

You may ask.

What were their shape paths before this calling?

SsLissa's brow ridges spiked. *They were chosen for their potential, like you and Pavi, but they did not develop the capacity for the roles of Waker and Guardian. Their journeystones are tuned to the O'o'o'sl'h', however, and the O'o'o'sl'h' groomed them to become T'holin Gatherers, also known as Rounders.*

I waited for more information.

"That is all you need to know," SsLissa said, spreading her wings.

"Why did the Archive override your wishes?"

"Only a human would ask such a question," SsLissa said.

"Maybe the O'o'o'sl'h think you're keeping things from me that I need to know. Like Pavi's abilities! If I'd known she

could jam our link, I would never have left her side while the Auditors were here. ”

“I will leave you with your own thoughts,” SsLissa said. “You have no respect for mine.”

I slumped against the wall, sick with the realization that Pavi’s disappearance was tied to something SsLissa never saw on the shape path. I knew this because she couldn’t bear my presence. And because she activated her signet. I’d only seen the signet once before, long ago when she brought me and Pavi to Farside, and the memory was dim.

Maybe this was a nightmare or a practical joke and I’d wake up with Pavi laughing in my face. Or worse, maybe my role as Guardian of the Waker was a delusion I’d conjured to make up for the fact that I was just a maimed and orphaned zyph herding school teacher living in the planet’s most backwater settlement with no prospects of mating.

But if it was real, what did it say about Pavi, who was more than a sister to me? I’d never considered the possibility that becoming the Waker might take her from me.

Besides her signal-blocking capability, what other powers did the Waker possess? For example, there was no way for Pavi to leave the Fold undetected. I could imagine her stowing aboard Arden Cardiff’s private train, but I couldn’t see a way for her to get that far. Even if she’d seduced or bribed someone to squeeze her into a runabout, it was ludicrous to think everyone in the entourage would go along with that scheme—unless the spores affected the men, too.

It wasn’t much of a stretch for me to imagine Pavi as a Rounder. She was scrappy, and she could speak several T’holin dialects. Except Pavi would never be complicit in a scheme that enslaved T’holin against their will.

Unless the role was a cover.

Thanks to the Auditors, I knew there was a nasty underbelly to the Collaborative's economies. I didn't want to think about all the ways the Rounders could be exploited.

But why would the Archive defy SsLissa to show me the files?

I waited for SsLissa until dusk, but she didn't come and her link was silent. XxRiis didn't respond to my query, and CcShirnir's link was distant.

A shaky thread from Pavi's link recharged me with adrenaline.

If my decision to leave on my own was conscious, my body acted before I perceived it. I grabbed my knapsack and stole out of my room. The domicile was dark and still.

Next thing I knew, I was catching my breath outside the stables and Archer was leaping over his stall, sensing my urgency. I mounted him, and he slipped like a wraith through Malbec sector, blending into the purple and indigo twilight, where lamps glowed here and there, but no one stirred outside.

I rode with the sunset's glow at my back. The fading light had already unmasked a few stars by the time I faced the peaks rimming the Fold's valley.

Archer needed no urging. He knew the way through the pass.

Two hours later, we descended to the desert. Though I'd never seen it, I knew it stretched for two hundred kilometers and its only infrastructure was the maglev railway, Farside's sole physical connection with the other provinces.

Ghostly by starlight and a gibbous moon, the vast landscape made me dizzy. I wrapped my arms around

Archer's neck as a thread of rationality seeped into my awareness. I was heading into the desert with no food, no water and no destination. My cheeks burned with shame.

"We should turn back," I said.

But Archer tossed his head and shot forward. My journeystone sputtered to life with incoherent signals, sometimes SsLissa's, less often, Pavi's, and beneath theirs, a susurrations like the mingling of hundreds of journeystones. They haunted me, but Archer continued his pace as if he knew where we were going. I reached the railway after two more hours and took its cue to veer north, out of sight of trains traversing the desert in the cool of night, as Arden's had done after the Brandyshine the night before.

When I changed direction, something in the air raised goosebumps on my arms. I saw or imagined fleeting shapes darting among the desert scrubs and rocks. Shadows slid across the ground, but whenever I looked up, there was nothing to see but the moon and stars until three crisp shadows darkened the moon and Archer halted.

I shuddered. And then I recognized SsLissa's starry breast as she descended in front of us alongside CcShirnir and XxRiis. "Will you help us find the Waker?" SsLissa asked. Her song held a tone of formality, but no anger or rancor.

My journeystone grew warmer. "I will help you find the Waker," I said.

"Come with us," SsLissa said, and I wondered if I'd passed some sort of test, because, dear Valor- in-training, SsLissa never called my reckless behavior to account.

I nudged Archer forward, but CcShirnir spread his wings displaying a transport harness spangled to match the camouflage spots on his breast.

“But, Archer!” I protested.

Let him go home, SsLissa linked. Tobin will enfold him.

I dismounted and hugged Archer’s neck. His thrumming skin eased my anxiety. I released him and watched him trot away with his neck and tail high and then I turned to CcShirnir.

Even though my knapsack was pitifully light, containing only a change of clothing and essential items for personal hygiene, I passed it to SsLissa, figuring I was enough for CcShirnir to carry. He knelt and I climbed into the harness. It was snug,—the last time I used it, I wasn’t fully grown. It encased my legs in a net and left my arms free to grasp its straps.

With a grand swoop of wings, CcShirnir carried me to the sky. SsLissa and XxRiis followed.

My journeystone thrummed with the steady links of my triad. As we flew farther into the desert, I sensed other links outside our network, whispering below my threshold to engage: T’holin not beholden to humans, living in the wild T’holin ways, unseen unless it suited them to show themselves.

I began to drowse, but a pang of guilt jolted me alert. Not all T’holin links were part of a network of safety. The triad could not rest, or even relax its wariness, so why should I?

SsLissa clucked to reassure me and I resettled into the cadence of the flight: CcShirnir’s heartbeat, the sigh of wings cutting the air, and the clicks and whistles augmenting the triad’s otherwise silent link-speak. I occasionally grasped an idiom, though, more often than not, I couldn’t follow it at all.

But SsLissa keened suddenly and my journeystone turned cold. My reflexes needed no translation.

The ground careened toward me and I braced as CcShirnir dived behind a cluster of boulders. He spread his wings to cover me, and his heart thumped against my back. In darkness, I couldn't see the threat, nor even confirm that SsLissa and XxRiis were safe. I strained to find their links, but met only random susurrations. Like Pavi's link, theirs were intentionally jammed.

My stump throbbed and the white hot hole in my memory rose without warning.



A chorus of twitters and chirps aroused me to an aroma like pepper and cloves. I stretched my limbs and silky fabric brushed my skin. Maybe it was my imagination, but the fabric seemed to hum, like zyph skin. My eyes opened to dim rosy light.

The smooth wall over my right shoulder was the color of cinnamon, and flowed in a seamless arch from a point over my head too high to see. On my left, the wall seemed far away. Its only feature was a single sconce where a small light glowed.

My bed was on the floor—if I could trust my orientation. A meter away from me, the floor fell away to nothingness.

A high, shrill wail pierced my ear. When it seared my lungs and throat, I realized I was screaming.

My journeystone warmed with SsLissa's link. *Gather yourself. Your presence requires more payment than I can barter.*

My heart sank. Another rebuke from SsLissa. But a flurry of small wings and high pitched voices shortchanged my self

pity. I pulled a tiny T'holin from my hair and swatted another's digits from my breast. A third T'holin child crept up my skirt and a fourth clung to my back.

They whistled and clicked in the wild desert T'holin dialect. "What is it?" "Why is it sleeping on the floor?" "Its head fur is ugly." "It must be hurt. It has no wings." "Is it good to eat?" "No, it's too big. We don't eat anything too big to swallow whole."

A strident whistle marshaled the small flock. The children clambered off me and stood beside my pallet, staring with yellow eyes too large for their heads. Their fox-like ears were flattened in submission to the caretaker's warning, but they trembled with curiosity.

Judging by its size and pale fur, the T'holin that swept into the room was a neuter Enfolder. Its brow ridges were raised and its nictitating membranes half-closed in an involuntary response to a perceived threat.

I bowed, burying my face in the exquisite, fragrant fabric. The Enfolder chittered and shushed the children.

"We want to Maker it," one child said, using the terrifying idiom for dissecting something to learn how it functions. The Enfolder shooed the children from the room and their rustling and skittering faded from earshot.

When the only sound that remained was my own heartbeat, I sat up and looked around. At least I knew I was in a T'holin place.

I reached for SsLissa's link. She glided into the room and stood beside my pallet.

SsLissa has been with me since my birth, but, seeing her in that wild Tholin habitat was like encountering her for the

first time. Her forehead displayed the blue, diamond-shaped Patternbearer signet, but that's not what unraveled me.

I've written and rewritten this passage a hundred times to no avail. Perhaps if you've appreciated the difference between a rose flourishing on the vine and one languishing in a vase, or watched a bird in flight versus staring at a caged one, you might have a pitiful glimpse of a glimpse of a glimpse of what I saw.

In comparison, I shrank from her in my ugliness and incompleteness.

"Let me tend to you, and then you must Cluster with us," SsLissa said, extending an arm. "I will guide you."

I grasped her segmented digits. She pulled me to my feet and we made our way to an alcove with several low, wide trenches and a basin catching water that flowed from a hole in the wall.

"Relieve yourself and wash while we find something suitable for you to eat," SsLissa said.

I could barely piss and it was unthinkable to defecate in the presence of T'holin, whose excrement teemed with healthy microbes and was practically edible. I splashed my face with silky water and fumbled with my hair.

SsLissa grasped my elbow and led me along a ledge wide enough for me to walk with a normal gait if I didn't look down. I kept my eyes forward, where the ledge broadened to a platform spanning several meters. Sunlight filtered through slits well above my eye level.

I was afraid to look higher. For all I knew, the roof of the cavern could be as far away as its base.

Sixteen T'holin sat in a circle in the center of the platform, taking up a fraction of its space, and blue-white patterns

swirled inside the circle with the gathered energy of their journeystones.

I was relieved to see CcShirnir and XxRiis. They scooted aside to make a gap in the circle. SsLissa nudged me inside and took her place with her mates.

I sat on my knees in the center of the space, engulfed in ribbons of light, and I found a small platter holding the Chaalis equivalent of dates and figs, nuts and fruit.

Bow and eat, SsLissa said. The food is costly. So is the energy required to temper the Archive here. You must acknowledge the sacrifice.

I bent from the waist and held the posture for several seconds, and then straightened and took a bite of a date so rich and sweet that my eyes closed as I chewed.

The light fractals flurried.

Your grateful response is adequate, SsLissa said.

The T'holin sat in silence while I finished the meal, but the shifting fractals evidenced their deep engagement.

I swallowed the last bite, and a tall T'holin marked as a Patternbearer spoke aloud.

“Our rook is small in the Unfolding,” she said. “So small you would not find us if you were looking.” She spread her wings and whistled a piercing tone.

I stretched my hands to the floor, palms down and planted my face.

“It’s right for you to hide your face,” the Patternbearer said. “We tolerate you only because the Unfolding brought you with the *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’*.”

The Patternbearer of Patternbearers, I translated, baffled. The dust and sand in the folds of my skirt tickled my nose. I

stifled a sneeze, longing to disappear, afraid if I moved, there would be consequences for SsLissa.

A chorus of hisses erupted around me.

“In another best now, this place resonated with the *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’s* shape path,” SsLissa said. “What changed?”

“We’ve been watching the signs,” the Patternbearer said. “We all suffer the entropy cost of your leadership.”

SsLissa’s leadership...*O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h*. I was glad no one could see my face as the realization washed over me that SsLissa was more than a Patternbearer. She was their leader, in some fashion I would probably never grasp, if the resident Patternbearer’s attitude toward her was any measure.

“The *O’o’o’sl’h* responded to your call to Flock at Farside,” the Patternbearer said, “journeyfolding for an audience of one wing-clipped human. The entropy cost required tapping into the Archive’s reserves, making us more vulnerable than we’ve been since the First Death. And now, your presence draws the Phalanx to our refuge.”

I kept my face down, waiting for SsLissa to respond.

“There are Founders among you,” SsLissa said. “I would demand that you make yourself smaller, but I will tolerate your dissonance for their sake and for the sake of the Unfolding. In fact, I make myself smaller in your presence, so that I might ask you who bore the cost of journeyfolding the Founders from Continuum?”

I had no idea what a Founder was, but SsLissa’s tone implied near reverence.

The air filled with clicks and hisses and then a bass drone rattled the platform.

“The Waker summoned the Founders,” said a deep-voiced male. “The Founders bear the cost. So long as the Unfolding uses the T’hee’xx for its purposes, and so long as we trust that the Unfolding can’t be thwarted, the Founders will bear the cost, because the Waker is on the move.”

“CcT’holner *Lissin W’h’uu*,” SsLissa said. Her voice was muffled, and I suspected she had bowed to the floor. “How could I not know the *W’h’uu* of *W’h’uu* was here? So many broken threads. I should have known the Waker was on the move. I should have expected the Phalanx to reach this far.”

“The depleted Archive has blurred the shape path,” CcT’holner said. “How can we help the *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’*?”

“The rift in the *O’o’o’sl’h’* hampers me,” SsLissa said. “I need its unity to help the Gillis.”

The Gillis. SsLissa used my surname like a title. My stump throbbed and white patches broke up my vision.

Raise your face, SsLissa said.

I straightened. My vision cleared.

SsLissa sat erect.

The links began to chatter in rapid T’holin. I caught a few compound nouns: the terms for the a Patternbearer’s signet, for the distance one could fly without requiring food, for Riffs, for T’holin enslavement and for Rounders. The Advocate was mentioned as symbolically dead, and his heir described as a failed fledgling. The prefix associated with the sex act peppered the exchange. I gave up trying to follow it.

The Patternbearer opened her wings again and the links grew silent, but the light fractals quickened and brightened.

SsLissa moved aside and motioned for me to stand. She and her mates left the circle and I followed them.

“We rest until sundown and then we start the next wing of our journey,” SsLissa said.

“How do we know where to go? What to do?”

“The *O’o’o’sl’h*’ know,” SsLissa said.



To this day, I believe the dates I ate were drugged. I barely remember returning to my pallet after the Cluster, and then SsLissa woke me in darkness. I relied on her superior night vision to direct me to the alcove to relieve myself. From there, we joined CcShirnir and XxRiis.

“There’ll be no link talk tonight,” SsLissa said, as she helped me climb into CcShirnir’s harness.

I already sensed the triad’s dulled signals. “Then how will we follow the *O’o’o’sl’h*?” I asked.

SsLissa threaded her arms into their wing pouches, ignoring me, and led us along the precarious route to the platform where the Cluster met earlier. No T’holin attended our departure. It seemed like a snub to me, but I don’t claim to think like a T’holin.

My triad launched toward the window slits, which seemed too narrow for passage until I realized how far away they were. CcShirnir’s bulk slipped through easily, and he began a quick ascent, brushing my sides with each powerful downstroke of wings, cutting through cool, dry air that stung my eyes.

Strapped to CcShirnir’s breast, I could only see what was directly below me. There was nothing in the landscape to orient me.

The incoherence of the journeystone links was jarring, especially without SsLissa beside me as XxRiis took the middle position in the triad. But the rhythms of CcShirnir's wing strokes and heartbeat helped anchor my senses.

I quieted my mind by studying the shapes among the rock formations, like cloud gazing. I found a troll, an old lady in profile, a baby zyph and a fish.

SsLissa screeched and broke my focus.

XxRiis veered sharply left. SsLissa was not beside her. CcShirnir swooped right and his wings beat a hard ascent. I curled my legs in the net and grabbed the harness straps, expecting him to reverse and begin a nosedive, but my vertical view revealed why he continued to climb.

A chevron of dark T'holin shapes glided at a lower altitude ahead.

CcShirnir continued to rise toward the bright gibbous moon. The stars shined through his wing membranes, and I strained to make sense of the illusion that several layers of his substance had been rubbed away.

I craned my neck to find SsLissa and XxRiis, but red flares splattered the sky and CcShirnir bellowed in pain. The moon and stars spun away and the rocky terrain churned toward me.

I sensed the planet's retrograde motion. There was no sunrise to comfort me with the sense of falling upward. Instead, as I fell, I confronted the absurdity of time, of marking the forward march of hours and days by the planet's backwards spin.

The free fall slowed. I thought my mind was trying to defend itself from the fact CcShirnir and I would hit the

ground before I counted to five, and I cursed SsLissa for teaching me physics.

We did hit the ground, with a bone-jolting thud instead of a splat, landing in deep sand between the baby zyph rock and the fish rock. I dangled from the harness. Blood pooled below me. CcShirnir's breath was ragged at my back.

I struggled to free myself from the harness, looking for the source of the blood.

Where CcShirnir should have been, the harness floated in nothingness. I whimpered and stumbled backward.

CcShirnir whispered, "Shush. I'm here. Look closely."

I took another step back. Shimmers and glints resolved, as if CcShirnir had been extracted from a bubble that retained his shape. I reached for him and tangled my fingers in his fur, as a harsh wail tore at the back of my throat.

"I'm here, too," SsLissa said. "And so is XxRiis. But we need to get you out of sight."

"I don't—I can't—"

"Be still and take my hand," SsLissa said.

The rock that formed the baby zyph's belly was wide enough to hide me in shadow. Fairy lights teased me with hints to my triad's location nearby, but I closed my eyes, preferring darkness. My mind reeled from the strangeness of the T'holin rook we'd just left, from the terror of the Phalanx attack and the plunge toward death, but most ravaging was the truth that my own, dear T'holin triad was something so utterly other.

CHAPTER 4



“To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.” –Soren Kierkegaard

XxRiis clucked and whispered. Flickers of light disclosed her movement and CcShirnir's wound began to knit into a faint white line.

“You'll go on without us,” SsLissa said, from someplace near CcShirnir's right side. “We can't gather food and we must preserve our energy until CcShirnir can travel.” She whistled a low tone, the T'holin equivalent of a sigh. “We are depleted. We failed to best now the need for *sillay*,” she said, using the T'holin word for window.

I couldn't form the questions that swam in my mind. My forehead began to tingle, and my journeystone grew warm.

“Go south, to the railway,” SsLissa said. “You will be walking for two nights more, resting in the day. It is the best now.”

Her words buzzed like hornets, and I shrank against the rock wall.

“Touch your forehead,” SsLissa said.

My fingers slid over my cool, dry skin and encountered a warm, textured patch. “What is this?”

“It is all you need,” SsLissa said.

“You’re sending me into the desert with one empty hand?”

“You have two feet and a brain,” SsLissa said. “And now you have a signet and a journeystone tuned to a frequency only the *O’o’o’sl’h* know.”

“Where were the *O’o’o’sl’h* when the Phalanx attacked? What good are they?”

“Take your anger and channel it for the shape path of your journey,” SsLissa said. I sensed her nearness and groped for her feet, where I settled for a final enfolding.

“I am not sending you to the desert,” she said. “I’m asking you in the name of the Unfolding to go.”

A shiver chilled my spine and my forehead grew warm. “I have a signet?” I asked, as the delayed realization sunk in. “How do I use it?”

“Sparingly,” she said. “It will keep you alive in the desert. Your Journeystone signal will wax and wane, depending on the *O’o’o’sl’h* and their ability to sustain it. Use your wits, attend to your environment, especially to places where negentropy is strong. And use the Discipline.” She tightened her wings. “I will be finding you,” she said, and then released me.



It must have been well past midnight. With the moon shining over my right shoulder and my shadow leaning to my left, I figured I was facing south. I hoisted my knapsack and began to walk, following the high rocky ridge that stretched to the horizon.

The night air was chilly enough to give me goosebumps., especially when I heard the occasional skittering of a nocturnal creature.

I glanced back at my footprints, guessing I was the first human to touch that sand, and then refocused on the way ahead.

The rock ridge provided the only scale to buffer the disorienting vastness of the landscape. After a while, I could tolerate the dizzying sky reel of stars that drew my eyes upward—it reminded me of SsLissa's breast. When a wash of pale blue began to fade the eastern sky, I was surprised how quickly the night had passed.

I acknowledged the first twinges of hunger and fatigue, and wondered how I would find a safe place to rest. Abruptly, my journeystone warmed and my forehead tingled.

A flash of movement near the ledge stopped me in my tracks.

An animal larger than me and tawny as the sand crouched in front of me with flattened ears and bared fangs and hideous tusks. It crept toward me, sniffing, and I froze.

A croy. I quashed the terror invoked by my text-book knowledge of this fierce cousin of the T'holin.

Its pointed snout quivered and touched my foot, inching up my boot-clad calf to my thigh. The animal sniffed at my crotch and its ears perked at my scent. It nuzzled my navel and reared to explore my torso.

My whole body shook and my teeth clattered.

Reaching the level of my journeystone, the croy whimpered and pulled back, but regrouped and stretched its neck to touch my lips with its nose, grazing my neck with the long, curved, bony tusks hanging from its jaw hinge. I comforted myself with the reminder that in some ancestor common to croy and T'holin, the hideous appendages gave rise to T'holin arms.

The croy's golden eyes held my gaze for several seconds before it leaned in, matched its forehead with the signet and backed down.

It rocked on its haunches, raised its nose to the sky and yowled, and then bounded away.

I dropped to the ground and succumbed to the inevitable release of tears, but regrouped. I couldn't afford to squander my body's moisture.

The tip of the croy's tail flicked from behind a rock ahead. My forehead warmed and a beam of light stretched toward the rock like a pointer. I shook the sand from my skirt and followed the light, terrified of this feature of the signet, but unable to resist.

The beam led me to a low cavern, about as long as I was tall. It was empty with a floor of smooth, level sand.

Before I went in, I had the presence of mind to dig a small trough where I relieved myself, pissing a pitiful stream, which I covered with sand.

I wondered how to find water and food, but I was exhausted to the point of not caring.

I plopped down and slipped my knapsack from my shoulders.

A nook at eye level reflected the light. I looked closer and discovered a natural basin of water bordered by succulents with tiny leaves and berries. My forehead warmed and a dancing ring of lights encircled the plants. I sensed they were safe to eat.

I cupped my hand to drink—the water was sweet and soft with minerals—and then plucked some leaves and berries. The tart berries and aromatic leaves soothed my griping stomach and took the edge off my hunger.

With my knapsack for my pillow, I lay down. Before my lids fluttered shut, I thought I glimpsed golden eyes at the door of the cavern.



My forehead tingled and my journeystone warmed. It was a gentle rousing from a sleep untroubled by dreams, and I was grateful.

Before I opened my eyes, I assessed my body: it was hungry and thirsty with sore feet and a warm, low pelvic cramping accompanied by a telltale lethargy.

Of course. My menses was due. I'd packed menstrual cups, but hadn't planned on dealing with them in the desert.

"O'o'o'sl'h," I said aloud, "if you're eavesdropping on my journey, I could use some suggestions."

There was no one to hear me. No eyes peered back at me from the cavern opening.

I preemptively inserted a menstrual cup and drank greedily from the basin before I washed my hands. I devoured more leaves and berries and took a wary step out into the night, where the moon was fuller and the air colder than before.

I tensed at the prospect of trudging on alone, and I considered pausing for my Discipline, but a flash of tail high on the ridge injected a fresh surge of adrenaline. I imagined SsLissa with me, coaxing me to halt the tyranny of my thoughts. That's when it struck me: my stump had not pained me since I set out on the journey. It was curious. But too much had changed for me to speculate on a cause.

Two hours later, the journeystone—or maybe the signet—cued me to rest under a grove of palmetto-like scrubs growing in a breach in the rocky ridge. The plants were heavy with fruit identical to the dates I ate at the Tholin place.

My forehead projected the reassuring beam, and I ate a few of the dates. Strengthened, I went on my way. Occasionally, I glimpsed the croy maintaining a distance of about 15 meters ahead.

Every two hours, I accepted the cue to rest. At the third haven, I found a trickle of water flowing from a crevice, enough for me to rinse the menstrual cup after emptying it deep in the sand.

An animal howled in the distance, and told myself it was just a coincidence and had nothing to do with blood.

I rested for the fourth time in an alcove providing little shelter. I'd been trekking on high alert for eight hours, but there were two more hours before dawn's first blush, so I pressed on, trusting the signet would prompt me when it was safe to take shelter for the day.

The ground ahead rose at a sharp incline. The rock ridge followed the same elevation, giving some assurance that the rise wasn't a sand dune that would swallow me. I took a few cautious steps and began to climb, slipping in the loose sand more than once and skinning my hand. I reached the crest, slightly winded, and paused to catch my breath.

The downslope was vastly longer than the climb. Far below me stretched a plain dotted with scruffy plants. The rock ridge disappeared beneath the sand like the spine of a diving behemoth. There was no shelter in sight.

I sat down and considered sliding down the incline on my bum, when several tawny bodies sailed over my head and a pack of croy tore down the slope. A straggler landed at my feet, grabbed my shirt in its teeth, pulled me down, and began to drag me below the crest.

I kicked and screamed. The croy released me and shoved me with its nose, sending me tumbling nearly to the bottom of the slope, where it kicked sand over me with its hind legs, half-burying my body, and then prostrated itself on my head.

After a few seconds, the gentle sounds of its tattooing heartbeat and panting breath were overpowered by the unmistakable whine of T'holin wings cutting the air, mixed with snarling, bellowing, growling, snapping and yelping laced with harsh clicks, hisses and barely intelligible T'holin curses.

I began to shake. I couldn't imagine wild T'holin attacking the croy. It had to be Phalanx.

The melee quickly faded, replaced by the tympani of down-stroking wings. I could only hope the Phalanx was retreating to the air and not regrouping to strike again.

My captor splayed its legs to cover my body with its patagium, a membrane stretching from its wrists to hind ankles. The position uncovered swollen teats.

After several seconds, the croy jumped up, responding to the whimpers of her pack mates.

I got to my knees, flinging sand from my hair and eyes. The female croy paced a few feet away, whining and casting furtive glances between me and her pack.

One croy loped nearer and touched noses with her. I recognized his golden eyes.

In the faint light below, four more croy circled a fallen one.

My journeystone began to thrum. I yielded to an urge to run toward the pack, as a radiant sphere formed in front of my chest. Obeying an impulse, I thrust my hands into the sphere. It swirled and reflowed around my fingers.

I dropped to my knees beside the wounded animal and guided the sphere to the seared flesh on its flank. The light from the sphere focused and began to knit the wound.

Stunned, I fell backward. The sphere faded as my stump sank in the cool, gritty sand.

The rising sun glinted in the croy eyes facing me. The male from the mated pair sprang forward and touched his forehead to mine, and then scampered away with his partner. As I watched them climb the slope, a cloudy impression of pups in a den formed in my mind. Whether the pups were an image of something real, or were simply the animal's way of telling me I was safe, I grasped a small measure of reassurance.

The remaining croy sprang into motion, pummeling the sand with their front paws. One animal dug until water gurgled up in a slurry. He beckoned me with a piercing gaze and I crawled over to the slurry, pressing my lips to it, discovering I could suck up the moisture and spit out the sand.

I had other needs, but there was no way to make the beasts understand the menstrual cup. I started to empty it into the sand, but one of the croy snatched it up and ran away with it. I inserted the spare.

A small female nuzzled me and I followed her into a trench. She nudged my head until I settled it on her breast

and then she thrust her nose in the air while her pack mate covered us with sand. With my face in her silky fur, I took a few relieved breaths, wishing the beasts could tell me what drew them here, and why they risked their lives to fight off the Phalanx. And then I fell asleep.



The sun was setting when my trench mate stirred and shook the sand from our lair. I drank what I could from the slurry, and ignored my other needs, hoping the journeystone would make some provision for them.

One of the males dropped several objects like puffballs at my feet, and a female deposited a pile of mossy fibers. I sniffed a puffball, and my forehead told me it was safe to eat. I realized the moss could replace the menstrual cup. I used what I needed and stashed the rest in my knapsack.

The animals bounded ahead, staying just within my peripheral vision for the rest of the night. The journeystone prompted me to rest and the animals dug water for me at each stop before resuming their sentinel positions.

After six hours, the animals showed themselves in a line, flicked their tails and ran back in the direction we'd come. Oddly bereft, I turned to watch them until my journeystone nudged me to resume my course.

I trudged on for another hour that seemed like a full day, and came to a rise. Heart pounding, I climbed it, sidestepping in the loose sand. To my relief, the downslope was gentle and at its base, the railway dissected the landscape from west to east. About a quarter kilometer ahead were a shelter and a platform, like a boarding station.

The platform was occupied. With T'holin. They saw me before I could retreat. My journeystone gave me no clues whether they were safe or part of a Phalanx, and there was nothing I could do but approach slowly with my eyes down and my hand extended, palm up.

A large male wearing a blue slave collar and a Maker's harness spread his wings and approached me. My journeystone thrummed in recognition. CcT'holner pressed his forehead to mine. "We've been waiting for you, Patternbearer," he said, in classic T'holin.

I opened my mouth to contradict him, but his digits brushed my lips to shush me.

"The train comes soon," he said, opening a pouch on the harness and pulling out an embroidered band and a Riff. He positioned the band to cover my forehead, and then lifted my hand and placed the Riff in it. "You must step into your Role," he said. "Breathe, Patternbearer."

The journeystone pulsed. "*Ye lelele O'o'o'sl'h' xx haaa*," I answered. "I'm not a Patternbearer," I repeated in Clipped, in case my fragmented T'holin was unintelligible.

"A Patternbearer you are," he said. "And a T'holin-gatherer. A T'holin-gatherer delivering us to Hadera."

His words clattered in my brain.

"Are you understanding my speech?" he asked, switching to Clipped.

"A Rounder?"

"Yes," he said. "We are your Acquisition." He gestured to the other T'holin on the platform.

I count eight. He was the ninth. Three triads.

"Our documents are on the Riff," he said, and showed me how to navigate the touch screen.

"Will the Riff tell me where to go, and when?"

The maglev train's whine drew his attention and he didn't answer. The train came into view and began to brake. A few shoddy passenger cars slid past, but the train didn't stop until a freight car aligned with the platform.

A man in brown coveralls hopped down and appraised us. He pulled out a Riff, and my CcT'holner nudged me forward. I retrieved my Riff, touched the file icon as I'd practiced and presented my Riff to the attendant. He positioned his Riff over mine until a gentle chime satisfied him. Without a word, he gestured for us to board.

It was a tall step for a human, but the T'holin simply sprang into the car. I waited for all nine T'holin to board before I examined the stark interior: a flat-bottomed metal tube lined with vertical bars...cages.

I closed my eyes and took a shuddering breath as the cage doors creaked open.

CcT'holner raised his ears and clucked under his breath for my attention. I mustered a stern expression and shoved his shoulder. "Lead," I said.

CcT'holner led his companions into the cages where they sorted themselves into triads.

"Three hours to Flat Irons," the attendant said in Basic as he locked the cages with a remote electronic key. "Tell your bats to hold their piss and shit," he said. "If you'd rather breathe the same air as a human, I'm not bad company."

"I'll stay with my cargo," I said. "This clutch is putting on a show for you, but I don't trust them out of my sight."

"Have it your way," he said, and opened the connecting door to the next car. He stepped through the door and the train whirled up to speed.

Planting my feet wide to compensate for my one-handed grip on the bars, I looked around for cameras or microphones. I found no obvious signs of them— although they could have been hidden in the window slits high above us or embedded in the rivets.

The train swooped around a curve and CcT'holner slipped his digits through the bars to catch my skirt and steady me.

CcT'holner, the Maker of Makers, wearing a slave collar.

CcT'holner, the Maker of Makers, in a cage in a livestock car on a Parsimony maglev train, headed to Hadera.

The train swayed and whined and rumbled and so did my thoughts.

My journeystone brought no clarity. It was warm beneath my breasts but there was no coherence nor soothing link to Pavi or SsLissa or the *O'o'o'sl'h*. Waning, as SsLissa warned.

SsLissa's wings were not there to enfold me and there was no symbolic stepping stone to show me my path.

The train hurtled forward, against the planet's retrograde motion. Its linear, horizontal orientation defied falling upward.

I was untethered with nowhere to fall.

CcT'holner caught me in his gaze and I couldn't look away. Only SsLissa's eyes had ever pinned me like that. The striated muscles of his irises flowed like molten stars around black holes of dilated pupils. He didn't blink, but his nictitating membranes flashed to moisten his eyes—a stark reminder of the differences in our species and the billions of years of cosmic evolution and millions of years of biological evolution that separated us.

“The stars call you CcT’holner *Lissin W’h’uu*,” I said, in my best attempt at T’holin. “Your name means Bright Winged Male of Gatherer lineage and Maker role.”

“That is the Clipped smallness of my name,” he said.

“SsLissa called you *W’h’uu l’ W’h’uu*. Maker of Makers.”

“Yes,” he said. “I guide the Makers on the shape path, as SsLissa guides the Patternbearers. SsLissa’s mate CcShirnir has maker-ed your journeystone well, Aleya Gillis *O’o’o’sl’h*.”

“I can barely find my own path,” I said. “Why do you call me Patternbearer? Why were you waiting for me? Why are you acting like slaves?”

“Acting?”

I whirled around and sat on the floor with my back to the cold bars, sinking into my misery. My skin crawled with sweat and sand and grime, my teeth were fuzzy from lack of hygiene, my empty stomach griped and churned, my crotch was soggy with menstrual-soaked moss, and my feet burned with blisters. “Just tell me what to do,” I said. “My brain hurts from trying to understand.”

“Do you know the principle of 12?” CcT’holner asked. “It’s six plus four to you.”

“I can’t do base eight, not now.”

“It’s why we’re acting like slaves.”

“I want to understand,” I said. “Just—”

The train lurched to a halt and the attendant burst through the connecting door. “Shit fire,” he cried. “The demons have come for you! Just do whatever they say!” He unlocked the cages and opened the car’s loading door.

I jumped up, clinging to the bars, as three huge T’holin males barged into the car from the outside.

After an involuntary glance at them, I couldn't avert my eyes. They were magnificent, with sleek fur, over-developed muscles and glittering harnesses.

"Rounder," one of them wheezed in Clipped.

The dullness in his eyes quashed my illusion of his physical beauty, and I realized he was Phalanx. "Show the males to me," he said in a flat, sluggish T'holin dialect.

I tilted my head at CcT'holner. He clicked his assent and stepped out of the cage, followed by the other two males.

"Are you Cc'Tholin or T'hee'xx?" the Phalanx leader asked. He reached a gloved hand beneath the furry tuft that hid CcT'holner's genitals and twisted until his arm muscles bulged.

CcT'holner shuddered. His eyes rolled back and he slumped to the floor.

The Phalanx leader appraised the other males. "Rejects," he said. He thrust his digits toward my face. "Good luck getting your price." He turned to the door and led the Phalanx out into the night.

CcT'holner's mates lifted him back inside the cage with the help of the other two males.

"How bad?" I asked in my ignorance of T'holin physiology. I clasped my journeystone and touched my forehead for help, but neither responded beyond a gentle thrum.

"He will be healing," the neuter mate said. "But not in the best now for the estrus coming." The neuter clucked and touched foreheads with the female.

"CcT'holner is truest CcT'holin," the female crooned, emphasizing the word for an adult male. She cradled CcT'holner's head and rocked on her heels.

"Why? Why did they hurt him?" I asked.

“For the Phalanx,” the neuter said. “This is their test. If a male can bear it, they take him.”

“The taken males are cut off from their mates,” the female said. “It is toxic.”

“What happens to their mates?” I asked.

The female whimpered and her nictitating membrane covered her eyes. I didn’t expect an answer.

The neuter T’holin stroked the female’s head. “It is best now for us to rest.”

CcT’holner’s mates distributed his weight in their laps and closed their eyes, and the remaining T’holin settled in their upright sleeping positions.

I sat on the rumbling floor until daylight streamed through the window slits and I started to sweat. Though my senses were dull from lack of sleep, I smelled moisture in the air instead of the sandy aroma of the desert. It was just enough dampness to activate telltale odors of straw and urine from the car’s previous cargos. It was not unpleasant; it reminded me of Archer’s stable.

My head nodded a few times, and I fought sleep, but I must have lost the battle, because a hubbub outside jerked me awake.

The train had stopped. Flat Irons, I guessed.

With my T’holin cargo in a state deeper than sleep, I judged it safe to leave the car and look for a toilet and food and water.

Unsure if I would need the attendant to operate the outside door, I gathered my courage and hit the palm switch. The cargo door slid open, activating a buzzer and a strobe light overhead.

The alarms weren't jarring, however, and my T'holin didn't flinch. I braced for the attendant's response, but he didn't appear, so I climbed out.

The source of the commotion was few cars closer to the train's front, where burly T'holin wearing Phalanx gear tossed pallets of cargo to the ground. Men in orange caftans were shaking their fists and cursing the T'holin in a language I'd never heard.

In search of a way around the chaos, I looked past livestock pens, squat warehouses and outbuildings. Far up the line, a building aligned with the passenger cars gave me hope for amenities. I lowered my head and picked my way through trampled mud and straw.

As I passed the pallets, I recognized the salty, fishy scent of kelp, and chided myself for being so thick-headed. What if the kelp cargo had failed a customs inspection? What if inspectors came to my car while it was unattended?

I hurried on, looking for the public toilet with renewed urgency.

My stomach sank when I found it, along with at least 50 other people in line. When a stall finally became available, I relieved myself and used my last menstrual cup. The queue to the public drinking fountain stretched beyond the platform. I swallowed to coax saliva into my parched mouth and ran back to my car, passing a uniformed man with two Phalanx.

I perched inside the open cargo door and watched them approach. They halted at my car and one of the Phalanx whispered in the man's ear.

The man's unreadable expression faltered for a moment as he looked up at me. "Documents," he said.

I examined the badges and insignia on his uniform. They triggered my synesthesia and became a circle of children dancing around a flame. I shook my head to clear the image and met the man's steady gaze.

He assumed I recognized his authority, but I had no experience judging an imposter from a real customs officer. Wary, I accessed my documents and handed him the Riff. He verified them with his device and returned mine with a curt nod. "You're new?" he asked.

"My first cargo," I said.

"We don't condone what happened in the desert," he said. "This train is a private carrier, and I use that term generously. The Collaborative has no control over its security. Stay inside with your cargo until you reach Fort Cardiff. I've approved your documents all the way to your final destination."

I nodded.

"To be clear, don't let anyone subject you to another checkpoint," he said. "And don't talk to the Scalpers."

Thoroughly confused by the officer's kindness, I watched him move on to the next car, and then resumed my vigil in front of the cages.

My knowledge of Fort Cardiff was limited to the Archive. I had no idea how to recognize a Scalper.



My empty stomach told me I'd missed lunch. Judging from the cooler air and the maglev's reduced speed, I figured we were starting our transit through the mid-continental mountains. Every few minutes, we shot through a tunnel in utter darkness.

CcT'holner's neuter mate was the first to stir from the sleep state. I asked for its name.

"XxRaalis," it said. "I'm a Gatherer by Role, and my pronoun is masculine. Ssuulu is female enough for all of us."

Ssuulu opened her eyes, "You'r confidence is comforting," she said. "I gather your kindness."

"Our Rounder has the scent of one who is ready to mate," XxRaalis said.

CcT'holner lifted his head. "Our Rounder was raised in Farside," he rasped. "Be gentle with your mating talk."

"There's nothing gentle about her circumstances now," XxRaalis said. "Better to be bruised by the truth than crushed by ignorance."

"What is a Scalper?" I asked.

"A person seeking to profit from a Rounder's workload," XxRaalis said. "Scalpers make deals with the Rounders to save them the trouble of delivering their acquisition directly into the hands of their new masters."

"The offer can be tempting," Ssuulu said, "especially to a Rounder making multiple transactions and deliveries."

"Like me?"

"Like you," CcT'holner said. His voice was barely more than a whisper. "Be patient and follow my shape path."

Ssuulu clucked and stroked his head. "Save your strength," she said. "The Patternbearer has a Riff. She should use it."

I fumbled in my knapsack and pulled out the Riff, searching its icons for a clue. "Why would the customs officer warn me about Scalpers?" I asked. "Just two cars away, I saw his T'holin goons throwing pallets of kelp to the ground."

“Don’t be disarmed by his charity,” XxRaalis said. “He has something to gain. Ssuulu is right. Focus on your broker’s instructions. Open the icon that looks like wings.”

“I have a broker?”

“Yes,” Ssuulu said. “Someone whom the *O’o’o’sl’h* trust.”

Reassured that she used the formal name for the Patternbearer Flock, I touched the wing icon, which opened an array of files, including a directional tracker for my delivery destinations and a contact link for the broker

“Is my broker a T’holin?” I asked.

“Brokers are human,” XxRaalis said. “Why do you ask?”

“He has a T’holin name,” I said. “Male with Wounded Left Wing.”

“That’s a curious name for a human,” XxRaalis said.

“Another curious thing,” I said. “We haven’t seen our attendant since Flat Irons.”

“The best now would suggest he was relieved of his duties for putting us in danger,” XxRaalis said.

“I know little about the Phalanx, but I can’t fault him for his actions,” Ssuulu said.

“We’re all on the shape path to learning,” XxRaalis said.

“We settled for a false peace, believing there is nothing beyond Parsimony that the Collaborative cares to enforce. It makes us wonder what is unfolding.”

I struggled to study the Riff files until the next stop, two hours later. My state of stress and exhaustion exacerbated my synesthesia, and the digital characters threatened to overwhelm me with their motives and personalities.

Thankfully, the station break was uneventful. I might have ignored caution and left the car to deal with my hunger and thirst, but XxRaalis kept a stern eye on me.

Late in the afternoon, a new noise began to compete with the unceasing whine of the maglev. It began as a whisper and built to a rushing, pounding roar.

“What’s that?” I cried, wondering if anyone could hear me.

“Glory Falls and the mid continent hydroelectric plant,” XxRaalis keened.

As the train slowed to maneuver a sharp curve, the smell of moisture seeped through the slats of the rail car and the cacophony pummeled my senses. The power of the rushing water tugged at my cells as the train resumed its speed and the falls receded.

Late in the afternoon, the train stopped again. My Riff marked the station as Horizon.

CcT’holner struggled to his feet, against Ssuulu’s protests. The short fur over his brow ridge was spiked, a sign of stress. He touched Ssuulu’s nose with his digits. “Do you smell it?” he asked. She whispered something about the male’s “first smell,” and one of the other males keened, “What died here?”

Outside, someone shouted in a language I didn’t recognize. The clamor of voices and footsteps grew louder and closer, and the language switched to Basic. “Rounder,” said a voice right outside the car. “Open up. I have a deal you can’t refuse.”

I got to my feet, but stood still.

The door began to rattle and the shouting resumed, switching between the regional language and heavily accented Basic. “Open the door. Don’t make me ruin your cargo.”

The T’holin stood motionless with their nictitating membranes fully covering their eyes.

I held my breath, hoping the door would hold, praying there was no way to open it from the outside.

An odor like rotting flesh billowed into the car.

The T'holin began to shudder.

My empty stomach pitched and rolled and I stumbled to a floor grate. I vomited pure bile and then kept retching with dry heaves. My throat burned and I clasped my stomach.

The reeking air thickened like fog.

I crawled back to the cages, holding my breath and sitting with my head between my legs. When I could muster the strength, I looked up toward the window slits for a way to open them wider.

XxRaalis had the same idea. He stretched to his full height and extended his arms with their long digits to crank one of the windows.

The stream of tepid air did nothing to dilute the stench. My eyes still stung and the stink clung to my nostrils and throat.

"We're covered in it," I said. "Our hair and fur. My clothes." My stomach was still in knots, and my heart seemed to sink into it. My cargo was ruined. I couldn't do anything right. If this was my path to the Waker, I'd already failed.

For the first time since my triad evaded the Phalanx, my stump began to throb and my vision burned with the white-hot hole in my memory.

CcT'holner reached for me and stroked my head. "You were right to ignore the Scalper," he said.

I received his comfort and wracked my mind for options. "The next stop is Fort Cardiff," I said. "The least I can do is warn the broker before we get there."

I touched the communication link, unsure how it operated.

“Just start talking,” XxRaalis said. “Your voice will activate it. But use Basic. It doesn’t recognize Clipped.”

“Cargo is damaged by Scalpers,” I said slowly, and then with more confidence: “Covered with a smell like something that died. One male is compromised by Phalanx. Please advise.” I pressed the transmission icon and the Riff pinged confirmation.

The activity drained my last reserves and I began to shake. I put my head between my legs as the minutes dragged on. Finally, the Riff pinged again. I groped for it and found it on the floor beside me.

The screen was bright with lines of text written in Basic. The letters swam in my vision, competing for my favor, and I swiped my forehead in frustration. My brow was hot and dry. “CcT”holaaxx will meet you at Fort Cardiff platform,” I read slowly. “Don’t open the cargo door until your Riff confirms his arrival and his identity.”

My brain clanged with alarms.

“The *O’o’o’sl’h* trust him,” XxRaalis said. “So should we.”

CHAPTER 5



“I speak without knowing it. I speak with my body and I do so unbeknownst to myself. Thus I always say more than I know.” –Jacques Lacan, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore

My shakiness was not just from hunger. It came in waves like chills. I held on to the Riff and watched its directional tracker follow our progress toward Fort Cardiff, which was less than an hour away.

The graphics displayed Fort Cardiff as a huge complex surrounded by walls, and marked some of its locations with tiny icons of the Advocate’s seal.

When the train whined to a stop, my heart started to race. The hubbub of the other stations was absent. My mind filled the void with random images like fever dreams. After ten long minutes, the clomp of boots on pavement roused me, along with deep voices. Human voices.

The Riff pinged with a message. “CcT’holaaxx has arrived. Open the cargo door.”

Fighting light-headedness, I got to my feet and assessed my T’holin cargo. If not for their stench and CcT’holner’s unsteadiness, they could pass as intact.

XxRaalis and Ssuulu slipped their arms under CcT’holner’s wing pits to support him.

The Riff pinged again, more stridently.

A sinking realization stole over me. Without an attendant, I had no access to the cage doors' electronic locks.

I straightened my hair and clothing as if I could make myself presentable and palmed the door switch.

It opened with the buzzing alarms and strobe lights, and early twilight seeped into the car, silhouetting four men. One man climbed inside the car wearing a full mask of stitched leather that appeared to be more disguise than protection from the odor.

"CcT'holaaxx at your service," he said. "Present your Riff for confirmation."

My mind was playing tricks on me: the muffled voice sounded familiar. With a trembling hand, I presented the Riff.

CcT'holaaxx steadied the Riff until the devices pinged in unison. Keeping his eyes on me, he addressed the men outside. "Unlock my cargo," he said.

"But I don't have a mask," said a man wearing a railway attendant uniform.

"Not my problem," CcT'holaaxx said. The more he talked, the more my mind wanted to believe I was hearing Davin's voice.

CcT'holaaxx hopped out of the car and the railway attendant hoisted himself inside, covering his mouth and nose with an elbow as he clicked the electronic fob. He bolted from the car as soon as the cage swung open.

Stepping shakily from the cages, the T'holin hobbled out the door. When they were safely on the platform, CcT'holaaxx extended his hand to help me exit.

My feet hit the hard surface and I fell against him until the ground stopped swaying, and then raised my head and

stepped back to see concrete walls framing a passageway extending in both directions, illuminated only by the dusky sky.

The railway attendant was nowhere in sight, but there were two other men standing with CcT'holaaxx, both wearing high-grade masks and uniforms with heavily ranked shoulder marks.

One of the men pulled out a Riff and scanned the T'holin collars, pausing at CcT'holner's. "This is the male we ordered for his size and strength," he said. "Pity. We have no use for him now. We can't accept him."

"As I anticipated," CcT'holaaxx said. "Does another of these triads suit your purposes?"

The man shook his head. "T'holin like him don't come along very often without being recruited for other duties. But, I suppose we can always use more scullery slaves. I'd be willing to take one of the other triads so your loss isn't total."

"My loss is no concern," CcT'holaaxx said. "The Advocate will recover it from this pitiful excuse of a rail company. Make me a reasonable offer for another triad and I'll consider it."

The officer stroked his mask-covered chin. "The Guard will pay a half garner," he said. "Although the discount will barely offset the cost of removing the stench. Either triad will do. If you've seen one triad, you've seen them all."

"A half garner is fair," CcT'holaaxx said. "If the Rounder condescends to the arrangement."

A half garner was more money than I'd ever seen, but I even in my foggy state, I sensed CcT'holaaxx's disdain. "I accept," I said. "I'll work out the difference with CcT'holaaxx, now or in some future transaction."

In a flurry of Riff pings, the deal was finalized.

The chosen triad glided away with the soldiers. I keened an involuntary lament. CcT'holaaxx watched until they blended with the shadows, and then he motioned to me. "Let's get going."

After a few steps, CcT'holner's legs buckled. CcT'holaaxx helped catch him and ease him to the ground. "Hold him while bring up the carrier," he said.

The T'holin moved closer to CcT'holner. I tried to help, but a wave of chills cramped the muscles in my arms and thighs. The ground seemed far away. My head was a chunk of wood and my eyeballs ached. Just when I thought I should lay down on the pavement, a runabout approached in the passageway, towing a covered trailer.

CcT'holaaxx climbed out and helped support CcT'holner while the T'holin lifted him into the trailer. He told the T'holin to sit in the middle and try to distribute their weight evenly. "I'm sorry I can't rearrange the transactions to get this one the attention he needs," he said, as he watched the T'holin settle CcT'holner. He turned to me. "Are you coming, Rounder?" he asked and trotted to the passenger side of the runabout to open the door. "Get in."

I complied as fast as I could move, suppressing a chill and staring ahead as CcT'holaaxx's finger hovered over the ignition button. Instead of pressing it, he unlatched his door, ripped off his mask and fell to his knees outside the runabout.

Davin.

He disgorged his stomach contents and then succumbed to dry heaves. For a long moment, he sat with his head between his legs and then got to his feet and slid back into his seat, resting his cheek on the steering bar. "I'm surprised I held it

so long,” he rasped. “It smells worse than death. The rumors don’t do it justice.” He raised his head and looked at me. “Do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into? Are you trying to get yourself killed? What are you doing posing as a Rounder?”

I raised my left arm and covered my eyes as if to shield myself from his questions. My right hand fumbled to my sternum to touch my journeystone. Its thready response cleared my head a bit, but there was no link to SsLissa or Pavi. Pavi’s absence was as palpable as my amputated limb, prompting me to wonder why Davin was alone.

“Where is Arden?” I asked. “Who’s guarding him?”

Davin glared at me and pressed the ignition.

The passageway was barely wider than the runabout. I flinched and closed my aching eyes until we passed Fort Cardiff’s exit checkpoint.

The road followed the coastline. Beyond a border of tropical foliage and fern-like trees on my right was the beach. The last orange ribbon of sunset glinted on the Gulf of Danladi. The view on my left was more trees and bushes, but straight ahead was the city skyline with the Capitol wall at its center. I gasped at its grotesque beauty.

A rush of adrenaline fueled my delayed retort to Davin’s questions. “Why are you pretending to be a slave broker?”

He didn’t take his eyes off the road. “What makes you think I’m pretending?” he asked.

Davin’s response uncannily mirrored CcT’holner’s. He replaced his mask “I am CcT’holaaxx now,” he said. “Try not to think of me as Davin Roan, do you understand?”

I shivered and turned away from him, looking out the window to stop my thoughts from careening off a cliff of uncertainty.

After a half hour, the road curved to bypass the city. It followed an ivy-covered wall for several kilometers, until a checkpoint blocked our way.

Another chill shook me while a Phalanx guard processed CcT'holaaxx's Riff.

"You're clear to the Manse," guard said.

The runabout passed through security arms and then several barred gates before the road continued beneath a canopy of trees opening to a large, stone mansion.

"I'll try to salvage this transaction," CcT'holaaxx said as he parked. "Do your Rounder thing. I'll handle your Riff."

A white-haired woman came out to meet us, glowering over a filter mask. "CcT'holaaxx," she said. It was not question, but CcT'holaaxx tipped his head and said, "It is I."

"Obviously," the woman said. "Under these circumstances, the Lady would have cancelled this transaction for any other broker." She presented her Riff. "But for you, I was able to persuade her to accept the new offer. You understand how this puts my situation at risk? She attached conditions for your contract. Severe conditions. And if the T'holin don't work out...it will be up to me to..."

CcT'holaaxx lowered his chin and nodded. He touched his Riff, and mine pinged with updated files.

"This Rounder is new?" The woman asked.

"My sources trust her," CcT'holaaxx said. "To her credit, she kept her head during a Phalanx attack."

The woman turned to me. "Do you accept our offer?" she asked.

I opened the files and pretended to understand them. “I accept,” I said, handing my Riff to CcT’holaaaxx, who finalized the transactions and returned the device.

He helped the T’holin climb out of the trailer and presented them to the woman. “I know you’ll take good care of them,” he said.

She pinched her nose through her mask and looked the T’holin up and down. “If scrubbing the stench off them doesn’t wear out their fur, they should do,” she said.

“They’ll have to do,” CcT’holaaaxx said. “T’holin will be hard to come by until the supply line can be secured.”

“I’m not sure any of us is willing to pay the price for that,” she said, and led the T’holin into the cottage.

CcT’holaaaxx sat with his hand on the steering bar. He let out his breath. “That went better than I hoped,” he said, “considering where we are. Do you have any idea what just happened?”

I shook my head.

“This is the Chancellor’s private residence,” he said. “Nothing happens in the Collaborative without Stellan Leander’s stamp.”

My foggy brain slogged with questions. “You’re handpicking T’holin for the Chancellor? For Fort Cardiff? How can they not know who you are? Is this a spy ring? Are you assassins? Martyrs?” I remembered CcT’holner’s remark about the Principle of 12. “I’ve messed up the plan, haven’t I?” The rant drained me and I shivered.

“The proof is in the final transaction,” CcT’holaaaxx said. “I have to get you and your T’holin cleaned up for inspection. The Complement never trusts her acquisitions to her servants.”

The Complement. I stared at CcT'holaaxx, dumfounded.



Darkness had settled by the time we passed the last security checkpoints. My chills intensified and I huddled in the far corner of the bench, hoping CcT'holaaxx wouldn't notice.

He kept his attention on the road and then parked the runabout in front a row of plain buildings.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Honor guard barracks," he said. "The Chamberlain is sympathetic and allowed me to secure them for your privacy."

His earnest tone implied I would understand the duties of honor guards and chamberlains and appreciate his efforts. "I'll take you to the showers and find some kind of clothes for you to change into," he said.

I nodded. It would be pointless to confess that I'd never used a shower.

"But first," CcT'holaaxx said, "I need to turn these T'holin over to my aides."

I shivered as the cool night air crept into the runabout. Perhaps a shower would cure me of my misery. CcT'holaaxx gave instructions to someone out of sight and then he opened my door.

"Follow me," he said, leading me into the building through a side door.

I shielded my aching eyes from bright light glaring off white tiles. CcT'holaaxx pointed to a bank of open stalls. "Pile your clothes and knapsack out here on the floor," he said. "If you trust me with your Riff, I'll take it now so it won't get wet."

“It’s in the knapsack,” I said.

He cast a wary look at the bundle.

“I’ll get it for you,” I said.

CcT’holaaaxx tucked the Riff into his jacket. “I’m going in search of something for you to wear—pajamas, underwear, I don’t know,” he said. “Soap is dispensed by that button between the shower handles. Towels are on the shelf. Before I come back, I’ll warn you in time to cover up.”

As CcT’holaaaxx’s footsteps receded in the hollow space, I stared at the nearest stall, and then fiddled with the two handles in the wall. I was rewarded with a trickle of cold water from the shower head. It should have been easy to remember which direction opened and shut the flow, but it took several tries for me to get a mix at the proper temperature, and the struggle left me shaky.

I stripped off my clothes. I hadn’t changed the menstrual cup since Flat Irons and it had overflowed into the moss lining of my underwear. I removed the menstrual cup and emptied it into the drain, and then rinsed it and inserted it again.

I straightened to look for the soap dispenser. My head seemed to float away from my body and the white tiles in front of me dissolved.



“Aleya.”

Still floating, I heard my name. My back was resting on something hard.

“Aleya Gillis!”

I opened my eyes and flinched at the bright light. A patchwork of stitches hovered near my face.

“Aleya, did you hit your head?”

CcT'holaaxx's mask came into focus. "Did you hit your head?" he asked again, moving two fingers in front of my eyes.

I tracked his fingers and struggled to lift my neck. My hand fluttered to my chest where I found a rough, damp cloth.

"There was blood," he said. "I thought you hit your head. Can you sit up?"

I nodded.

He eased me to the floor and helped me sit cross legged. I saw blood smearing the inside of my thighs.

"Lean forward with you head between your legs," Davin said. "I need to step away. But I'll be right back."

I hung my head, dizzy and ashamed. I didn't realize he'd returned until his hands slipped under my armpits as he hoisted me to my feet and tucked a towel around me.

He'd stripped and wrapped a towel around his waist, and my eyes were level with his bare chest.

My sternum began to buzz and I laid my ear on his chest. A journeystone. My fingers fluttered to touch it.

CcT'holaaxx pressed his hand over mine and then placed it on the towel between my breasts.

Speechless, I looked up at him.

"We've been hiding a lot from each other," he said, with a flash of direct eye contact through the mask. "I covered you as soon as I could." His gaze moved to my forehead and he tucked a finger under the headband. "This is beautiful," he said, and pulled the band off my head, "but it has to go."

He tossed the band aside and gasped at the signet, taking my face in his hands. "What?" His voice caught. He released my face and touched the patch on my brow. "How? When?"

He leaned in to press his forehead to mine. "Patternbearer," he whispered.

"But I'm not," I said.

"Cinaia will be the judge of that," he said, pulling away. "Hold on to your towel and turn your back. Tilt your head toward me." He shielded my eyes with one hand and aimed the shower head at my hairline, moving it away from my face to spray my head. Water ran down my back in a warm stream.

CcT'holaaxx hung up the shower head and massaged my scalp with soap scented like cloves and nutmeg. "Sorry to make you smell like the honor guard," he said. "But it's definitely an improvement." He rinsed my head and then soaped and rinsed it again. "Now, your back," he said. "Hold tight to your towel."

He finished and turned me around. "A final rinse and we're done," he said, reaching for the shower head.

My towel slipped to the floor. I gasped and CcT'holaaxx pulled me close, covering me with his body. I threw my arms around his waist and my stump sank into the small of his back.

His heart thumped in my ear and I breathed his scent as his chest rose and fell against my breasts.

"You're so warm," he said, and then stepped back and stooped to pick up the towel. Without another word, he rewrapped it and secured my grip on it before he retrieved the shower head to rinse me.

He grabbed a dry towel from the shelf and wrapped it around me. "I think you should sit while I get dressed," he said. He eased me to the floor and left.

When he returned, he offered me a plain, muslin tunic and drawstring pants to wear. He turned away while I put them on, and then helped me cinch the pants, which swallowed me, and twisted a towel on my head as a turban. He collected my belongings and stashed them in a sack.

We walked outside and he offered his arm to lean on. The damp air was chill on my skin, but it was warm in my nostrils and smelled humid.

CcT'holaaxx settled me into the runabout.

Dizzy, I leaned against the back of the bench as the vehicle followed the curves of a narrow lane and came to a stop.

CcT'holaaxx tucked two fingers under my chin and turned my face to his. "I doubt you want to meet Cinaia wearing a towel on your head," he said. "I have some practice with long hair."

I nodded. He leaned closer to unwind the turban, and raked my damp hair with gentle fingers before gathering it into a loose knot. He secured the arrangement with a leather thong and deftly loosened a few strands to frame my face.

"Let's go introduce the Patternbearer to the Complement," he said.

CHAPTER 6



“The doctrine of foods is of great ethical and political significance. Food becomes blood, blood becomes heart and brain, thoughts and mind stuff.” – Ludwig Feuerbach

The stone walkway was cool beneath my feet. I almost obeyed an urge to lie down and rest my cheek against it as waves of chills gripped my muscles, ringing in my ears and clattering my teeth.

CcT'holaaxx pressed his palm against his journeystone. He halted, as if listening. “Change of plans,” he said after several seconds and scooped me in his arms. “Cinaia will meet us in the infirmary,” he said. “A physician is already there, tending the injured T'holin.”

I rested my hand on his chest. His journeystone was warm. “The T'holin's name is CcT'holner,” I said. “Bright-winged male. It would be a good name for you. Better than CcT'holaaxx.”

“Shush,” CcT'holaaxx said. “Save your strength.”

“Why did you choose that name? What do you know about a broken left wing? I should be CcT'holaaxx.” I laughed. “Wrong gender. I should be SsT'holaaxx.” A sob welled up, burning my throat and eyes. “I don't want to meet Cinaia like this. I want her to think I'm strong and smart and worthy to guard the Waker.”

CcT'holaaxx halted and shifted my weight, pulling me so close his lips touched my ear. "Shhh," he said. "The fever is talking."



CcT'holaaxx carried me through a blur of softly lit corridors into a bright room filled with chirping and pinging and whirring.

"Bring her here," a female voice said.

CcT'holaaxx lowered me onto a bed with white rails and a glowing light above the headboard.

A woman's face with a furrowed brow and soft brown eyes leaned over me. "I'm Dr. Vancyn," she said. "You're very ill. But I do need your consent to treatment."

I looked up at CcT'holaaxx. "You said to-to—hold my tongue," I stammered.

"It's all right," he said. "Just squeeze my hand if you agree." He slipped his hand under mine.

"Now, sir, you need to trust her to our care," the physician said.

CcT'holaaxx left and a young man replaced him at the bedside.

"My assistant will check your vital signs and start some fluids," the physician said, "and then I'll examine you."

The assistant swiped my forearm with something cool. I closed my eyes while he inserted a needle and attached some tubing. He withdrew blood into a syringe and flushed the tubing, hung a bag of liquid. He wrapped a band around my left arm that inflated until it pinched and made my pulse pound. He announced a string of numbers and stepped away.

The physician pressed a stethoscope to my abdomen, and then rolled me on my side and held the cold instrument to my back. "I know you're weak, but I need to ask you some questions," she said. "When was your last menstrual period?"

"Now," I said.

"When did it start?"

"I don't know," I said, as another chill wracked me. "Two or three days ago."

"What are you using for hygiene?"

I described the menstrual cups and the moss. "But then I couldn't leave the train," I said through my clattering teeth.

The physician's face puckered and she told the assistant to fetch a pelvic exam kit.

She was gentle when she removed the menstrual cup.

"I think we caught this before full blown sepsis," she said. She rattled off a list of instructions to the assistant and he left.

"I'm giving you antibiotics and something to help you rest," the physician said. She placed my fingers on a soft pad built into the side rail. "Press here if you need anything."

I sank into a floating state, like falling upward.

Sometime later, I awoke to gentle tugs at my hair. A woman with a crown of reddish braids was leaned over me, fanning my hair on the pillow.

The woman began to stroke my forehead. "Aleya Gillis," she said. "I'm Cinaia. I knew your mother. And your father. And your T'holin."

I reached for her hand and looked into her hazel eyes.

"But we must not speak of it here," she said. She slipped a band made of soft cloth onto my forehead, the same blue as the Patternbearer patch. "It's a shame to hide the signet," she

said. “You’re the first, you know. The first human Patternbearer.”

“That can’t be,” I said.

“But it is,” she said. “Rest in that truth. We need you returned to full strength as soon as possible.”



Something nudged me toward wakefulness: a small sound or a change in the light, or both, but my eyelids resisted opening. I moved my arms over cool sheets as subdued hums and whirs reoriented me to my surroundings, and opened my eyes to a large T’holin silhouette.

The light framing the T’holin came from a window at eye level, a stark reminder that I was far from the Fold.

The T’holin’s presence made SsLissa’s absence more palpable.

The T’holin whistled a greeting. “It is I, CcT’holner,” he said. “How are your wings?”

I raised my arms, but they were heavy, so I let them drop. “Still tethered,” I said, fingering the tubing attached to the needle in my left arm.

“The healer is freeing me,” CcT’holner said.

The remark uncorked memories of the Phalanx’s cruelty, of the train trip, of slave collars and Fort Cardiff and brokerage deals and Davin—CcT’holaaxx holding me naked in the shower.

Of a woman who called herself Cinaia. But that was probably a dream.

I touched my forehead. The cloth band was real.

“Are you better, then?” I asked, cautiously.

“We won’t speak of that,” he said.

Cinaia had said something similar. “What can we speak of here?” I asked.

“That’s why I must help you use the signet.”

I reached under the band to touch the patch on my forehead. “I think it’s broken,” I said. “Or maybe I’m not worthy of it.”

“You were too ill,” CcT’holner said and launched into a description of the signet’s technology, beyond my grasp of T’holin.

After his third attempt, I interjected in Clipped, “So, it works with neural pathways and requires a lot of metabolic energy?”

“That and more,” he said. “It takes practice, like the journeystone.”

“And you can teach me? Even though you’re not an Enfolder?”

“I’m a Maker,” he said.

“An engineer?”

“There’s more to Making than making. There’s imagining and planning...”

“You’re a designer, too,” I suggested. “But, if the signet is just technology, why is everyone acting like I’m special?”

“It is not just technology. But, right now, neither of us is strong enough for that conversation.”

“I need SsLissa,” I said.

“The Founders need you,” he said.

“But, I’m needed...someplace else.”

“There is no need outside the shape path of the Founders’ summons,” he said.

Dr. Vancyn appeared at the bedside. “Time to get out of bed and sit in a chair,” she said.

CcT’holner retreated. “I’ll find you when the healer frees you,” he said.



I searched the Archive for a reference to the Founders, encountering a blank wall of resistance that exhausted me.

Later that afternoon, the health assistant pulled the intravenous line and brought me porridge to eat.

On my first trip to the toilet, I mustered the courage to look at my face in the mirror above the sink. My lips were still cracked and peeling. My cheekbones seemed sharper and my eyes bigger, ringed with dark circles. I lifted the headband to examine the signet, a shimmering gray-blue diamond in the center of my forehead. A shiver ran through me as I touched it.

During long stretches of solitude, I napped and looked out the window. My mind flitted from one unanswered question to another, like a moth avoiding the flames in a roomful of candles. I fought panic every time I confronted my failure to guard the Waker.

After my first meal of solid food—a stew of lentils and vegetables—I felt strong enough to ponder the improbable odds of landing in the Capitol of Hadera, not as a bewildered vagrant, but as a guest in the care of The Complement.

Such was my state of mind when Cinaia pulled up a stool beside me.

“Do you mind if I sit with you a while?” she asked, as if I could refuse her. “I’m sorry I haven’t been back to see you.” She folded her hands in the gathers of her skirt and regarded me until I shifted my gaze, uncomfortable. “Dr. Vancyn is

releasing you into my care tomorrow,” she said. “While you recover, I hope to get to know you better. I assume you’re familiar with the T’holin method of pedagogy? Of course you are. You understand there are things I can’t tell you explicitly. Things you must learn through observing, to reach your own conclusions and solutions.”

I pushed my food around in its bowl.

“Aleya, look at me,” Cinaia said.

I met eyes warmed by gold flecks. Tiny lines feathered their corners. Cinaia was just a few years older than my mother would be, I realized with a twinge. What would it be like to have a mother’s love?

“The method constrains me, too,” Cinaia said. “I have questions that I don’t dare ask you. The strain is wearing on me, so forgive me if I seem harsh.” She sighed. “In the meantime, you need to build up your strength. Can you finish the last bites of stew?”

I was full, but I finished the food and she took the tray.

“Sleep well,” she said.

The next morning, Dr. Vancyn woke me just past dawn. “Listen to the staff and don’t balk at orders to eat and rest,” she said. “There are those among us who will help you with other disciplines, too. Accept their wisdom.”



My hand trembled as I examined the clothing laid out for me. Its style was not so different from my old things, but the quality and workmanship were superior. The undergarments fit like they’d been tailored, although crossing the camisole under my breasts for support took a few tries. I tucked the sheer blouse into a gray riding skirt with deep pockets and

sat on the bed to put on soft leather boots the color of walnuts.

While I pushed my right foot into the boot, I steadied the boot shaft with my stump and applied my hand to the pull strap. I was in the middle of the process when Cinaia swooped in and knelt to help.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I’m used putting on my own boots.” I stood up and brushed a stray lock from my face. “I could use some help to braid my hair, though.” I swallowed the pang of Pavi’s absence.

Cinaia put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “It’s nice the way you’re wearing it now, parted in the middle and loose, especially with the band.”

I flushed with the memory of the Cataclysm dance. “Braids are more practical,” I said, twisting a tress that draped my shoulder. “But, if you think it’s all right, I’ll leave it undone.”

Cinaia smiled as if it was settled. “The staff has prepared a breakfast,” she said. “Everyone wants to meet you. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it brief so we don’t wear you out.” She extended her right elbow and I rested my stump on her arm as she guided me through a long, window-lined corridor.

“The skywalk would be a lovely place for you to spend time while you recover,” Cinaia said, gesturing to benches spaced under the windows for viewing a flower and vegetable garden below.

She pushed open a large double door and we entered a room filled with natural light gleaming on a polished terrazzo floor.

At the front of the room was a table laden with blossoms and greenery and platters of food where humans and T’holin

were gathered. Shyness threatened to overwhelm me until a face I recognized gave me a safe place to rest my eyes:

Davin, wearing a puffy white hat and a smock. He took my hand and turned to Cinaia, whose mouth gaped in surprise.

“Don’t worry, my lady, ” he said, pointing to Arden, who dashed to Cinaia’s side and doffed his own toque.

“As you can see, we came in with the helpers,” Arden said. He pecked Cinaia’s cheek. “As if this is the first time we’ve desecrated the women’s wing.”

“You’ll be the death of me,” Cinaia said.

Cinaia introduced me to three Tholin triads and at least a dozen human women whose ages ranged from teens to grandmothers. They wore their hair in intricate braids or flattering coils, and their simple dresses fit gracefully, blooming with vibrant colors. The modesty code: high necklines, long sleeves, ankle-length hems, failed to dampen the women’s innate beauty. In fact, I was so distracted by them, so puzzled about their roles, that I startled when Davin pulled out a chair for me at the nearest table.

“I’ll get your food,” he said. “I’ll just give you a bit of everything.”

Cinaia leaned in and whispered to him, “I know you’re relieved to see Aleya up on her feet. But, please respect your place.”

Davin flushed and looked to Arden.

Arden sighed in Cinaia’s direction. “Yes, please serve us, Lt. Roan,” he said, so everyone could hear. “And then be At Ease and sit with us.”

Davin brought our food and took the seat across from me. His gaze flickered my way and then he sat looking straight

ahead with his hands in his lap until Cinaia took her first bite.

I couldn't eat much, but the savory food settled well.

Cinaia addressed the woman seated across from her. "This is a lovely breakfast, Cilia," she said. "And you managed it on top of your responsibilities for tonight."

Cilia's hands moved as she replied, "The preparations for the quarterly dinners are so routine," she said, "and besides, I have help." She nodded to a T'holin by her side.

The female T'holin traced the air with her digits, and the woman's fingers mirrored the gestures, as if they were using a sign language. It was elegant, and knew I would learn it quickly if I could watch undistracted.

"SsWaaluu has a question for you, Rounder," Cilia said.

I turned to SsWaaluu and noticed for the first time she, along with the other T'holin, wasn't wearing a slave collar. "I will gather my thoughts for the best now," I sang in classic T'holin, hoping my west highland accent wouldn't make her suspicious of my true origins.

SsWaaluu's nictitating membranes flashed as she processed my response and then her ears perked and the corners of her mouth turned up in a joy response. "Your song glows in my ears," she sang in a quicker tempo, signing simultaneously. "I speak the southern dialect and rarely use the Founders song. Query. Did the Brave One at the Chancellor's nook flinch at the sight of the wild T'holin?"

I knew I was missing some deep context the question, and I was thrown off by her reference to the Founders's song. But, according to the T'holin way, it would be rude for me to ask for clarification. I could only guess that the Founders's song was classic T'holin, and the Brave One was the woman who

accepted the desert T'holin on behalf of the Chancellor's Lady.

"The Brave One did not flinch," I said. "I guessed that wild T'holin had been on her shape path before," I ventured.

SsWaalu rotated her chin in the T'holin "no." "We are unschooled," she said. "We gather your extraordinary kindness for bringing Ssuulu and CcT'holner and XxRaalis to teach us." Her pitch and tempo rose slightly. "The shape path for the wild T'holin's best now is urgent and the Brave Ones must be trained—"

Cinaia touched my hand. "You'll meet Lady Ria Leander tonight," she said. "You can tell her how much we all appreciate her Valor's handling of the wild T'holin."

The meal continued with polite chatter. I tried to follow its threads, but I was too distracted by what was not said. Suddenly weary, I was relieved when Cinaia rose and thanked everyone for coming.

Arden and Davin rose to help gather the plates.

Cinaia took Arden's hands. "I'll see you at the dinner tonight," she said, and then she helped me to my feet. "This way," she said, and led me out the door and into a corridor that branched from the skywalk.

We passed several doors, all painted white, with brass plates numbered in both base 10 and base 8. Cinaia unlocked door 17/21. It opened to a room with soft blue walls and creamy accents, furnished with a bed, a chair, and chest and a table. Its one large window overlooked the garden.

"I think you'll find everything you need," Cinaia said. "The clothing and toiletries may not be to your taste, and I apologize."

She opened a drawer and pulled out the Riff. “I’ve installed some new files that might interest you,” she said. “You can explore them while you wait. My T’holin will tend to you for the rest of the day.”

I chewed my lower lip to keep from asking her more questions.

“I’ll be back in time to help you dress for the banquet,” she said.

Cinaia left and I stood in the middle of the room, alone, feeling the planet rotate under my feet, wishing I could manipulate its path and return to the day of the Brandyshine before I lost Pavi, before I lost SsLissa.

I touched the journeystone beneath silky fabric of my blouse, but it brought no comfort.

Opening more drawers, I found undergarments, dresses, skirts and blouses and sleepwear. Behind a sliding door was a closet where a robe, a large-brimmed hat, an outdoor wrap and a long formal dress were hung.

Another door opened to a tiny room with a sink, a toilet and shower. There was no adjoining door. Apparently, the facility was just for me.

I examined my face in the mirror hanging above the sink and discovered the circles under my eyes weren’t as dark as before, and my lips were healing.

I returned to the room and tested the upholstered chair. It was comfortably firm, so I retrieved the Riff and curled up in to explore the files Cinaia had installed: music and moving images of people and T’holin dancing, a map of the Capitol, and news articles, but nothing about sign language or women’s roles.

“This is not the best now for reading the news articles,” said T’holin voice.

I looked up to see XxRaalis.

He seemed larger than I recalled, and his pale fur shimmered in the natural light of the room. His arms were tucked into the wing pouches.

“I came to see that you have all you need,” he said. “If not, I will Gather for you.”

“I wish someone could help me gather my thoughts,” I said.

“CcT’holner will sit with you and Maker your thoughts,” he said. “We will each take our turn with you. In time, Ssuulu may enfold you. In time. Enfolding is not a light thing. Ssuulu is not SsLissa.”

XxRaalis extracted his arms, opened the closet and brought out the hat and the wrap. “We will walk in the garden.”

“Why do I need these?” I asked as I put them on.

“Sun protection,” he said. “We are close to the equator.”

He adjusted the wrap to cover my neck. “Find your first Node,” he said. “We will Descend into silence.”

My dear Initiate, if you are anything like me, you balked at the first Node when you were first learning the Discipline because it seemed completely counterproductive to a contemplative practice. At least I knew at this point that there was no use arguing with XxRaalis or explaining that my mind was already stuck in the first Node’s disorganized state.

“Use this session to explore your surroundings with me at your side, without the strain of conversation,” XxRaalis said.

We took a stairway to the main floor. It opened to a corridor with the same blue walls and white trim I’d come to

expect in this wing of the complex. I didn't see any people or T'holin, but I heard children's laughter.

XxRaalis opened a glass-paned double door to the garden, where I breathed humid air ripe with sun-warmed tropical foliage and moist soil, tinged with salt from the Gulf. Walking on a cobblestone path, we passed a trellis heavy with honey-scented red blossoms as big as my head.

Bordered on two sides by vine-covered walls with tall windows, the expanse of flowers and vegetables reminded me of the Fold and I recognized the T'holin influence: every square inch of usable soil produced something edible, useful or beautiful.

But a concrete bulwark several stories high, about a hundred meters away, shattered the illusion that I was safe at home. I shuddered at dark shapes moving along the parapet. Phalanx.

XxRaalis's focus seemed to be elsewhere. He stood still and his nictitating membranes twitched as his arm shot toward the branch of a nearby bush. His digits snapped around a lizard, which he raised to his mouth and nipped with one fang and then tucked into the skin flap on his belly.

Never in my long, intimate relationship with my triad had they allowed me to witness them hunting for food. They took turns gathering the small reptiles, amphibians, fish, worms, and insects that rounded out their omnivorous diet, hunting mostly at night out of deference to human squeamishness for the fact that the T'holin stunned their prey and brought it home for the triad to eat live.

XxRaalis was a wild T'holin, and new to Hadera. I wondered if his behavior was acceptable here.

I kept my silence and turned my attention to a group of T'holin picking bean pods a few yards away. They stared at us and the hair on their brow ridges spiked in stress. I looked up at the parapet. One of the sentries paused, but XxRaalis continued walking along the path and I followed his example. The sentry resumed his patrol.

XxRaalis took me for a full lap around the garden, which left me tired and hungry. He led me to my room, where a tray of bread and cheese and vegetables was waiting for me.

"Nap after your meal," XxRaalis said. "CcT'holner will sit with you then."

I crawled into bed after lunch and surrendered to sleep.

CcT'holner was sitting beside me when I awoke two hours later.

"Is there no privacy here?" I asked.

"I don't know the rules," he said.

"Neither does XxRaalis," I said. "He nearly brought the Phalanx down on us this morning," I said.

"He did a foolish thing, but the urge for a Gatherer is hard to ignore," CcT'holner said, as he assumed the T'holin sitting posture, lowering his breast over folded legs.

"Are all the Founders wild?" I asked.

"They are the wildest of all T'holin," CcT'holner said.

"Why have I never learned about them?"

"It is the best now," he said. "Sit with me."

"I need to tend to my human needs first," I said, unsatisfied with his answer. I went to the toilet and then returned to curl up in the chair with my legs tucked.

After sitting with CcT'holner for an hour, my thoughts were more roiled than before.

"Tell me about Farside," CcT'holner said.

“What can I tell you that you don’t already know?”

“I don’t know about your Farside,” he said. “Let your thoughts fly. I’m not a Gatherer to judge them.”

“How do I describe something that’s all I’ve ever known?” I asked. “At least I can say that Farside is everything this place is not. No, that’s not quite right. Hadera is everything Farside is not! Hadera is clean and orderly and elegant and smart and Farside is threadbare and backwards. We barely go to the toilet indoors. We take great pains to avoid technology.”

“Do you have rakes and hoes and sewing needles and fire for cooking?”

“Of course.”

“Then you have technology.”

“Not compared to Hadera.”

“You treat technology as unnatural. It is not. Technology is on the shape path Unfolding. The path you are on. You will learn. Tell me more. I will not interrupt unless I need to—” and here he used the word for biting and stunning prey—*ccsaatixx* a thought.”

The imagery caught me off guard, but I didn’t want to test CcT’holner’s patience. I rambled about Archer and my students and my triad. “Do wild T’holin have to catch all their food?” I asked. “In Farside, the T’holin taught us to grow vegetables on top of fish tanks. The waste from the fish nourishes the plants, and the humans and T’holin share the fish and the vegetables so the Tholin don’t have to hunt so often. And that’s not all—we use T’holin sloo to fertilize our crops. We share the work of farming, cooking and building. We even incorporate T’holin methods in our education. Although, my own education was more T’holin than most because my triad raised me after my parents died.” I took a

breath, expecting my stump to throb as it always did when I spoke of my mother. To my surprise, it stayed calm. “That’s why I have a journeystone and know the Discipline.”

“That’s not why you have a journeystone, and you don’t know the Discipline,” CcT’holner said. “Not in the T’holin way.” His tone was matter-of-fact, without a hint of condescension. “Do your T’holin teach you about sex?” he asked.

“Sex? Of course not,” I sputtered.

His nictitating membranes flashed. “So much information to scale and compare,” he said.

CHAPTER 7



*“I need to listen well so that I hear what is not said.” –
Thuli Madonsela*

CcT’holner’s question about sex was still echoing in my head when Cinaia swept into my room wearing a crimson, low-cut gown that clung to her hips. Her hair fell in waves to her waist and she’d applied color to her eyes and lips and cheeks.

I was mesmerized. She laughed. “Now it’s your turn.” She retrieved the dress from my closet and laid it on the bed.

“Take off your camisole,” she said, turning aside. “The dress has undergarments built in.”

I stepped into a sheath of satiny sapphire and pulled the bodice as high as it would go, feeling Cinaia’s hands at my back working the fasteners. The gown flowed to the floor, sleek, but not as form-fitting as Cinaia’s.

“It fits better than I hoped,” she said, coming to the front to adjust the neckline.

I’d never worn a garment that created décolletage, let alone gone out in public to display it.

“It’s just right,” Cinaia said. “The color suits your eyes.”

Cinaia secured my hair in a pile of curls atop my head and covered my signet with a band of jeweled ribbon. She opened a folio and pulled out a brush. “You don’t need much enhancement, so I’ll go lightly,” she said. She groomed my

eyebrows and lashes, slicked something shimmery on my brow bones and applied a gloss to my lips and cheeks.

Stepping back to assess the results, she tilted her head again, as if not quite sure what to make of me.

“Maybe I’m not ready for a formal evening,” I said.

“You are not ready for a formal evening, but that fact has nothing to do with your appearance,” she said. “This evening is critical to your preparation.”

“But I don’t know the rules. The etiquette.”

“You know enough,” she said, and one hand swept her sternum.

Was she hinting at my access to the Archive? As if I could model my behavior on that information?

“I don’t even know who will be at our table,” I said.

“And that is the whole point,” Cinaia said. “Come, now. It’s time to go.”

I dropped to one knee and bowed as if she were SsLissa, about to enfold me. “I have a question,” I said.

Cinaia lifted my chin.

“The way we’re dressed—” I said.

She put a finger to my lips. “Observe and learn,” she said.



A tall young man with ginger hair, a light brown beard and a uniform identical to the one Davin wore at the Brandyshine stood at attention outside the door.

“Fillan, my Honor Guard,” Cinaia said.

Fillan bowed to Cinaia and then led us down the stairs and through a maze of corridors. I kept my eyes on him until I found myself comparing him to Davin, who was taller, with

broad shoulders and thicker hair and an economy of motion lending a more confident grace. Annoyed with myself, I switched my focus to the polished granite walls and elaborate fittings that marked the transition from the women's wing.

The air was sweet with incense burning in sconces. Tiny lights from chandeliers in the high ceiling glowed like fireflies, barely offsetting the twilight that seeped through tall arched windows.

We turned a corner and were bathed in white light. Ripples of conversation and laughter spilled into the corridor as it opened to an marble-floored atrium where men in bright tunics and women with shimmering gowns mixed like scattered gems.

I tensed and brushed my left arm against the side seam of my dress, finding a gap that I explored with my stump, and discovering a hidden pocket. Its presence gave me just enough courage to step into the mirage of perfection in front of me.

Cinaia took my right arm and nudged me into the crowd, behind Fillan. People stepped aside for us, raising their drinks and staring openly as we crossed the atrium into a candlelit room furnished with round tables.

As Fillan led the way to the front of the room, the people filed in behind us to find their tables. They remained standing as Fillan brought us to a long, rectangular table. Arden, standing behind the table, was the only person I recognized, until Fillan took his place near the wall behind two unclaimed chairs at the center of the table. On his right were two honor guards with their backs against the wall.

Davin was one of them, dressed the white uniform, standing arrow-straight behind Arden with his gaze fixed ahead. If he saw me, he gave no indication, but my journeystone tingled.

Arden was wearing his cerulean jacket and his curls were freshly cropped. His eyes brightened as we approached, but they hadn't lost the ungrounded furtiveness instilled by the Archive.

At Arden's right, beside the empty chairs, was a middle-aged man with a trim white beard and long, white, cinched hair, dressed in a jacket of deep amethyst swathed in sashes and medals. His eyes were the color of sunlight on the ocean and they were fixed on Cinaia. At Arden's left at the far right edge of the table, were two men. One wore a white brocade jacket similar to the honor guards' but with more rank insignia. His hair was tied back in dreadlocks and his skin was dark as coffee.

Beside him was a man in a slate-colored jacket with a turquoise sash, whose short hair was streaked with pewter gray and whose face time had marked with smile lines and crows' feet. The teardrop curve of his hooded eyes widened when he saw me, and then his gaze softened and fixed on me.

My heart did a strange flip flop. His planes of his face formed a map to a safe place to rest my attention. He might as well have spoken aloud, "*Trust me. Look here to get grounded.*"

A young man in a ruby jacket also sashed and decorated sat at the far left side of the table. His straight, ash brown hair was parted on the side and cut just above his ears. It

moved in a gleaming arc as he bent his head to the ear of a dusky woman at his left.

The woman's topaz gown grazed her shoulders. Its scooped neckline lifted billows of bosom. She wore a jeweled headband much like mine.

The white-haired man sprang forward and bowed to kiss Cinaia's hands and then straightened to appraise me. "So this is the Rounder who preserved our select cargo at the risk of her own life," he said.

"Advocate Eldon Cardiff, I present Rounder Aleya Gillis," Cinaia said, offering my hand to him.

He pressed his lips to it and the world began to spin.

Nothing had prepared me for that moment. For that Contradiction. The Advocate's unfeigned delight in Cinaia and his guileless welcome contradicted my expectation—indeed, my demand—for him to be a pure expression of evil.

Cinaia touched my shoulder and led me to my seat beside the woman in topaz, where a new distraction confronted me.

My seat placed Davin squarely in my peripheral vision.

His chest rose and fell in a deep breath, but his gaze didn't flicker.

Fillan pulled out Cinaia's chair. As soon as she was seated, everyone followed her example and the wait staff flurried to refill drinks and serve finger food.

Cinaia introduced me. I learned the man in the ruby jacket was Chancellor Stellan Leander and the woman in topaz was his wife Ria. The beautiful, dark man beside Arden was Chamberlain Hadrian Kofi, and the man with the kind eyes was Gregor Wong, the President of the Consortium—the first non-white member in the history of the Collaborative.

I felt like a lump of unfinished wood in their presence.

Ria's black hair was swept into loops of gleaming braids. There wasn't a wisp out of place in her sculpted, wing-shaped eyebrows, her skin was as smooth as a china cup and her lips were plump and sleek. Even her fingernails were shaped and polished.

I ran my tongue along my bottom lip, feeling its partially healed fissure, and buried my chafed hand in my lap. A moment later, I was forced to pull it out and pick up my wineglass when the Advocate raised his.

"Members of the Consultancy, the Consortium, and esteemed guests, welcome to the SecQuarter Concord," he said in a voice that filled the room. "Raise your glasses to the good fortunes that brought us together. Tonight's cheer is enhanced by spirits from Farside, beyond Parsimony."

I startled at the mention of Farside, but no one seemed to notice.

Cinaia took the first sip and pronounced it delightful. "The perfect dryness for my palate," she said, to audience applause that faded to a murmur of conversation.

"This wine the best of the best," Arden said. "It was such a pleasure exploring FarSide's cellars."

Stellan huffed. "Its value is either a tribute to your business acumen," he said, "or..."

"Or, what?" Arden pressed.

"I've seen the ledgers," Stellan said. "Your assessment, putting Farside on the receiving end of the annual transaction. It puts me at a loss."

The Advocate held his glass to the light. "My son is learning to govern," he said, leaning in toward Ria, who blushed. "You'll soon find out, it's a challenge to prepare our children for a world that doesn't yet exist."

I noticed Ria wasn't drinking the wine.

"Aren't we responsible for creating that world?" Stellan asked.

"I'll admit, if Arden wasn't a grown man, I might have cuffed his ears when I learned what he did in Farside," the Advocate said. "But I trust the consequences of his decision will be his best teacher, for good or for ill."

"Of course, Advocate," Stellan said. "If you believe we have the luxury of trial and error."

"Such weighty talk," Cinaia said. "We're being rude to our guest."

"I think you underestimate the Rounder," Ria said. "This talk is not unrelated to her latest acquisition."

Stellan sighed and gave his wife a sidelong look, but she turned her earnest face to me. "How did you do it?" she asked. "As the Advocate said, you risked your life. Against those odds, I would have given up."

My journeystone warmed and my hand fluttered to my breast. I took a sip of water, grasping for an idea, and ventured a glance at Gregor Wong. His eyes reminded me of the shape of SsLissa's wings when she was about to enfold me. My journeystone warmed, and a memory surfaced, of the croy protecting me and helping me find water.

"Moisture that sinks into the sand is more life-giving than a flash flood in the desert," I said, hoping the sentence was coherent. "Our enterprise may be new, but it's based on long-standing connections. Built on trust."

The Advocate stroked his beard and nodded but Stellan pursed his lips and rubbed his chin.

"Your adage is lovely, but I'm not a poet," Stellan said. "Help me understand."

I glanced at Cinaia. She gave a slight nod.

“Trust is built on small acts,” I said, slowly, gathering my thoughts. “Trust with my broker, and his trust with his clients saved the acquisition.” My cheeks burned as I realized my mistake. If someone asked me how I knew my broker....

“Hold on to that thread,” the Advocate said as the wait staff reappeared and hovered a few meters away, awaiting his signal. He reached his hand to Cinaia, who stood with him as he raised his arms and a curtain displaying the Collaborative’s Great Seal descended from the wall behind him.

“Please join me in invoking our hope,” the Advocate said in a sonorous voice. He faced the Great Seal and laid his hand over his heart. “*‘From the stars we came. To the stars we aspire.’* Let the meal begin.” He gestured over our table. “We’re already having robust conversations,” he said. “I trust the same for you. Enjoy the meal. We’ll give a brief report during dessert, but we won’t keep you long. I haven’t seen my wife in three days.”

The crowd cheered as the Advocate’s hand slid to Cinaia’s waist and he helped her back to her seat.

Stellan was finished with his soup before the rest of us were served. “Arden can thank the Rounder for diverting the conversation from his antics in Farside,” he said.

“A skilled statesman could steer the topic back around,” the Advocate countered. “Don’t you agree, Gregor?”

Gregor lifted one corner of his mouth. “One might ask, what does trust have to do with Farside, an isolated outpost that has little in common with the rest of the Parsimony, let alone Hadera,” he said.

“I would raise different questions,” Arden said. “Why is Farside isolated, with so little in common with the rest of the Collaborative? Yet, how has it survived—and how can we learn from it? What kinds of enterprise might we share if we invest in trust and connections instead of pillaging for assets?”

Stellan’s mouth thinned to a half-veiled smirk. “How boring and predictable,” he said. “Do you think your high ideals have never been pursued? Wait until you face the challenges of actual governance.”

The waiters brought platters of whole roasted game hens and honeyed squash, saving Arden from responding. I nearly panicked at the sight of the uncut birds, but Cinaia quickly placed two servings on her plate and carved one into small portions for me.

“I know how hard it is to judge one’s appetite when one is on the mend,” she said, to cover for my predicament.

Stellan took a quick bite and turned to Arden. “So, you think one little concession will warm relations with Farside after years of isolation?”

Ria shot a quick glance at Cinaia, and then took a deep breath. “It’s a first step,” Ria said. “As the Rounder said, trust is built on small acts.”

“Speaking of the latest acquisition, how are the new T’holin working out?” the Advocate asked.

Ria dabbed her mouth. “Better than I expected,” she said. “How so?” Gregor asked.

“I won’t repeat the details about the atrocities in the desert, but, as you know, one of the T’holin I requisitioned was injured,” Ria said, as if Gregor’s presence gave her more confidence. “I knew I could trust my Valor to help me

negotiate in good faith with the Broker and the Rounder for a replacement. The new triad has exceeded my expectations in ways I couldn't have foreseen." She fidgeted with her necklace. "But this fortunate outcome doesn't excuse whoever's to blame. We must make it safe to acquire wild T'holin."

Stellan covered Ria's hand with his. "You don't need to worry about that anymore," he said. "Our household has a full complement of T'holin, and our Valor has her hands full."

"Your Valor managed the transaction well," I ventured, anchoring my gaze on Gregor for a moment, hoping to gain more context for a subject I only knew from the Archive. "This was my first acquisition for such a high estate. Are all Valors so well-equipped?"

Ria looked to Cinaia. "All Valors are equipped to collaborate with the Lady to manage the household—actually, the whole estate," Ria said, spreading her hands. Her eyes were wide and bright with excitement. "The role comes from an ancient sacred text. We don't practice the religion, but it gives us a framework." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "My Valor couldn't stop talking about you," she said. "She said you were like a fresh breeze from the desert that cleared the air."

I covered my mouth to keep from laughing and stole a glance at Davin, who continued to hold his deadpan stare.

"Ah," the Advocate said. "The first sign of levity from our Rounder." He flagged a waiter. "Refill her glass," he said.

"The Rounder should beware the wine of Farside," Stellan said.

"Too late," Arden said. "It's already doing its job."

Gregor smiled and raised his glass to me. “And now you’re obligated to tell us what’s so amusing,” he said.

“I’m not sure it’s fit for this fine table,” I said.

The Chamberlain extended his right hand, palm up, toward the Advocate. “Protocol, sir?” he asked.

“May the conversation flow as freely as the wine,” the Advocate said.

I took a deep breath. “The Valor’s poetic words are ironic, considering the condition I was in when I met her.”

“And what condition was that?” Gregor asked.

“Sprayed with some stench that could not be mistaken for a fresh breeze from the desert,” I said.

“Which proved my Valor’s words as a testament to you and her faith,” Ria said.

“Our Valor’s simple faith serves us well,” Stellan said. “But the Rounder didn’t come here for a sermon.”

Ria’s eyes flashed. “Excuse me,” she said. “When the men talk, it’s statesmanship, but when the women talk, it’s preaching.”

Stellan drew back his head in surprise, but the Advocate chuckled.

“Your wife would make a worthy Complement,” the Advocate said.

Ria put down her napkin and faced her husband. “Our Valor’s faith is not simple,” she said. “She gave me the courage to renegotiate the contract. Every aspect of the T’holin trade reflects on you, husband, and the Collaborative, so we take great care to protect your interests.”

“And I am working to alleviate that strain,” the Advocate said. “Why do you think I’m exposing Arden to such a broad swath of the economy?”

“Maybe the Rounder needs to take Arden on a few acquisitions,” Stellan said.

Ria gasped. “I didn’t mean to suggest...”

“Under no circumstances,” the Advocate said. “It’s too risky. With conditions as they are, I can’t guarantee his safety on a public train, and an official train hardly affords the anonymity the Rounder requires.”

“By all means, protect Arden,” Stellan said. “But it’s fine for the Rounder, who weighs 50 kilos with her boots on, to risk her life.”

“I’m not in line to succeed the Advocate,” I said, lowering my eyes and tucking away the fact that I did not sense any genuine concern from Stellan.

A sorbet arrived to cleanse our palates. We ate quietly and then a fruit and nut torte was served with kafee and brandy as the curtain bearing the Great Seal rose back into the ceiling and Stellan stood to announce the second quarter report.

A holographic display of bar graphs and pie charts formed against the backdrop of the blank wall.

The numbers and letters jumped out at me like a horde of taunting hucksters full of sarcasm and lies. I cursed my synesthesia and looked away.

“Despite disruptions to trade routes and struggles to refresh our T’holin workforce,” Stellan said, “we’ve maintained or increased all economic indicators.” He flicked the display and the graphic updated. “You can see the stock values have risen by twenty percent, the reserves have increased, the tariffs and value taxes...”

Cinaia whispered something in the Advocate’s ear. His gaze hardened and his eyes ticked up and to the left, but he

gave a curt nod and announced, “I acknowledge the Complement.”

Cinaia stood with her hand raised and her palms spread. “Are there any citizens in the provinces who are hungry? Who seek employment? Who need health care and education?”

Stellan tilted his head and flexed his brows. “My report is on economic indicators, not social welfare programs,” he said.

Even without graphic representation, his tone triggered my synesthesia. His inflection changed the words “economic indicators”, “not” and “social welfare programs” into impish children jamming their fingers in their ears and sticking out their tongues.

“But you say the economy is healthy and growing,” Cinaia said. “To what end?”

With his eyes on the Advocate instead of Cinaia, Stellan shrugged and spread his hands. “I trust The Complement’s good intentions,” he said, “but she was not educated in economic theory—”

“I’m educated in the disclaimers *you* used to frame this report,” Cinaia said sharply. “What mitigation strategies are in place to protect citizens and provide relief to stricken areas?”

A murmur rippled through the audience and one or two people coughed.

I twisted my napkin.

Stellan’s brows lifted and he shifted his gaze to the guests. “May I remind the Complement that this is the SecQuarter report and not a policy session or a budget hearing,” he said.

“Interesting,” Cinaia said. She pulled a Riff from her skirt and projected a new graphic.

Stellan turned a shade paler and the audience coughed and whispered.

“I just commented to President Wong that I seemed to have missed the sessions allocating funds for biofuel production and weapons development that were not in the original budget for this fiscal year,” Cinaia said. “He seems just as surprised as I am. How could the Chair of the InterProvince Monetary Fund be left out of such—”

The Advocate stood and reached for Cinaia’s Riff. “This is high level report, not a delve into the weeds,” he said with a forced smile. “Let’s hear what the Chancellor has to say for the upcoming quarter.”

Cinaia stood her ground. “I request an opportunity for the Chamberlain to comment at the close,” she said.

The Advocate took Cinaia’s wrist, but she met his eyes with a charged intensity that I felt in my journeystone.

“Of course,” the Advocate said, tightening his grip with one hand and making with a sweeping gesture in Hadrian’s direction with the other.

Hadrian’s gaze flicked toward Arden as he acknowledged the Advocate with a stolid nod.

Stellan stepped to the table and took a long drink of water before he resumed his presentation. His tone was flat, and his commentary sparse on the goals and projections for the third quarter.

He took his seat, but Cinaia remained standing with the Advocate beside her tense as a cat poised to pounce at her next move, until his thin, half-hearted voice broke the strained silence. “Do you have anything to add, Chamberlain?” he asked.

Hadrian stood and crossed his arms behind his back, bowing his head and then raising his chin as Cinaia and the Advocates took their seats.

As Hadrian's chest filled with a deep breath, a wave of unnamed grief hit my journeystone and Pavi's link touched mine, but the rich timbre of Hadrian's voice recaptured my focus.

"In our efforts to recruit wild T'holin to compensate for the stagnation of our domestic stock, I believe we could use the Honor Guard more effectively," he said, pausing to fix his gaze on Gregor. "With a few budget adjustments, their skills and diplomacy could be put to use—"

"I promised our guests a brief report," the Advocate said. "I suggest we save this important discussion for our table talk."

He snapped for the head waiter, and the staff scrambled to refill the beverages.

Hadrian sat down and Arden's hand inched toward his.

"It's getting late for our guest," Cinaia said, casting her gaze in Arden's direction before turning to me, as a string quartet assembled near our table and began to play.

"Who will take Aleya to her quarters so my wife can remain with me?" the Advocate asked.

Hadrian raised his hand, but Arden announced, "I'll provide the escort with my Honor Guard. The Chamberlain is already committed to table talk and I'd like him to hear President Wong's concerns, as well."

Hadrian's brows shot up and Stellan's eyes narrowed. Gregor raised his glass with a steady hand to sip his wine.

"Then, allow me to revisit my earlier suggestion before Arden retires," Stellan said. "I don't know what the

Chamberlain has in mind for the Honor Guard, but it seems premature to commit the Guard to new duties when we're so close to a transition for the Succession. Perhaps the Chamberlain would be better served if Arden acquired leadership experience in building up the T'holin workforce."

"We have an expert among us," the Advocate said. "Let's ask the Rounder."

Cinaia's eyes flashed. "The Rounder has graced us with her presence far longer than her physician recommended," she said.

"Why be so quick to suggest who will speak tonight and who won't?" The Advocate asked. "I'm sure we could all benefit from the Rounder's experience. In theory." He turned to me. "What might we learn from your work?"

I took a breath and tried to find my own strength without looking at Gregor.

The Advocate tapped his spoon on the table. If it was supposed to fluster me, it was working.

"I'm reminded of what you said to Lady Leander earlier," I said carefully. "The experience might help your son realize how well you raised him to lead in conditions you couldn't foresee."

"Ah," the Advocate said with a controlled nod. "Is there anything my Chancellor might learn?"

My journeystone fired with a surge of confidence. "The Chancellor would learn that the Complement's requests for domestic programs are not contrary to his economic goals."

The silence was tense.

"Well, then," the Advocate said. "Maybe I should reconsider. Would you be willing to take my son on your next acquisition?"

I struggled to keep my eyes from straying to Davin. “I’d need to clear it with my broker and my sources,” I said.

“Let’s hope by the time Aleya is well enough for that acquisition, security will be restored,” Cinaia said. “And now, I insist we allow her to retire.”

Arden stood and motioned to Davin, who came around the table and pulled out my chair, giving me his arm.

My journeystone remained warm and my forehead tingled as Cinaia handed Davin the electronic key to my room.

Gregor gave me a nod and a smile. As I left the Great Room with Davin and Arden, Davin raised his eyes to the ceiling. I saw a surveillance camera and understood there’d be no discussion on the way to the women’s wing, and no answers to my questions.

Arden walked beside me and Davin led. I stared at Davin’s broad back. The blank canvas of his white jacket soothed my eyes. Under the various lights along the way, I picked out subtle shades of gold, red and ochre in his cinched hair.

At my door, Arden took my hand. “Rest well, little sister,” he said, and then whispered, “You certainly have a way of stirring things up. Odds are I’ll be up drinking with Davin until the wee hours. Poor man has no immunity.”

Confused, I looked to Davin, but he stared ahead, deadpan.

Arden followed my gaze. “Aleya has no idea what I’m talking about and you’re no help,” he said. “We’ll remedy that. Someday.” He sighed. “Not tonight.”

“I’ll check the room,” Davin said stiffly, as he swept the door with the electronic key.

While I waited, there was nowhere to look except Arden's eyes. He didn't shrink from my gaze. His eyes still held deep shadows.

Davin came out, declaring the room safe. He placed the key in my palm and folded my fingers over it. His hand was warm. "Keep it safe," he said.

I watched him walk toward the stairway with Arden, and then slipped into my room, tucking the key in a drawer. I fumbled for the buttons on back of my dress and found tiny beads with fabric loops, a dozen or more. I sighed. I couldn't call Cinaia. I longed for Pavi. My stump throbbed and I cursed it before stepping back out into the hall.

"Davin? Arden?" I called.

Davin halted first.

"I need help," I said and turned my back to show him.

Arden gestured to Davin, who loped to my side and followed me into the room.

My cheeks burned as I held the bodice in place while he loosened the beads from their tight loops.

"Whoever designed this dress didn't plan on taking it off," he said.

The row of beads reached below my waist, and Davin's hands were on the small of my back as he finished.

The dress fell away from my shoulders, but I kept a firm grip on the bodice. "Thank you," I said keeping my back to him

"Good night," he said. His voice was soft and thick.

My journeystone began to thrum.

"Aleya," he said. "Turn around." He touched my shoulders to steady me as I pivoted, sliding his hand to my back to draw me to his chest.

I stood near enough to inhale the fragrance of his beard and feel his warmth. My journey stone hummed, not with a coherent signal, but with real energy.

“Almost,” he said. “It’s like they’re trying to calibrate.”

CHAPTER 8



“Love does not control. It opens up the space of becoming. The space is not without protective boundaries, not without rules.”– Catherine Keller On the Uncontrolling God Open and Relational Leadership, November 15, 2016

The hazel-eyed suitor was back in my dreams. His face never came into focus, but his warm lips kissed my back, my thighs, between my breasts over the journeystone. He grew wings like a T’holin and dared me to ride Archer naked. My body pulsed with an ecstasy I couldn’t name but had always known, mounting as we climbed a mesa where the clouds thinned and I could almost touch the nearest star. When I woke up, my stump was throbbing and CcT’holner was the first thing I saw.

“Why does my door even have a lock?” I asked.

“I don’t understand the question,” he said.

“In the first place, I don’t know why we need to lock our doors in the women’s section. But since we do lock them, how did you get in?”

CcT’holner stared at me with those magnificent golden eyes. I suspected my question fell on the far side of a spatial,

ethical, linguistic chasm. I sat on the edge of the bed and dangled my legs, groggy, hungry and petulant. “With all her trusted staff to choose from, including familiar T’holin, why does Cinaia entrust me with a triad of wild T’holin?” I asked.

“How would her tame T’holin help a wild human?”

CcT’holner said.

“I don’t understand the humans in this place, let alone the T’holin.”

“That’s because your T’holin didn’t teach you about sex,”

CcT’holner said. “We need to take care of that soon.”

“Sex? That’s preposterous.”

“You’re having orgasms in your sleep,” CcT’holner said.

My jaw dropped.

“There’s much at stake,” CcT’holner said. “Did you notice how the Advocate longs for Cinaia when she’s busy with her other duties? Do you see her power to speak truth to him and to pull him back on the shape path? Did you see how Lady Leander is mirroring Cinaia’s example? How do you think they make these toxic males?”

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

“How would you know?” he said. “Farside is no better, where sex is all arranged.”

“So, how can T’holin give humans advice on sex?”

“You’ll learn,” he said. “When humans master a fraction of what keeps a triad together...” he whistled and clicked something that didn’t translate at all. “But our shape path gives us other things to master first,” he said.

“What are we doing today?”

“The rhythm of the day will sing itself,” he said. “Care for your personal needs while I bring what XxRaalis gathered for you.”

“I’m not that wild,” I said.

“Part of XxRaalis’ Discipline is learning to gather human food,” CcT’holner said.

“And I’m the research subject for his education?”

“He knows what you need.”

I lingered in the shower and then slipped into a simple, one-piece dress. With no one to help me arrange my hair, I twisted it into a knot and secured it with a tie.

CcT’holner returned with a breakfast tray: whole grain bread, poached eggs, and roasted vegetables with tea and figs. He sat by the window and closed his nictitating membranes while I ate and then he gathered the tray and placed it outside the door.

CcT’holner took my hand and settled me on the floor near the window, where the morning light brightened, sweeping the room’s shapes and shadows into its radiance. The difference was so striking, I asked CcT’holner what he did to cause it.

“You called this light,” he said. “Sit with it now, in the Discipline.”

My signet grew warm and so did my journeystone. Ribbons of lights shimmered in front of me. My thoughts began to swirl like snowflakes, crisp and pure, unburdened with direction or destination, suspended in the contradiction. I imagined catching them on my tongue. As they melted, they quenched my questions, not with answers, but with possibilities.

They first soothed the blazing white scars in my memory. Some things must not be recalled until the full cycle of my being—which made me guardian of the Waker, and now Patternbearer—could enfold them.

Over the next three days, I was vaguely aware of Cinaia's attention at times, but CcT'holner never left me.

When I told him it was like falling upward, and it wasn't the first time, his reaction was the T'holin equivalent, of, "But, of course! What did you expect? That's the shape path of the Discipline."

"But, I've never gone beyond the contradiction," I said.

"When we lose the contradiction, we don't fall upward anymore," he said. "We just fall."

I understood—in a bumbling way consistent with T'holin heuristic precepts—that I'd passed through all the Nodes, allowing disorder to reveal the contradiction, winnowing the cognitive dissonance to enfold what is true and carry it into novelty and love. Except the T'holin don't have a word for love. Love is the Unfolding.

Fractals danced in my head and I saw them for what they were: geometric representations of frequency ratios that stabilize complex systems from the formation of galaxies down to subatomic processes.

Dear Valor-in-training, please don't conclude that by passing through the Nodes I had mastered them. And you must not assume I was adept at using the signet. In fact, when I asked CcT'holner for a list of its functions, he made it clear the question was nonsense, and muttered something about wing-clipped humans. He did seem pleased when the signet linked my journeystone with Ssuulu and XxRaalis and I could hear whispers of other journeystones that were not attuned to mine, like I the ones I encountered flying through the desert with my triad. Some signals, like Davin's and Cinaia's, were stronger than others.

Once or twice a pattern like Pavi's taunted me.

“The signals are muted for your safety,” CcT’holner said. “You’ll understand in time.”

At the end of that third day, CcT’holner told me Ssuulu would enfold me to mark the conclusion of this phase of training. “XxRaalis and I will support her with our journeystones,” he said. “Like quenching hot steel, the enfolding will seal your novice link to the signet.”



I woke to a predawn rain shower whispering on the tile roof.

CcT’holner was still with me, waiting near the window with glowing eyes. I was about to greet him, but he flung his wings wide and keened, “Stench! Phalanx!” His body faded to a milky blur and then he disappeared.

My journeystone jolted me alert. I threw on a robe and grabbed a band to cover the signet. My journeystone settled to a murmur, so I thought I might be safe, until I, too, smelled the Phalanx.

Footsteps pounded in the hall. I backed to the window, butting CcT’holner’s invisible breast as the door shattered and two Phalanx soldiers crowded the room, crinkling their snouts and snuffling the air.

I recoiled from the one closest to me, but I forced myself not to look away. He wore a purple harness with a rank insignia and he carried a long-muzzled weapon. Instead of the vibrant gold eyes of a healthy T’holin, his were the color of cloudy urine, dampening my horror and terror and allowing pity and loathing to seep through.

“Where is CcT’holner?” he said in sloppy Clipped.

“I don’t know where he sleeps,” I replied. “I am a guest of The Complement.” The thought gave me courage. “What kind of place is Hadera if its protectors threaten a guest?”

His nictitating membranes flickered in surprise. “I am an Apex,” he said. “I follow orders and my wing guards follow me.”

“This is not about orders,” I said, wondering what gave me the presence of mind to study the wing guard’s drab, brown gear. “It’s about decency.”

“It’s about honor,” he said.

“Where is the honor is breaking down my door?” I said. “Take me to The Complement or I will summon her myself.”

“I will be finding CcT’holner first,” the Apex said, and then shouting and shuffling drew his attention and he moved closer to the doorway, clearing my view of the hallway where a another Phalanx pair in wing guard gear was dragging a man whose head was bent.

The man’s lower lip was bleeding onto his shirt, and his arms were wrenched behind his back.

“We have the Chamberlain’s cooperation to continue our search,” one of wing guards said.

Hadrian Kofi raised his head. The wing guard reared back and delivered a kick to Hadrian’s midsection.

Rapid footsteps smacked the tile floor, and Cinaia came in sight with a flash of emerald robe and a banner of unbound hair. “Let him go!” she shouted, stepping between the Chamberlain and the wing guard who was poised for another kick.

“It will be better for me if you move aside,” Hadrian rasped.

“He’s right,” the Apex said. “We’ve been ordered to clean house, beginning with the Chamberlain and the honor guard.”

Cinaia paled but stood her ground. “The women’s quarter is my domain,” she said.

“We have the authority to find the T’holin that shamed the Phalanx,” the Apex said.

“You won’t find what you’re looking for in the women’s quarters,” Cinaia said.

“Did the Chancellor mislead us?” the other wing guard asked.

The Apex bared his fangs. “Since you can’t control your mouth,” he barked in southern T’holin, “I hope you enjoy the taste of your last words.”

The offending wing guard drew a blade from his harness and stared at it before he raised it to his neck and slid it across his throat. He remained straight and still for several seconds with blood spurting from his neck. The other wing guards reached to catch him, but the Apex said, “He falls where he stands.”

The floor shook as the wing guard collapsed face first.

Bile rose in my throat. I reeled and fell backward all the way to CcT’holner’s invisible breast.

The Apex barked at Cinaia. “Are expecting your honor guard to come to your aid?” He punctuated the statement with a series of clicks and grunts. “It’s time for you to step aside,” he said. “We are the honor guard now. Do you understand? There is no honor among the humans.” He switched to his T’holin dialect. “The barracks were contaminated by woman flow. The Chamberlain—a Receptacle—allowed it.” He spat in Hadrian’s face.

I translated all the words, but the idioms made no sense. I looked to Cinaia to see if her face registered understanding, but the Apex took a step toward her and I leaped to my feet, trembling as my journeystone's signal rose to reassure me with a thousand whispering voices.

"Let me help you find what you're looking for," I said. "I'm a Rounder. I have...skills with T'holin."

CcT'holner's alarm jangled my journeystone. To calm him, I pursed my lips and breathed with the *O'o'o'sl'hs'* distant, ambient chorus.

"I also will help," Cinaia said, and I heard her speak Clipped for the first time. "And I don't need your approval or the Chancellor's. I have the Advocate's ear."

The Apex growled.

"If we don't find CcT'holner, we'll keep culling males until you give him up," the Apex said.

"Give us five minutes to dress," Cinaia said. "And release the Chamberlain."



Dizzy with uncertainty, I put on the dress I'd worn the day before and shoved my feet into boots. As I adjusted my headband, the signet turned hot. My journeystone was warm, so I tested my link with CcT'holner, not daring to speak out loud.

How long can you stay in sillay? Why doesn't the Phalanx suspect? How did you shame the Phalanx? What happens if they start culling males? Will the O'o'o'sl'h show me what do next? What if I can't enfold with Ssuulu?

CcT'holner's answer was not satisfying. *This is your shape path with the O'o'o'sl'h*, he said, and I surmised we'd reached the limits of language.

I stepped into the hallway and recoiled from a pool of blood on the carpet. The wing guard's body was gone, and so were the extra wing guards.

The Apex glared at me. Hadrian stood beside him, upright with hands free.

Cinaia emerged from the stairwell wearing a headband and a simple dress much like mine. She motioned for us to follow her.

With the Apex and his wing guards at our heels, we clambered downstairs to the first floor corridor directly beneath the skywalk. The hall took several turns and then widened and opened to an immense space that drew my eyes to the top of a clear dome.

At first, the only shapes I recognized were trees whose gold-green branches embraced the morning sunlight, and then, fluttering colors settled into cloth banners separating tiers of wooden platforms hung by tethers.

The air danced with light fractals from active journeystones, like sunlight on water, and I finally discerned the presence of T'holin of every size and hue from ebony to pearl, perched on the platforms and in the trees.

My eye caught movement from several directions. A few individual T'holin glided from their perches and settled on the floor to face us. They were female, each marked with a Patternbearer signet.

The Patternbearers sang a single chord. Its minor scale and dissonant harmonies lit my brain and vagus nerve.

The Apex roared, but his voice petered to a thin whine. He stumbled and blinked at the Patternbearers.

My signet ejected a bolus of light and I gasped in surprise. The light split into strands, one for each Patternbearer's signet. The Patternbearers sent the light back to my signet, refocused. It bolstered my courage.

"These creatures," I said in Clipped, pointing to the Phalanx. "They came to find one of us."

"They can't recover something they cast off the shape path," one of the Patternbearers said.

From the trees, male T'holin voices began to drone with the bass and tenor intonation of ancient bagpipes. Other T'holin added harmonies, layering the sound. It swelled and filled the dome with a palpable resonance.

The Phalanx rocked back on their heels and covered their ears. The Apex opened his wings and flapped them twice in challenge, but they drooped, flaccid. He let them hang and his chin sank onto his chest.

The droning ebbed and the Apex blinked his cloudy eyes at Hadrian as if seeing him for the first time. "The domicile is in order, Chamberlain," he said, tucking his wings. "We don't find any threat here."

Hadrian turned to Cinaia, confused.

I translated, adding, "Thank him for answering your call to check the domicile, and tell him to report to his commander."

Hadrian offered profuse thanks, in fluent Clipped.

"I'll make a report," the Apex said. He led his troops away and I dropped to my knees, drained and baffled.

Cinaia knelt beside me. "What just happened?" she asked. The fractals flickered, thick as fireflies.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The Patternbearers did it.”

Cinaia bowed her head on my shoulder, wetting it with warm tears. “The Phalanx will regroup and they’ll be back,” she said. “Come with me.” She grasped my forearms and pulled me up.

Ssuulu and XxRaalis glided into view and Ssuulu clucked and fluttered her wings. “The Patternbearers didn’t do it,” she said. “You did it. Before you leave, you must have enfolding,” she said.

“Cinaia also must unfold,” XxRaalis said.

Cinaia raised her brows but didn’t protest.

“Enfolding will not be pleasant,” Ssuulu said. “I’m not SsLissa. You’re not tuned to me. But it is necessary.” She spread her wings wide and I settled on her left foot, drawing Cinaia to my side. Cinaia copied my posture atop SsUuulu’s right foot, and SsUuulu closed her wings.

With one cheek against SsUuulu’s downy breast and the other covered by her velvet wing, I breathed her spicy scent. Her heartbeat marked the passing moments. My journeystone flamed, searing my breastbone with exquisite heat, and I recalled CcT’holner telling me how he and XxRaalis would boost SsUuulu’s enfolding.

My mind blanked, white hot. I confronted the constraints of my ignorance, my puny perspective of reality and my naiveté, like a weight on my sternum, oddly comforting, like swaddling to an infant. The sense of falling upward, which was becoming reassuringly familiar, suggested I was descending into the contradiction as I should. And the whispers of the *O’o’o’sl’h* confirmed I was not alone. I lost track of SsUuulu’s heartbeat until my journeystone cooled, and SsUuulu opened her wings.

Beside me, Cinaia trembled with her fingers tangled in SsUuulu's fur and her face buried in SsUuulu's breast while SsUuulu stroked her hair.

I turned to see CcT'holner standing tall above me and my heart lifted with relief. I got to my feet.

My signet tingled and projected a small, jewel-toned sphere a few inches from my forehead.

"Ah, the enfolding was successful," CcT'holner said. "This is your pilot sphere. Only you and the T'holin can see it."

"It came to me before, in the desert," I said. "But not in this form."

CcT'holner's nictitating membranes flickered. "Your Pattern is strong, then. Now the sphere is sealed to you. When it is before you, you must follow its shape path. At all costs."

CHAPTER 9



“To live is to suffer and to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

Cinaia left SsUuulu’s embrace, wiping her eyes and smoothing her hair. She thanked SsUuulu and motioned for me to follow her.

The sphere synced with Cinaia’s course, but my muscles responded tepidly. I struggled to keep pace as Cinaia rushed along the unfamiliar corridors until we reached the women’s wing and passed through it to the official complex. I was out of breath by the time we reached the atrium, where Cinaia turned to enter a wide hallway tiled in polished white marble. Trimmed in silver and turquoise sconces, its windowless walls curved seamlessly to the high ceiling where recessed lights glowed cool blue.

Thirty meters ahead, closed double doors of gleaming turquoise were flanked by four Phalanx in Apex gear.

Cinaia halted when she saw the Phalanx, but she squared her shoulders to proceed.

The sphere tumbled ahead of me, so I followed.

One of the Apex guards stepped forward. “The Advocate is expecting you,” he said. “But the Rounder stays outside.”

“She is under my protection,” Cinaia said.

His lip curled, but he moved aside. When the doors swung open to admit us, his brow ridges spiked in surprise.

I peered into a huge room where soft white lights glowed on pewter walls. A long white table bisected the space, drawing my eye to Advocate Eldon Cardiff.

Wearing a teal jacket over a crisp, white shirt, the Advocate eclipsed the dull men seated around him. He pushed back his chair and stood when Cinaia approached.

Cinaia's calico dress covered her from neck to ankle. With her loose hair and confident stride, it added to her wild grace. I sensed her self control as something chosen, not imposed.

The Advocate's expression flickered with competing emotions.

I lagged behind Cinaia, but she grabbed my elbow and pulled me abreast.

"I come to you as the director of the women's section," Cinaia said. "Where was Due Process in replacing the Honor Guard?"

"I appreciate your concern," the Advocate said. "However, Due Process was forfeited when the Chamberlain supported egregious actions that compromised the Guard's integrity."

Cinaia tilted her head. "And who judged the actions egregious?"

"The Guard is Chancellor Leander's purview," the Advocate said. "I stand by his decision."

"You stand with the Chancellor despite the great deference you showed me at the SecQuarter Concord, dear Eldon?" Cinaia asked.

The Advocate shifted his weight and crossed his arms, planting his feet wider.

“I will challenge your protocol,” Cinaia said with a slight lift of chin, “but not in the presence of the Consultancy and staff.”

As if he didn’t trust what he heard, the Advocate cocked his head. His expression hardened.

I took a half-step back, hoping to tuck myself behind Cinaia, but her grip on my elbow was too strong.

“In the meantime, I will not allow the Phalanx—untethered males—to guard the women,” Cinaia said, unfazed.

“Ah,” the Advocate said, leaning forward and raising one finger. “That’s the heart of the matter, isn’t it? Don’t you see? It’s impossible for the T’holin to be compromised by human motives, therefore, the Phalanx will stand in for the Honor Guard until suitable human replacements can be vetted, trained and put in place.”

“Suitable?” Cinaia countered. “Is it suitable for the Phalanx to break down our guest’s door? To threaten her? To order a wing guard to slit his own throat while she watches?” Cinaia asked.

The Advocate’s expression flickered with surprise and he glanced toward the other men. Their faces were blank, as if waiting for his reaction.

“I seem to have caught you and the Consultancy off-guard,” Cinaia said. “How could you not know? I suppose your staff didn’t count the incident worthy of disturbing you. Did you even miss me when I left your bed to address the distress call from mine?” She gestured widely to the table where the men of the Consultancy sat. “And where is the Chancellor? No matter. I didn’t expect to find him here. Why

would waste his time in pointless meetings when he can be more effective elsewhere, fomenting disruption?”

The Advocate’s eyes narrowed. “You won’t challenge protocol in front of this group yet you disparage my Chancellor in their presence?”

A Consultancy members raised his hand. “Advocate, we can recess and allow you to—”

Cinaia stepped forward, dragging me with her. “I am the Complement,” she said. “Do you understand the meaning of the word? Stay and learn. Eldon, how dare you question my restraint regarding this incident. There is no disparagement in speaking truth. Leander is responsible for what happened in the women’s quarters. The Phalanx either acted due to his negligence or under his orders.”

“Nonsense. What possible reason could he have for ordering the incident?” the Advocate asked.

“The Phalanx came looking for the male T’holin I acquired,” Cinaia said.

“Now I’m thoroughly confused,” the Advocate said. “Why would they hope to find your male T’holin in the women’s quarters?”

“He was intended for service at Fort Cardiff, but he was attacked by Phalanx brutes on the train. His injuries made him...unsuitable...for those purposes.”

“You’re digging yourself quite a hole, my dear,” the Advocate said. “What services is he suitable for?”

“And you’re deflecting to obfuscate the point,” Cinaia said. “This is about toxic male dominance. It’s about honor and shame. Word of CcT’holner’s injuries spread throughout Fort Cardiff and exposed the Phalanx’s obscene tactics.”

“Did it occur to you that the Chancellor has been too busy dealing with the Honor Guard’s obscene tactics to be concerned about an honor debt involving a single male T’holin slave?” The Advocate said.

Cinaia held his gaze for a moment and then turned her attention to the other men. “So it’s a matter of proportion?” she asked. “Then who in this room can explain how allowing a woman in distress to shower in the barracks is obscene? How it’s an offense worthy of dismissing the Chamberlain and the entire Honor Guard, yet Phalanx can threaten male T’holin with castration, break down the doors to women’s bedrooms, and perform executions in the sanctity of the women’s quarters with impunity?” She lowered her voice. “Did I mention how the Phalanx treated the Chamberlain? And what, dear Eldon, shall I tell our sources about our care for the Rounder they’re entrusting with the most critical acquisition of our fragile alliance?”

The Advocate’s knuckles whitened as he gripped the back of his chair.

Cinaia tapped her foot. “I’m waiting,” she said.

The Advocate spread his hands. “What, you expect me to discipline the Phalanx myself? This is the Chancellor’s purview.”

“And the Chancellor is under your purview.”

“I would remind you that you’re the one who brought the Chamberlain’s actions to light by presenting the Rounder at the SecQuarter Concord.”

“You’re deflecting again,” Cinaia said.

“Nonetheless, her presence drew attention to matters we might otherwise have overlooked. By the way, the Chancellor

was impressed with Hadrian's idea to use the Honor Guard more effectively. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"But to dismiss the Honor Guard, an institution as old as the Collaborative..." Cinaia's voice rose. "I can't imagine the Consortium approves," she said. "I wish to speak with President Wong."

"The Consortium is too unwieldy for this situation," Eldon said.

Cinaia turned to the Consultancy. "Why does none of you challenge this egregious breach of protocol?" she cried.

"Cinaia, you're meddling in matters beyond your domain," the Advocate said.

Cinaia took a shaky breath.

"At least allow Arden to keep Davin at his side."

"Davin Roan has been dismissed with the rest of the Honor Guard," the Advocate said, his tone flat and hard.

"But, Eldon! He is our—" Cinaia said, and her voice broke.

"He's grown and has no claims on us," the Advocate said. "Besides, as Captain of the Honor Guard, he had the authority to challenge the Chamberlain's orders. Yet he allowed a woman to strip naked in the barracks."

"He allowed the Broker CcT'holaaxx to care for the Rounder Gillis," Cinaia said. "In so doing, he preserved my dignity and saved the Rounder's life."

"You're being a bit dramatic," Eldon said.

"Were you there? Did you see her condition?"

"That's beside the point," Eldon said. He gestured in my direction. "She seems to have recovered quite nicely."

"Then, where is Arden, and who—or what—is protecting him?" Cinaia asked. "The Succession is just weeks away—"

“Precisely,” the Advocate said. “According to my plan for the Succession, I sent our son,” he said, drawing out the word for emphasis, “to deal with a production issue at the offshore kelp refinery.”

“With a Phalanx guard?”

“I find your sudden interest in who’s guarding Arden quite telling. I do hope Davin’s absence doesn’t hinder the next acquisition.” The Advocate’s tone was heavy with unspoken accusation.

Cinaia’s mouth formed an oval of surprise, but she recovered instantly. “And I find your sudden interest in T’holin acquisitions telling,” she said. “Isn’t that the Chancellor’s purview?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know why this acquisition is more important than your goals for domestic programs.”

“My goals, Eldon?” Cinaia said, leaning in to adjust his lapel, though her hands were trembling. “I thought our goals were mutual. Now you must tell me what you failed to disclose.”

The Advocate gripped Cinaia’s wrists and pulled her close to his chest.

Her face turned white but she didn’t wince or pull back.

“Nothing more than you failed to disclose about Arden’s trip to your childhood home,” the Advocate said. He dropped Cinaia’s arms. “If Arden is successful at the refinery, the next test of his leadership will be accompanying the Rounder,” he said.

“But, his safety...” Cinaia said.

“What good is a test if we control all the conditions?” the Advocate said.



We retraced our steps to my room, where we picked our way around pieces of the splintered door as Cinaia flung drawers and closets open and gathered my belongings.

“I’m taking you to the Dome,” she said. “I can’t protect you here.”

“But you said the Phalanx would come back—“

“I know what I said. I’ve calculated the risk. With the T’holin’s help, you’ll recover faster. I need you to at full strength. To find Davin. Do you understand?” She handed me my knapsack. “Maybe I expect too much of you at this point on the shape path, but this move is for the best. If the Phalanx search the Dome, at least you’ll be on ground level, closer to the Capitol’s exit points.”

By the time we entered the T’holin habitat, my strength was flagging. SsUuulu swept an arm around me and led me to a low platform piled with soft fabric. She placed a morsel in my hand. “Eat,” she said. “You’re in full flight or fight mode. This will help you descend.”

XxRaalis came along side Cinaia. “This one, too,” he said.

“But I need to—” Cinaia said.

“Listen to your wild T’holin,” CcT’holner said, handing her a nugget.

“Spinner tincture?” she asked.

“It’s a tiny dose, ” he said. “To help you rest and wake up clear-headed.”

“But I really don’t have time.”

“Do you have time to undue the damage of rash decisions?” XxRaalis said.



Cinaia was gone when I woke up.

SsUuulu reassured me that Cinaia had rested well, and had gone to attend to urgent matters. “You, however, need another day of uninterrupted healing,” SsUuulu said.

She led me to a seat made of woven reeds beside a bubbling fountain set with round stones. Mosses and ferns grew between the rocks, and flowering vines climbed tree trunks surrounding the space. The setting appeared old, as if the Dome had been built around it. I breathed the scent of moist earth and sweet blossoms.

Unlike the agitated T’holin in the desert rook—most of whom had never seen a human—the T’holin in the Dome seemed calm and alert, if I could trust subtle cues such as the slight elevation of their folded wings, their fluffed but not spiked brow ridges, and the pitch of their non-verbal vocalizations. Their vigilance had more to do with the state of Hadera than my presence, I figured.

The Dome habitat was less unsettling than the desert rook and its T’holin were more like my triad. Instead of recoiling from their otherness, I observed them with awe, and in contrast, felt naked, earth-bound, and stunted. Their facile movements, whether in the air or on the ground or someplace in between—even sideways or upside down—augmented my awareness of their spatial aptitude. Their arms and digits were always occupied with some graceful task, such as weaving with reeds and thread and, to my awe, with light from their signets.

Small groups of T’holin left and returned to the habitat at intervals, led by neuters, it seemed, and I assumed they were rotating through their duties in the workforce.

It was hard for me to think of them as slaves, but they were, in fact, captives, in some elaborate scheme based, I suspected, on hidden motives from all sides.

Later that afternoon, the Patternbearers sat with me, wrapping me in light and sound that reached me like a deep massage. My journeystone tuned to their individual links, which they attenuated to dampen the stimulus. Among the pleasant harmonics, I picked out an echo of the *O'o'o'sl'h* and an ambient whisper of Pavi's signal and experienced a moment of panic that the Patternbearer buffered. As I regained composure, I discerned my triad, and Cinaia and Davin in the mix.

Without cues to locate the links in space or time, I relapsed into alarm, but the Patternbearers's streams of light and sound steered me back to calm.

The sphere was absent. I asked CcT'holner why. He said I must remain in the Dome until the sphere guided me elsewhere.

"Will it lead me to the Waker?"

He crossed his arms on his chest.

The next morning, the curtains around several platforms were closed. When CcT'holner came to take me for a walk, I asked him about the significance.

Noting his spiked brow fur, I figured he was annoyed at me for asking a question.

But there was a charge in the air. The delicate hair follicles on my arms reacted with unsettling impulses like an unsolicited caress. My nipples ached and my pulse quickened, recalling the dream of the faceless suitor.

CcT'holner led me to the dome's exit. I hesitated, but the sphere bloomed on cue and I followed him outside along a

path shaded by palmettos. The sphere spun ahead of me as we walked for half a kilometer. I smelled the tang of salt and began to relax.

CcT'holner's brow smoothed and his journeystone's signal calmed as the path opened to a beach. He spread his wings to shield me from the sun, casting me in their lavender shadow.

"You need to mate soon," he said. "To bond."

His remark sparked a recollection of SsUulu lamenting CcT'holner's injuries. She said he wouldn't be healed in time for the next estrus. I connected the closed curtains in the Dome, CcT'holner's unease and my own disorienting state of arousal like pieces of a puzzle. But I'd never seen the whole picture, so I didn't know where the pieces fit.

"You're wondering about the triads," CcT'holner said. "Did no one explain?"

I shook my head.

"Our processes are tuned to a stabilizing frequency, which mating calibrates," he said, and switched to link-talk. *"In your number system, it is based on the transcendental number 2.71828. It is the basis of the natural exponential function, the only function that is the derivative of itself. It is not a whole number, yet it is not incomplete. The triad's essences and our biological processes follow frequency scales based on this number. We appear to be three entities, but we are both less and more, and this is what stabilizes and bonds us."*

Spoken like a true Maker. But the link conveyed something more, like reverence, awe, and yearning.

"What about you?" I asked.

"The Patternbearers are healing me and I won't be losing the best now," he said, aloud.

The sphere drew my attention to the shoreline's southward curve. Where the sea met the sky, the spires and platforms of an offshore structure swam like a mirage.

My journeystone whispered, "*The worst now.*"

CcT'holner pointed to the distant complex. "I'm permitted to tell you it's the kelp refinery," he said.

"Where the Advocate sent Arden?"

"At least its spires point upward," CcT'holner said.

Knowing it was pointless to ask for clarification, I tucked the comment away. I figured it was safe to infer the T'holin weren't pleased with the kelp refinery.

My mind danced with images and technical terms for biomass fermentation and anaerobic digestion and salinity, for the mechanics of an elevator that raised the kelp beds closer to the surface during daylight hours and plunged them into the depths at night to capture nutrients; for net energy yields per kilogram of biomass...

"Your signet is boosting your access to the Archive," CcT'holner said.

"It's like I have a Riff in my head," I said. "Makes me dizzy. I've used a filtered Archive all my life. Why is this different?"

"The information is new on the shape path," CcT'holner said. "The Archive is still adapting to it. I'm surprised your neural pathways can accept it. Have you noticed your journeystone is connecting you to more links?"

"It's confusing," I said. "The links are..." I searched for a word. "Sporadic."

"The problem is not confined to your journeystone," he said. "The *O'o'o'sl'h* are struggling to find the Contradiction."

My stomach clenched. I waited for him to explain, but he just stared at the horizon. I began to think the griping in my

stomach was actual hunger. “Can we go back now?” I asked. “I’m famished.”

CcT’holner’s chin rotated “no.” “I’m not a Gatherer, but I can feed you,” he said. “Your brain requires extra energy to work with the signet.”

He rose into the air, glided over the water and then dived, popping back to the surface with a dark object in his mouth. He waded to shore and wrapped several strands of seaweed around a morsel I couldn’t identify.

“It’s safe for you to eat it raw,” he said, handing it to me. “The seaweed wrapper will make it more pleasing. You might even enjoy it.”

I closed my eyes and bit into something pliant and fleshy. As I chewed, its saltiness merged with a buttery flavor.

The pilot sphere shot away and hovered over the water.

“Follow it,” CcT’holner said.

“Into the sea?”

“It is the best now,” he said. “Take off your dress and your boots so they don’t drag you down.”

CcT’holner didn’t move to help me as I sat in the sand to pull the boots off and then stood to unfasten the dress’s single button at the neckline and wriggle my shoulders free. The dress collapsed around my ankles and I stepped out of it.

The sun was warm on my face and chest. I dipped my toe into the cool, foaming break and tracked the sphere’s dance away from shore where the waves crested a meter high.

I took a few steps, surprised at the strength of the incoming current.

“Quickly,” CcT’holner said. “The sun’s rays are harsh.”

Lifting my knees, I dashed into the surf, but a large swell knocked me off balance, and I fell on my back, swallowing

salt. The water flowed over my head and I flailed to find my feet, but the current kept me down, sweeping me away from shore until a new wave lifted me. I flipped onto my stomach and kicked until I was vertical again. Finding I could touch the sandy bottom with my feet, I pushed to the surface, and looked for the sphere.

Even farther from shore, it hovered under the crest of a huge wave.

“Dive,” CcT’holner called.

I shut my eyes, held my breath and extended my arms, clasp my stump with my hand to part the water. As I submerged, underwater whispers and gurgles enveloped me.

I opened my eyes to the sting of salt. It passed quickly and I was able to navigate the water’s silk curtains of turquoise and gold.

The sphere swam a few meters ahead, skimming a bed of kelp. I shot to the surface to refill my lungs, and then dived again and kicked toward the sphere.

Between the waving strands of kelp, black slugs clung in clusters the size of walnuts. I plucked a few, along with a bouquet of kelp.

The sphere bobbed to the surface, so I followed it until it came to rest on shore near CcT’holner. I swam until I could stand, and then I waded ashore.

“Second lunch,” I said, waving my catch, proud of my accomplishment until the possibility struck me that the sphere was teaching me survival skills.

I wasn’t averse to learning. I just didn’t want to face another situation that required them.

CcT’holner touched my signet. “You wear it well,” he said. “Always weigh the energy cost of using it.



Just before sunset that evening, as the sunlight fell at a perfect right angle to the tree trunks in the dome, the T'holin males began to drone. In response, the females and neuters gathered on the ground with the children, and threaded their harmonies with the bass tones.

“The Patternbearers are calling us to Cluster,” CcT'holner said, as SsUuulu and XxRaalis met him at my platform.

I joined the Patternbearers where CcT'holner directed me, without questioning, and the sphere confirmed my place.

My signet tingled and sent a pulsing light that merged with the Patternbearers' fractals, matching the rhythm of the song. My mind stilled and my shoulders relaxed.

The fractals bloomed into images: an airship spewing fire; a light bolus breaking the bright bubble of the planet's atmosphere. I tried to discern their shape path, but I knew no best-now where airships existed.

The images blurred and reformed with montages from the Archive of the First Death: trenches stacked with human bodies as the hemorrhagic virus raged; T'holin fleeing to the Founders on the far continent, Continuum, as the Collaborative doubled down and metastasized into a corporatocracy with no regard for human and T'holin rights.

The Patternbearers sang a song. Its tune was a dirge.

The pandemic wasn't the First Death. It won't be the last.

The T'holin voices ebbed, the light fractals stilled, and I slumped, empty and confused. Waves of homesickness rushed in to fill the void. I yearned for the Fold, for the gratification of doing simple chores every day, for Archer, for my students, soon resuming their studies without me; for SsLissa's sharp

tongue and warm breast, for banter with Pavi, for the certainty of my purpose—no matter how I chafed against it—to guard the Waker.

I sensed Pavi and my triad, and a thread of the shape path to them, but T'holin keened an alarm that shattered it, and the pilot sphere surged toward the dome's exit. I stumbled to follow it.

Smoke stung my eyes. The garden's damp vegetation was on fire.

T'holin scrambled to shut the dome's exits and ventilation slits, but masked Phalanx wing guards swooped in to block their way.

Acrid smoke billowed into the dome and I jumped back as a T'holin female dropped at my feet.

CcT'holner flew to my side with SsUuulu and XxRaalis.

Images of hexagons and knobby filaments rotated in my mind. I recognized a nitrogen atom within an amine structure, and my teaching memory gave the molecule a name: an alkaloid. Maybe the T'holin were more sensitive to the toxin than humans, but I was not exempt.

An Apex flapped into the dome and settled near the Patternbearers. "Your Clustering song called us," he said. "You are already gathered. We will take what we want."

I cowered beneath CcT'holner's wings. The Phalanx culled seven males from the group. They didn't resist.

My journeystone confirmed what I suspected: they were all from the Patternbearers' triads.

The children raised a tone that raked my heart.

A matriarch Patternbearer extended her wings. "Makers," she called, "open the ceiling. Gatherers and Enfolders, carry

the children! All who have the strength, fly to safety. Those who remain will join the Patternbearers.”

I turned to CcT’holner, not sure I’d understood. “Join the Patternbearers?”

His wings drooped. “You can’t join them on that shape path. But you must come alongside them. I will enfold you.”

“Males don’t enfold,” I said.

“It is your best now,” he said.

The dome echoed with rustling wings and chittering voices, but CcT’holner spread his wings, preventing me from watching. I settled onto his feet. He wrapped me in darkness and without warning, I fell into a geometry of searing fractals that took my breath. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound escaped.

The Patternbearers raised a droning song. It quenched the fractals, climbing to a trembling crescendo and then fading to white noise.

As CcT’holner opened his wings, my signet projected a diffuse glow that encircled the center of the gathering place, where the Patternbearers lay motionless.

My journeystone jolted my breastbone and my signet grew hot, refining a single pattern, marking me as the sole remaining Patternbearer in that place.

From beneath CcT’holner’s wing, I saw Cinaia, Cilia and SsWaalu approaching. Cinaia knelt, ashen faced, and gathered one of the Patternbearers in her arms.

I ran to her side and clasped her shoulder.

“You have to go,” she said, without looking at me.

“Don’t send me away!”

But the pilot sphere surged to the far side of the garden and I sensed its pull.

“It’s time for you to get back to your work,” Cinaia said tentatively, as if testing the premise, and then finished with a commanding tone. “Connect with your sources. And your broker.” She wrenched her shoulder from my grip.

Tears blurred my vision. I stumbled back to CcT’holner and clutched his breast. His heart beat against my cheek and I wrapped my arms around his solid warmth.

Tell me what you understood, CcT’holner linked.

How am I going to find Davin? I queried.

The shape path will show you, he said.

I broke the shape path. Again. The O’o’o’sl’h’ is even weaker now. The Patternbearers are gone.

Nothing is lost on the shape path, he said. *Follow it.*

My tears were damp on his breast. I breathed his scent until I was calm enough to step back and wipe my eyes.

Barely visible in the smoky haze, the sphere twirled near an exit. I took a step. The sphere shot toward me and bloomed like a giant umbrella, engulfing me.

At first, I thought the visual distortion was smoke residue, but my journeystone whispered, “*Sillay.*”

CHAPTER 10



“A woman of valor, who can find? Her value exceeds that of gems.” –Proverbs 31

My vision adjusted to the sillay bubble, like seeing underwater. I found the nearest garden gate and ran to the larger courtyard. Oriented by the Capitol parapets, I headed toward the campus perimeter.

Outside the courtyard, the sillay bubble was my only cover. Several hundred meters away, the dark outlines of twin towers marked the main security checkpoint.

I ran, bolstered by adrenaline as the rumble and hum of vehicles preceded my view of the access road where cargo carriers and runabouts streamed toward the Capitol, shifting gears to resume speed after stopping at the gate.

Aiming for a clump of shrubs at the base of the checkpoint booth, I hurried to take shelter and figure out my next move. In sillay, without the pilot sphere’s validation, I had no idea where to go when I reached the other side.

I watched as drivers stopped their vehicles at the checkpoint and produced their Riffs. Runabouts were cleared after a brief scan, but cargo carriers were subject to search. I retrieved my Riff from the knapsack to clock the gate settings.

The gate remained open eight seconds to admit runabouts and 16 seconds for cargo carriers. I let those facts sink in.

A human would never set the timer in multiples of eight.

Phalanx were in charge the Capitol access.

My hands shook as I stashed my Riff.

I touched my journeystone as I waited for a cargo carrier to stop. For the first time since the desert, I discerned information in the ambient signal of the *O'o'o'sl'h*, in a preverbal form that activated with my synesthesia, helping me to visualize sounds as shapes and colors—the most literal expression of T'holin consciousness.

I cobbled a translation: *you, we were-will-are falling-up* and interpreted the string of state of being verbs as: *we're guiding you to the best now (a present based on the relevant past and its most likely possibilities and consequences)*.

One of the Patternbearer threads asserted prominence.

SsLissa's link.

You, I(triad) were are will, she said.

SsLissa and CcShirnir and XxRiis will be in my best now, I guessed.

A vague shape path came to mind. My best hope for shelter was with Lady Leander's Valor.

I took a long breath and walked slowly toward the gate, passing a shadowy figure in the booth that was unmistakably Phalanx.

Taking courage in the memory of Phalanx ignoring CcT'holner in sillay, I bolted through the gate when it opened for the next cargo carrier.

I ran along a paved walkway parallel with the winding road for about a kilometer, and came to another security checkpoint. If I could trust my recollection of the trip with

Davin, this gate governed the Leander estate. Less fortified than the main gate, it was simply a booth with gated arms. I slowed down and slipped under the arms. The human-shaped figure in the booth didn't react.

The road narrowed to a lane. I followed it around a curve to a thick grove of trees. No longer in view of the security gate, I felt less vulnerable, but my relief was short lived. The *silly* bubble contracted with an electric crackle and the pilot sphere reformed.

I scrambled to take cover behind a bush. Through its branches, the manse's exterior walls and windows looked like a puzzle with missing pieces.

I parted the leaves to get my bearings. In daylight and graced with ivy and shade, the setting beckoned like a haven.

It was a trick of the light, I told myself, remaining wary. This was Stellan Leander's home, and I was, in fact, insane to go near it. I listened for direction from the *O'o'o'sl'h*, but their signal was just a whisper.

CcT'holner said I must follow the sphere at all costs.

For that reason alone, I walked on.



I emerged from the foliage to the sound of chirping birds and gurgling water, stepping onto cobblestone, near a fountain at the edge of a paved circle. A grove with a small pavilion stretched beyond the circle. The lawn was scattered with children's balls and playthings, and sunlight glinted on a pair of knitting needles and a swatch of yarn that looked like they'd been dropped.

The sphere veered, drawing my attention to a path beside the manse. I followed it past a vegetable garden where two

shovels leaned at a precarious angle in a mound of mulch, and came to another copse that shaded me as I approached a tall, white-washed building with screened windows and small slits near the roof.

The sphere hovered at the entrance, where the T'holin scent was strong, inflaming my heart with longing for SsLissa and her mates. For CcT'holner.

I looked for a bell or a knocker, and seeing none, I raised my hand to rap on the heavy wood, but the door opened and I nearly fell into the arms of the Valor.

Her shoulders were high and tense and her face was more pinched than I remembered. As she wiped her hands on her apron, I glimpsed a tattoo in the palm of her right hand: a diamond and two arms of a spiral, the symbol of the Unfolding.

It was enough to drop me to my knees. "I need your protection," I said, and removed my headband to show my signet.

The Valor stared and then took my arms and helped me to my feet. "I was expecting you," she whispered. "Come inside and may the Unfolding help us all."

T'holin fabrics draped the walls and hung from the ceiling to form partitions, catching the glow from a skylight in the center of the space where a T'holin triad sat with women holding Riffs.

The female's Patternbearer signet shot a beam of light toward mine and a surge of grief and rage rocked me on my heels.

The Valor steadied my shoulders and then released them to use her hands to sign something in the Patternbearer's direction.

The Patternbearer rose to her full height and spread her wings as she faced the Valor. “You are foolish,” she said in the southern dialect. “We have hid the children and yet you open the door. And I will speak my language or none at all.”

The Valor’s hands flurried in the sign language and the Patternbearer retreated to the circle, hissing.

The Valor crossed her arms and waited.

After a moment, the Patternbearer stepped forward again. My signet flared and my journeystone turned hot. *The stars call me SsToola Whuu O’o’o’sl*, she said through my link. *I am Patternbearer for this rook.*

Surprised to receive the link, I opened my palm and answered, “*I am Aleya Gillis Whuu O’o’o’sl.*”

SsToola’s nictitating membranes flashed and her brow ridge spiked, but she acknowledged me with a dip of her chin. *The walls have ears. Do you know our hand language?*

I shook my head.

Pity, SsToola said. *It falls to me to translate for you.*

I’m sorry to be a burden. I will leave.

Did the signet bring you here?

It did.

Damn the O’o’o’sl’h.

The Valor signed something and SsToola glared. *She wants you to stow your things and then tell us how it unfolded*, SsToola said.

I clasped my knapsack to my chest, fighting the urge to run out the door, but I couldn’t see the sphere and had I nowhere to go.

The Valor gestured toward a door at the rear of the room. I followed her to a smaller room. In its center, a skylight illumined a play mat strewn with books and toys. The walls

were lined with sleeping platforms and cubbies. A fabric partition blocked the rear of the room, and that's where the Valor led me.

My eyes were drawn to a ceiling almost as high as the one in my Fold domicile, fitted with several nooks. Three nooks were occupied, washing me with a wave of homesickness. A Gatherer entered from a window slit and flitted among the nooks, distributing something from its pouch. Amid clicks and twitters and short song bursts of chatter, my ears tuned to the faint peeps of infants.

A male Maker emerged from the shadows. I recognized him from the triad I delivered to the Valor. His wildness made my heart race. The domestic T'holin seemed less substantial in comparison, as if they were partly in sillay.

"The newborns?" The Valor asked in Clipped.

"Able to be living," he answered.

The Valor's brow was furrowed in concentration. "But..." she prompted.

He spoke again, filling in his fractured Clipped with terms from the desert dialect. Seeing the look of incomprehension on the Valor's face, I turned to her and raised my hands in a gesture of helplessness, wishing I could link or sign.

She shook her head vehemently and put her finger on her lips. "Let's see if I understood," she said in Clipped. "The infants' ears are crimped, but they can hear. Their wings are stunted. They may never fly."

The Maker dipped his chin.

The Valor slumped. "As I expected," she said. "I wonder if it the same throughout the provinces."

The Maker's brow ridges spiked.

The Valor sighed and pointed to a pallet. “It’s time for the afternoon Discipline,” she said, and the Maker dipped his chin again. “The women from the manse will be joining us,” the Valor said.



Returning to the main gathering space, we found SsToola waiting under the skylight, with neck retracted, wings hunched and brow fur spiked.

The Valor frowned and signed with sharp gestures.

SsToola didn’t acknowledge the Valor. Instead, she jarred my journeystone with a strident link. *I will translate, but I will not sheath my fangs for you*, she said.

I gasped as my signet threw a tiny fractal into the space between us and I sensed a whisper from the *O’o’o’sl’h*.

SsToola’s nictitating membranes flashed. *Do you challenge my authority?*

The Maker began a low drone. It cleared my head.

*If my presence is a challenger to your authority....*I answered.

Women in hooded cloaks began to file into the room. They kneeled, forming a circle around SsToola.

The Valor motioned for me to join the circle. Her knees creaked as she lowered herself to the floor beside me.

SsToola began the liturgy for the afternoon Discipline, singing the same austere form of T’holin that the *O’o’o’sl’h* had whispered to guide me earlier. Whether by intuition, or with help from the Archive, I understood the women didn’t need to grasp the language to surrender to it.

The First Node stirred a memory of my dream suitor. Like before, he kissed my stump and clasped my forearm in desperation.

I sensed the same urgency in SsToola.

I reached out to her. *Separate Desire from Demand*, I said, cringing at my boldness.

SsToola's link seared my journeystone in rebuke, but I stood my ground and our signet fractals dueled in the space between us, crackling with tension until my signet cast a novel fractal that disrupted the patterns and opened the second and third nodes.

Some of the pathways were frayed. Others were half-formed wisps.

"I will join you in the Contradiction," SsToola said, grudgingly. *So many broken places in your experience...*

The women lowered their cowls. Only one face was familiar. Even unadorned, Lady Leander's dark brows and full lips were unmistakable. She lifted her hands and began to sign.

SsToola linked to me. *The Lady wants to know how it unfolded.*

I studied the faces around me for a clue to what they knew or suspected. Some eyes were red and puffy, some lips were set in thin lines. Some heads were bowed as if they couldn't bear to look at me.

I linked to SsToola. *They know about the...tragedy... in the Dome?*

SsToola screeched and flapped her wings. *Then, it's true?* My throat tightened and I managed to nod.

SsToola signed, and some of the women hid their faces in their hands.

Everywhere you touch the shape path, it breaks, SsToola said. How would it not? You follow SsLissa, who fractured the O'o'o'sl'h'. How do you explain the silence? The Complement is silent. CcT'holaaxx is silent. The croy are silent. The Founders are silent. The Archive is silent. The Gatherer is silent.

The Gatherer is silent. My stump began to throb in confusion but I didn't deny SsToola's claims. Instead, I confessed to the other broken places on the shape path. *Does Lady Leander know her husband dismissed the Honor Guard? That Cinaia fears for Arden's safety and grieves for Davin?*

SsToola's link sputtered. *Explain, then, she said. What else has the O'o'o'sl'h's silence hid from us?*

Before I could respond, Ria stood up and stepped between us. She signed frantically to SsToola, who hissed and clucked and then signed a retort.

The Lady doesn't have the patience for this clumsy exchange, SsToola said. She'll take you to a place where there are no walls to hear. There is no such place, in truth, yet she demands that you tell her what you know.

SsToola's signet threw a fractal that twirled near my sternum. *It chafes my pride, but I must ask if you will maintain your link with me so that I may learn, too, she said.*

I don't know what this rift is between you and SsLissa, I said. What I must tell the Lady is true no matter who learns it. Yes, I will link to you.

Ria signed to the Valor, who stepped away and returned with a hooded cloak that she handed to me. I put it on, and the women stood, waiting for Ria to lead the way.

Outside on the path back to the manse, Ria said, "Our goals follow the Unfolding's rising counterclockwise spiral.

We can trust each setback and victory to hold the Contradiction. To create the best now.”

I rocked back on my heels. I’d never heard a human speak so confidently about the Unfolding, especially one without a journeystone. And I’d never heard human or T’holin invoke the Unfolding for specific goals.

“What SsToola says is true,” I said. “I break the shape path everywhere I go.” I touched my forehead. “I’m sorry I followed the signet here. It must be faulty.”

“No,” Ria said. “We know why you’re here. To learn about us. But just enough to find your next step on the shape path. You’ll learn the rest in the T’holin way, by exposure and experience.”

She leaned forward and touched my arm. “What were you going to tell us?”

I risked full eye contact with her.

“Here?” I asked.

The women fanned out into the garden and threw off their cloaks. Ria retreated to the shade and pulled me down to sit on a bench beside her. “Yes, we can talk here,” she said.

“Do you have an honor guard?” I asked.

“Only when I travel outside the Capitol,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“Then, you don’t know that your husband replaced the Guard with Phalanx?”

Ria clapped her hands over her mouth.

“How can you possibly know why I’m here if you don’t even know what your husband is doing?” I asked.

Her eyes flashed. “Don’t judge me by what you think I don’t know,” she said.

I touched my forehead again. “Help me remove the signet. I don’t know how to use it, or who gave it to me, or who made me a Rounder. I’m compromised and I have no business here. I saw a Phalanx wing guard slit his own throat today. It was his penalty for a slip of the tongue naming the Chancellor! Right outside my room. In the women’s quarters. And then the Phalanx burned the Dome and the Patternbearers took their—”

“Stop!” Ria cried. “I can’t bear it.”

“I should leave before I cause more harm,” I said. “But I promised Cinaia I would find Davin.”

“Davin?” Ria asked. “Davin is gone?”

I touched my forehead. “I can only hope the signet guides me to him.” And then my constraint snapped. “To think I let the Advocate kiss my hand at the banquet,” I said with a little shudder. “But Cinaia stood up to him, even when he twisted everything she said to wear her down. Even when he used Arden to hurt her.”

Ria twisted a fold in her cloak. “What did he do to Arden?”

“He sent him on some sort of test. For leadership.”

“Do you know where?”

“To the kelp refinery. I know that doesn’t seem like—”

Ria released my arms. She called on several women by name. “Contact the Gatherer,” she said. “And your field agents!”

The women scrambled and formed a huddle, pulling Riffs from their cloaks, whispering, with fingers flurrying over their devices.

Ria turned back to me. “Tell me everything the Advocate said.”

“Who is the Gatherer?”

“I can’t speak of it,” Ria said. Please! Just tell me what the Advocate said to Cinaia!”

I wracked my memory. “He said if Arden is successful at the refinery, his next test would be going with me on an acquisition,” I said. “Doesn’t he know I can’t take Arden on an acquisition. I’m not a real—”

“And if Arden isn’t successful?” Ria pressed.

I closed my eyes and recalled how the Advocate squeezed Cinaia’s wrists, inflicting pain she tried to hide.

“I can’t be sure—”

“Open your eyes. Tell me what you heard.”

“Cinaia reminded the Advocate of the dangerous conditions on the trade routes. The Advocate said it wouldn’t be a test if all the conditions were controlled.”

Ria peered over the shoulders of the women who were still busy on their Riffs. “Look wider than the kelp supply line,” she said. “There must be something we’ve overlooked.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked. “Why are you all pretending that you believe I’m a Rounder? You know I’m not! And I’m not a Patternbearer. I keep breaking the shape path because I’m on the wrong one.” My stomach knotted. “I saw the Patternbearers die. I can’t risk hurting Arden. I have to leave.”

Ria grabbed my shoulders. “You’re not on the wrong path,” she said. “CcT”holaaxx was working on an acquisition to restore the shape path. You have to find Davin.”

My stump flared again with the old pain.

You think this is about you? SsToola said. The Waker is not lost. Nothing is lost on the shape path.



I awoke the next morning with the familiar heart-sickness of losing Pavi. The silky T'holin bed was no comfort. It brought to mind SsLissa's absence. I welcomed the distraction of a random thought. How many T'holin habitats had I experienced since leaving the Fold? The Rook, the Dome, and now, this domicile? In the Fold, the T'holin assimilated to the human space. In this dom, humans adapted to T'holin space. Ironic, because, here, the T'holin were slaves.

I tried again to access the *O'o'o'sl'h* s, but their signals remained muddled.

The Valor approached my pallet and called me to breakfast. "Lady Leander requests your presence at the main residence after you finish breakfast and the Discipline," she said.

As if there was nothing more important to do, I joined Ria by the window of her sitting room, where we sipped tea and watched the rain.

Wearing a soft dress that didn't hide her pregnancy, Ria patted her belly. "Ah, I love the rainy season," she said. "Especially this year. It helps me mark the time."

"When are you due?" I asked, and immediately regretted it. I had no clue about the rules for a one-one-one conversation with the Lady Leander.

"Three months," she said. "About the time the rainy season ends." With her hair loose and her face unadorned, she looked as young as Pavi. My gaze lingered too long, and something hardened in her eyes.

"What's the verdict, pity or disgust?" she asked.

I recoiled, and ruled out subtly as a social expectation. “I’m in no position to judge,” I said.

“But you do it anyway,” she said. “But, if you must know, it’s all part of my contract. And I take pride in doing it well. I actually enjoy parts of it. Because I’m good at it.” She sighed. “I leveraged what I had to offer: sex and good looks.”

I looked away so hide the questions in my eyes.

Ria followed my gaze. “I didn’t do it for this,” she said, with a gesture that encompassed the room. Its clean lines, soft fabrics and subtle pallet implied unlimited resources.

I shook my head. “I didn’t think—”

Ria pursed her lips and spluttered. “Stop acting like you don’t know how this works. The Unfolding always goes backward to move forward. The answers lead to new questions. Harder questions.” She refilled our teacups. “There’s something I’ve learned from watching T’holin raise their children,” she said. “The pups learn the query inflection first. My point is, Tholin don’t discourage questions unless the one asking them lacks a place for the answers to land.”

“A place to land. That’s a T’holin metaphor. Who taught you?”

Ria raised her brows and met my eyes. “Have you checked your Riff lately?”



The message from CcT’holaaxx appeared on my Riff just after breakfast the next morning. He said he would meet me in two days, at a location yet to be determined and told me not to reply.

The message filled me with relief. Davin must be safe if he was able to send it.

I told Ria about it. “Two days,” she said, as if pleased. “That will give you time to learn a few skills from the women and the Valor.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “It’s like you were born in a cave.”

SsToola, however, didn’t bother to hide her disdain. She led the morning discipline and then excused herself from my presence.

The Valor swept through the meeting space and ordered everyone outside, including the children, and then turned and followed SsToola.

Ria stared after the Valor for a few seconds, and then took a deep breath. “Well, then, Rounder, I suppose that leaves me in charge.”

I followed her outside to the shelter. She motioned for me to sit, and then looked me up and down. “We have work to do,” she said. “I don’t know where to start. I don’t know where were you were bred, but if you’re going to continue to do business in Hadera, you need draw the right kind of attention.”

“You mean, blend in?”

She rolled her eyes again, reminding me of Pavi. “Blending in would draw the wrong kind of attention,” she said.

Surrounded by women in plain attire and muted colors, I raised my hands, perplexed.

“Think of the SecQuarter Banquet,” Ria said. “By the way, you nearly made Arden question his sexual orientation.” She laughed at my blank look and the other women twittered. “Are you really so sheltered?” Ria asked. “Do I need to draw a picture?”

“Ah,” I said, and something finally clicked, based on hints as recent as the banquet and as far back as the Brandyshine. “It’s just that I’ve never met anyone...I’m recalling something Arden said to me. You remember that he and Davin took me back to my room after the banquet...”

“Go on,” Ria said.

“Arden said he would have cancel his plans to drink with Davin, who has no resistance. Resistance to what, I wondered. Now, I get it.”

“You’ve really never met an invert?”

“Not that I know of,” I said. “Where I come from, it wouldn’t matter so much. Our mates are chosen for us, like breeding stock. I’ve been passed over so far.” I lifted my stump to make the point. “So, trust me, I really don’t judge your contractual marriage.”

Ria joined me on the bench and took my stump in her hand.

“But, what about Arden?” I asked. “Surely no one judges him.”

“Hah!” Ria said. “Only real men rule here. But everyone knows about Arden. It’s just unmentionable, especially since he’s in line to succeed the Advocate. Long live the Cardiff dynasty, you know?” She stroked my arm. “On one hand, I pity the woman who becomes his Complement. On the other hand, I think he’d be the perfect husband.” She arched her brows. “But who knows? Maybe Arden won’t have to worry about the Succession.”

A woman sitting on the next bench wagged a finger. “With respect, Lady,” she said.

Ria sighed. “You’re right. It’s unkind to burden the Rounder with issues beyond her shape path.”

“Too late,” I said. “I’ve seen too much.”

The Valor approached, holding a basket of pea pods. “The Rounder is right,” she said. “Stop protecting her. She’s here for a reason.” She jutted her chin in my direction. “Pull the bottom off the basket,” she said. “I need the nested one.”

I tugged, and an identical basket slipped into my hands. The Valor set it on the ground and began to shuck peas into it. “Speaking of nested things, let’s explore how Arden’s test at the kelp refinery might intersect with the Rounder’s shape path,” she said.

“That’s what worries me,” Ria said.

“Shall we at least give the Rounder some context?” the Valor asked.

Some of the women fidgeted and cast bewildered looks at each other.

Ria stared at her hands. “I defer to you, dear Farrah, my Valor,” she said, revealing the Valor’s given name for the first time.

“I demand no deference,” Farrah said. “You are my Lady.”

“Without our Patternbearer?” Ria asked.

“Our Patternbearer chose to silence her link,” Farrah said.

I checked to confirm, and indeed SsToola’s link was mute. So were the *O’o’o’sl’h*. My mind recoiled, unable to track the twisted tensions between tensions.

“We have a Patternbearer with us,” Farrah said. “Let’s use her.

“What can I do?” I asked. “In this silence, the signet is useless. So is my journeystone.” A new question stirred me. “Does none of you have a journeystone?”

Farrah’s eyes widened and she put a finger to her lips. Ria laughed nervously.

Farrah stood and raised a hand to get the women's attention.

"The Gillis speaks words that make no sense to us," she said. "What do we do with her words?"

Ria touched her breast. "We hold them in the Contradiction," she said. "We trust the shape path. The Gillis's words show us that her shape path is taking us beyond our current understanding."

I searched Ria's eyes, thoroughly confused. "I thought it was safe to talk out here," I said.

"There are some things even the Cohort doesn't know," she said.

"Let's show the Gillis where we are on the shape path," Farrah said.

The women pulled Riffs from their aprons and began to speak in turn, creating a cadence, as if each one knew her part.

"Arden will get credit for restoring the supply chain," Ria began.

"And if The Advocate forces Arden to go on an acquisition with the Rounder—" another woman said.

"We will prepare CcT'holaaxx," Farrah said.

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but the Valor touched her lips to shush me. I settled back to listen.

"If the kelp refinery was a distraction, what was its purpose?" the Valor asked. She raised one hand. "Think. Don't speak."

One of woman signed something with her hands and several women nodded in agreement.

Farrah sighed deeply. “Correct. The tax audits in the provinces were so devastating, we were able to persuade more citizens to our cause,” she said.

I turned to Ria, telegraphing my frustration to Ria. *What is this cause?* But instead, I asked, “How do you keep track of so many complex systems?”

Ria raised her eyebrows. “It’s a T’holin thing,” she said. “Too bad SsToola isn’t here to explain it. The T’holin are attuned to frequency ratios equal to Euler’s number, its integer powers or roots. I’m a mathematician and an accountant, so I saw the opportunity immediately. We work together, with the Gatherer, to plug in algorithms for all the interconnected and periodic activities...and that’s more information than you needed,” she said, stifling my question about the identity of the mysterious Gatherer. She gave her attention to Farrah, who asked for a report on the status of certain marriage contracts.

When Farrah asked if the women were ready for the sexual demands of marriage, everyone’s eyes turned to me, and I blushed.

“Enough for now,” Farrah said.

Ria picked up the basket of shucked peas. “Poor, sweet young thing,” she said to me. “Your life is about to change.” “Go get some rest. You and I will spend the evening in Hadera.”



The cascade of afternoon rain on the roof soothed my raw nerves and I nearly fell asleep, but my signet activated, filling my mind with information as if a Riff data base was

downloading in my brain. I breathed into the First Node, allowing the information to pass through my thoughts without engagement. Few of the images made sense. Machinery, perhaps engines; long metal blades, pipelines in the desert, vehicles with large tanks, spinners, spores, a network of saprophages.

When Ria came for me an hour later, she roused me from a strange, altered state. My head buzzed and my body tingled, yet I felt rested.

Wearing a large-brimmed hat, a flowing dress and elbow length gloves, Ria handed me an armful of similar attire. “We’re going to work,” she said. “Do you need help to change?” She unfolded a dress. “It’s a slip over,” she said.

I reached for the bundle. “I’ll be fine,” I said.

She turned her back while I took off my clothes and put on the dress. It slipped over my head easily.

Ria helped me with the soft boots and then handed me a knapsack that matched their fabric. “Bring your Riff,” she said. “Oh, the gloves,” she said. “They’re in the knapsack.”

“You know I can’t wear gloves,” I said.

“No exposed skin in Hadera,” she said.

I lifted my stump. She arched her brows. “Give me the glove,” she said.

I handed her the left one. She turned it inside out, gathered the fingers into a knot, and flipped it right side out. She slipped the glove onto my arm and smoothed it into place over my stump. “It will do,” she said.

The pilot sphere popped into view. I braced to follow Ria outside to the courtyard, where the air was steamy after the rain and drops still glistened on the waxy leaves of bushes.

Ria led me to a parked runabout with a T'holin female in the driver's seat.

“Don't stare,” Ria said. “This isn't the strangest thing you'll see T'holin doing in Hadera.”

CHAPTER 11



“Lasting change is a series of compromises. And compromise is all right, as long your values don't change.” –Jane Goodall

I climbed into the backseat of the runabout with Ria. The air in the cab air was rich with the scent of moisture and T'holin.

Ria leaned over the seat and used her hands to sign something to the T'holin, who dipped her chin in acknowledgement and adjusted a setting on the control panel before starting the ignition.

As the vehicle zipped through the security point and turned to the main the road, the air turned cool and dry. It reeked of chemicals.

Ria took a deep breath. “I love the smell of a new vehicle,” she said.

I rubbed my arms against the chill and kept my opinion of the sterile environment to myself.

Ria glanced at me. “Put on your hat,” she said, pointing ahead where the border of thick foliage and trees ended and the road opened to a wide circle buzzing with vehicles.

I hesitated for half a second.

“We’re leaving the Capitol campus,” Ria said. “It’s all public space now.”

I plopped the hat on my head.

Ria adjusted the translucent veil that dropped from inside its crown. Its rosy tint blurred my view, but I could see the pilot sphere.

The vehicle veered right at the roundabout, heading west, I guessed. Stark walls lined both sides of the road. Occasionally I glimpsed brightly colored tiled roofs above the walls.

After a few kilometers, tall buildings replaced the walled city scape. Arched trims and lush landscaping softened the stark architecture cast in stone, metal and glass. Gardens and arbors topped many of the roofs.

We entered a parking structure and passed through two security checkpoints to reach a reserved stall. The T’holin driver parked the runabout and hopped out to open the door for Ria.

I waited, expecting more instructions from Ria, but there were none. She got out of the runabout and followed the T’holin to a bank of closed doors. I hurried to catch up. The T’holin’s Riff activated the doors and we followed her into a tiny cubicle.

Numbers on the wall flashed in ascending order and my stomach lurched. I struggled to hide my astonishment. I’d never used an elevator.

We emerged onto a canopied walkway high above the ground. Even in the shade, the air was hot and humid.

Ria placed her hands on the safety barrier and gazed down. Fifteen stories below, where I expected to see the street, was a paved strip where people—mostly women

dressed like Ria and me—and T’holin weaved among kiosks and covered booths.

Ria sighed and turned to follow the T’holin to another secure door where we entered the cool, sterile air of a room divided by a maze of low walls above which could see the heads of people and T’holin staring at images that glowed like the surfaces of large Riffs.

Like the elevator, the workspace was a concept I had studied but never experienced. In the Fold, there was no work that required groups of people to sit inside and manipulate data on computing devices.

We walked along a wide aisle, encountering more people and T’holin. The people were dressed in simple, gray tunics and trousers. Like Auditors. But that made no sense. T’holin would never work alongside Auditors. I was so preoccupied with this conundrum that I nearly bumped into Ria when we reached a curved counter. The man behind it greeted Ria and led us to a glass-walled room where men, women and T’holin were seated around a table.

They stood to acknowledge Ria. She took off her hat, and gestured for me to do the same. She didn’t sit, but took her place beside a young man at the head of the table.

Perrin.

His eyes widened as he recognized me.

Oblivious, Ria introduced me.

“I was just about to begin the briefing,” Perrin said. It was more like a question than a statement.

Ria answered with sign language.

The attendees took their seats. A hologram appeared in the center of the table, accompanied by Perrin’s prerecorded voice .

Perrin began to move his fingers and hands, slowly and deliberately, as if he was merely adding emphasis to the spoken presentation, but Ria turned pale. The people squirmed in their seats and the T'holin's brow ridges spiked.

There was nothing alarming in the narrated report. Third quarter estimates...corporate roll backs...luxury taxes... and then I chided myself for the belated realization that the meeting was a cover for a secret agenda.

The hologram faded. Perrin dropped his hands to his sides and turned to Ria.

Her hands flurried. A few humans and a T'holin engaged her in response. Her face relaxed. Perrin signed something briefly, and Ria took a deep breath. Her color returned.

A male T'holin stepped into the room and took Ria's Riff. He returned it a few minutes later, and she sighed with relief.

She said farewell to the group, and gestured to beckon our T'holin driver.

We took the elevator to the ground floor and stepped outside. The scent of moist earth and flowers revived my senses.

I trembled with the effort it took restrain myself from asking Ria what happened in the conference room.

She turned to me abruptly, and said, "Watch how I walk and move. Try to copy me."

She took a few steps, placing one foot in front of the other, with her right elbow tucked at her waist and her forearm raised. She braced her left hand on her hip and cocked her elbow like the handle of a teacup.

She looked ridiculous.

"I can't do that," I said.

She stamped her foot and reached for me, forcing my arms into the stance.

I saw immediately how conveniently it disguised my stump, but realized that wasn't the point.

We stepped out into the thick air.

"Now, to the mall," Ria said. She resumed the affected pose and I gritted my teeth as I struggled to mimic her moves.

To my astonishment, the women we passed were actually strutting like Ria. As they passed us, they turned their heads and gave a quick nod without speaking. We encountered a few men, all dressed in tunics and trousers. They acknowledged us with a nod but didn't turn their heads or make eye contact.

I shivered, unsettled. The people seemed like playthings placed into a perfect, orderly, beautiful diorama. I actually missed the rustic randomness of the Fold.

I was saddened, but not surprised, to see T'holin sweeping the pavement, grooming the landscaping, pushing human babies in strollers and tending kiosks and booths.

We stopped to buy flowers from a T'holin, and tea from a man who wore a visor to shield his eyes from us.

Ria didn't speak until we came to a building with an awning that extended to the curb.

"Now, for the other reason we came," she said.

Like all the buildings I'd seen, this one was devoid of signage. Inside, however, its sterile facade gave way to T'holin fabrics and textures, paintings and gazing pools, arbors and gardens. I breathed deeply, and sensed my microbiome perking up.

We traversed an atrium hung with T'holin nooks and entered a corridor with arched walls. The pilot sphere

bloomed larger, and fractals propagated like a convergence of aurora borealis, fireworks and kaleidoscopes. Ria didn't react. Her eyes didn't reflect the lights and I realized they weren't visible to her.

The corridor ended abruptly and the ceiling disappeared. Behind a copse of trees, the walkway passed behind a whispering waterfall and we entered a maze of hedges. We changed direction so many times, I lost my orientation and forgot I was in the middle of a city. Ahead were small, round hills dotted with trees and boulders.

The T'holin led us behind a slab of rock and we descended a sloping tunnel that opened to a cavern.

The pilot sphere condensed into a pinpoint of light and then disappeared. My journeystone began to whisper with an echo of the O'o'o'sl'h.

A silver-furred Neuter greeted us with open wings and a lilting song. Ria knelt in the enfolding posture and I followed her example.

"A gentle introduction awaits the Gillis," the Neuter said, signing for Ria. "If she consents."

The T'holin word for consent is hard for a human to grasp. It dances around a shape path holding the tension of desire and curiosity, an acknowledgement of risks and responsibility, and the necessity of letting go of oneself to experience mutual dependence and trust with another. Hearing it from the Neuter made me dizzy with fear and longing and it threw to the forefront my memory of Arden's reaction to Davin's declaration of implied consent for recording images of the Fold. But that was in another lifetime, on another world, it seemed.

I realized Arden knew, somehow, the T'holin concept of consent.

I remained in the kneeling position. My journeystone grew warm and the chorus of *O'o'o'sl'h* grew more distinct.

Even if there were human words for the experience they were calling me to, I would not say them here.

I consented, and the Neuter led me away. It gave me something to drink, an elixir, it said, made from spores and spinner venom. Just to bring me to the proper threshold for a gentle introduction. With time and practice, I would be immersed more fully into the practice.

Dear Valor in training, I can reassure you that there was nothing physical about this practice. Nothing or no one touched me. The humans have a euphemism for it: “embodiment,” and it was certainly that and more. It was enough to bring CcT'holner's remarks to mind: “When humans master a fraction of what keeps a triad together...”

On the way back to the estate, I floated in a state of afterglow and bewilderment. Ria didn't press, but she occasionally reached over to touch my arm.

“I remember my first time,” she said. “I wish you could stay longer for more sessions.” She stared out the window as we circled the roundabout. “I had a session today, too. For a boost. Stellan is coming home for a few days.” Her brow crinkled for a second and she sighed deeply. She reached for her Riff and began to type. She stared at the message for several seconds and then handed the Riff to me.

I blinked until I could see the characters instead of their personalities. “*The Maker updated my Riff,*” Ria's message said. “*He installed a stronger encryption. It made it safe for me to check in with Cinaia. She asked about you.*”

“*She’s safe?*” I typed back.

“*Keeping a low profile until Arden returns from the refinery,*” she answered. “*In the meantime, the work falls on me and my Valor. The small things I accomplished today will help. Are you familiar with the Tholin saying, ‘A small gesture in Hadera moves the wind in Farside?’*”

I prepared to answer, that in Farside, the saying was reversed. But I caught myself before disclosing my origins.

But I did type, “*I know Perrin. I’d rather not disclose how I know him. But I’d like to get in touch with him. Is that possible?*”

Ria pursed her lips and gave me a long look. She typed. “*We know you know Perrin. The best now is acting as if you don’t know him. It is truly, truly the best now. For you and for him. And for anyone else you care about.*”

Ria touched her belly. Her face softened for a moment. “*Baby’s kicking,*” she said aloud. She typed, “*Stellan’s return means you must leave. Check your Riff for new instructions.*”



CcT’holaaaxx ’s message was brief. He told me to pack two days supply of food, water and basic necessities and set out at sunset to meet him, using the geographic coordinates he provided.

I gathered my belongings and turned to find the Valor behind me with her arms full of toiletries.

“*You’ll also need sunscreen and dental wipes,*” she said. “*An adequate water bottle, extra underwear and menstrual cups.*” She added a packet of butter nuggets.

I thanked her and packed the items. "I'm a bit uncertain about the instructions," I said and showed her the coordinates on the Riff. "Do you have any idea where this is?"

She shook her head. "Even if I knew, I would not speak of it. In fact, even though your Riff is on a secured network, you should depend on the signet."

I nodded. Of course, the pilot sphere would guide me.

SsToola linked to my journeystone, and I realized she'd been eavesdropping. *The signet won't guide you until you leave the estate*, she said. *We will help you take your leave. When we accompany the children to the beach to gather shiners at sunset, you will go with us and slip through the security gate with us.* She keened as if the link caused her pain.

There was no chance to speak to Ria. I added my questions and unfinished business to the burden of leaving.

The children and their caretakers filed to the door carrying pails and nets and beach towels, and I knew it was time to go.

I knelt before the Valor. "Thank you for your care," I said.

She pulled me to my feet and touched my forehead, placing one hand on my breast, over my journeystone. "Go now," she said.

I followed the rowdy cohort through the slanting light across the estate grounds. The salt tang in the air grew stronger as we approached the beach, and tall grass and scrubby palmettos replaced the canopy of trees.

On the horizon, orange and mauve clouds blurred the sunset across the Gulf and the surf whispered over the chattering and chirping voices of the children.

One of the caretakers palmed the security gate and the children scrambled past her, flapping their arms and wings and squealing and screeching with joy.

In the shiny wake of low tide, the beach was spangled with bright shells. I stood for a moment watching T'holin children among human ones as they gathered shells, with hairy heads and furry heads bent close, sorting and comparing their loot before they stashed it in their pails. Occasionally, the temptation of open sky and sea was too much for some of the T'holin pups and they spread their wings to skim the surf until a caretaker barked a warning.

The pilot sphere popped into view and spun ahead of me toward the North, throwing a fractal that hovered in place as it bounded back to surround me in sillay.

The caretakers were so attuned to the children, they seemed to forget about me. Without acknowledging them, I walked shakily away.

After a few hundred meters, the pilot sphere reformed, leaving me exposed as it shot forward again and threw another fractal. I realized it was a marker.

The sphere returned to envelope me in sillay and I walked along the beach for several kilometers in the gathering dark. As my eyes adjusted to the bubble, near the inland edge of the beach I saw the blurred forms of thatched-roof houses illuminated by hanging lights. The aroma of charcoal and fish and spices drifted my way, along with sounds of laughter and conversation.

The next marker directed me to a boardwalk. The moment outside of the bubble gave me a glimpse of jumbled wooden buildings, some whitewashed and others weathered. Most had porches hung with lights, where people were gathering

for evening meals. I shrank behind a palm trunk with a twinge of longing and curiosity, wondering where these people fit into the society of Hadera.

A new marker led me to a paved road where street lights cast uneven patches of light. The sillay bubble collapsed, revealing a masked and cloaked figure leaning against a light poles, too short and bulky to be CcT'holaaxx.

The arms that reached from under the cloak were T'holin arms and the digits that pulled off the mask were T'holin digits. The exposed face was SsToola's.

My journeystone tuned to hers.

Don't expect CcT'holaaxx, she said.

"The message was from you?"

"CcT'holaaxx is not available," SsToola said. "Davin is a grunt in the infantry, deep inside Fort Cardiff."

It took a moment for my mind to sort the layers of her statement.

SsToola knew Davin's location. She also knew CcT'holaaxx's identity.

"Are you alarmed?" she asked. "You should be." Her shoulders heaved in the T'holin equivalent of a deep sigh. "CcT'holaaxx's Maker is a pitiful hack," she said. "If a Patternbearer can corrupt his work, he's not earned First Flight."

My heart pounded and my nerves screamed, poised to run. I looked for the pilot sphere, but it was nowhere in sight. I pivoted in a full circle to make certain. My journeystone was like a literal rock; heavy, silent and cold. I touched my forehead and found the signet cool and static.

"Where is your guidance?" SsToola asked. "Have the *O'o'o'sl'h* abandoned you?"

Dear Valor in Training, please know that from this point in this encounter, I've stripped the T'holin dimensions from my translation of the dialogue. It would be irresponsible for me to expose you to them. Even with my limited fluency in SsToola's dialect, my experience with the T'holin languages and the spheres of consciousness they touch, SsToola's words sent me into a free-fall, as if I'd slipped off the shape path.

Her question hung, unanswered in my confusion.

"I can help you," she said.

"But—"

"Why don't you trust me?"

"Because you're against me. You—hate me—I disgust you."

SsToola spat. "I have nothing against you," she said. "I detest the Patternbearers who are using you. Is your journeystone cold now? I thought so. They've cut you off to spite me! So, let me ask you, have I ever done anything to break your trust?"

I tried to think, but my mind was too cluttered.

"On the other hand, answer me this: who misled you and failed to prepare you for the Waker's journey?" she asked.

"What journey?"

"You have a journeystone. Do you think the name is just a whimsy to describe a neural implant? What did SsLissa tell you? Think about this: who left you in the desert to die?"

My jaw dropped.

"Come with me," SsToola said. "I will earn your trust. If you don't sense Pavi's link, you can turn back and wait for the *O'o'o'sl'h* of *O'o'o'sl'h* to backtrack and revise her failed plan. Every day the Waker waits for you weakens the Unfolding."

“Nothing can stop the Unfolding,” I said, from rote, with more confidence than I felt.

“And who taught you that pile of sloo?” SsToola dropped the cloak and spread her wings.

I stared at her, shivering as if my journeystone was freezing me from the inside, and then stepped onto her feet in the posture of enfolding.

The world fell away and I wondered if I’d ever find the shape path again.

CHAPTER 12



“In any free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty - all are responsible.” – Abraham Heschel

I smelled savory spices and sensed solid ground beneath my feet as my vision adjusted to reddish light. In a tiny room with bare walls, a young man with dark hair stirred charcoal in a brazier.

He startled and dropped a glowing coal, and I became aware that he was real and not just an image on the shape path.

“Sorry,” the man said in Basic as he stooped to pick up the coal. He ventured a glance at something over my left shoulder. “I was expecting you, but it’s just too strange—”

I took a step backward and bumped into SsToola’s breast.

SsToola steadied me and then signed a response to the man. I recognized the inflection for a question.

The man was expecting a response. I looked to SsToola and back to him.

“I don’t sign,” I said.

His gaze flicked toward a shuttered window and then to a barred wooden door. “The Phalanx is thick here.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Speak in Clipped. Just keep your voice down. And cut your links, for pity’s sake.

SsToola clucked. “Where is She?” she asked.

“She’s hid with the women,” he said. “The streets aren’t safe for man or beast.”

His brows drew together and the expression spurred a memory.

“Perrin?” I asked, wondering why it took so long for me to recognize him.

He nodded. “I know you’re worried, but I can’t take you to Her,” he said, and I allowed myself to believe he might mean Pavi.

“The Phalanx have an appetite for...and there’s no one to stop them,” Perrin said. “They rounded most of the fit men and T’holin for duty, so it’s only the women and children and elders and weak ones left. Sometimes they go door to door —”

SsToola keened.

“Do you have any idea how fast the Phalanx are adapting? It’s only a matter of time before they recruit a Maker who can fit a journeystone. Maybe they already have...”

SsToola sang a long cadence to sooth herself.

“Your confidence in the *O’o’o’sl’h’* is misplaced,” Perrin said. “Both sides need to come to their senses.” He pointed to my signet. “You need to use that for good,” he said. “If the prototype works...we can’t afford to wait.”

“What prototype?” I asked.

He placed skewers of meat and vegetables on the brazier, leaving some cubes of raw meat aside. “You need to refuel and get out of here,” he said. “She says the best now is to send out the Rounder.”

SsToola signed a question.

“Can’t you see it?” Perrin said. “The acquisition must be completed. It serves both factions. It will get the *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h* into the Capitol.”

SsToola’s digits traced a spiral.

“She hasn’t seen that far,” Perrin said. “She says the best now is still unfolding.”

SsToola’s brow ridges spiked again.

Perrin straightened and his timid posture fell away. He walked toward SsToola, giving her a long, direct look.

Her nictitating membranes flashed.

“Don’t question Her loyalties,” Perrin said through clenched teeth. “The truth has dealt Her a blow, but that shock is good for us. Certainty is the enemy of the Unfolding,” he said, and then shrank back to tend the coals.

SsToola spat and spread her wings.

“You’re right,” Perrin said. His shoulders slumped and his voice sounded suddenly weary. “I have no right to advise you,” he said. “I haven’t been bred for a thousand generations to understand your space-time,” he said. “But don’t forget whose side I’m on. And what I’m willing to do to save you.” His hands shook as he placed the skewers on platters and set them on a rough table. “Food’s ready,” he said.

SsToola turned her back to me to consume the raw meat.

I raised a skewer to eat, but my mouth was dry and my throat was constricted.

Perrin handed me a canteen.

I felt foolish reaching for it, suddenly doubting that he was really there and not just a product of my stress and grief. But he said the truth was a shock to Pavi. What truth?

“Drink,” Perrin said. I gaped at him and then took the canteen, relieved to feel its smooth, cool surface in my hands.

I sipped water that was tepid but sweet, and and set the canteen on the table. After a cautious first bite of the food, I devoured the rest of it. Its subtle spices cleared my head and made room for me to wonder how Perrin knew so much about T'holin consciousness and how he was privy to details about Rounders and acquisitions.

"The T'holin have set me on a difficult shape path," I said, placing a finger on my signet. "I don't want to risk unraveling it, but I have so much to learn and the T'holin way takes time and patience."

Perrin mustered a wry grin. "If we start with what you already know, we will honor the T'holin way," he said.

I took a deep breath. "How can I hope to acquire the *O'o'o'sl'h* of *O'o'o'sl'h*, if I can't link with the *O'o'o'sl'h*?"

"The signet will guide you," SsToola hissed.

"Can you journeyfold?" Perrin asked.

I looked to SsToola to hide my confusion.

"She is untested," SsToola said for me, in both T'holin and sign language.

"Then your best now is taking the maglev past Horizon into the mountains," Perrin said. "As soon as possible. Intel says the prototype will be tested on the plains in the next 5-10 days."

"Would you please tell me what you're talking about?"

It was Perrin's turn to look to SsToola.

She answered with swooping digits. "A flying machine," she said. "An aircraft. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "It's dangerous?" I asked.

"You were raised by T'holin?" Perrin asked.

"Yes, but—"

“Then we shouldn’t have to tell you why it’s a threat.” He turned away and began to clear the platters.

My mind flashed with the memory of Eldon squeezing Cinaia’s wrists and insinuating a threat to Arden. “Arden isn’t safe on the passenger train,” I blurted. “We need another form of transportation.”

Perrin reached under the table and pulled out a black satchel—identical to the one he had when he came to the Fold as an Auditor. His eyes widened when he caught me staring at it.

“Just to be clear, I didn’t lure Her away,” he said as he pulled a Riff from the satchel.

“How did She get away, then?” I asked.

“How did you get away?” Perrin countered.

“I wish I could—” I stopped short of saying “journeyfold,” and glared at SsToola instead. “Is that how She did it?” I asked, and my grief for Pavi’s disappearance welled up in a black cloud.

SsToola flapped her wings.

“What good is my signet if I can’t use it —” I protested.

The memory intruded of CcT’holner first touching my forehead when he met me. That was the moment he acknowledged my signet and told me to step into my role as Patternbearer and Rounder, to take the lead as he stepped into the freight car as a slave.

“The freight train,” I blurted. “Could we take the freight train instead?”

Perrin wrinkled his nose as he swiped the screen again. “Is that the best you can do?” He paused with his finger hovering over the Riff. “Well, I found something,” he said. “A bill of lading for a car on the freight train headed from South

Provence to Horizon. Passing through Hadera late tomorrow. A zyph herder is looking for a cost share,” he said.

SsToola’s brow ridges were fully erect. “Tomorrow is too soon on the shape path,” she said.

“It’s our best chance,” I said. “Here’s my Riff. Contact the herder. If you reach him, I’ll take it as a sign.”

Perrin studied me for a moment. “A sign? I didn’t figure you for the religious type.”

“I’m not—”

“Never mind,” Perrin said, taking the Riff from my hand.

SsToola paced while Perrin worked.

“Done,” Perrin said. Just as he gave the Riff back to me, the shutters behind SsToola rattled and the door on the other side of the room shook with a thundering crash.

Wings spread, SsToola whirled to place herself between me and the door.

A second strike followed, straining the door’s latch and creaking its hinges.

“Journeyfold now!” Perrin cried as the door’s wooden slats splintered and fell into the room, and three Phalanx stepped over the debris.

One Phalanx wrapped Perrin in its wings as a second one reached for me. I realized what appetite Perrin had tried to warn us about. The Phalanx’s genitals were exposed and engorged.

SsToola keened and a veil settled over my vision. The Phalanx dissolved in a haze of white light.



I lost my balance and fell backwards, scanning my peripheral view for Phalanx.

A shadow covered me and something touched my shoulder. SsToola's face came into focus and I recognized my surroundings: the meeting place under the street lamp in Hadera. I glanced wildly around, hoping to find Perrin.

SsToola keened a lament. "I tried to journeyfold him," she said. "I'm too—" and she used a word that meant attenuated, stretched too far on the shape path. "I need a moment," she said. "My shape path can't find the best now." She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "Is your journeystone warm?"

I struggled to my feet, touching my sternum and feeling my journeystone's familiar hum. For the moment, it blunted my horror for Perrin.

"Damn *O'o'o'sl'h* of *O'o'o'sl'h*," SsToola said. "She wins this best now. No matter. Cinaia is here. Do as she asks. She and Davin and Arden are caught in our Contradiction. And they need your help."

"How do I know—"

"Just hold the Contradiction," SsToola said. "The *O'o'o'sl'h* are divided but we have a common enemy." She swooped toward the lamppost.

A slim figure stepped out of the bushes and threw back its hood.

"You're late," Cinaia said. "I can't sense your link."

SsToola clucked. "One can't be too careful," she said.

"Is the Gillis prepared?"

SsToola stretched to her full height. "She is. As well as a human can be. But remember, she is untested."

"We don't have much time to catch the train," Cinaia said. "Sillay!"

My forehead grew warmer. The pilot sphere coalesced in front of me and froze. I listened for the Patternbearers' whispering links, and they answered. *It must come from you.*

"Sillay!" Cinaia cried again.

It is in you, the *O'o'o'sl'h* said.

My stump throbbed and my stomach knotted. There was nothing in my head but a fog of incomplete thoughts. I looked first to Cinaia, whose lovely face was locked in that moment of expectation, and then to SsToola, whose golden eyes looked like two far-flung alien stars. The planet's retrograde motion was so strong, I thought I might throw up. For one instant, I sensed the time and distance between Challis and Earth and it cast me adrift.

The *O'o'o'sl'h* sang in my link.

Use me, then, I answered. My fists clenched. So did my jaw. Anger flared like a white hot tide. Energy surged from my signet. The sphere bloomed and a sillay bubble engulfed me and caught Cinaia.

As my enflamed mind cooled, it filled with images rotating counterclockwise in a slow, upward spiral. The maglev. Fort Cardiff.

The *O'o'o'sl'h* whispered, suddenly as clear as if I was in the same room with the Flock.

Follow your shape path to the best now.

I reacted instantly, running with irrational confidence, and Cinaia followed. The maglev whined nearby and I envisioned the train station. The bubble collapsed as the station came into view and the pilot sphere hovered above a cluster of folks waiting on the platform to board. Their rainbow cloaks fluttered in the breeze.

“We’re exposed,” Cinaia said. “We have to find a way to stow on board. We can’t buy fare; they’d track our Riffs.”

The train braked at the platform and I knew what to do. I linked to the O’o’o’sl’h’s whisper and focused my will on the signet as I sprang forward. The pilot sphere collapsed and the sillay bubble reformed.

Cinaia took my hand and we braced to leap into the nearest car. We brushed passed the departing passengers and looked for a place to tuck ourselves out of the way.

A bulkhead separating the car’s standing room from the seating area looked promising. I pressed my back to it, making my self as small as possible, and Cinaia followed my example.

The boarding group clumped into the car and settled in in the standing room, less than a meter away from us.

Their colorful shapes moved like underwater wraiths just outside the bubble. An aromatic scent tickled my nose and someone exhaled a long breath.

“Good stuff,” said a female voice. “Is it supposed to make things blurry? It feels like someone’s watching me.”

“You’ve had enough,” said a man.

“You just want it all for yourself,” said another male voice. “Pace your buzz, man. It’d be hell to come down before Fort Cardiff.”

The female squealed. “I hope we see a Phalanx guard at Fort Cardiff,” she said.

“That’s sick,” one of the males said. “Too bad the train won’t slow down to give you a good look.”

It made perfect sense that the train wouldn’t stop at Fort Cardiff, which wasn’t a public passenger station. Either my

vision of our destination was wrong or Cinaia believed the train would stop there. But I couldn't ask her.

Damn journeystones. If only ours were linked.

The *O'o'o'sl'h* answered. *She knows. She knows.*

She squeezed my hand. "The train will slow down to pass between the concrete bulwarks," she whispered.

My heart began to pound.

The nearest exit door was outside the sillay bubble, too far away for me to see a latch or palm switch and I know even if I could find the switch, it probably wouldn't open while the train was moving.

But the emergency window would.

I inched closer to read the instructions. The letters and numbers laughed at my audacity, but I ignored my taunting synesthesia and held my breath.

As the train braked, its high-pitched whine slipped an octave. I motioned to Cinaia and grabbed the window's emergency bar. She placed her hands alongside mine and, together, we wrenched the window open.

With my heart in my throat, I locked my fingers around the top rim of the window and hoisted myself up, one-handed, and launched through the opening. Shutting my eyes, I bent my knees to soften my landing. My skirts billowed and my bare knees skidded on the concrete.

Cinaia dropped beside me and pulled me to my feet.

As I caught my breath, the sillay bubble wavered. Cinaia paused, as if she knew it would stabilize, and then took off in a sprint.

I followed, wincing as the skin stretched over my scraped knees with each stride.

Although we were invisible, our feet slapped the concrete walkway and the Phalanx guards turned toward us, looking for the source of the sound.

I wondered if the girl on the train got a thrill.

“Focus,” Cinaia said between breaths. “Just because Phalanx can’t see us...doesn’t mean one of them won’t suddenly regain the ability...”

Her words recalled Perrin’s warning.

The walkway ended at the roadway near the check point. Cinaia backed against the concrete wall as vehicles rumbled by.

“Wait for a cargo carrier to enter,” I said. “The gate will stay open longer.”

Cinaia nodded.

My journeystone began to tingle and I leaned forward, clutching my sternum. I curled my body around a deep, deep yearning. It passed in an instant, and I straightened and caught my breath. “I know where Davin is,” I said, even though I’d not seen him on the shape path.

“I know you do,” Cinaia said. “Take CcT’holaaax’s Riff and his masks and find him.”

“But you—”

Cinaia cut me off. “I don’t have time to argue,” she said and began to retrieve the items from her knapsack. She placed a stack of food bars in my hand. “Eat,” she said. “You’ll need energy to journeyfold me home.”

“What—”

Cinaia grabbed a bar and held it to my mouth. I took it from her and gulped it down, stashing the others in my knapsack.

“Go!” Cinaia cried. “Focus on the shape path. Don’t look back!”

CHAPTER 13



“To live is to step with trust into the next moment: into the unpredictable.” –Catherine Keller from “Prologue On the Mystery”

My pulse hammered in my ears as I bolted through the check point. I kept to the edge of a wide roadway. Mental images began to fill in the blurry details beyond the sillay bubble, showing me a complex of brightly lit stone buildings. Beyond them, rows of long, squat structures stretched behind a high, barred fence: barracks. But Davin wasn’t there; he was nearby, and I should look for an arena.

A wave of shouts and cheers pointed me to a circular building a hundred meters away. As I sprinted toward it, my signet turned hot. My stomach lurched. The ground rolled under my feet in a single, discrete wave, like someone was pulling a wrinkle from a rug.

I fell backward on my rear and sat on the curb with my head in my hands.

The shape path showed me Cinaia. She was already home. The *O'o'o'sl'h* cheered, *Your first journey-fold*.

But not all its members celebrated. A thread of scorching disdain sucked my last energy reserves, bringing old fear and self-pity to the surface.

I looked back toward the check point, tempted to retrace my steps. But where would I go? There was no place familiar or safe. And I could not give up the search for Pavi.

My head cleared and filled with clues to the arena's access, and I knew my best now was right in front of me.

Several entrances were spaced around the arena's curved exterior. All of them were open and none of them were guarded, but I smelled Phalanx.

My head told me it made no sense to go inside the arena, that no one in their right mind would walk blindly into such danger, yet my body took me to the nearest door and the signet showed me an aisle lined with spectators standing on risers—soldiers, I guessed from their drab, loose uniforms.

Phalanx guards flanked every other row.

The aisle sloped downward to a wood-floored platform where a line of men, stripped to their briefs, stretched to the center of the platform where one man stood over another who sprawled on the floor.

It took a moment for me to process my view of the standing man's wide shoulders, his auburn hair, long and pulled back in the honor guard queue, his thick brows furrowed with exertion, and his beard. I clamped my hand over my mouth to keep from shouting Davin's name.

The crowd cheered as the next man advanced. Davin grabbed the opposer's wrist and flipped him to the ground.

The onlookers jeered.

Enclosed in the sillay bubble, I moved slowly down the aisle. My journeystone linked to Davin's raw anger, shame and defiant determination.

If only I could whisk him into the sillay bubble. But that would be impossible with an arena full of onlookers. His best now required him to finish the ordeal.

As the defeated man struggled to his feet, an officer in full uniform strode onto the platform flanked by two Phalanx guards. The officer shoved the disgraced man back down as he struggled to his feet.

"Is this the best we can do?" the officer called to the crowd.

"No, sir!" the soldiers chorused.

"Shall we redouble our efforts?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sir!" their unison voices rang in the arena.

"Two-to-one it is, then!" the officer announced. "Whoever bests the honor guard gets to shave him!"

The arena reverberated with cheers. "But if he wins, I'll put him in charge of your training!" the officer said.

The crowd jeered and the officer lowered his arm to cue the first pair of men to charge.

I winced at the smacks and thuds of blows to flesh and bone. Davin twirled and parried to dodge the onslaught of swings and kicks. He ducked, and his opponents crashed together, momentarily stunned. Davin grabbed their arms and twisted them, flipping the pair to the floor where they landed facedown.

Boos and jeers filled the arena and the officer bellowed, "Two times two is four!"

I cringed. Four men rushed at Davin. He met them with aggressive blows, and they flailed and stumbled, but kept recovering and charging him. In the tangle of arms and legs, I couldn't follow Davin's final moves, but somehow, the four men landed on the floor.

Four men were left in line. The officer waved them forward and they charged abreast, heads down, arms crossed, forming a human battering ram.

Davin dropped and rolled, and two of the men tripped. Davin was on his feet in time to escape kicks and blows from the other pair, but one of the men who had stumbled got to his feet and landed a fist in Davin's gut.

The crowd cheered.

Davin wobbled but kept his balance. One man jumped on Davin's back and two others grabbed his ankles while the fourth rained punches on his exposed middle.

I covered my eyes. My signet grew warmer and my journeystone tingled. The *O'o'o'sl'h* sang and my stump throbbed. The pain dropped me to my knees.

I mustered the courage to watch.

Davin twisted and lowered his torso, and then straightened sharply. The man on his back lost his grip and the three remaining attackers broke focus. Davin spread his arms and extended his hands, whirling and kicking, aiming hands and feet at his adversaries' throats, sending them coughing and stumbling. He continued a barrage of thrusts and kicks that left his opponents cowering on their knees.

The officer raised his arms to silence the waves of jeers and boos. He moved closer to Davin and lifted Davin's arm.

“This is how the honor guard fights,” the officer said.
“From now on, this is how you will fight!”

The soldiers’ silence hung in the air.

“Your real training begins tomorrow,” the officer said.
“Dismissed!”

The clumping of boots on risers as the soldiers shuffled out of the arena seemed distant and surreal, but the sight of Phalanx guards grabbing Davin’s arms was crisp and clear.

Davin slumped for a second, and then his shoulders straightened and he wrenched free of the Phalanx grip.

The officer gave Davin a curt nod and marched away, leaving Davin alone with the Phalanx guards.

Davin’s back was stiff and straight as he walked between the bulky guards. I followed as closely as I dared, near enough to hear him tell the guards to take him to the showers.

One of the guards clicked and grunted. “Not the arena,” he said in Clipped. “Too crowded.”

“The barracks, then,” Davin said.

At the rear of a squat block building, the guards shoved Davin through a door.

The interior was dim. I nearly tripped on the concrete slab that passed as a shower stall. The signet showed Davin doubled over with his head bowed, letting the water stream down his back.

I fought the urge to run to him and then I remembered I was invisible. I reached for my link with his journeystone, hoping to give him a sense of my nearness, to avoid startling him.

He straightened looked around slowly.

“Turn. Face the guards,” I whispered as I stepped behind him and grabbed the soap. I lathered his back and began to knead his muscles, watching his skin blur at the edge of the sillay bubble, resisting the urge to surround him with it, knowing I couldn’t risk the guards’ reaction to his sudden disappearance. “I’ll create a distraction to draw the guards away so we can get out of here,” I said, with no actual idea what to do. “Get dressed. I’ll be back.”

I wracked my brain for the next moment on the shape path. The *O’o’o’sl’h* whispered without clear direction. I opened my knapsack to look for inspiration and found a tiny hand mirror in my toiletry bag. I tossed it just outside the door of the bath house and projected a light fractal that caught it and created an impressive flare.

The Phalanx guards spread their wings and bellowed. One guard flew outside to investigate and the other stared after him.

Davin hastily passed the towel over his body and shoved his arms and legs into the jumpsuit.

I closed my eyes and breathed, willing the sillay bubble to envelope him. It responded with an audible swoosh.

Davin’s eyes widened and he fumbled with the jumpsuit zipper until he made sense of me standing so close, in the bubble with him.

Already poised to run, I realized Davin had no footwear and there was no time to solve that problem.

Undeterred by Davin’s bare feet, we sprinted through the complex, past the checkpoint to the walkway, and pressed our backs against the wall to catch our breath.

“What in the twelfth level of hell is happening?” Davin said in a voice more like a hiss than a whisper. His pupils

were dilated and there were dark circles under his eyes. “You can sillay?”

A startling wave of clarity swept away my astonishment. I knew where to go next, without prompting, as if I was in the middle of a series of tasks I’d planned ahead. “We need to get to Hadera,” I said. “And there are no more trains tonight.”

Sirens and shouts drowned his response.

“They’ll be after us with Phalanx and croy,” Davin said. “Run!”

“Croy?” I asked, unable to imagine the creatures in the city or doing the bidding of the Phalanx.

“Yes, croy.”

I knew without looking that the bulwarks stretched for half a kilometer along the maglev track before they opened to a buffer zone beyond Fort Cardiff. I also knew I didn’t have the strength to run that far, so when a cargo truck rattled by, still shifting gears, I took off to catch it, motioning Davin to follow.

Davin outpaced me and leaped onto the rear running board first, securing his grip with a cord hanging from the canvas cover. He reached down to pull me up beside him.

With my last drop of energy spent, the sillay bubble wavered. I held my breath and watched sand and barbed wire zipping by and realized with relief that we’d reached the buffer zone. Darkness had fallen and there was no one in sight except vehicle drivers, and no sign of pursuit.

“Open my knapsack,” I said, twisting so Davin could reach it. “I need food.”

Davin gave me a bar and then grabbed my waist as the truck took a curve. His sudden touch startled me, and I struggled to chew and swallow the dry bar. After a few bites,

the sillay bubble resumed full strength, but something blurred at its boundary. A croy tusk grazed my thigh and I screamed. Davin pulled me closer.

My signet flared and a ball of white light filled my vision. A fragmented scene sifted into my mind: booths, kiosks, lights and banners, milling humans and T'holin.

"Let go and jump!" I cried. My stomach turned inside out and I stepped off the running board. Instead of falling, I floated upward on ribbons of light and then tumbled, landing not in sand, but into an alleyway hung with streamers, with Davin beside me.

A rectangle of light at the end of the alley framed the marketplace I envisioned a moment ago.

"Sloo," Davin said. "Sloo sloo sloo sloo." And then he rattled off a string of curse words I'd never heard.

I pulled my skinned knees up to my chest and hugged them, rocking back and forth, squeezing my eyes shut to keep tears from spilling.

"You journeyfolded," Davin said in an awe-tinged whisper.

"But we're not in sillay anymore," I said. "I'm all used up. I need to eat but I can't choke down another food bar."

He leaned back against the dark brick wall and put his head between his legs. "Let me sit for a minute," he said. "My brain is scrambled."

I struggled to hear myself think above the distant whine of road noise and the low din of voices and music and news broadcasts outside the alley. I had my Riff. I could buy food. Real food. And clothes for Davin to replace the uniform. But there would be security cameras. Even if Cinaia's cover story for me held, I couldn't wander out of an alleyway without drawing attention to my behavior.

I'd have to eat another food bar, just enough to sillage into the crowd of shoppers.

"I have a plan," I said, taking a food bar from my knapsack and gagging it down.

Davin helped me to my feet. The sillage bubble shielded my eyes from the glaring lights in the square. I merged with the pedestrians and allowed the bubble to retract. The pilot sphere bobbed over a man selling frozen confections from a push cart. I retrieved my Riff and bought a cream bar to devour while I searched for a booth offering men's clothing.

It seemed most of the kiosks were devoted to masculine attire and accessories, as if the shape path had chosen this market for us. Many of the shoppers and vendors were well-groomed women. I smoothed my hair but there was nothing I could do about my rustic clothing.

I approached a booth as the merchant finished a transaction. She raked me with an appraising look. "Why so pale, dear?" she asked. "First time?"

I tried to recall the milestones for courting couples. But which culture? At least I had no trouble blushing to fit the role.

"Nothing too flashy," I said.

"Active wear is always a good choice," the woman said. "What size?"

Numbers that made no sense filled my head, measurements, I guessed, and my synesthesia gave them trumpets and a fanfare. I recited them with all the confidence I could muster.

"A fine specimen," the woman said with a wink.

"And I need footwear, too," I said. And a knapsack."

Any of the tunics and breeches she laid out for my inspection would have been suitable, but I chose an outfit in buff and black. I picked out a pair of low-heeled boots, and then blushed even more intensely. “He needs socks and undergarments,” I said.

She grinned. “Remember me when you’re ready to choose the wedding clothes,” she said, as she wrapped the items in tissue paper and placed them in paper bags.

I handed her my Riff and saw a tattoo in her palm: a diamond and two arms of a spiral.

The sign of a Valor.

She tapped the transaction icon and returned the Riff with her card. “Scan the card for special offers,” she said.

I hesitated, stumbling over the special offers idiom.

“Scan the card,” she said again, and my journeystone tingled. Her eyes narrowed and locked with mine.

I placed the card on the scanner. It opened the Riff’s contacts file. A security icon popped up, asking me to confirm I wanted to download and encrypt new content. The vendor gave a curt nod. I confirmed the encryption.

“Go now,” the vendor said.

It was too much for me to believe the strange Valor knew I would be there. I shook off my bewilderment looked for a food kiosk, but stopped in my tracks when a siren shrieked and a red banner flashed on a digital screen.

Davin’s face was the image on the banner.

I put my head down to hide my reaction and meandered toward the alleyway, willing the sillay bubble to form again. It wavered and created a fragile boundary. I darted into the ally and found Davin still sitting his back to the wall and knees to his chest.

“So the search is full on,” he said.

“I didn’t get food, but I got you real clothes,” I said, handing him the packages and turning to let him dress. “I’ll try to eat some more food bars to sillay.”

“You did all right,” he said “It all fits. Even the boots. How’d you know?”

I faced him as he stretched his arms out to show me. “Sleeves are even long enough.”

“Good,” I said. “I have your masks, too. Let’s get moving.”

“I’d be more help if I knew where we’re headed.”

“To Hadera. To the Capitol to report to Cinaia and get Arden.” I said.

“For the acquisition?” he asked.

I nodded.

Davin shook his head. “Damn,” he said. “That’s bold.” His eyes widened. “No sillay, then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I should become CcT’holaaxx. It’s the best way to hide Davin.”

“Ah,” I said. I pulled a mask from my knapsack and handed it to him.

“This is new,” he said, flicking it inside out and inhaling the scent of its soft leather. “Where did you get it?”

“Cinaia gave me your things,” I said, emptying my knapsack to sort his items from mine.

“Cinaia,” he said, with unmistakable tenderness. He slipped on the mask and adjusted its mesh hood to hide his hair. Accented with a black strip bordering the eye holes, the mask’s rich butterscotch color suited his new clothes.

I repacked the new knapsack and handed to him.

“I’m CcT’holaaax now,” he said. “You can’t think of me as Davin Roan. Understand?”

I nodded. “I wish I had a Rounder mask,” I said.

“There’s no such thing,” he said. “But you should cover the signet.”

The siren blared again.

“Do you have an extra set of clothes?” Davin asked

“One change,” I said, puzzled.

“Put on the skirt,” he said. “Throw the bloody one away. There’s no point drawing the croy. They already know your scent.”

I suppressed a shudder. CcT’holaaax pulled out his Riff and turned his back as I changed.

““Let’s go,” he said, when I finished. “I hired a runabout.”



We located the runabout at the edge of the market square. CcT’holaaax entered a code to unlock it and we sped away.

We hadn’t gone far when we encountered a roadblock manned by Phalanx and croy. A Phalanx wing guard stepped in front of us as CcT’holaaax braked.

As CcT’holaaax handed him the Riff, the croy slinked toward me and sniffed. I held my breath. The animal folded its ears and tucked its tail, and then lowered itself to a kneeling position.

The wing guard’s nictitating membranes flicked in surprise. He said something lewd to his partner with no idea we understood T’holin and returned CcT’holaaax’s Riff, waving us on.

“Sorry you had to hear that,” CcT’holaaxx said.

“I’m fine,” I lied, closing my eyes to block the memory of the Phalanx snaring Perrin in its wings.

“Just making sure,” CcT’holaaxx said. “I don’t know what to think about a human who can sillay, journeyfold and charm croy. What else can you do?”

“What else is there?” I asked. “You seem to know more than I do.”

“Cinaia’s bedtime stories,” he said. “I thought they were fables until real croy started slinking around our bunks on Base. I haven’t slept in days.” He turned a corner. “Maybe I’m asleep right now and this is a nightmare.”

“Sorry to be a part of your bad dreams.”

CcT’holaaxx glanced my way. “I didn’t mean—”

“Who taught you to fight like that?”

“What, do you think the Honor Guard is just for show?”

“Remember, I’m just a zyph herder from Farside.” Saying the name of the Fold brought Pavi to mind. I took a shaky breath. “We’ll be at the Capitol check point soon,” I said. “Is there anything we should rehearse? To get our story straight?”

“We just need to pass security,” he said. “Unless you messed with my Riff, it should have everything we need.”

I could only hope SsToola had left CcT’holaaxx’s files intact.

“Then, let’s go straight to Cinaia and Arden,” I said.

It was dark when we reached the main Capital checkpoint. Its floodlights nearly blinded us. The Phalanx guards checked CCT’holaaxx’s documents and opened the gate.

I expected to feel relief. Instead, my heart sank like lead.

“I hate this place,” CcT’holaaaxx said, as if he read my mind. He grew quiet and gripped the steering bar harder. “Change of plans,” he said, patting his journeystone. “Cinaia is sending us straight to the Dome for the night. She says the T’holin will make sure we rest.”

I shook my head, unable to bear the thought of the Dome, but I sensed CcT’holner’s link and my heart lightened incrementally.

I was grateful when he crushed me to his breast and held me.

He led us to a nook. A single nook.

I didn’t have the strength to argue.

XxRiis brought food: rich, buttery nuggets. Ssuulu undressed me and wrapped me in spinner silk while XxRiis tended to CcT’holaaaxx.

I took my place in the nook, floating in the awareness that CcT’holaaaxx’s mask was gone and Davin was lying next to me and we were both naked except for the spinner silk.

He reached for me and tucked my head under his chin. “The T’holin drugged us, you know?”

I could only nod, lacking the strength or will to form words. I knew I should tell him about the plan to board the freight train, how it was all arranged, but he stroked the back of my head and said, “If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up.”

I wondered if the T’holin had given us the elixir? A wave of euphoria licked at the edges of my consciousnesses and my fear became irrelevant.

Davin might have wrapped me tighter in his arms, but I wasn’t sure. It could have been a dream.



Watching Davin's eyes open and reorient from sleep was like witnessing the dawn of human consciousness. Having never risked more than a stolen glance at him, I held his gaze as long as I could, and decided 'hazel' is a wholly inadequate word to describe dark-rimmed irises with striations radiating like gold and green fireworks in a pale sky. My cheeks flushed and my core began to melt.



CcT'holner took Davin aside and XxRaalis fed me a rich breakfast. As I ate, I reviewed and memorized the instructions stored on my Riff for checking in at the freight car.

The T'holin gave us back our clothing, crisp and clean, Enfolders groomed our hair. Davin poised to put on the hooded mask, but he first gave me a long look that stirred my journeystone. And then he donned the mask and Davin receded, becoming CcT'holaaxx again, and we set off to meet Cinaia.

We entered a gate to an ornate garden and took a path that led to a patio where Cinaia rose from a table to greet us.

Eldon and Arden were seated at the table. Late morning sunlight dazzled my eyes and the colors began to bleed with the movement of every leaf and cloud and finger and lip. The colors traced pathways that flowed like ribbons to intertwine and follow the spiral of the shape path.

Cinaia's color was golden. Arden's was blue. Eldon's was red. Mine was turquoise and CcT'holaaxx's was a gradient that matched Davin's irises.

I don't recall the words of the conversation, I was too consumed with the patterns they formed. Only when Arden stood and gathered his knapsack did I realize we were being commissioned to take him with us.

I should have been terrified, but I floated in peace that settled like a welcome weight in my breast, hunkered down in confident submission to the shape path. The contradiction delighted me.

As we crossed the Capitol campus, Davin's journeystone thrummed in sync with mine. The external world gradually reasserted its firm edge. I listened to the deep timbre of CcT'holaaxx's and Arden's voices, and stretched my stride to match theirs.

We came to a runabout parked in the shade of a tree near the honor guard barracks, and Arden threw his arms around me. It was so unexpected, I would have lost my balance if his hand hadn't been pressing my cheek to his chest. His pounding heart belied his calm exterior.

He kept his hand on mine as we settled in the runabout. Between the two men, I felt almost whole. Their presence mitigated the void of my losses. It gave me hope.

As CcT'holaaxx started the runabout, Davin's link receded, replaced by CcT'holaaxx's tension. He raised his shoulders and gripped the steering bar. "Do you know where we're going?" he asked. "If so, now would be a good time to tell me."

"Maglev freight station," I said. "Can anyone trace this runabout?"

“It’s registered to CcT’holaaaxx,” he said.

“Then take us as close to the station as you can.”

“That’s it?” CcT’holaaaxx asked. “That’s the plan?”

“We’ll take the train to the mountains past Horizon,” I said. “I’ll explain the rest when we get that far.” I turned to Arden to hide my half-truth. “Can I ask you some questions?”

“You can ask him,” CcT’holaaaxx said. “And he might be undisciplined enough to answer. So, you’d better not.”

“That’s not fair,” Arden said. “You’re just peevish because you’re not in control this time.”

CcT’holaaaxx steered around a corner, bringing us parallel with the Gulf, a few blocks away from a harbor where the afternoon sunlight silhouetted the tall, irregular shapes of industrial ships and freighters. The streetscape was a clutter of metal buildings, equipment and vehicles—showing me another part of Hadera that wasn’t tidy and elegant.

“I’m wondering what life is like for people outside the...”

“The Concord class?” Arden asked. “You can do better than that. That’s not what you’re wondering.”

I took a breath. “The list is long,” I said.

“And now is not the time,” CcT’holaaaxx said. “Stay focused.”

I wanted to take advantage of their captive attention, to spew all my pent questions: did Arden know about Perrin’s double life? Did he know the women at the Capitol were conducting secret and highly coordinated activities behind their husbands’ backs? Did CcT’holaaaxx know what was wrong with the T’holin babies, and...My face grow flushed. Could either of them tell me why everyone was obsessed with sex in this place? But Arden’s eyes held the ghosts of pain still fresh from his own losses. I wondered what happened at the

kelp refinery, and before that, at the Archive, and knew he couldn't bear my questions "Everything has changed since I saw you last," I said. "You must be reeling."

He squeezed my hand.

My journeystone tingled, and Davin's incoherent link returned, but instead of bringing comfort, it sent a searing pain to my stump. I whimpered and pulled my hand from Arden's to cradle the stump.

Arden gathered me close. "There, there, little sister," he said.

"Did you talk to Cinaia before you left?" I blurted. "Did she—"

CcT'holaaxx yanked the brake to stop at an intersection. We flew forward, saved from hitting the control panel by our restraints.

Arden glared at CcT'holaaxx. "What are you trying to prove?"

CcT'holaaxx watched for a break in traffic, and then accelerated with a squeal of tires.

Arden glared at him, but he kept his eyes on the road, finally pulling the runabout into a lot packed with rows and rows of scruffy, well-worn vehicles as far as I could see. He drove until he found an empty spot, and then he parked and activated his Riff, changing some settings before putting his hand on the door. "I've done my part," he said. "What next?"

"You need to apologize," Arden said.

"To whom?" CcT'holaaxx said.

"To Aleya."

"For what?"

"You know what."

“If you’re so concerned about Aleya, let her speak for herself.”

“I teach adolescents back home more mature than you two,” I said. “Why are you making this about me?”

CcT’holaaaxx raised his brows. “Ask Arden. He brought you into it.”

“What a pile of sloo,” Arden said.

I took a breath and asked softly, “What did I do to set you off?”

CcT’holaaaxx gripped the steering bar. “You’re asking dangerous questions,” he said.

“Someone should ask them,” I said.

He sat for a while, staring ahead, and then he opened his door and got out, reaching for my hand.

I crossed my arms and met his eyes, and then took another deep breath before accepting his hand and scooting out of the runabout.

Arden opened the back hatch and retrieved the knapsacks and bedrolls, and then CcT’holaaaxx led the way to a gravel walkway.

Road noise whined in the distance. Our feet crunched on the gravel and dust began to coat my throat and nostrils. I reached for my water bottle. When my thirst was quenched, I realized how hungry I was.

As we neared the end of the lot, I smelled hay and urine from livestock. We approached a gate that activated with my Riff. And then, my heart skipped a beat.

The air thrummed with zyphs.

Ahead, a long maglev freight train curved out of sight.

“A freighter?” Arden asked. “Really?”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “What it lacks in amenities it makes up in anonymity. Let’s check in.”

“That’s the best the Gatherer could do?”

“Who is this Gatherer?” I asked.

“Never mind,” Arden said. “I need a minute.” He pulled his Riff from his pocket and flicked its screen.

“I told you to shut that thing down,” CcT’holaaax said.

“I’m expecting a message. Don’t worry, I have a good encryption.”

“No encryption is good enough for this situation,” CcT’holaaax said.

Arden studied the screen and then shoved it back into his pocket, delivering a stream of curse words.

“What?” CcT’holaaax pressed.

Arden’s mouth compressed to a thin line. He stormed ahead as if he knew where to go.

I pushed ahead of him and pulled out my Riff to find the serial number of our destination car.

I needn’t have bothered: a young man with shaggy red hair and baggy coveralls leaned out from an open cargo door and waved.

“Ty Merritt?” I asked.

“Aleya Gillis?” the youth responded.

“It is I.”

Ty reached down to swing me up into the car. CcT’holaaax followed and extended an arm for Arden.

I inhaled the zyp scent and looked around a compartment measuring no more than three meters square. In one corner behind a pair of swinging doors there was a toilet, and the opposite wall held a water spigot—more

amenities than I expected—but my eyes were drawn to the zyphs corralled behind a barricade.

I ran to them and they craned their necks to greet me. I opened my palm and let them nuzzle while I stroked their necks with my stump.

Behind me, Arden addressed Ty. “Sorry to barge in on your solitude,” he said.

“No skin off my back,” Ty said in his unfamiliar accent. “There’s plenty of room and I can use the cash.”

Ty pointed at CcT’holaaax, who was dragging the toe of his boot along the crack between the floor and the wall.

“What’s he doing?”

“Checking for spinners,” CcT’holaaax said.

Ty laughed. “No spinners where there’s zyphs,” he said. CcT’holaaax’s shoulders relaxed.

“I forget you’re not a Rounder,” Ty said.

“I’m just the Broker,” CcT’holaaax said. “And this pitiful specimen is... Gormon,” he said, cocking his index finger at Arden. “Gormon thinks he has the right stuff to be a broker.” The mask hid CcT’holaaax’s expression, but his eyes widened and I imagined him arching his brows in exaggerated disdain.

Ty clapped his hands. “Wait till I get home to tell this tale,” he said. “My mam won’t believe it. But you can rest your worries about the spinners here. They’re sensitive to the corporate farms—chemicals, you know—and they follow the jet stream. They’re more apt to swarm these days instead of spreading out like they did before humans mucked things up. Same with the spores. This year, the swarms are closer to southern Provence. Just so you know. A few zyphs is all we need.”

We passed the evening swapping stories in the eerie light of our Riffs. Ty pulled sandwiches of lamb and cucumber on flatbread from his knapsack and shared them with us. I licked my fingers and savored the greasy richness while Ty offered breathless accounts of his zyph-breeding enterprise, of raising them and freeing them to range the plains and then rounding them up for market.

“But what about the summer grazing season?” I asked. “Surely you’r not taking these zyphs to market now.”

“I’m selling them to a herder in Horizon,” he said. “They’ll graze with his herd until breeding season,” he said.

I sat rapt, comparing his experience with my mine, which was based on the limited zyph habitat in Farside.

CcT’holaaax surprised me with improvised tales of forging alliances with wild T’holin, but Arden grew quiet. He sat with unfocused eyes and barely reacted when Ty jumped up and went to tend to the zyphs.

I clambered to Ty’s side. “Let me help,” I said.

For the next hour, the aromatic scent of zyph scat and the trilling electricity of the animals’ presence soothed my heart. It was like being home.

Afterwards, we took turns at the toilet. Its swinging doors didn’t cover the top or the bottom of the doorway, and I cringed knowing every rustle and tinkle was audible. At least I had the presence of mind to keep my underwear from dropping to my ankles in view of the men.

I washed my face at the spigot. The tepid water smelled like sulfur, so I didn’t refill my canteen.

CcT’holaaax and Arden threw their bedrolls on the floor and zipped them together.

Arden perked up after washing his face. “Good thing you’re a wisp,” he said. “You’ll fit right between us.”

I gasped.

“Where did you think you were going to sleep?” Arden asked. “With the zyphs?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. I slipped off my knapsack and sat down to take off my boots.

For an awkward moment, both men leaned in to help me. Arden was first to sit back on his heels. He tilted his head and locked eyes with CcT’holaaaxx.

“I can do it myself,” I said.

“Of course you can,” Arden said. “However, my mother taught me that accepting help is a form of grace.”

I expected him to move toward me, but instead, he crossed his arms and CcT’holaaaxx was the one who knelt in front of me with his hands resting on his thighs.

My journeystone warmed. The shape path for consent danced in my vision, but my cheeks warmed with chagrin. What if my feet stink? Are my stockings dirty? Why do I care?

“All right,” I said, and regretted it immediately. I tugged my skirt to cover my knees.

CcT’holaaaxx reached under my bent knee with one gloved hand to support my right leg. With his free hand, he gave the boot a deft tug. The boot slipped off and I planted my foot firmly on the floor. He repeated the process for the left boot.

I hugged my knees for a moment and said, “Thank you.”

Ty rescued the moment, calling from his corner near the zyphs. “Night, all,” he said, already curled up in his bedroll.

“Night,” Arden answered. He took off his boots and sat on his bed roll. “Do you feel it?” he asked.

“What?” CcT’holaaaxx said.

“The buzz in the air,” Arden said. “It’s like I drank kafee.”

“The zyph buzz,” CcT’holaaaxx said.

“The zyphs are wary,” Ty said. “Course, they never rode a train.”

“Maybe we should take turns sleeping,” I said.

CcT’holaaaxx squatted near the wall with his hands resting on bent knees. “I wasn’t planning to sleep, anyway,” he said. “I’m on guard.”

I settled on my back beside Arden, close enough to feel his body heat. I could hear the zyphs breathing and shifting their weight. Their thrumming merged with the whine of the maglev train. The hypnotic effect was enough to overcome my stress and lull me to sleep.

CHAPTER 14



*“We do not remember days, we remember moments.” –
Cesare Pavese*

I opened my eyes in the predawn light, nose to nose with a face like a patchwork of stitched leather: CcT’holaaxx in his mask. I sat up and found Arden sitting against the wall, grinning at me.

Arden shrugged. “Did you think I’d let him stay up all night?”

“I could have taken a turn,” I said.

Arden raised a finger to his lips as CcT’holaaxx grunted and shifted his weight. “He talked more last night than he’s done in a year. Trust me, he needs the rest.”

In the other corner, Ty was stirring, too. He stood up to stretch and then began to gather his bedroll.

I hurried to use the toilet while it was free. By the I finished, Ty was already tending the zyphs. I joined him.

Pink fingers of sunlight poked through the slats in the car’s walls as Ty and I raked up the mucky hay and broke up fresh bales to replace it.

“You fill the water troughs and I’ll grab the feed,” Ty said, pointing to a hose attached to a spigot near the rear of the car.

He hefted a bag of feed and poured it into a trough. The sound was like a whispering waterfall, but it was enough to

waken CcT'holaaxx. He braced on his elbows, looking for the source of the disturbance. Glaring at Arden, he said, "You promised you'd wake me—"

"You're awake, aren't you?" Arden said.

CcT'holaaxx muttered something and pulled out his Riff. "Were there any unexpected stops?" he asked.

Arden shook his head. "The trip was smooth as a—never mind," he said and blushed.

CcT'holaaxx shot him an exasperated look and turned back to the Riff. "According to this, we're on schedule, about an hour from the foothills."

"So next stop's Horizon," Ty said. "The last freight station before the mountains. That's where I get off."

Arden jumped up to peer over CcT'holaaxx's shoulder. "Can you see the passenger liner?"

CcT'holaaxx pointed to the screen. "Just ahead," he said.

"Are you switching to the passenger train, then?" Ty asked. "It's not worth the fare, if you ask me. Besides, this car won't pick up another cargo until Farside, so you'll have it all to yourselves."

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Farside. Tears brimmed my eyes and I hid them by peering into my knapsack for my comb.

CcT'holaaxx looked at me as if he expected me to say something, and the air grew tenser between us. I could do nothing to relieve it. I hadn't seen the shape path beyond the train.

He sighed and reached into his own knapsack. "It isn't much, but I brought breakfast bars," he said, handing each of us a packet.

“They’d be better with kafee,” Arden said. He held his bar between his teeth and began to roll up the bedding.

I swallowed the last, dry bite of my breakfast, and tried to calculate how far we were from Farside. Without knowing how fast a freight train traveled on the maglev, the exercise was pointless, but it gave me a focus in the absence of the Discipline, so when the drone of the maglev turned shrill, I noticed. My skin tingled and the hairs on my arm stood up, and I realized train sound hadn’t changed but the zyph harmonics had. The zyphs began to pace and circle their paddock.

“They’re spooked,” Ty said. “Help me take a look out.” He grabbed the bar to open the door and heaved with all his strength.

CcT’holaaax added his weight and together, they were able to move the heavy door panel. Ty stuck out his head. His hair whipped in the wake of the moving train. “Nothing to see,” he said.

One of the zyphs squealed and leaped over the barricade. Ty and CcT’holaaax blocked the door with splayed legs and spread arms. The animal charged and reared, pawing the air in front of their faces.

I ran to its side and touched its flank to calm it, blinking as bright spot of light appeared just outside the door. It took a moment to recognize the pilot sphere.

“We have to get out of here,” I said.

“You want to jump out of a moving maglev train?” Arden asked.

I tore off my headband and exposed the signet. “We damn well can’t ignore the warnings,” I said. I ordered Ty to release

the zyphs. “I’ll block the door,” I said. “You help CcT’holaaaxx and Ard—Gormon— get mounted.”

“This is insane,” CcT’holaaaxx said.

“Zyphs can do it,” Ty said. “They’re made for jumping.” He strapped on his knapsack and opened the barricade, snatching the zyphs’ neck tendrils to catch them as they surged forward.

“Grab your gear and climb on,” Ty said as the zyphs stamped and twisted their heads. “Wrap the tendrils around your wrists.”

“What about you?” CcT’holaaaxx asked.

“I’ll hop a zyph after Ty gets mounted,” I answered. “Hang on, because your zyph is going to bolt when I unblock the door.”

It happened in a blur. The next thing I knew, I was flying from the car on the back of a zyph with my fingers tangled in its tendrils, trusting it to adjust the arc of its descent as the ground rose to meet me. I wrapped my arms around the zyph’s neck as its springy legs absorbed the shock.

I looked back at the maglev receding toward the foothills and then time slowed as a crash and rumble split the air and the train froze in place. Cars rose in the air and hung there and then time righted itself and the cars skidded and tumbled across the plain like tossed toys.

The pilot sphere shot toward an outcropping of rock, tearing my attention from the chaos. I nudged my zyph forward. “This way,” I called.

A hideous, rattling noise filled the air from the direction opposite the foothills and a shadow slid over us. At first I thought the winged shape was a Phalanx, but I shuddered

with the realization that it was too enormous and geometric to be a living thing.

The terrified zyphs hugged the boulder as we watched the flying thing roar toward the tracks. Its shadow fixed the maglev like crosshairs, and it dropped two dark cylinders.

A shock wave split my eardrums and compressed my sternum. By the time I caught my breath, a second explosion took it again. In the distance, where I should have seen the maglev, two fireballs mushroomed.

I don't know how long we stared in stunned silence. I remember throwing my arms around the warm, vibrant neck of my zyph.

Arden did the same, holding his cheek against his zyph's skin with his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth bared in a grimace.

CcT'holaaxx jumped down from his zyph and laid his hand on Arden's shoulder. Instead of reassuring Arden after we'd thwarted an attempt on Arden's life, CcT'holaaxx said something that made no sense to me at all.

"He could have survived," CcT'holaaxx whispered.

Arden raised his head. "We have to go find him."

"We can't," CcT'holaaxx said. "Horizon is crawling with Phalanx."

His words recalled Perrin's warning. I tightened my grip on my zyph's tendrils as the external world receded and the only thing I sensed was the thrum of its skin and my journeystone's incoherent signal. A veneer of awareness warned me that I was falling into shock and denial and it was all that saved me from being swallowed by a white hot abyss. I forced my mind into the Discipline and replayed the shape path. It led me to the encounter with Perrin and SsToola.

Perrin said ‘prototype,’ and ‘plains’ and ‘she is hid with the women and children’.

Now I understood. Pavi was in Horizon. I couldn’t sense her link because she was hiding from the Phalanx.

My zyph tossed its head and ramped up its thrumming. My journeystone synced with the harmonics and my head cleared. Of course, I could be mistaken and Pavi could be hidden someplace other than Horizon. It would not be prudent to go there. Besides, according to Perrin, she believed my best now was to proceed with the acquisition.

I turned to Ty. “I’ll pay market price for all six zyphs if you’ll let us have three,” I said. “You’re within walking distance of Horizon. Maybe you can still sell the rest.”

“What’ll you do?”

CcT’holaxx shook his head and glared at me.

“If you’re going through the mountains, you’ll need more than zyphs,” Ty said. “I’ll throw in my gear with the deal.”

“Let’s get your story straight, then,” CcT’holaxx said. “If anyone asks, tell them you lost three zyphs in the chaos and don’t mention us. Got it?”

Ty nodded vigorously.

CcT’holaxx opened his knapsack and pulled out a small card. “How much for the zyphs?”

Blushing, Ty named a price.

CcT’holaxx shook his head. “They’re worth double that,” he said. He swiped the card across an icon on the Riff.

“There, it’s loaded. You can redeem it in Horizon.”

Ty pocketed the card and handed CcT’holaxx his knapsack and bedroll.

CcT’holaxx rifled through the gear, and handed back a canteen and some food packets.

Ty accepted the canteen but he pushed the food back into CcT'holaaxx's palm. "You need it more than I do," he said. He turned to the three remaining zyphs and stroked their necks until they settled, and then he mounted one. "Can I at least tell my mam about you?" he asked.

CcT'holaaxx nodded. "Yes, tell your mam," he said.

We watched Ty and the two riderless zyphs until they were specks. I noticed Ty went out of his way to avoid the disaster.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

"We need to get moving," CcT'holaaxx said as he remounted. "Point us in the right direction, Rounder."

His tone was sarcastic and condescending, but my journeystone warmed and whispered with the *O'o'o'sl'h's* link. Although there was no coherent message, the ambient signal was comforting. As if to reassure me further, the pilot sphere bloomed larger and floated toward the foothills on the western horizon.

I took a deep breath and mounted my zyph to scan the open plain ahead. Other than a few scattered rocks and boulders, there was no cover in sight.

The pilot sphere zoomed back toward me and expanded into a sillay bubble big enough for all three of us.

The zyphs didn't react, but Arden gasped.

"It's safe," I said. "A T'holin technology. We're nearly invisible now. But the bubble will collapse sometimes to show us where to go next. When that happens, we'll be exposed."

"You can't control it?" CcT'holaaxx asked.

I would journeyfold if I could, I said through my link, wishing Davin's journeystone could receive the message, and that he would trust me or at least give me grace.

He muttered something and my cheeks burned. I chided myself for caring.

We rode in awkward silence for a kilometer or so. Riding bareback on a zyph was second nature for me, but CcT'holaaxx and Arden's lack of experience showed. They pressed their legs against their mounts and gripped the tendrils for dear life.

"Slide your thighs into the dip behind the zyph's shoulders," I coached. "It will put you in the nodal point. The zyph will resonate with you. And give the tendrils more slack. The gait is smoother if you give full rein.

Arden complied immediately, but CcT'holaaxx pulled tighter on his zyph's tendrils as if to spite me. The animal scissor-stepped and balked, sending CcT'holaaxx tumbling to the ground. I reached out and steadied his zyph while he remounted.

The mask hid his expression, but his shoulders were tense. He slid his thighs toward the zyph's shoulders and took the tendrils in a looser grip. His zyph stood still, waiting.

I took the lead.



The sun's pale wafer inched toward its zenith. At intervals, the sillay bubble contracted and the pilot sphere reformed briefly to point the way. Scattered rock formations and wildflowers buzzing with insects broke the monotony of the rippling grass. Near noon, we came to an oxbow river bordered by willowy trees.

“The zyphs need a break,” I said.

I led the zyphs to the river where they found a deep, clear pool. The sillay bubble collapsed and the pilot sphere hovered as the zyphs drank, so I judged the water safe to refill our canteens.

The zyphs grazed on the lush grass while we ate a lunch of cheese, bread and dried fruit assembled from CcT’holaaaxx’s provisions, which included buttery nuggets like those XxRaalis’s fed me in the dome—and the rations we found in Ty’s knapsack. No one spoke, but Arden kept looking at CcT’holaaaxx as if he was afraid CcT’holaaaxx would disappear.

CcT’holaaaxx ignored him. He ignored me, too.

Neither man seemed interested in the nuggets, and I squirreled them away in my knapsack. Arden left part of his food uneaten. He walked away and found a tree to relieve himself, I guessed.

CcT’holaaaxx began to gather the empty food wrappers. He crumpled them with white-knuckled force.

“You’re doing it again,” I said.

“Doing what?” CcT’holaaaxx said.

“I don’t know what to call it. I’ve never seen a grown man pouting.”

“Sorry I’m not perfect,” he said. “Not that it matters.” He tossed a wrapper at a rock.

The comment sparked a pang of sympathy. Of course he was reeling. But that didn’t excuse his petulance. I snatched up the discarded wrapper and waited, letting the tension build.

He began to shove things into his knapsack. “You know what matters?” he asked. “I need a real Rounder for this

acquisition.” He cinched the knapsack shut with a dramatic tug.

My cheeks burned. I fingered the signet.

“And that thing doesn’t make you a Patternbearer,” he said. “Your fancy talk about resonating. I’ve heard it all my life. What good is it? It isn’t going to help us survive in the mountains or find food.”

“You didn’t doubt me when I sillayed and journeyfolded,” I said. “Besides, I didn’t ask for this. In fact, there’s someplace else I need to be, so maybe you should tell me why this acquisition matters so much.”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you. You should be telling me. Along with where we’re going, and when we’ll get there.”

“Maybe we should concentrate on what we do know.”

“You don’t seem to know a thing.”

“And you’re no help,” I said. “No one has given me a straight answer I left Farside. Including the *O’o’o’sl’h*.” Sadness constricted my throat. “They just whisper. What good are our journeystones?”

CcT’holaaaxx jumped up and clamped his hand over my mouth.

“Do. Not. Ever. Mention. Them. Ever. In any way,” he hissed. “If Arden knew, we’d all be—”

“We’d all be what?” Arden asked.

CcT’holaaaxx dropped his hand and stepped back.

Arden put his hands on his hips. “What is wrong with you, man?”

“I was asking what happened on the train,” I said. “I knew some questions were off limits...but...”

“We should tell her,” Arden said, and his shoulders slumped. “We owe her that much.” He faced me. “The

passenger liner was in front of the freighter.” His voice rose. “We were supposed to be on it. Hadrian *was* on it. My Hadrian.”

I nodded slowly to let him know I understood

“A stupid, impulsive, last minute decision,” Arden said. “I didn’t have a chance to warn him. He just wanted to stop hiding in Hadera...” Arden’s voice trailed as he stared into the blurry edge of the sillay bubble.

I took a step closer. “I wish I were a T’holin to enfold you,” I said.

He accepted my embrace. I laid my cheek on this chest.

“It’s the not knowing,” he said. “That’s what’s hard.”

His grief hit me like waves, battering the barriers I’d erected around my own losses. My journeystone began to hum and Davin’s journeystone amplified the effect.

“You’re T’holin enough,” CcT’holaxx said.

I accepted it as the best apology he could offer at the moment.

The *O’o’o’sl’h* signal began to thrum, not with instructions, but with comfort.

We moved on. The next moment outside the sillay bubble revealed terrain rolling toward foothills, tawny in the afternoon sun. Old mountains with rounded blue tops seemed to stand on the shoulders of the foothills. Younger, snowy peaks beyond them poked the sky like dragon teeth.

By sunset, pines and stubby bushes gave us hope for overnight cover. We continued until lavender twilight, when the pilot sphere guided us to a rock-sheltered stand of evergreens beside a brook, a place much like Farside near the Archive rook.

We took turns finding privacy to relieve ourselves and prepare for the night. I rubbed down the zyphs and turned them loose to graze and then sat shoulder-to-shoulder between Arden and CcT'holaaxx while we ate a meager ration of food bars.

As darkness settled, the crown of the sillay bubble opened to the sky.

"I've never seen so many stars," Arden said. "Hadera has too many lights."

"This sky is like home," I said. "Except for the flying machine."

Arden stiffened. "It's an airplane," he said. "The damn thing is called an airplane."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have—"

"That's right," Arden said. "You shouldn't have brought it up. Now you've made both your boys pissy."

"At least CcT'holaaxx apologized," I said.

"Really?" Arden said. "I missed it."

"It was subtle," I said.

Arden sighed. "Sorry I snapped at you. I don't know why I expected you to know something about airplanes. I'm just touchy because I didn't even know there was a working prototype, let alone a weaponized version... of course, I'd be the last to know." He turned to CcT'holaaxx, "Did you know?"

CcT'holaaxx shook his head. "Should we even be talking about it?" he asked.

"Who's going to hear us out here?" Arden said. "I'm an idiot for not anticipating it after the biofuel breakthrough."

My head began to swim. "My brain is filling up with stuff I have no idea how to use," I said. "It's the signet. I need CcT'holner to explain it."

“CcT’holner?” Arden asked.

“The Maker from the triad we delivered to Cinaia. You do know what a Maker is?”

“In theory,” Arden said.

“He’s also one of the signet’s designers. He did his best to teach me to use it.” I ventured a glance at CcT’holaaax but his only reaction was to wrap his arms more tightly around his knees.

“So, did you learn?” Arden asked.

“Apparently.” I pointed to the sillay bubble’s shimmering aperture. “CcT’holner said this is my graduation token. But it didn’t come with a user’s manual and my head keeps filling up with new information.”

I stopped short of contrasting the signet’s information dump with the Archive access I’d known my whole life, afraid the mere mention of the Archive might reopen the wound Arden received there. I shrugged and dropped the subject, but Arden raised one finger.

“What kind of information?” he asked.

I groaned. “The kind that would be very useful if I was prepping history lessons for 15-year olds,” I said, rolling my eyes. “For example, I can quote a file that says the delay in the development of the airplane was, in fact, due to this planet’s lack of fossil fuels— complicated by political infighting that prevented coordinated research and development toward advanced alternatives. Does that seem right?”

Arden’s sharp profile bobbed in affirmation.

“Although, there’s more,” I said. “A T’holin concept I can’t translate.”

“Try us,” Arden said. “Maybe it will fit with something we know.”

CcT’holaaaxx snapped to attention and I sensed his wariness.

“It’s like taking steps—no—walking backwards—on the shape path,” I said.

I tried to envision the result of walking backward while facing forward on a shape path that was spinning upward and counterclockwise. It made me dizzy. An old idiom came to mind in my own language: two steps forward and one step back. Maybe it was like that. Maybe the T’holin manipulated the shape path to prevent progress on the fuel. But that would go against the Unfolding. It would mean exerting collective Tholin will against the humans.

Davin’s link tingled with alarm. CcT’holaaaxx put a finger on his mask over his lips.

“I think it’s outside of the human range of awareness,” I said, hoping that would satisfy Arden.

“Unless it simply means the T’holin deliberately controlled some events to delay the development of the fuel,” Arden pressed.

CcT’holaaaxx jumped to his feet, but Arden didn’t take the hint.

“But I’ve never seen T’holin manipulating humans,” Arden said. “They do the opposite. They always accommodate. I’ve never understood why...” his voice trailed off and his eyes lost focus.

Shocked at Arden’s words, which could only have been spoken by someone intimate with the T’holin, I stole a glance at CcT’holaaaxx, wishing his journeystone could communicate

fully with mine. *What are you hiding? Why do the T'holin submit to you? Why do they give themselves as slaves?*

The zyphs returned from grazing, drawing CcT'holaaxx's attention. Smelling of grass, they shuffled around us, so close we could feel their thrumming skin.

Arden stood up to stroke one of the zyphs. "Is this their natural behavior?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never spent the night with one."

Arden raised his eyebrows and grinned as grabbed the bedrolls. He zipped two of them together and spread them on the ground.

CcT'holaaxx unrolled the bedroll from Ty's gear and Arden eyed it critically.

"It might be big enough to cover us if we get cozy," Arden said.

I crossed my arms on my chest.

"Is that a problem?" Arden asked. "You slept with us last night. Was it that bad?"

"Not together, and that was before you both regressed into adolescent boys," I said. "Let's at least clear the air. No hard feelings or grudges. Who knows what new infractions we'll have to overlook by morning?"

"Like what?" Arden asked.

"Drooling, snoring, passing gas..." I said.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Arden said. "Of course the air is clear between us. At least for now. Until someone passes gas."

"Hah," CcT'holaaxx said with a little snort that almost passed as a laugh. "I was about to take off the mask, but I'm having second thoughts."

Arden flicked the mask's nose piece. "It's not a gas mask," he said.

CcT'holaaxx slipped off the mask. Our eyes met for a flickering moment and he became Davin again.

"Things are about to get interesting," Arden said with a sigh.

Blushing, I lay down on the ground facing Arden as Davin spread the bedroll over us and settled with his back to mine.

The zyphs knelt around us; one at our heads and the others stretched alongside Arden and Davin with their rumps meeting at our feet, forming an equilateral triangle of soothing warmth and harmonics.

Arden touched my cheek. "Davin's trying to avoid spooning," he whispered. "But he can't hold that position all night."

"You're a sick, evil man," Davin said.

It took me a moment to understand, and then I was more embarrassed at my naivety than I was for the situation. I tried to lighten the moment. "We'll just add that to the list of bodily functions to forgive each other for," I said.

I was dreaming that SsLissa was enfolding me and her journeystone was singing to me when I awoke in pearly light with my head on Davin's shoulder and my arm on his chest. Our journeystones were humming, incoherently, but in sync. I didn't dare move, even though Davin's beard was tickling my forehead and filling my nostrils with the scent of rosemary and sage oils.

The zyph at our heads stretched its long neck and nuzzled Davin's forehead with its velvet nose. Davin's hand rose to bat it away. The zyph trilled and pulled back. Davin dropped his arm and shifted his weight, involuntarily drawing me

closer and tucking my head under his chin. He expelled a long sigh, muttering something that included the word 'better'.

The sun was bright when I opened my eyes again. Davin's arm was still around my waist. He pulled it away and sat up. "Sorry," he said.

"At least you didn't drool," I said.



The air thrummed with the energy of life in the soil and the grass. Perhaps the journeystone and the signet tuned me to it, or perhaps the prairie's ecosystems were so unspoiled that negentropy was palpable here. It was like being enfolded, and it created a pleasant pressure in my chest, calming my vagus nerve.

Arden and Davin grew quiet, too. We rode steadily, reaching the foothills by noon and the base of the mountains by sunset.

As if the mountains marked a safe boundary, the sillay bubble collapsed and the pilot sphere remained in constant view.

The air turned colder and thinner, with just enough moisture to tickle my nostrils.

"Smells like snow," I said as we bedded down beneath a rocky overhang. "Good thing it's summer. I don't think we'll need to worry. I doubt we'll be traveling above the tree line."

"Snow has a smell?" Arden asked.

"It does."

“I wasn’t counting on a hiking in the mountains at all,” Davin said. “We don’t have the right supplies. Just some extra tunics from Ty’s gear and my cloak.”

“I have a wrap,” I said. “And we have the zyphs.”

“I hope we can make the food last,” Davin said. “I can barely choke down those butter balls.”

I didn’t tell him how hungry I was, that ketosis was the best state for maintaining the sillay bubble and the sphere, and I was already dealing with a headache and constant thirst.

My signet warmed and I remembered how it guided me to find food in the desert and the ocean.

“I’ll be back,” I said.

“Where are you going?” Davin asked.

“Foraging,” I said.

The signet cast a blue light and I loaded my knapsack with nuts and berries. I even found a plant with a minty leaf, which I saved to chew later to mask the ketones on my breath. I came to a stream and the signet caught two fat fish in a sillay bubble.

I brought my prizes back to camp, where I laid out flat stones and heated them with a beam from the signet. The fish roasted in minutes. Davin and Arden crossed their arms and shook their heads in amazement.

Our hunger satisfied, we lay on our backs under the covers. The overhang blocked part of the sky, but a few stars glimmered in view until a veil of clouds slid over them.

I was ready to close my eyes, but Arden heaved a sigh and said, “I’ve had all day to think and I’m mad enough to strangle someone.”

“Why don’t you go throw rocks?” I said. “Come back when you feel better.”

“I’ll never feel better. As long as the Advocate is in power.”

“Careful,” Davin said. “There are some things you should never say, no matter how far in the wilderness we are.”

“Someone needs to say them,” Arden said. “After the Collaborative perfects airplanes for military use, what’s next? Where does it end?”

“Space?” Davin said. “Maybe this is just the first step.”

His words stirred a flurry of information from the signet’s data base and memories from my days as a teacher. “The T’holin would never permit us to launch rockets using combustible fuel,” I said.

“You sound very sure about that,” Arden said.

“Sorry, it’s the signet talking,” I said. “But, if you think about the T’holin prime directive—reversing entropy whenever possible in open systems—”

“Now, you sound like a teacher,” Arden said.

“Stop acting like you don’t know what I’m talking about,” I said. “Doesn’t it makes sense the T’holin would oppose the fuel? Am I right?”

“I try not to think about that stuff,” Arden said. “It’s too much like a religion. I’m allergic.” He looked up at the stars and I followed his gaze.

“You did know, didn’t you, that the T’holin actually once had technology for...” a word came to mind... “a star drive. Long ago.” I wondered if its specifications were still in the Archive. It was pointless to speculate. “Who knows what the O’o’osl’h have seen on the shape path for the future?” I said.

“The shape path,” Arden said. “I like that language. It’s less like religion and more like something Mother would say.”

They zyphs drew the triangle tighter. I turned on my right side, and so did Arden and Davin, sandwiching me in their warmth.

Davin's arm draped around my waist and my arm rested on Arden.

"Is this spooning?" I asked.

"More or less," Arden said. "More for Davin and less for me."

Their warmth lulled me to sleep.

Sometime later, a zyph nuzzled me awake I braced on my elbows and looked out.

A pair of yellow eyes glowed back at me and a shaggy shape blocked my view.

A croy.

Adrenaline brought me fully alert.

The zyphs were calm. Their harmonics changed to wakefulness but not fear.

I searched for confirmation from the pilot sphere.

It began to glow over the croy's head.

CHAPTER 15



“The fatal pedagogical error is to throw answers like stones at the heads of those who have not yet asked the questions.” – Paul Tillich

I shook Davin’s shoulder. “Sit up,” I whispered. “No sudden moves.”

I turned to Arden and repeated the instructions. “It’s a croy,” I said. “I don’t think it means to harm us. But we can’t stay here.”

The croy backed away and sat on his haunches a meter away, watching as we rolled up the bedding and led the zyphs outside. Davin and I threw on our wraps and Arden dressed in the extra tunic.

The croy bounded away and the pilot sphere matched its direction.

“We’re following it?” Davin asked.

I nodded and tapped my forehead.

The pilot sphere helped me keep my eyes on the croy as the zyphs picked their way around patches of unmelted snow and uneven terrain

“The zyph’s feet are bare. Won’t they freeze?” Arden asked.

“Their circulatory system will compensate,” I said. “In fact, they’re generating heat for us.”

After half a kilometer, the zyph harmonics shifted to a higher pitch. Three more croy darted from the trees.

Wary but not alarmed, the zyphs followed the pack's lead, which matched the pilot sphere's trajectory, until the croy suddenly reversed course and zipped behind us. The zyphs froze in place and the pilot sphere maintained its position ahead of them.

Behind us, twigs snapped and a reverberating roar made the hairs on my arm stand up. It faded to sounds of scuffling, growling and snarling.

I twisted around to peer into the half-light. Something shaggy and large as a boulder reared and stomped, scattering ground debris.

The croy charged, darting and parrying like shadows fencing with the wind. The creature reared again and bellowed, waving its forelegs and then dropping to all fours to lope away.

Throughout the encounter, my journeystone warmed to faint sensations, like I was eavesdropping on secrets whispered in an unknown language. I sensed the shape path of the exchange: the animals were holding back, pulling their punches. The predator acquiesced, but not from fear or defeat. It simply accepted the shape path and its best now.

The croy formed a wedge at our heels and watched until the predator was out of sight, and the zyph remained motionless until the croy shot ahead to set the pace forward.

"I think I wet myself," Arden said.

"It looked like a karabon," I said, doing my best to keep my voice steady.

"There's no such thing," Davin said.

“I didn’t believe in croy, either,” Arden said. “Mother said they were just nursery tales to scare children into behaving.”

“At least the zyphs are calm,” Davin said. “Do you think the croy put a spell on them?”

I withheld comment. Suddenly exhausted, I slumped and struggled to stay alert and upright on my zyph.

The sky turned pale as we traveled, and thick, white clouds hid the sunrise. The croy kept a relentless pace. After about three hours, I noticed the ground beginning to slope downward. The zyph slackened their gait, lowering their heads and picking their way more carefully. The croy slowed to accommodate.

A break in the trees gave us a glimpse of a valley ahead. As we descended, the view widened to a meadow of rough grass dotted with domed rock formations. Conifers and shrubs grew thick along a river shining like a fallen ribbon along the center of the valley.

The croy bounded ahead with the pilot sphere keeping pace. As soon as we entered the grass, the zyphs paused to snatch mouthfuls, but the croy dashed back to nip their heels and herd them forward.

The valley was vaster than I first judged. It took an hour to reach the river.

The zyphs waded in, and I drew up my knees as the water splashed around me. The cold spray revived me for another hour of travel.

The croy led us to a large smooth rock and sat on their haunches in front of it.

My journeystone crackled to life. SsLissa’s link. And XxRiis. And CcShirnir. I clutched my chest and closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the rock face was retracted like a door and Davin had masked. CcT'holaaxx was beside me. He led my zyph inside.

The croy took their leave of us, bounding away through the grass.



Flanking my zyph, I followed CcT'holaaxx down a long, smooth incline toward a flickering light that cast elongated, wavering shadows behind us.

Multiple links swelled my journeystone's signal. My chest grew tight and heavy with a sensation that unlocked old, deep memories.

The unfiltered Archive presence.

The T'holin scent of pepper and cloves thickened as we emerged into a cavern. As far as I could see, T'holin bathed in dancing light fractals were perched in tiers arranged like an amphitheater.

Some fractals were golden and fluid; others were turquoise, angular and erratic. Every third T'holin bore a signet.

These were the *O'o'o'sl'h*, Flocking with their mates. The realization took my breath. I tried to refill my lungs, but the powerful harmonics from their journeystones hit my sternum like fists.

CcT'holaaxx gasped and coughed: Davin's journeystone was not spared.

Through the melee of signals, my journeystone tuned to a Patternbearer sitting with her triad apart from the rest in the center of the space.

SsLissa. She was larger than I remembered.

I stumbled toward her, but a network of fractals entangled me.

“The Gillis is here,” SsLissa announced. “Dampen the Archive.”

The fractals in the room erupted and flurried and then diminished slightly. My chest loosened and I took a full breath.

Come to me, SsLissa linked. I took a timid step, following the pilot sphere. The entangled fractals moved with me.

“The Gillis came as I said,” SsLissa said to the Flock. “Those who doubted should redouble their Discipline. Discerning the shape path is never a game, never a competition. It is a Descent. I will hear your rebuttals.”

“We all desire the shape path of flourishing,” said a Patternbearer from a far turquoise tier. “But we can’t yet see its best now. As T’holin, we have but one Certainty: that the Unfolding forbids unbridled entropy.”

“And you also know that Certainty ultimately falls into Contradiction—even on the shape path of flourishing,” SsLissa said. “Thus, this Flock’s quarrel fails to ruffle my brow.”

“Unbridled entropy nearly killed us in the past,” said another Patternbearer from the turquoise section. “So why do we perpetually submit to a species so ignorant of negentropy?”

Davin’s journeystone cut through the noise.

Speak to us, SsLissa said.

The fractals snapped and crackled around CCT’holaaax’s head, but he faced SsLissa tall and still, with the dignity of an honor guard. “How many representatives of that species would it take to prove we are willing to learn?” he asked.

“The question is nonsense,” said a third Patternbearer.

“Only because you fail to hold the Contradiction,” SsLissa said, spreading her wings. She sang a long pattern. I recognized the concept of walking backwards on the shape path to face the future. “The Gillis is here as I foretold, and I will go to Hadera with her,” SsLissa said.

“We’ve followed the Gillis shape path before,” said the second Patternbearer. This Gillis holds its failure in her body.”

My stump throbbed.

“Failure?” SsLissa said. “Have you seen the complete Unfolding then? Did you not hear the words of CcT’holaaxx?”

“CcT’holaaxx is not an honest name,” the same Patternbearer said. “He is a wingless creeper: a condition worse than a wounded wing.”

“I’m willing bear the struggle of any T’holin or human whose wing is wounded,” CcT’holaaxx said.

My journeystone flared, linking for an instant to Davin's heartbeat, but the fractals tightened around me.

SsLissa spread her wings and threw an arc of blue light from her signet. It expanded, muting the agitated fractals.

“As the *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h*, I have the authority to revoke your signets,” she said “Make yourselves smaller. I will leave with these travelers after giving them a day of rest and debriefing. But know this: my physical absence does not diminish my role.”

I watched her glide away. *Don’t leave me*, I called. *Enfold me!*

Silence.

I could only hope the sea of *O’o’o’sl’h* links was creating interference. It was unthinkable that SsLissa would snub me. Unless SsToola was right and SsLissa was hiding the truth.



Bereft and confused, I watched CcShirnir lead our zyphs away and then followed XxRiis with Arden and CcT'holaaxx across the vast cavern, thought a maze of silken partitions to a vaulted space where natural light burnished a large, irregularly shaped pool. I craned my neck to an oval of blue sky thirty meters above.

"Give me your rags," XxRiis said. Her tone was sharp, more like SsLissa in teaching mode than the gentle Enfolder I remembered XxRiis to be.

Unsure of her meaning, I tested our link, not really expecting a reply. *You want us to take off our clothes?*

You stink, she said.

Her response was immediate and clear, and my mind rushed to invent a rationale for SsLissa's silence. She is O'o'o'sl'h of O'o'o'sl'h. Of course we require a ritual cleansing.

This is medicine water, XxRiis said.

I waited for more explanation, but there was none. "I guess we're stripping and going swimming," I told the men.

Arden was already peeling off his tunic and I realized he had understood XxRiis.

CcT'holaaxx crossed his arms on his chest .

"Take off the mask," XxRiis ordered. "We already know what the stars call you."

CcT'holaaxx eased the mask from his face and held it in both hands. The three of us stared at each other, waiting for someone to move first.

"Turn around, you two," I said.

I stripped and waded into the water until it reached my chin, so buoyant I had to stroke with my arms to remain

vertical. The warmth matched my body temperature and my muscles relaxed.

Arden and Davin swam up beside me, and then Davin dove, popping to the surface a few meters away.

Arden turned to look for him. His pupils were dilated and his irises seemed more violet than blue, matching the circles beneath his eyes. He puckered his brows and glanced overhead as if expecting something to appear. I was relieved when he refocused and swam to Davin.

“Can’t you make the T’holin leave with us now?” he asked. “Why do we have to wait? What do your sources say?”

“The one called SsLissa is my source,” Davin whispered. “We’ll do as she says.”

I ducked under the water to hide my astonishment. When I resurfaced, XxRiis linked to summon me.

“I’m getting out,” I told the men.

They turned their backs.

XxRiis met me with a towel and led me to a table behind a trellis of vines. She began to knead the muscles of my back. “You need something more than rest,” she said. “But there’s only so much I can do. Sit up and drink.” She handed me a vial.

I sipped its pleasantly bitter contents and watched Davin and Arden wade out at the other side of the pool where a T’holin male waited with towels.

The sight of Davin’s broad shoulders, of his back tapering to his hips and the movement of the muscles in his buttocks, thighs and calves as he climbed out of the pool was the last thing I remember before swooning on XxRiis’s breast.



I awoke knowing XxRiis had given me a drug made from the spinner venom and I'd slept 14 hours as a result, and that Davin and Arden had been medicated, too, and were still asleep in their curtained nooks on either side of mine.

These were not the only new facts that filled my head. My signet was warm with activity.

I knew Collaborative operatives had tampered with the maglev tracks outside Horizon, forcing the trains to stop just in time to be hit by bombs reported as an unfortunate weapons malfunction during a test of the prototype airplane.

I knew Hadrian was alive, in the protection of a valor in Horizon. I knew the Collaborative had placed a bounty his head sufficient to motivate corrupt local officials to hire scalpers to do the dirty work of finding him.

I knew the scalpers would be looking for CcT'holaaxx, Arden and me, too.

The signet did not supply a solution to that dilemma.

I invoked the first Node of the Discipline to see if my fear would show itself. Instead, I recalled the incident between the croy and the *karabon*. Their example prompted me to submit to the Descent. To the best now.

Surely my lack of resistance was a hangover from the spinner venom.

Naked beneath silky T'holin sheets, I stretched to face the day. Beside my pallet was a pile of fabric patterned in fine points of vivid color. I reached for it, but XxRiis swooped in to snatch it away.

"I will dress you," she said.

I followed her instructions, stepping into the underclothes, pushing my arms through the slits of a seamless tunic and

raising them as she draped a sash between my breasts and around my back.

Cool and smooth, stimulating to my nipples, the fabrics were made from silk woven from the webs of the same spinners that produced venom with soporific or lethal qualities, depending on its dose.

XxRiis unbound my hair and combed it, applying a bit of fragrant oil to my curls. “The *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h* will see you now,” she said.

My heart sank. XxRiis did not name SsLissa as my SsLissa, but the *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h*.

It seemed fitting that SsLissa’s nook was a cathedral of shimmering curtains. I knelt before her, expecting enfolding.

She neither corrected me nor called me forward. “You wear the signet well,” she said.

Her aloofness broke the fragile container holding my grief. I stayed on my knees with my head bowed, refusing to falter in her presence.

SsLissa’s signet threw a mandala of light to envelop me. The emotions receded, stranding me in a wake of new questions. My memory flashed with an image of Ria rubbing her pregnant belly and surprising me with her T’holin wisdom. Tholin welcome questions, she said, unless the one asking them has no place for the answers to land.

If that was why SsLissa didn’t tell me she is *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h*, I could accept it. But what of the other truth?

My journeystone grew warm, and I felt small and enfolded, even standing two meters apart from SsLissa. I didn’t need enfolding to accept that waiting was still my best now.

“You wear the signet well,” SsLissa said again, and I knew I’d passed a test. “Go. CcShirnir will call you when it’s time.”



There was nowhere to escape the signal of the *O’o’o’sl’h* or the Archive’s heavy presence, but I craved solitude, so I set off alone to explore the caverns before Davin and Arden woke up.

Following the thrum of the zyphs, I discovered a hidden meadows where lichen and grass flourished under sunlight pouring from overhead vents. There, I found the zyphs grazing contentedly. I mounted one and tracked a stream through winding passages that brought me to a series of arches that opened to daylight, where I dismounted and stepped outside to a ledge.

If its drop off had a bottom, I couldn’t see it. I retreated from the edge and looked across a chasm where columns of rock rose hundreds of meters as far as I could see, like shards thrown by a giant and abandoned to the sculpting hands of the wind and rain. Each spire was a vertical garden flocked with trees, flowers and shrubs.

Winged shapes glided and darted between the formations. T’holin Gatherers. Dozens of them, snatching bugs and creepers to bring back to the rooks. I shivered in awe and shrank from the knowledge that my kind did not belong to this world

A wave of numbness washed over me. It was impossible to fathom SsLissa’s identity. There were no human categories for *O’o’o’sl’h* of *O’o’o’sl’h*. It was too much to bear.

I sat down and put my head between my legs.

The air pressure changed with the swoop of close T'holin wings. I looked up as CcShirnir landed beside me.

He withdrew his arms from their wing pouches and crossed them on his breast, regarding me with piercing yellow eyes. His brown fur was longer than I remembered. He looked like a wild T'holin.

"Your wing is healed," I said when I could no longer bear the silence.

"It is better than it was but not as well as it will be," he said. "No long desert flights carrying the Gillis are in my best now."

I tried to calculate how long ago he was wounded. After I left him, I spent two nights in the desert and one night on the train... but how many nights in the infirmary? In the women's quarters and the dome? I was certain of spending two nights at the Leander estate plus a night on a train with Davin and Arden and then two more nights in the wilderness, and now, one night in this place... at the very least, I should be preparing for my menses...

CcShirnir clucked to draw my attention. "Distraction is not the best now on this shape path," he said. "I will sit with you."

It was a strange thing for a Maker to say. He sounded more like XxRiis than himself.

"Your best now is falling up," he said. "I can help you choose your tools."

I thought he said, "use your tools."

"CcT'holner tried to help me," I said. My memory of the wild Maker was already fading and CcT'holner seemed tamer than CcShirnir now.

CcShirnir circled his chin in the gesture for “no.” “Choose your tools,” he repeated, and this time I discerned the difference. “In the T’holin way. Tools must fit.”

The tone of his song took me back to my childhood, to countless sessions with him. I could have learned the same skills from humans, but as a Maker, he taught them as art. I learned to weave, to repair garden tools, to organize my belongings and clean the stables, to cook and sew and plant and harvest with the same attention to innovation, function and beauty as singing, storytelling, drawing, painting and sculpture. It was all alchemy for the shape path; all for the Archive, he said.

My journeystone told me as clearly as if he’d spoken it aloud: he had been maker-ing my journeystone all my life.

“It was many generations before the journeystones became part of the T’holin,” he said, as if following my thoughts. “Each generation makers them for the next. You are maker-ing the journeystone for your kind.”

“But I broke the shape path and lost the Waker.”

“Nothing is lost on the shape path. But making requires tools and you must choose. Which one is available to you?”

I lost the thread of meaning and looked at him, totally perplexed.

CcShirnir sang a few notes and paused. It was enough for me to recognize the song used to launch the embodiment practice.

My jaw dropped.

“Are you offended?” CcShirnir asked. “The tool will not take offense. Why would it? It is waiting to be fit into the hand that was made for it. To be used for the purpose it was maker-ed.”



I wandered the caverns until dark, filling my thoughts with everything except CcShirnir's counsel, unwilling to admit I was avoiding Arden and Davin. At least there was no reprimand from SsLissa's link, nor was XxRiis lurking to tend to some imaginary need of mine when I returned.

I attended to my hygiene and slipped into my nook. It was lit by a cool, blue light, and I found a tray of food waiting for me. I ate quickly, noticing that Arden's nook was dark, but Davin's light was on, casting him in silhouette. He seemed to be sitting up with his knees drawn to his chin.

I set the tray aside to begin the awkward process of pulling off my boots. The force of tugging off the left boot rocked me backward with a thud.

"Aleya," Davin called. "Do you want some help?"

I gritted my teeth. "I can do it myself." My journeystone sent a tingling signal that challenged my stubbornness. "All right," I said.

He parted the curtain and ducked inside. Shirtless, with his hair unbound, he knelt with his hands on his thighs.

Our journeystones thrummed as if trying to settle on a compatible frequency and our eyes met. This time, his did not waver until the color rose in his cheeks. He looked down and pointed at my boot-clad right calf.

I extended my leg so he could pull off the boot.

"Thank you," I said, fidgeting with my hair tie, threading my fingers into my braid to loosen it, wondering what to do next.

He reached to help. "May I?"

My journeystone jangled with yearning, confusion, frustration, and embarrassment and his echoed mine. I

searched his eyes and then fumbled in my knapsack for my comb. “If you’ll tell me something,” I said, offering him the comb.

“Not fair,” he said. “How can I answer?”

“When did you choose your Broker name?” I asked.

He looked down. “It’s very personal,” he said. “It involves a recurring dream I’ve had since...adolescence.”

Our journeystones created an arc of signal so strong that the air glowed between us.

His eyebrows shot up

“Tell me about your journeystone,” I whispered.

He put his finger to his lips.

“If not here, then where?” I asked.

He sighed. “There’s not much to tell,” he said. “I only know what Cinaia told me.” He touched my shoulder and I took the hint to turn my back to him. He began to loosen my braid with his fingers.

“I’ve had the journeystone as long as I can remember,” he said in a half whisper. His fingers grazed the small of my back as he began at the tips of my long, unbound hair and gently combed through the strands all the way to my scalp.

“Tholin found me in a Parsimony hell hole during the second hemorrhagic pandemic,” he said. “With my dead parents.”

“How old were you?”

“Barely a year.”

For the first time, I realized how much Farside had been spared by its isolation. The pandemic never spread to the Fold. Davin was lucky to be alive. “How did Cinaia find you?” I asked.

“She was helping the T’holin take care of other orphans. She hadn’t been with the Advocate very long when the second pandemic broke out. She’s trained as a healer, and the Advocate allowed her to serve in the crisis. She went back to him after the pandemic was contained.” He finished combing my hair and I turned to face him.

“Why would she go back to him?” I asked.

He took a long, deep breath and looked down at his hands, fidgeting with the comb. “You have to understand that she never speaks ill of him,” he said. “She says Gregor—Gregor Wong—gave her the courage, somehow. Convinced her to bring me with her and promise to stay with the Advocate if he’d let her foster me.”

“Just you? What about the others?”

“Just me,” he said, patting his chest. “She had to protect my journeystone.”

“The other orphans didn’t get a journeystone?” I asked.

“I don’t know. They gave Cinaia one, too. I don’t know why. Do you know why you were chosen?”

“I’m the guardian...”

A shadow loomed behind my nook. I parted the curtain and found CcShirnir.

“Rouse Arden,” he said. “It is our best now to leave.”

CHAPTER 16



“There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

By the light of a gibbous moon half hidden by tattered clouds, we picked our way down tortuous, rain-slick terrain toward the canyon between the rock columns. The winding gorge was the most straightforward route to Horizon, according to SsLissa, and so hidden, we could avoid *sillay* until we emerged onto the plain.

At least I knew we were headed for Horizon.

The knowledge was not comforting.

The landscape’s long shadows, its looming rock formations and the eerie shapes of our T’holin guides jolted me with an adrenaline surge that almost compensated for my lack of sleep, yet I struggled to keep pace with Arden and Davin’s longer legs.

T’holin have short, delicate legs that make walking ungainly, so they kept gliding a few meters ahead and waiting for us to catch up. The predictable cadence rendered the pilot sphere redundant, yet the sphere continued to show itself, matching the T’holin’s movement.

A dull, warm ache bloomed in my pelvis. The moon phase confirmed four weeks had passed since I first crossed the

desert, so I was prepared for my menses, and determined not to let it hamper me.

Be grateful for it, SsLissa linked. It makes you less susceptible to the spores still blooming at this latitude.

Her link was intimate. But she was O'o'o'sl'h of O'o'o'sl'h, Did I dare ask a question? *Are you still leading the Flock? Are the O'o'o'sl'h guiding the sphere?*

She didn't answer.

Daylight seeped into the sky. The rock columns gave way to worn boulders and the view opened to the plain.

We paused to rest and relieve ourselves. I leaned against a rock and closed my eyes to the sunrise's orange glint, and gave up fighting sleep. The whisper of my journeystone drifted into a dream of being on trial for losing Pavi. T'holin digits pointed and wagged near my face but I couldn't see who they belonged to. An odor like wet moss and sweet musk swept into the dream, inducing a real fit of sneezing and coughing. I rubbed my eyes and opened them to a wall of shaggy, dark brown hair at least three meters high.

A karabon.

I froze with terror, but my journeystone intervened with a steady, calming signal.

Save your fear, SsLissa linked. The real danger is not the karabon.

Arden gasped and clambered to his feet. Davin stood up slowly.

The *karabon* folded its thick legs and knelt. Its mass shook the ground and it expelled a moist, raspy snort.

XxRiis spread her wings like a hen and clucked at us, gesturing for us to mount.

Davin locked eyes with her. His stance was stiff and defiant.

XxRiis stepped toward him, hissing.

He grabbed fistfuls of fur and pulled himself up, fitting himself behind the karabon's prominent shoulder hump. As soon as he was settled, he leaned over the karabon's side and reached for me.

I was slow to realize he wanted to pull me up and XxRiis nudged me with her breast. I extended both arms and Davin caught them. He pulled me up a few inches, but my stump slid from his grasp. I dangled by my right wrist as his hand recaptured my stump.

My head clouded with the memory of a dream...

"Climb!" Davin cried. "Dig your feet into its ribs!"

I took a breath, raised my knees and kicked until my feet found a bony ridge of rib. It was enough purchase to take the weight off my arms and Davin deftly swung me up behind him.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," Davin said.

I sputtered in protest, but realized he'd already determined the beast was too wide for me to straddle without straining my hip joints. Cheeks burning, I tucked my skirt between my legs and extended both legs.

Davin reached behind to maneuver my boot-clad feet. He crossed my ankles in front of his midriff.

From my perch, I couldn't see how Arden managed to mount and snug himself behind me supported by the karabon's high iliac crests.

As the *karabon* straightened to its full height, Arden threw his arms around my waist and I grabbed the back of Davin's

shirt. After one draining look at the creature's flat, ponderous head, I hid my face between Davin's shoulder blades.

The *karabon* lurched forward and settled into a rolling gait that rumbled the ground like thunder. I looked up just in time to see SsLissa and her mates take to the air. I saw or imagined other wing shapes, and then the sillay bubble, thick with the combined efforts of the triad, blurred my vision.



We were close enough to Horizon to draw Phalanx scouts, SsLissa said. *Toxic males. Their first smell is augmented*, she said directly to me, and I blushed her implied reference to my menses. *It can't be helped*, she said.

The *karabon* took a zig zag course to confuse the Phalanx, but I feared its pace would hinder a nimble response to small-scale threats like human Scalpers.

The triad's keen vision gave us advance warning twice when the blurry shadow of Phalanx wings darkened the sillay bubble. The *karabon* heeded the T'holin's calls to freeze in place.

After two days in a state of vigilance and two nights sleeping with a *karabon*, two men and three T'holin, my nerves were like a piece of thread beginning to fray.

I changed the menstrual cup often and buried its contents as quickly as I could. No one complained or chided me for slowing our progress.

At one point, something snagged my awareness with a pinprick of pain followed by a dull ache, as if something had been pulled out of me.

SsLissa's link reached for mine. *The Waker is here and not here*, she said, and began to keen, giving no further explanation.

Each night, XxRiis served us spinner venom, just enough to take the edge off our constant wariness.

"Just enough to build tolerance," she corrected me. "You may need it in Horizon."

I shivered at the implications.

The venom's effects lingered all day, smoothing a cacophony of stimuli—not least, a low-level of arousal from the spore toxins that persisted in spite of my hormonal phase. At the time, dear Valor in training, while bouncing along on the karabon with my cheek constantly pressed against Davin's back and my legs splayed around his middle, I was unable to admit that the spores weren't entirely to blame.

Arden rode in a limp slouch behind me and might have fallen off the karabon had I not kept his arms firmly wrapped around my waist. He stopped talking and Davin had to coax him to eat and drink. Despite the spinner venom, Arden's grief for Hadrian was taking its toll. I understood too well. There were moments when I had no control over the tide of pain for the loss of Pavi.

For hours at a time, I clung to the Discipline, desperate to keep from losing my shape path. It seemed thin as a wisp of smoke, too insubstantial to support me.

I couldn't remember the point of guarding the Waker. I could see no shape path in which humans awoke to the Unfolding.

From her position ahead, SsLissa linked my thoughts like a dust devil gathering leaves, shaping the whirlwind and

letting it collapse over and over, until finally, she said, *Your turn to create it.*

A surge of peevishness whet my focus. I resolved to comply, if only to end the futile exercise.

I envisioned walking backward on a shape path that was spinning upward and counterclockwise. Unbidden, T'holin shape-words filled my head, singing cycles of birth and death, of self-giving, flowing into the fullness of receiving. The words regrouped and became the song for the embodiment practice.

I didn't realize we'd stopped to rest until Davin asked, "Are you all right?"

I lifted my head. The back of his shirt was wet with my tears.



On our third morning in the plains, I woke up with a clear, calm assurance of my best now. I must take the lead as Rounder. The T'holin must assume their role as acquisitions.

I breathed through a wave of sadness for the T'holin and woke Davin. "Put on your mask," I said. "I need you to be CcT'holaaxx now."

He blinked at me, but didn't argue.

"Do you have a spare mask? For Arden?" I asked.

The masks were identical, but Arden's pale curls and slightly smaller frame easily distinguished him from CcT'holaaxx.

SsLissa and her mates descended from their perches, already displaying the dignified but humble posture of T'holin slaves.

Enfold me? I begged SsLissa.

You are already enfolding me.

Her answer was unsatisfying, but I accepted it.

We cleared camp and Arden seemed to perk up.

“The last camp before Horizon,” he said, and I sensed an ember of hope.

The karabon abandoned us with a farewell display of head shaking and snorting.

Without warning, the pilot sphere shot forward. I waited for it to return and form the sillay bubble, but it stayed in place, hovering crisp and clear.

“Follow me,” I said with more conviction than I felt. “Keep your eyes open for threats. There will be no sillay today.”

“Without the karabon, your pace will be too slow for us to glide,” SsLissa said.

“We’ll try to adjust to you,” I said.

After a quarter kilometer, we settled on a gait that allowed the T’holin to combine hopping with gliding for short bursts.

Before long, we encountered cattle and zyphs and cultivated fields. My nose twitched with an astringent smell. Agricultural chemicals. These were corporate farms.

The T’holin’s brow ridges spiked. XxRiis keened.

Something tawny caught my eye, darting between rows of corn.

“Croy,” Arden cried.

The croy dashed between hedgerows and bushes, staying just ahead of us.

We passed a farmstead where a dusty road led to a cluster of dwellings.

I shielded my eyes to frame the hazy distance, where the concentration of buildings marked the transition to the

outskirts of Horizon. Beyond, the distant city was a jumble of blocky shapes wavering in light bent by the heated air.

“We need to keep moving if we expect to get there by dark,” I said.

The croy took the lead.



I smelled the city before we reached its narrow walkways. Its odor reminded me of a time the chiller failed in my domicile and the milk turned sour.

The croy flattened its ears and crinkled its nose.

The ramshackle structures, hung with tattered awnings and dingy laundry, seemed the perfect set up for an ambush, but an irrational sadness for the people living there competed with my wariness. All the doors and windows we passed were shuttered. We didn't see a single person, even in the open air markets whose carts and kiosks seemed abandoned.

The croy hopped onto an apple cart, and the pilot sphere sputtered to the other side of the market. I followed it to a street where the buildings seemed more uniform.

The odor faded but my journeystone remained chilled to the core. The street was empty and silent except for a faint rumble and whine of engines and wheels that signaled we were near a heavily traveled area.

We walked for two blocks and then the croy dropped to its haunches and howled.

My heart jumped into my throat. The pilot sphere froze and the nape of my neck prickled. XxRiis keened and the croy sprang to its feet, growling and bristling as two hooded human forms dropped in front of us from the shadowy rim of a retaining wall.

CcT'holaaxx and Arden leaped to meet them. Their arms cut the air and flesh and bone collided.

I backed into the wall and CcShirnir spread his wings to shield me. My heart pounded, but my urge to watch overcame my fear and I craned my neck to see over CcShirnir's wing apex.

The attackers matched CcT'holaaxx in size, so I judged them to be male. CcT'holaaxx grabbed the wrist of the man facing him and flipped him over one knee, throwing him to the ground with a thud.

Arden's attacker drew a hand gun, but Arden's foot dislodged it with one graceful arc. Arden pocketed the weapon as CcShirnir swooped in with open wings and bared fangs, joined by the snarling croy.

The attackers fled toward the market.

"Bounty hunters," CcT'holaaxx muttered. "They weren't prepared for croy."

Or a Maker who would defend. Or your hand-to-hand skills, I said as if I could link to his journeystone.

His signal jarred mine, and our unanswered questions tangled in the air between us, but before I could catch my breath, the pilot sphere shot forward, toward the heart of the city.

"Run!" I cried. "The sphere's getting away!"

The T'holin rose on wings nearly the width of the roadway. The croy bounded ahead.

I sprinted to catch up with the pilot sphere as it zipped around a corner, trusting CcT'holaaxx and Arden to follow, but I skidded to a halt when I found myself facing a broad thoroughfare swarming with runabouts and human and

T'holin pedestrians. The humans stopped to gawk at the flying T'holin.

Sillay? I begged SsLissa.

It is not the best now, she answered.

I linked to argue with her, but my journeystone turned hot, humming a signal that Davin's journeystone echoed, a split second out of sync.

The pilot sphere paused and the T'holin settled on the ground. The traffic noise froze and the sunlight flickered and turned to shadow. The street scape turned grainy and fell away like sand, and then reshaped into the ledge from which bounty hunters had jumped moments ago. In a rough, choppy image, like drawings in a flip book I made when I was a child, I saw the bounty hunters running.

I rubbed my eyes as if I could correct the scene, and saw the bounty hunters again: a flash of movement, like a hand touching a Riff.

And then the sunlight flooded back, pouring the buildings and vehicles and pedestrians into their proper places. The road noise rushed back with full force.

I reached for SsLissa's link. Her response was not immediate, and it was layered with something like fear or awe. *You touched another now,* she said. *Not the best now. Stay focused. Stay in the best now.*

I took a deep breath. Davin's journeystone amplified my journeystone's attempt to calm me, but as CcT'holaaxx, his posture remained stiff and wary.

Arden maintained a defensive stance, with knees slightly bent and arms spread.

CcT'holaaxx touched Arden's shoulder. "Trust the Rounder," he said, but Arden did not relax.

Just ahead, the pilot sphere twirled and glowed with fractal patterns that focused my attention. My mind rang with the T'holin phrase for walking backward and upward on the shape path. I found the Contradiction: the buildings and vehicles and bystanders were too tidy and orderly—because in the real world, the bounty hunters would be spreading the word that Arden was in Horizon with the Gillis and her acquisition and her broker, the sky would be dark with Phalanx, and every shadow could be cover for an ambush.

My journeystone turned to ice and the croy tucked their tails.

“What I saw was the real best now,” I said. “Help me sillay until we can find a safe place.”

SsLissa stumbled and CcShirnir caught her.



CcShirnir cradled SsLissa in his arms. XxRiis touched SsLissa's signet and keened.

“The *Xx'O'o'o'sl'h* have emptied her,” XxRiis said and turned to me. “I can't Gather enough food to keep meet the energy demands of the conflicting signets,” she said.

I was still clumsily translating the term *Xx'O'o'o'sl'h*— my best guess was that it meant “neuter Patternbearer”. But there was no such thing as neuter Patternbearer. The female life force carried the shape path.

“You need food,” XxRiis said, “or you will collapse like SsLissa.”

“Can you help make sillay?” I begged. “Just until we find a real place?” *A place where I can find the shape path, and sort the journeystone links. If Pavi is here, I will know it.*

CcShirnir shifted SsLissa’s weight. “Only SsLissa has a signet.”

“But I saw you sillay—”

“Without a signet, we can only sillay ourselves,” CcShirnir said.

Darkness settled around us, too early for dusk, in a cloudless sky. The traffic noise receded, and everything grew still. Pressure built in my chest. It was like waiting for a storm on the mesa in Farside.

Arden’s eyes widened like a confused hare. CcT’holaaaxx moved closer to him, but Arden backed away as if he’d never seen the Broker before.

CcT’holaaaxx spread his arms and whispered, “It’s just a mask.” Something fluttered at the edge of his sleeve. A tag. In his haste to dress, he’d not removed it’d from his new clothes.

The absurd phrase “special offers” echoed in my head and I remembered the merchant with the tattooed palm. I touched my signet and closed my eyes to see what the shape path would show me.

One of the croy howled and jumped up to sniff my knapsack. The others circled us, with flattened ears and tucked tails.

“Something’s coming,” CcT’holaaaxx said.

I whipped my knapsack from my shoulders and retrieved my Riff. I found the contacts file and touched it, but a prompt appeared with a symbol I didn’t recognize. I handed the Riff to CcT’holaaaxx. “I need help opening a file,” I said..

He glanced at it quickly. "The file wants a retinal scan," he said, handing the Riff back to me.

I followed the prompts for the retinal scan and watched an icon resolve. "The Unfolding symbol," I breathed shakily and showed XxRiis.

She clucked and her brow ridges spiked. "Follow it," she said.

My finger shook as I touched the icon. Shapes began to scroll. It took me a moment to calm my synesthesia and make sense of them.

"It's a table," I said. "A list, I think."

"Of what?" CcT'holaaxx asked.

The croy began to circle at a frenetic pace.

"Show me," XxRiis said.

I gave her the Riff.

"A list of Valors," XxRiis said. "And there's just one Valor in Horizon." She gave the Riff back to me.

The pilot sphere sputtered and twirled. My head was foggy, and I was too weak to sustain the pilot sphere and probably too depleted to sillay. My fingers trembled and I fumbled with the Riff. "CcT'holaaxx," I said, "I need help. I don't know how to use the list."

CcT'holaaxx took the Riff and flicked his fingers on its surface. "There's an embedded directional finder for the Valors," he said.

"Show me," I said. "Show me the one in Horizon."

On the screen, a blue thread stretched between our location and a red dot scaled as two kilometers away.

The croy howled and bristled and the wing shapes deepened the darkness. My mouth tasted tinny and my muscles tensed. A stray thought about stress raising one's

blood sugar level crossed my mind and I wondered if that was true in Ketosis, and if I could muster the energy to journeyfold.

The ring of pacing croy contracted, forcing us together.

“Grab on to each other,” I cried.

“You’re too weak to journeyfold!” CcShirnir hissed.

“Then sync with my—” I somehow had the presence of mind to stop short of mentioning my journeystone. “Help me!”

The energy surge turned my stomach inside out. The world faded to white-hot fog and I fell upward into a golden light, and hung there with no sense of time until I began to tumble and my nostrils filled with a the tang of salt and fish.

A croy broke my fall and I landed beside SsLissa. Her yellow eyes were wide, her wings were spread and she was singing a wordless cadence.

Sunlight glinted on turquoise water over her shoulder. The water stretched to the horizon, and the thin, blue line where they met tilted crazily. My head hit a hard surface and I looked up into the blue bowl of sky. Darkness fell over it like a curtain.

CHAPTER 17



“Faith is the act of a finite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite.” – Paul Tillich

My skin tingled against cool fabric and I inhaled the pepper and clove scent of T’holin mixed with the smell of the sea. My legs were tucked under red and blue spinner silk bedsheets and my pale arms were uncovered.

The floor dipped from side to side, matching the rolling seascape beyond a round window not far from my feet.

I looked left. A large male T’holin—a Maker, judging by his harness—sat beside me. Reflexively, I glanced to my right and saw another Maker. I recognized CcShirnir’s blue-black fur, which spurred a delayed realization that the Maker on my left was CcT’holner. I turned back to him to confirm this highly unlikely possibility.

Only then did I notice the human male with kind, hooded eyes. Gregor Wong smiled.

CcT’holner touched my signet. “You’ve exceeded our expectations,” he said. “And your energy reserves. You summoned the Gatherer.”

I braced with my elbows and then threw back the sheet, but CcShirnir restrained me. “This is your best now,” he said. “Eat and rest.”

I don't know how long I remained in the company of SsLissa and her mates and with CcT'holner and Gregor and the croy in that bestnow, which was neither a time nor a place. It was more like a song. It might have lasted hours or days or years. CcT'holner told me such categories were useless, because my decision to journeyfold on behalf of the *O'o'o'sl'h* of *O'o'o'sl'h*—who was too weak and compromised to do it herself—had suspended the shape path.

Yes, dear Valor in training. CcT'holner said I suspended the shape path.

It was no surprise, he said. The *O'o'o'sl'h* first realized I had such power when I sang the Cataclysm Dance: without a signet—with my journeystone alone—and gave Pavi the clarity she needed to fledge.

Fledge, I repeated. Like a baby bird?

Like a T'holin pup, CcT'holner said. You gave her what she needed for First Flight.

At the time, I didn't appreciate the gravity of that revelation. I was too concerned about CcT'holaaxx and Arden, and SsLissa and XxRiis. CcT'holner said my journeyfold carried SsLissa, XxRiis and the croy to this place, and left CcT'holaaxx and Arden resting in suspension.

I was horrified to learn of this, but CcT'holner puffed out his breast with pride and told me there was nothing to fear, and that my decisive action had, in fact, saved the *O'o'o'sl'h* of *O'o'o'sl'h* and summoned all the Founders.

I told him I was still waiting to learn what a Founder was. He said I would learn in the T'holin way, by immersion in experiences.

Gregor told me why I was drawn to him, why I trusted him instantly. "You carry a bit of me with you," he said. "It

was cultures from my vagus nerve along with placental stem cells and T'holin engineering that we used to develop the journeystones."

"But you're the President of the Consortium," I said. "You're chair of the InterProvince Monetary Fund."

"I'm all those things and more," he said. "Follow the shape path far enough, and there is Contradiction. Follow the Contradiction and it holds itself in tension."

And so I drifted in the song's shape words while floating on the sea in a tiny craft in the company of the T'holin and the croy. The experience was a more intense version of the Discipline through which SsLissa had led me during my journey to Horizon.

Aided by the stillness of the shape path, I grew more adept at tracing colored pathways along its spiral.

Peace settled in my breast and the embodiment practice inscribed new neural connections.

There were intervals of golden sunlight and indigo darkness, as if the shape path at least was allowing night to follow day, and my menses ended, so it seemed my biological processes were not suspended.

Sometimes I seemed to soar above patterns resembling sand and trees and fantastic domes of rock.

Once, I saw the shoreline as clearly as if I was standing on its pristine beach. Heavy equipment was excavating a deep channel, and the T'holin journeystones thrummed with unmitigated stress as they caught me back up into the air. I passed through a shimmering barrier and descended headlong into a gorge.

I saw a T'holin Flocking where SsLissa took her place as O'o'ls'h of O'o'ls'h.

Dear Valor-in-training, to this day, I don't know if I was physically in that discrete location, or if any words were spoken or sung. I can't pinpoint the moment when my understanding crystalized. It was like swimming in the sea of information until my vision adjusted, and I knew the Founders were showing me the continent of Continuum, where they were striving to protect the T'holin's last refuge from human encroachment.

I fell into the Archive and assimilated events on the shape path older than time, watching T'holin civilization soar and flounder. As clearly as I saw machines digging deep into the planet to construct particle colliders, my mind acquired the models of physics those experiments discovered. I saw ships reaching for space and returning to be dismantled forever. The Archive did not explain why, however, but it showed me drought and famine and death and T'holin responding by taking down their cities brick by brick and returning to the way of the Gatherers, restoring the Discipline of the Unfolding.

The T'holin established principles for developing open systems for renewal and flourishing, to offset entropy. They perfected the neural implants that synchronized their minds and bodies with the health of the planet: the journeystones.

And then a signal from space confirmed they were not alone. The Founders discovered a ship inhabited by sapient beings aligned with the shape path, summoned by the Unfolding. Knowing the risks, but sparing no sacrifice, they divided their population between separate continents. One group to be Patternbearers to teach the humans how to live on Chaalis and the other to preserve the T'holin ways until the humans could accept T'holin ways.

The information nestled in my mind as if I'd always known it. It brought me to the full awareness that I was, in fact, sitting on the bright deck of a small water craft bobbing on the sea, and CcT'holner and SsLissa were with me.

"We can't sustain the scale of sillay required to keep our settlements hidden, now that the humans are perfecting air travel," CcT'holner said. "You must go back into the Contradiction. SsLissa needs you to help her hold to it among the *O'o'o'sl'h*."

"Hold to it?" I asked. "What about the truth?" I asked.

CcT'holner's nictitating membranes flashed with his palpable anger and disappointment. "Have you learned nothing about the Contradiction?" he asked.

SsLissa rose to her full height. "I will journeyfold us back to our best now," she said. "Your signet will supplement."



Instead of a white hot glow and stomach churning lurch, SsLissa's journeyfold wrapped me in warm, golden light and held me there. The light changed to a smoky red glow and I my feet planted on a firm surface as objects solidified around me.

A hand reached for me and I looked up to see CcT'holaaxx's mask. Arden, also masked, was in the process of regaining his balance, and it occurred to me that the journeyfold had been one seamless event for CcT'holaaxx and Arden and they hadn't noticed my absence.

The T'holin triad spread its wings around us and the croy crept at our ankles with bared teeth. In the dim light, a woman dressed in a loose, black dress walked toward us,

spreading her hands, palms up, showing the tattoos of a Valor. She said her name was Miri. Her smooth, dark hair and deep brown eyes reminded me of Ria, but her wide-eyed expression seemed stiff and resolved, as if it was her default setting.

“She said you would come,” Valor Miri said in Basic.

The way she emphasized “she” reminded me of Perrin speaking of Pavi. I closed my eyes and strained to access Pavi’s link. Instead, I felt the ache of its absence.

But Pavi and I were closer than sisters, and I didn’t need her journeystone to tell me she was nearby. My heart knew. “Take me to Her,” I said.

“Wait here,” Miri said. “I’ll settle the others. Only you may go in to Her.”

My companions left with the Valor. Alone in the small ante room, I paced, rehearsing what I might say to Pavi instead of blubbering or cursing. But my mind blanked when Miri returned to lead me through a maze of stone-walled corridors lit by sconces.

She opened the door to a small room illuminated by a soft, blue light, and gestured for me to enter.

A dark-skinned man dressed in pale clothing sat beside a bed in the center of the dim space. His head was bandaged and his left arm and leg were in casts.

The person in the bed had dark-skin, too, in sharp contrast with the white bed clothes.

I fell to my knees beside the bed as thin arms reached for me, and found Pavi’s eyes. She wrapped her arms around me and I shrank from her tiny, frail frame.

“I have so much to tell you,” she said. “But I have to save my strength.” Her large, black eyes shifted toward the man at

the bedside. “Hadrian, my half brother,” she said, and turned back to me. “Don’t look so surprised. There’s so much you don’t know. And what you’ve been told is mostly lies.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she raised one hand to silence me. “Do you see the light on my nightstand?” she asked.

I looked and found a small, glowing oval container.

“Give it to me,” she said.

The object was smooth and pliant like silicone and it emitted a gentle hum, like the skin of a zyph. I handed it to Pavi but she waved her hand and said, “Hold on to it. As collateral. All the collateral I have.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Collateral for what?” I asked.

“So you’ll do what I ask,” she said. “It’s my journeystone.”

The room tilted and my head grew light.

“No one forced me to remove it,” she said. “I knew what would happen if I did it. My central nervous system will deteriorate entirely if I don’t reimplant it. Did you know that’s what the T’holin did to us?” She paused to catch her breath. “Along with the Waker nonsense. That’s one of the lies you need to wake up from. If you want to save me, you have three months.” She closed her eyes and then said, “Hadrian, please tell her...”

Hadrian cleared his throat. “It’s critical for you to take that T’holin acquisition to Hadera so Arden gets credit for it,” he said.

“But you were nearly killed and Arden could still be a target —”

“We’ll manage the Scalpers and bounty hunters,” Hadrian said. “They’re not picky and they’ll take the best offer.

Besides, in light of the bombing disaster, Stellan can afford to let Arden have a moment of success. Its suits his purpose to build up the Advocate before he takes him down.” Hadrian paused as if waiting for my reaction.

I nodded just to fill the awkward silence.

“And we need to let that happen,” Hadrian said. He pointed to a chair across the room. “Why don’t you sit down? You look uncomfortable.”

I drew the chair closer to him and sat.

“Arden needs to bring me back to Hadera with him,” Hadrian said. “I’ll do the rest.”

His statement hung, unfinished, and I waited for him to explain. He heaved a sigh and said, “Do I have to draw a picture?”

“She grew up in the Fold,” Pavi said. “I’m not sure she even knows where babies come from.” One side of her mouth turned up in a half-smile. “You should have seen the look on her face when Arden flirted with the waiter at the Brandyshine. Sorry, brother. It was quite innocent.”

Hadrian tilted his head. “I’d expect nothing less from my Arden,” he said. “But it galls me to use that weakness to our advantage...”

I shook my head, baffled.

Dear Valor in training, I was too young and naive about the politics of power to grasp the importance of this information, so I sputtered some nonsense about how much Arden has suffered wondering if Hadrian was even alive.

Pavi braced on one elbow and glared at me. “As if you know what Arden’s suffering,” she said. “Do you know the punishment for being homosexual? You have no idea what’s at stake, do you? Did you understand why Perrin was willing

to risk everything —” She fell back onto her pillow and stared at the ceiling. “Have you noticed how much spinner silk there is in the T’holin rooks? Do you have any idea how many spinners it takes to make it?”

I reached for her forehead to check for fever.

Her smile was forced. “The T’holin have been giving you spinner venom, haven’t they? Small doses. Teaching you mental sex techniques that involve a bit of elixir.” She closed her eyes and I thought she’d fallen asleep, but she turned to me again. “Don’t you wonder why all the women work so hard to control the supply lines? How they tolerate so much abuse?” She waved her hand. “Put my journeystone back on the table,” she said. “The T’holin will keep it safe until you come back to me with the news that Stellan is in power.”

Pavi looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. “When did you start wearing a headband?” she asked. “Never mind. It looks good on you.” She sighed and closed her eyes again. Her chest began to rise and fall gently and I knew she was asleep.

I began to shake with pent emotion, and my stump flared with raw pain. My signet turned warm, and SsLissa’s link probed mine, incoherently. I recognized the competing signals of the *O’o’o’sl’h* and the *XxO’o’o’sl’h*—but by no means could I discern which to trust.

I sought CcT’holner’s link, but he was too far away. There was only one journeystone I hadn’t tried to reach.

Davin’s.



Shaky and disoriented, I left Pavi with Hadrian and followed Valor Miri outside to a courtyard. The shadows slanted away from me, and the sun's rays fell perpendicular to the tree trunks and garden walls, casting light so vivid, yet so soft and pure that I wasn't sure it was real. It called up memories of tending the zyphs at the close of those rare, perfect midsummer days with clear skies and low humidity, and calmed me so that I was able to process my surroundings.

Davin and Arden were sitting on a wooden bench that curved around a giant broad-leafed tree, without their masks, with the croy laying at their feet. Davin stared at a flower bed and his eyes reflected the light, but Arden's eyes were fixed on the shadows.

I sensed SsLissa and her mates, but couldn't see them. As if reading my mind, Miri pointed high in the tree, and I found the T'holin hanging by their feet, wrapped in their wings.

Davin looked up at me and the sun formed twin starbursts in his eyes. I came closer to him and my knees grew weak. He stood up. His eyes were full of questions.

I threw my arms around him, and he tensed at the unexpected contact. Our Journeystones began to pulse, a bit out of sync, and then thrummed steadily over the beat of our hearts. His arms tightened around me.

My mind grew calmer and clearer, and the information my signet had connected to the Archive seemed more solid and familiar, as if I'd known it all my life. It didn't supply nuances, however. I didn't understand the motives and consequences of Stellan's ambitions, or see any reason why Pavi would want to leverage them. Yet, because SsLissa had trained me in the Discipline, I knew the Contradiction was hidden in

SsLissa's truth and in Pavi and SsToola's claims: at this point on the shape path, they were both and neither true. The Unfolding was calling me to walk backward and fall upward on the shape path, to allow events I couldn't predict or understand to come to pass.

The Archive did give me one particular fact that was actually useful, however.

The maglev rail was still under repair.

I pulled back from Davin and looked up at him. "I need you to be CcT'holaaxx," I said. "To broker some deals. We need a vehicle. A big one."

The triad swooped down from the tree with a swish of wings.

SsLissa clucked at me. "You are draining our links," she said. "I should have warned you that our Journeyfolds have depleted the Archive and the resistance from the *XxO'o'o'sl'h* is too much for me and the Waker's link is broken."

I gasped as the subtle links to Davin and the triad decayed to an incoherent slurry.

"Now, sing the shape path to me," SsLissa urged.

I began to sing in west highland T'holin. Of Hadrian in casts. Of Pavi, and her journeystone in a bottle, but SsLissa cut me off, keening a piercing sound that brought Miri running to her side.

SsLissa hissed at her. "How could you allow this? No matter. It is done. Bring Hadrian here."

Miri hurried back inside and I realized she'd understood my convoluted and idiomatic T'holin exchange with SsLissa. From the look of Arden's face, I knew he'd at least grasped the mention of Hadrian.

A moment later, Miri brought Hadrian outside in a wheelchair.

Arden ran and touched his cheek to Hadrian's. Their heads nodded and they spoke in murmurs and then Arden jumped up to retrieve his knapsack from the bench. He pulled out a cape and flicked it to reveal the Collaborative's Great Seal. "We won't be slinking back to Hadera on freight trains or pack animals," he said. "Stellan is in full face-saving mode."

SsLissa's nictitating membranes flashed and her brow ridges spiked.

Arden wrapped the cape around his shoulders. "It's time to flaunt—my wonderful self!" he said. "I will rub my father's face in this successful acquisition." He stepped closer to Hadrian and put his arm around him. "And that's not all," he said.

Davin glared. "You know how that will end," he said.

Hadrian put his hand on Arden's. "It's the only way," he said.

"We still have to make it to Hadera," Davin said. "That's more than 1,600 kilometers. On main roads. With charging stations and checkpoints."

"We're taking care of the Scalpers and bounty hunters," Hadrian said.

Valor Miri shook her head. "You can't trust them not to double skim," she said. "But we can add a layer of authority. We have connections with the press. I'll arrange for extensive news coverage of Arden's triumph."

"What good will that do?" Davin asked.

"If the public rallies around Arden, it will make it less acceptable for anyone to hinder your passage," the Valor said. She twisted her hands in her skirt and sighed. "It's getting

late.” Turning to Davin, she said, “Come with me, Broker. I can help you make arrangements. Vehicles are hard to come by these days.”

SsLissa squawked. “Don’t assume any help from our signets or our journeystones,” she said. “Use your synesthesia. Both of you,” she said with a nod to Davin. “Don’t filter it. We need every taste, smell, shape, sound and —” she waved a digit. “I have no words for it.”

Davin shot me a bemused look and I wondered how much of SsLissa’s agitated cadence he understood. In fact, I didn’t quite trust what I’d heard. And then all the the insignia and signage I’d filtered since I’d left the Fold flooded back into my memory.

“Wait,” I called to Valor Miri, “There was a customs official at Flat Irons.” The letters and numbers of his insignia held hands and danced. It was a circle of trust.

Valor Miri looked confused, but SsLissa clucked her approval. “Do you remember the letters and numbers?” SsLissa asked.

I nodded.

“Give me your Riff,” Valor Miri said to Davin. He handed it to her and her fingers flurried over it. “Now, tell me,” she said.

I closed my eyes, allowing the characters’ impish personalities to come to life as I recited the sequence.

Valor Miri entered them. “If the badge code is valid, we’ll know within the hour,” she said. “All of you, come inside. I’ll get you settled while we make preparations for your departure.”

She took us to a great room where people were seated on benches at a long table.

“It’s not unusual for us to host travelers,” Valor Miri said. “The T’holin will serve a meal soon. You’ll fit right in, but choose your backstory well.”

She left, taking Davin and Hadrian with her.

SsLissa retreated to a corner and her mates rushed to shield her. Her ambient link registered exhaustion and grief.

I sat on the bench beside Arden, whose eyes were round and shadowed. I touched his arm.

“It’s really unfolding,” he said. “I didn’t believe it.” He put his head down on his arms.

A T’holin arm reached from behind me and set a bowl of stew on the table. I looked up to see a female with a black slave collar.

The other spaces at the table began to fill with men and women and a few children. The T’holin served stew and bread, and bowls of fruit.

I managed polite exchanges with the guests seated near me. My stump garnered extra sympathy and no one pressed when I explained how weary we were.

Amid murmurs and nods of commiseration, one man harrumphed that the maglev destruction showed the Collaborative’s ugly underbelly. “The lack of infrastructure and foresight is inexcusable,” he said. “With the taxes we pay —”

His comments elicited tssks, raised eyebrows and frowns, and he shut his mouth in a thin line.

Arden raised his head and stared at his bowl. I coaxed him to eat, even though every bite I took stuck in my throat and I fought the urge to run from the table to Pavi’s bedside.

She still seemed far away, unreachable. Unknowable. I looked at Arden's perfect profile and choked back my questions. Did he know Hadrian was Pavi's brother?

My stump throbbed as it always did when my blocked memories were stirred up.

Valor Miri returned with Davin and he took a seat a few spaces away. He ventured a glance at me and then ate in silence.

A large neuter Enfolder took SsLissa and her triad away, leaving me even more bereft. Their links were so muted and distant, the effect was painful.

Valor Miri hovered near us, and came to me as soon as I finished my meal. "I'll take you to your room," she said.

I gave Arden and Davin one last look and followed her. In the corridor outside the great room, she put her fingers to her lips and whispered, "She's asking for you. I've prepared a pallet beside Her bed."

My heart lifted a bit.

"She's already asleep," Valor Miri said. "The promise that you'd be at Her bedside was enough to give Her some peace."

I took a shaky breath. "Thank you," I said.

"Get some rest," she said. "You'll be leaving early in the morning."

"It's all arranged, then?"

"The code was valid," Valor Miri said. "The customs official is one of us."

I followed the Valor into Pavi's room. "You'll find everything you need to refresh yourself," she said and placed a nugget in my hand. "Please take this. It will enhance your sleep."

I knelt at Pavi's bedside and touched her cheek, following the contours of her face in the soft blue light, wondering why she'd grown so thin. Her face was all cheekbones and lips.

Without the white noise of links, I was grateful for the spinner venom. Its tingling rush washed me into the oblivion of sleep.

Pavi was still sleeping when the Valor roused me. I gave her face a lingering caress and left the room, resisting the temptation to turn back.

The great room was buzzing with activity, and Arden, Davin and Hadrian were already half done with breakfast. Sitting with them was a young man with neatly trimmed red hair, wearing the uniform of a customs official. My synesthesia animated the characters on his breast pocket badge. They beckoned me with triumphant cheers and open arms and I slowly recognized Ty.

"Good to see you, Rounder," Ty said.

I pointed to his uniform, speechless.

"I have to earn my keep during grazing season," he said. "I'm your driver. Should be a cruise. We're already cleared for every checkpoint between Horizon and Hadera." His enthusiasm was almost comical. "You, Rounder, would do well to drink some scrimper tea. And bring plenty along."

Valor Miri shook her head. "Then, it's true?"

"In the Amethyst Range," Ty said. "There's no avoiding spores or spinners." He patted his knapsack. "I have the cure for spinners right here."

Supplied with food, water, bedrolls and all the antibiotics and analgesics Hadrian required, we loaded into a cargo carrier equipped with two benches and a covered trailer.

Arden helped Hadrian get situated in a wheelchair anchored near the front of the cargo area and I settled SsLissa and her mates in the rear, aware of the croys watching as they flanked Valor Miri, who stood nearby.

The canvas interior made SsLissa's eyes look dull. "We'll be stepping into healing sleep," she said. "The best now is to leave us alone."

Davin re-masked and took the front seat with Ty, and I scooted onto the back bench with Arden.

I stared at the back of CcT'holaax's head as Ty pulled the vehicle onto the street. My signet was inert and there was no pilot sphere. The journeystone links generated only ambient noise, as annoying as tinnitus. To compensate, I tried to engage the First Node of the Discipline, but my stump flared and my thoughts sputtered, unable to move past Pavi.

Pavi, thin and inert. Without her journeystone, what was she but a teen-aged girl? There was something not quite right about that assumption. A red haze filled my head. The journeystone had robbed her of that, and now, without the neural implant, she was dying. We were infants when the T'holin implanted our journeystones. Where was their noble principle of consent?

Arden touched my arm. "You alright? You're shaking."

I nodded. "I'm just—"

His jaw clenched. "Terrified?" he asked. "So am I. It will get worse before it gets better."

"As if we can know that—"

He was wearing the official cape. It looked comical in the cramped runabout. His eyes were shadowed, more gray than blue, and a furrow drew his pale brows together. "You have to believe," he said. "At least act like you do."

I don't know how he knew my faith was faltering, but he was correct. In that in that moment I didn't trust anything SsLissa had taught me. For all I knew, it was all an artifact of the journeystones.

For the rest of the day, I blanked my mind and watched Parsimony's changing scenery. Occasionally, the shape of Phalanx wings crossed the sky. Ty pointed to them once and said, "Don't worry. We're cleared all the way. They won't bother us."

Having only traveled between Farside and Hadera in a freight car, I'd never seen the region's wind mills, power lines, farms, factories or towns and villages. Some places were tidy, others were ramshackle. We moved from plains to prairies and from prairies to savannas broken by hardwood forests and rolling hills.

Every three hours, we stopped at a charging station, but instead of recharging the cargo carrier, which would have tripled our travel time, we transferred to a vehicle fully-charged and waiting for us.

Ty said he couldn't imagine how many favors we'd called in. "These are hard times," he said. "I don't know what your business is, but if it's that important, I'm happy to be a part of it."

"It's important," CcT'holaaxx said, "But put that damn cape away, Arden. We're cleared through security and there's no reason to draw attention to ourselves."

Near sunset, Ty asked CcT'holaaxx to take a turn at the steering bar. "Wake me up in three hours," he said.

"You need more rest than that," CcT'holaaxx said.

"Trust me," Ty said. "You'll want me at the steering bar after dark."

Arden and I crowded onto the front bench so Ty could stretch out in the back.

As I settled beside CcT'holaaxx, my arm brushed his. and my hair follicles tingled. He didn't pull away, but paused with his hand on the steering bar, inscrutable in his mask, staring at Ty's Riff, which was mounted on the dash.

Arden rescued the moment. "How much farther?" he asked pointing at the Riff.

"About 12 hours," CcT'holaaxx said. "We're nearly halfway."

"Does that count giving Hadrian regular breaks?" Arden asked.

"It does," CcT'holaaxx said. "But we're headed into a wild and remote stretch. I probably won't stop until it's time to wake Ty. You should check if Hadrian can hang on that long."

Arden got out and went to the rear, leaving me alone with CcT'holaaxx.

"It's so dead," he whispered, patting his journeystone. "SsLissa wasn't exaggerating, was she?"

"I don't understand it," I said.

"Trouble is, I can't raise Cinaia," he said.

"So, we have no plan?"

As I finished the question, Arden slid back into the seat next to me. "The plan is to let me lead," he said.

CcT'holaaxx sputtered.

"Damn you," Arden said. "Let me do what I have to do."

We rode in silence. As dusk settled, the road began to climb and curve around old mountains purple in the twilight and thick with trees. The turquoise sky darkened to indigo and stars broke through like jewels spilled on velvet.

Yellow speckles began smattering the windshield, and CcT'holaaxx turned on the intermittent wipers.

Spores.

"I should drink some tea," I said, realizing too late that I'd left my knapsack in back.

The Riff gave a gentle chime. CcT'holaaxx silenced it and pulled to the side of the road.

Ty roused instantly and hurried to the cargo area. I went to retrieve my knapsack but Arden called for my help tending to Hadrian.

SsLissa's wings rustled. "Tell Ty not to bother with the zyph hides," she said.

"What?"

"We'll let the spinners take us," SsLissa said.

CHAPTER 18



Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself. —Eleanor Roosevelt

SsLissa's voice was sharp. She barked in Clipped. "Did you not hear me? Tell Ty to put away the zyph hides. Hurry!"

I ran to the front of the vehicle and found Ty fastening strips of zyph hide between the headlights. The hide gave me a shudder, even though it was likely taken from an animal that had died from natural causes.

"Spinners be thick as mud beyond the next ridge," Ty said. "But it only takes a hide or two to spook 'em."

"SsLissa says to put them away—"

His pale eyes grew round. "Is that your business, then?"

I shook my head. The question made no sense to me.

Ty's hands trembled as he removed the strips and stuffed them back in his knapsack. "I'll hold on to them," he said. "But you best drink some tea." He slid into the driver's seat. A moment later, he screamed.

I followed his gaze. Eyes glowed in the headlights and I counted four karabon in front of the vehicle. Falling spores tickled my face and but I was afraid to move.

SsLissa swooped in with spread wings and commanded us gather our belongings and mount the karabon.

The humans hesitated, but CcShirnir and XxRiis began to carry Hadrian out of the cargo area.

CcT'holaaxx was the first to shake his shock. He coaxed Ty out of the vehicle. As soon as Hadrian was in mounted with Arden, CcT'holaaxx shoved Ty by the rump and Arden hoisted him onto the karabon.

CcT'holaaxx pulled me up on the beast and settled me in front of himself, folding his arms over mine.

"I didn't get a chance to drink tea and or look for my filter mask," I whispered, tucking my head under his chin. With his mask out of view, CcT'holaaxx receded and he became Davin to me.

"It's too late, now," he said. "I didn't catch what SsLissa said."

"Something about spinners."

A shudder ran through his him. His arms tightened around me.

As the karabon's stride reached its rolling rhythm, I struggled to make sense of the sight of three T'holin perched on a karabon beside me. I focused instead on the view beyond Davin's chin. I could see stars between the branches of trees.

I breathed the moist night air and remembered too late that I was inhaling spores. The breeze brushed my lips and cheeks and my nipples began to ache and harden. Davin's arms were unbearably close to my breasts. I leaned back against his chest, fighting the urge to grab his hands to satisfy the craving for his touch.

Patches of phosphorescent lichen grew on the low ceiling of a cavern and I wondered when the karabon had entered a cave.

The karabon knelt. As CcT'holaaxx dismounted, I struggled to make Davin recede. His hands held my waist to help me down. I wanted them to linger there, but he pulled away and grabbed my shoulders.

A thick rolling, velvet carpet moved toward us. It was creeping over me before my mind processed it as a swarm of spinners.

The spinners streamed over us, tickling us with thousands of delicate feet and pricking us with tiny teeth that left my skin stinging and tingling.

I fell with CcT'holaaxx onto a mound of spun silk as the spinners retreated.

After a moment, CcT'holaaxx braced on his elbows and looked around. "I don't see anyone," he said.

"The spinners are gone?" I asked.

"Everyone's gone." He sat up, took off his mask, and rubbed his arms and then stretched them out to examine them in the faint light. "I think I'm high," he said and turned to me. "Are you alright?"

I couldn't answer. Davin's face was too close and his eyes were too beautiful. I clasped my hand to my mouth to silence a moan as the spore effect washed over me, and then curled into the fetal position and covered my face with my arms. The next rush was so strong, I gasped.

Davin touched my shoulder. "Don't fight it," he said.

"I don't want you to see me like this," I said.

“Too late,” he said. “I see and hear and taste. Like SsLissa said. Do you know this song?” He began to sing in a clear, pure baritone that fell on my ears like a caress.

The song was the fragment of the embodiment practice asking for consent.

“I’ve never done—been—”

“Oh, no, no,” he soothed. “Not that. I can help you through this. Let me sing it for you,” he said.

I nodded tentatively.

His song did not quell the spores. It merged with the light and sound and bliss. My body became nothing and everything. I found his face and held it in my hand. “I need —”

“This?” he said. He touched my lips to his.

I sighed my assent.

He kissed my lips and ears and fingertips and I guided his hands to my breasts. The spore effect began to peak and he rocked me in his arms as I rode the arc of several climaxes.

Finally it was over, except for the residual effect of shaking thighs and a quivering chin. I rested with my cheek on his chest. A button on his shirt pressed into my skin, bringing me back into my body, but I was too embarrassed to raise my head.

His hand found my stump and stroked it. I remembered words he’s spoken to me months ago. “There are some things you must hide...but this is not one of them.”

My journeystone tingled and thrummed and I turned to find SsLissa standing beside us.

Our link was restored.



It was still night, but a rim of pearl edged the sky when we emerged from the cavern to remount the karabon. Davin helped me up, and I had trouble meeting his eyes, yet when he disappeared behind CcT'holaaxx's mask, it was his arms, not CcT'holaaxx's, I sensed around my waist.

SsLissa's link was clear, and so were her mates'. I detected the *O'o'o'sl'h* signals, but they were sporadic and chaotic.

When I searched for Davin and Cinaia, I found silence.

No links to tie you to each other, SsLissa said. Not in this best now. No signet, either.

I gathered my courage to ask her what happened in the cavern with the spinners.

Spinners are just Gatherers, she said. We needed you and Davin to shape the Enfolding.

Her answer baffled me as it settled with other information the Archive had imparted without context. In the flurry of activity surrounding our return to the vehicle, I didn't get a chance to ponder it or even decide if it was trustworthy.

By the time SsLissa climbed into the trailer, her nictitating membranes were already closed.

I took my place in the back seat beside Ty, who was still too shaken to drive.

CcT'holaaxx got in the driver's seat and Arden sat beside him.

We rode for two hours, and the air grew more humid as we entered the subtropical climate near Danladi Province.

"We're coming to the last charging station before we cross the border," CcT'holaaxx said. "Ty," he said sharply, with a look toward the back seat. "Are we still cleared?"

Ty rubbed his eyes and retrieved his Riff. “All the way to the Capitol,” he said.

“Let’s hope so,” CcT’holaaaxx said. “The bounty on Roan is worth more than the fine for removing a broker’s mask.”

“It has to unfold like this,” Arden said.

CcT’holaaaxx took a corner without slowing down. “If you know how this is going to play out, now would be a good time to tell us,” he said.

“I can’t,” Arden said. “You know I can’t.”

“Why not?” CcT’holaaaxx said. “What have you got to lose?”

“My life, maybe?” Arden said.

“Your life is worth too much in your father’s schemes.” CcT’holaaaxx said. “If it all works out, Stellan can take the Succession and you can fade into the sunset fucking Hadrian —”

Arden’s blonde brows shot up. “At least I’m not dry humping in plain sight like—” he shut his mouth in a thin line and turned toward the window.

I drew my knees up to my chin and buried my face. No one said another word.

Sinking into confusion and self-pity, I risked reaching for SsLissa’s link, hoping for any response, no matter how weak.

CcShirnir answered. *Let SsLissa collect her strength*, he said. *You have everything you need to make the best now.*

What a stupid, T’holin thing to say, I fumed. *Did you hear CcT’holaaaxx and Arden? Pavi’s life depends on getting this right.*

CcShirnir’s only response was a signal adjustment that cleared my head.

I looked through the screen to the front of the cab. CcT'holaaxx's shoulders were high and stiff and Arden was still staring out his window.

Beside me, Ty's earnest, young face was reflected in his window, superimposed on the tidy landscaping that bordered our route.

I recognized the cityscape marking our transition toward the Capitoli.

Someone needed to take charge of the situation.

"Can you drive?" I asked Ty.

He gave me a sheepish look. "You're right," he said, and tried to smooth his rumpled uniform. "I should be at the steering bar."

"I heard," CcT'holaaxx snapped. "I'll pull over when I can."

I saw several suitable spots, but CcT'holaaxx drove for half a kilometer more before he pulled off the street, and my tension built.

CcT'holaaxx got out and stood beside my window, looking everywhere but my direction as Ty took his place behind the steering bar.

I summoned the courage to get out. I stood beside CcT'holaaxx, staring at the ground. "I should be in back with the T'holin," I said. "Do you know what to do?"

"Whatever I do, it will be wrong," he said. "I'll ride in front with Ty. Pretending I don't know this is a trap."

I opened my mouth to protest, but I had no rebuttal. My distrust in that moment included him. "Then we play our parts," I said. Cinaia came to mind. "Let's act like we belong here."

I walked around the vehicle and tapped on Arden's window. "Straighten up," I said. "This is your big moment. Make your mother proud, even if it's the last thing you do."

I stepped into the trailer and sat on the floor beside Hadrian. His face was drawn. At least he had been spared CcT'holaaxx's and Arden's spat.



There were three checkpoints before we reached the Capitol. Unable to see in the windowless trailer, I held my breath as Ty presented the documents at each stop.

At the final checkpoint, a Phalanx guard speaking loud, floppy Clipped said something about the Advocate, the Complement. An Escort.

I pressed my ear to the canvas partition. I could hear Arden speaking—so stridently I could make out some of the words he emphasized. Passenger. Attention.

The Phalanx asked for Hadrian's documents. Hadrian fished his Riff from his knapsack and I took it to the rear of the trailer.

Arden pushed back the canvas flap. I passed him the Riff.

After a moment, the Phalanx spoke again. The only word I could catch was "citizen," but Arden's voice rose, sharp and clear. "The hellhole common clinic?" he asked.

A tense silence followed, and then CcT'holaaxx cleared his throat. He was closer to me, in the back seat, but his voice was calm and measured and I only made out three words. "Advocate's heir." "Terms."

The Phalanx's voice answered. I picked out the words "citizen." "Accompany." "Advocate." "Escort."

The driver's side door clicked open. Someone gagged and something splattered on the pavement. After a moment, the door thumped shut and the vehicle began to move again. I peeked through the trailer's rear flap to get my bearings, and recognized buildings in the center of the Capitol complex.

SsLissa and her mates were huddled in the shadows, deep in the healing state. Their journeystones barely registered, which made no sense to me. I expected—and needed—the triad to be alert, prepared to meet the Advocate.

The vehicle stopped and a Phalanx wing guard opened the trailer's tailgate. I refused his help and hopped out, watching warily as he unlatched Hadrian's wheel chair and lowered it to the ground. To my relief, CcShirnir sprang to attention and helped SsLissa and XxRiis climb out.

The wing guard ordered Ty to turn the vehicle around and leave the complex.

The wing guards didn't give us time to acknowledge Ty's departure. They ushered us through a door, into a corridor whose stark black, pewter and turquoise trim was familiar. It was identical to the area outside the room where Cinaia had confronted the Advocate.

The wing guards left us alone in a small, dimly lit room bare of furniture.

I reached for SsLissa's link and found a thready whisper. My chest grew tight with anxiety. My throat was parched and I needed to empty my bladder.

"Is it supposed to unfold like this?" CcT'holaaxx snarked. Arden glared.

An hour passed and then the door opened and the wing guards called us out.

I recognized the intimidating double doors that led to the Advocate's conference suite.

The doors swung open. Seated at the table were the Advocate, Cinaia and Stellan. Cinaia wore a high-necked dress and her hair was braided simply. In front her clasped hands on the table were four blue slave collars.

The Advocate touched her shoulder. "Do it," he said.

Cinaia threaded the collars over her forearm, stood and walked around the table to face us.

The T'holin's brow ridges spiked, but the triad remained motionless as Cinaia approached.

Cinaia walked past the T'holin and stopped in front of CcT'holaaxx. She reached up and yanked his mask, dislodging it partway, but was unable to pull it over his head. "Show your face," she said.

CcT'holaaxx tugged the mask back into place with both hands.

"You defy me?" Cinaia asked.

CcT'holaaxx ripped off the mask and stared ahead, avoiding her eyes.

The smack of her hand on his cheek stung my ears.

Davin's eyes widened in pain and shock. I thought I saw a flicker of clarity before they narrowed in a smoldering glare.

Both performances were convincing enough to throw me into utter confusion.

The Advocate stood and spread his hands. "I hate to say, 'I told you so,'" he said. "Do you still believe his only offense was complicity? If we can't trust our Broker, who can we trust? Certainly not our T'holin sources." He placed his hands, palms down on the table. "This deception has violated the terms of the acquisition," he said. "I don't fault the

Rounder. We'll pay her expenses. No more." His eyes strayed to the triad. "And we'll keep the T'holin, of course."

Cinaia snapped the slave collars on the T'holin's necks, and two wing guards led them away. The absence of their links left me hollow.

The Advocate waved his hand at Arden. "I'm not sure what this says about your leadership, but you accomplished what I asked," he said. "And you managed to find our disgraced Chamberlain."

Arden's white-knuckled hands gripped the handles of Hadrian's wheelchair.

"Chancellor," the Advocate said, addressing Stellan, but gesturing toward Hadrian. "I believe this your mess is under your purview. Clean it up."

Stellan raised his brows. "It's already arranged," he said. "Dr. Vancyn will meet them in the Infirmary."

Arden's expression wavered between outrage and relief.

Stellan heaved a dramatic sigh. "Don't keep the good healer waiting," he said.

With a dark look at Davin, Arden wheeled Hadrian away.

The Advocate watched until the door closed behind them, and then joined Cinaia beside Davin. "It was good of the Rounder to bring you here," he said. "We still have need of you." He nodded to Cinaia.

Tears limned Cinaia's eyes. She raised her arms and snapped the remaining slave collar around Davin's neck.

He closed his eyes and stiffened as two Apex guards led him away.

My gut clinched and my throat constricted.

The Advocate turned his attention to me with me a head-to-toe appraisal.

I fought the urge to back away.

“Can we trust her?” Stellan asked.

“She’s just a mercenary desert rat who doesn’t know what she’s gotten herself into,” the Advocate said, as if I wasn’t standing right in front of him. “And we need her, don’t you think, to recruit new brokers and rounders. And trustworthy T’holin sources. Otherwise, we’ll be forced to round up the T’holin ourselves. Do you agree?”

Stellan nodded slowly.

The Advocate addressed me. “And now, my wife will see to your needs and get you on your way,” he said.



Cinaia folded her arms across her chest and stalked away from her husband. I followed her into the corridor where she picked up her pace. She looked toward the ceiling and I caught her intent, remembering security cameras were everywhere throughout the complex. We crossed the atrium and exited to the garden. She began to sing in T’holin—in the western highland dialect, a language the Phalanx monitoring the cameras would struggle to understand.

“Go to Ria,” she said. “She’s asking for you.”

“What excuse is there for visiting Ria that won’t draw suspicion?”

“We’re all being watched, so it doesn’t matter. Besides, Ria’s Valor is well-connected.”

“That shape path is not the best now,” I protested.

“SsToola is against—”

“Have you seen it all unfold, then?” Cinaia asked. “Of course not. At least you can tell SsToola you’re looking for the

Contradiction. She needs to persuade the *O'o'o'sl'h'* to restore the Archive."

"What's wrong with the Archive?"

"Something is interfering with our links," she said.

"SsLissa said she dampened them for our protection."

"That may be true, but it's also true that the *O'o'o'sl'h'* are divided and under that stress in captivity, SsLissa won't be able to sustain the Archive," Cinaia said. [Aleya will "break open" and replenish the Archive. That's what makes her the Waker.]

"Why did SsLissa present herself? I want to know why the T'holin are throwing themselves at the Advocate's feet."

"To answer that, I'd have to be T'holin," Cinaia said.

"Right now, I don't pretend to know the Unfolding."

"SsToola says the Waker is a lie," I blurted. "Sometimes I believe her."

"Good," Cinaia said. "Sometimes, the best now is to believe the worst. It's the only way to bear it."

"Where did they take Davin?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Don't look for that shape path," she said. "Go to Ria. I'll reload your expense account and arrange for Ty to meet you tomorrow."

"You're expecting me to meet the Advocate's demands? Why does he trust me to be his Rounder?"

"He has SsLissa and her mates," she said. "He has Davin. Are you going to oppose him?"

"But how can I go off on my own with no information? Can I at least see SsLissa before I go?"

Cinaia wrung her hands. "SsLissa can't help you now," she said.

"Is CcT'holner here?"

“No,” she said. “Not since your last journeyfold.”

“My journeyfold?”

“Oh, my dear Aleya,” Cinaia said. “You really don’t know who you are.”

CHAPTER 19



*“No matter how difficult and painful it may be,
nothing sounds as good to the soul as the truth.” –
Martha Beck*

I awoke swaddled in spinner silk to find Valor Farrah sitting by my pallet, with no idea how I got there. I braced on one elbow, but the Valor touched my shoulder. “Easy now,” she said. “Don’t waste the rest you just got.”

“I don’t remember...”

“SsToola ‘folded you,’” Valor Farrah said. “Yes, SsToola. It suited a purpose we agree on.” Farrah helped me sit up, and handed me a cup of tea.

I waited for her to name the thing they both wanted, but, instead, she sighed and folded her hands in her lap. “All this journeyfolding,” she said. “Such an energy cost. It’s too much, you know.”

The warm tea cleared my head a bit. “How long did I sleep?”

“There you go again, squandering energy,” she said. “You’re not going anywhere in this state of exhaustion. Ty will wait for you.”

I wasn’t worried about Ty, but I didn’t dare mention my concern for Pavi.

Ria invited me to breakfast at the manse. Ponderously pregnant, she nibbled at her food. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” she said, barely looking up from her plate. “The world is going to hell and I don’t think I care anymore. Farrah tells me it’s normal at this stage. But I can’t remember why I thought it was a good idea to bring a child into this mess.”

“I have no experience or wisdom to offer,” I said.

She gave me a quick appraising look. “And my efforts to groom you so you’d have a chance to gain some experience seem to have come to naught.”

I smoothed my hair. “Sorry,” I said. “I’ve been a bit deprived of common comforts since I saw you last.”

“And, now, you’re here. But I don’t think I can help you.”

“Cinaia told me to come.”

“Dear Cinaia,” Ria said. “Her heart is breaking.”

“For the state of the world?”

Ria shook her head. “Not just that. It’s very personal for her. The Advocate has set up everyone she loves to fail.” She gave me a brief, intense look. “That includes you.”

“I don’t know what’s true anymore.” I said.

“But you do know what’s false,” she said. “You just don’t have words for it.” She rubbed her belly and closed her eyes. “Neither do I. We must work with Valor Farrah and SsToola. They’ll help us find the best now.”

“Can they help me find the other Rounders and Brokers?” I asked.

Something flickered in Ria’s eyes. “They’ll point you on the shape path,” she said.

Valor Farrah insisted I spend the next two days resting and practicing the Discipline before meeting with SsToola. The process revived my journeystone a bit—enough to sense

ambient signals and elicit an admonition from SsLissa to conserve energy. I was relieved to hear from her, to the point of tears.

On the third day, SsToola met me in the gathering space. She sat motionless with her nictitating membranes closed. Her signet threw a few wan fractals.

I fidgeted to keep from breaking the silence.

Finally, she stirred. “Your patience has tuned my ear,” she said, speaking the southern T’holin dialect.

“I’m trying to find the YesNo,” I said, unsure of the idiom for the Contradiction.

“Is that what you think will turn me to your shape path?” she asked. “You’re such a pup.” Her brow ridges were smooth and her nictitating membranes fully open, so I judged she was testing me and not truly annoyed.

I breathed and waited.

“It’s BothAnd,” she said at last. “But we can’t see it because the *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’* broke the shape path. We can see Stellan taking power. Beyond that is only AnyWhen.”

I’d wasn’t sure I’d understood that idiom, and there was no chance to clarify.

SsToola’s brow ridges spiked. “The *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’* and the *W’h’uu* of *W’h’uu* failed to count the entropy cost of giving you a signet,” she said. “Her actions further divided Assembly and weakened the Archive. We depleted its reserves for the journeyfolds and now we are vulnerable until it is replenished.” SsToola slipped her arms into their wing pouches and wrapped her wings around her breast to calm herself.

My mind clouded with doubt.

Dear Valor in Training, I can look back on this moment and know that it was impossible for me to hold this Contradiction. If SsToola was speaking truth, it would call into question everything I'd lived for. It would mean SsLissa had been lying to me for my whole life. Or, if not lying, at least following a false shape path.

I groped for something or someone I could trust.

Whose truth did Cinaia trust? Why did she believe SsToola could restore the Archive?

The task seemed too big for SsToola, so small and haggard compared to SsLissa. SsToola hadn't even mentioned uniting the Assembly and restoring the Archive. She said the Archive needed to be replenished.

With what?

Did I dare ask her?

"Tell Ria to take you into the city again," SsToola said before I could frame the question. "You both need another session."

Ria didn't seem surprised at my request. She merely smirked and said, "I wouldn't mind if it threw me into labor." Within the next two hours, she arranged for the trip and we were on our way to the T'holin habitat in the heart of Hadera.

This time, I fully appreciated the T'holin orientation and function of the rook and realized my mind had been unable to process those details the first time Ria brought me there.

This time, the Neuter who met us brought its female Enfolder and male Maker.

The Maker walked in a full circle around me and then faced me, moving closer to my chest and nearly touching my

forehead. “You are nearly broken open,” he said in classic T’holin.

“She had only one formal session before,” the Neuter said. “But she’s been practicing. And not always alone.”

I blushed in confusion as the Enfolder spread her wings. “Sit on my feet,” she said to me. “I will be gentle. Just a touch.”

I settled on her feet and my signet grew warm. My journeystone trilled a pleasing harmonic.

“You’ve been exposed to a spore load that could have been toxic,” the Enfolder said. “Only an Adept could take you through it.”

“An Adept or a Match,” the Maker said.

“Don’t speak nonsense,” the Enfolder said. “Humans don’t form triads.”

“The Archive will evolve,” the Maker said. “The Journeystone will adapt to humans.”

“In the AnyWhen or in the best now?” the Neuter keened.

“Unless these humans learn what’s at stake, there is no best now,” the Maker said.

Ria touched my arm. “What are they trying to keep from me? I can only understand a few words. Why don’t they sign?”

The T’holin locked gazes and then sat for a moment with their nictitating membranes closed. My journeystone was warm with their signals, but their links were too intimate to be coherent. Finally, the Maker gave me a clear-eyed look.

“Follow us,” he said, and led us through a slowly descending tunnel.

The Archive’s Presence was stronger there, contradicting what I’d been told about its depleted state. My head buzzed

and the air was thick with its energy. I had no words for the tide of information that rolled in. Qualia? Thresholds? Tipping points?

My mind danced with data for entropy levels. My synesthesia personified them as a horde of soldiers demolishing a city wall and cheering the victory. I saw visions of T'holin with clipped wings plummeting from the sky, and understood it as metaphor for their decline and suffering in all spatial dimensions.

My nose tickled with a fruity, cloying scent and my nasal passages grew numb, like I was inhaling frozen air. Raised vats covered with a flexible sheet like silicone stretched for several meters ahead.

“Even in these containers, the spinner venom sheds molecules into the air,” the Maker said. “You feel the effect, despite your acquired immunity, am I right? Imagine the shape path if these vats leaked into the water systems.”

My heart skipped in alarm. “We should get Ria out of here,” I said.

The Enfolder clucked, “We measured this exposure for the child,” she said. “And now, you both need a session of the Practice.”

I settled in a private nook for my session. The triad parted the curtain and sang the request for consent. “Why are you all here?” I asked.

“We need to know what the spore exposure did to you,” the Maker said.

I drank the elixir and floated in the song. My mind calmed and expanded, but my body barely responded.

The Neuter clucked and fretted. “Did you copulate with a man?” it asked.

“What right do you have to ask me that?”

“Who guided you through the spores?” the Neuter rephrased.

“I won’t give his name without his consent,” I said.

“But you have matched with him,” the Enfolder said.

“Now your Practice will depend on him.”

My cheeks burned. “Why do I need the Practice at all? I never should have consented to it.”

“You’ll know the reason when it breaks you open,” the Maker said. “You’re close. So close.”

“Did I give you the right to see that shape path?” My mind clamored with embarrassment and frustration, like a small child who’d been scolded for breaking some unspoken rule.

As I rode back to the estate with Ria, she made a small attempt at conversation, but I couldn’t muster more than one-syllable responses.

“I suppose you’re done with me,” she said. “You’re all turned inward and you’re not even pregnant.”

When the vehicle stopped, she said. “I’ll walk you to the T’holin rook.”

“I don’t want to deal with SsToola right now,” I said. “She’s the one who recommended the Session. What will I tell her?”

“Let it go,” Ria said. “She already knows, anyway. The T’holin have ways...”

We reached the doors and she touched my arm. “You’re leaving right away, aren’t you?”

“I don’t have a choice,” I said.

“Don’t forget about me,” she said.

It was a strange thing to hear from the woman who had Stellan, the Chancellor, wrapped around her finger and who managed a vast network of Valors. In that moment, she

seemed young and vulnerable. Like Pavi, she was barely more than a girl who'd accepted a mission beyond her understanding.

I saw my reflection in her eyes: barely more than a girl who'd accepted a mission beyond her understanding.

"I won't forget you," I said. "I'll see you before the baby comes."

I braced to meet SsToola and found her waiting for me in the gathering space with Valor Farrah.

I was surprised by their calm presence. SsToola's brow ridges were smooth and Valor Farrah's face was relaxed.

"Have the two of you agreed on the shape path, or have you just reached an impasse?" I asked.

Valor Farrah raised her eyebrows. "Why do you ask?"

"You're not sniping at each other," I said.

"It's only because we're tangled in the Contradiction," SsToola said in southern T'holin, signing for the Valor's benefit.

It was such a T'holin thing to say, but it placed on me the burden of following every nuance in every dimension on the shape path. "I'm so sick of trying to think like a T'holin," I snapped. "It hasn't served me or Pavi very well. She's all I have left in this world. So, I'm leaving. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her alive, even if it's wrong. Unless you have a better idea, I'm going try to meet the Advocate's demands and hope that satisfies the Chancellor."

"You are thinking like a T'holin," SsToola said. "Even SsLissa would find no fault with that decision."

"But you will need something the Archive can't give you," Valor Farrah said. "Thanks to the Gatherer, I can load your Riff with more contacts than the ones the merchant Valor

gave you in Horizon. And with the strong credentials you need to get by on your own.”

SsToola’s signet glowed with blue light, stirring my journeystone, but her signet reverted quickly to its inert state, leaving me to wonder if she had let down her guard for a moment.

I gave the Riff to Valor Farrah. When she finished with it, I retreated to my nook gather my belongings, dubious that I’d accomplished what Cinaia hoped with this encounter. I wanted to reach for Cinaia’s link, but I didn’t dare.

An hour later, I climbed into the runabout beside Ty, more afraid than when SsLissa sent me into the desert alone. The feeling was not unjustified. There was more to fear beyond Hadera than wild animals, and I couldn’t depend on my signet or my journeystone. My only support was a Riff and a driver who barely shaved. I could only hope the Gatherer had given my Riff what I needed.

Ty looked at me for a few seconds and said, “If you want my take on this situation...” He blushed and waited for me to respond.

“Of course,” I said.

“You need to rest,” he said. You’re over-thinking it. Curl up in the backseat. Riff me the first destination and trust me to me drive.”

His wisdom gave me a spark of hope.

“I don’t have a first destination,” I said. “Just head north for now.”

I stretched out on the back bench. As my inner ear adjusted to the motion of the vehicle, I closed my eyes to the dizzying sight of treetops and buildings zipping by, but I didn’t rest.

My mind sang with random notes from the Archive. No matter how hard I tried to connect the facts, I couldn't see a scenario in which the T'holin would benefit if Stellan came to power. Yet Pavi was willing to risk her life for that outcome.

SsLissa taught me that the Unfolding never resolves the Contradiction with a Yes/Yes or a No/No. It always offers a YesNo, or a BothAnd. But I couldn't find any good to offset the evil on this shape path.

After a while, I sat up and activated the Riff to view Valor Farrah's contacts. Just as she hinted, they comprised not only valors, but also health care workers, business owners, bankers, educators, artisans and musicians, and farmers and day laborers, even a few ministers from the loosely banded spiritual care communities that were common in the provinces.

With no idea how to prioritize whom to visit, I judged them with my synesthesia: if the characters comprising their names and addresses displayed winsome personalities, I flagged them as candidates.

I sent a message to some of the Provence contacts. To my great relief, a credit manager named Kirsta invited me to spend that night at her home.

After sending the address to Ty, there was nothing for me to do but to stare out the window at the scrubby palmettos lining the road.

Farther away, mossy trees rose out of water thick with lily pads. Something slipped off a log into the water, and I shuddered. This was the stretch of tropical wetlands I'd missed seeing while riding in the trailer for the last leg of the trip to Hadera. So alien compared to Farside, the landscape gave me a knot in my stomach and an ache in my chest.

I gathered my will to message Valor Miri to check on Pavi. She responded almost immediately, with a reminder that my concern was pointless unless I met Pavi's demands.

Late that afternoon Ty turned off the main road and we passed nut tree orchards and fields of legumes and vetches before the brick and adobe structures of a small town came into view.

Shaded by subtropical palms and broadleaved trees, with every centimeter of space occupied by a well-tended flower or vegetable, the town seemed too tidy to be occupied by humans.

Kirsta, a sturdy, middle-aged woman wearing trousers, met us at the curb and waved us into a garage. Ty parked the runabout, and Kirsta led us from the garage into a courtyard. Her home was built around the space, with a veranda spanning all the rear walls.

She showed us to our rooms, and after freshening up, we met her on the veranda, where she served us strong tea with ice and citrus slices.

The absence of road noise settled tangibly in my chest and the deep blue shadows cast by nut trees, palms and flowering bushes rested my eyes.

It took a moment for me to adjust to the flattened vowels of Kirsta's Provence accent. She spoke and moved in a big, brusque manner.

"I never would dream of a Rounder sitting in my chair," she said. "Not here in Rama."

She told me about her job, and I learned a credit manager helps people get access to the water and power grid.

"Not everyone earns enough to buy what they need from the grid," she said. "I manage incentives for subscribers who

can afford to donate shares, and work with the town council to give folks work credit for themselves or for someone else.”

“That’s why the town looks like it was designed by T’holin?” I asked.

“It was designed by T’holin. It looks like the T’holin are still running the place because the Gatherer keeps the funding flowing and the Valors keep it connected with the other provinces.”

I realized I hadn’t seen any T’holin.

Kirsta gave me a quizzical look. “You won’t be able to round up any specimens here,” she said. “We’re on our own. Even with the Gatherer’s help, the town doesn’t have the resources to sustain them and us—we have to dig deep to pay to the penalty tax, you know—but the T’holin check in on us every month or so to make sure we’re still on the right shape path.”

She studied my reaction and misinterpreted the source of my confusion.

Who are what is the Gatherer? I could never get an answer.

Kirsta patted my hand. “It’s worth it,” she said. “We have clean food and water. Just enough. Some of us have never known it any different.”

She took us inside to a great room with a kitchen and a long table lined with benches.

“Young’uns and housemates will be home in a bit,” she said. “It’s my turn to cook. Feel like helping me make supper?”

Ty and I washed our hands in the big sink. My eye was drawn to a wall of icons and images.

“That’s my line back to The Event,” Kirsta said. “I can trace it all the way back to the *Empress Wu*’s chief cook.”

Two tall young men bounded into the room, skidding to a halt in front of the chiller.

“Out, or I’ll put you to work,” Kirsta said. “Rounder Gillis, and Ty Merritt, meet my boys, Gable and Mateo.” She pointed to each as she said the name.

“Best now, to you,” the boys mumbled. Mateo grabbed a handful of apricots from a bowl on the counter and the pair left the room.

Ty chopped yams and I shelled beans while Kirsta diced fennel root and onion.

Within an hour, we were sitting at the table with Mateo and Gable and two young couples and an older man.

Kirsta stretched her hands to Mateo and Gable, and the woman next to me took my hand.

Kirsta bowed her head and prayed, “Loving Spirit, we come to the table with our gratitude and our full selves. Bless this food to our bodies and our bodies to your service.”

I kept my head bowed a moment longer than necessary to hide my astonishment, searching the Archive for a clue to prayer’s context, and then tucking away the information I found for a more appropriate setting to study it.

The conversation was straightforward, full of advice on navigating the various cultures we’d encounter on our way.

We learned most of the men were away from home, working in factories and refineries or serving in the military. It wasn’t likely we’d be invited to a place where the husband was at home. But if we did receive such an invitation, I should let Ty put the husband at ease.

I ate food seasoned with spice that soothed my stomach, and drank more wine than I meant to. With no signal from journeystones or signets and no spinner silk fabric to stimulate my skin, I slept deeply and woke feeling more confident.

Ty and I made our way north, spending several days with each contact who invited us, drinking tea and coffee and wine, holding infants and helping tuck children into bed, staying up late to talk and listen and learn, and waking up to join families at the breakfast table as they began their ordinary days, discovering a patchy network of spiritual practices based loosely on Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh wisdom, according to the Archive, and influenced by T'holin Discipline around the Unfolding.

If I had any romantic notions of marriage before this experience, they were challenged by the few couples I met. Life was hard in the provinces, and couples couldn't afford to display whatever tenderness or intimacy might have existed between them.

I sometimes fumbled in the diverse expectations among urban, suburban and rural folks, and often took the brunt of resentment toward the Collaborative.

I began to despair of recruiting any one to satisfy the Advocate. Everyone knew someone who knew a Rounder. But no one could, or would, point me to one.

My journeystone remained nearly inert. Some days I sensed my signet warming, but I refrained from testing it, since I was so far removed from the *O'o'o'sl'h'*.

Three weeks into our journey, we accepted an invitation from a Valor who managed a large farming estate near the southern border of Parsimony. As soon as I was inside its

hedge rows, I recognized extensive T'holin practices: ponds with aqua farming, nitrogen-generating ground cover that also fed grazing animals, tiers of fruits and grains and berries, and avian and insect pollinators buzzing in the air.

Valor Lita greeted me with effusive enthusiasm and beamed at me until I grew uncomfortable and realized she was waiting for something.

Ty blushed and confessed that she was his mam.

Lita glared at him.

He shrugged. "I never got a chance to tell her," he said. "You'd understand if you been there."

"Come in, then," Lita said, laying her hand on her sternum for a long moment. "I'll not break it to you out here."

Baffled, I followed her inside the cool, sparsely furnished house and she paused in front of a wall hung with graphic portraits.

My stump flared with sickening pain.

"Grace and peace, grace and peace," Lita murmured, still holding her hand to her breast. "Dear girl," she said. "Have you ever seen the Wall of Ancestors?"

I nodded. "Last Valor showed me hers," I said.

"Our line goes back to Empress Wu's chief medical officer," she said, and she lingered on the word "our" as she pointed to the the image of a woman with wavy light brown hair and gray eyes. "This is my sister," she said. "Does she look familiar?"

I shook my head.

"Her name was Melia. She was your mother."

I stared at Lita, cradling my searing stump while the world fell away.

She caught me by the shoulders.

“Now that the wounding is out of the way, dear girl, let’s get you settled and then we can sit with some iced tea.”

We rested on the veranda behind the house, looking out across gardens toward fields and outbuildings, drinking the tea, waiting for the right moment to resume our excavation into the past.

I sensed the thrum of zyphs nearby. “Aren’t the zyphs out on the plains?” I asked.

“We keep some here to remind the spinners,” Lita said. “You have the touch, Ty tells me. It runs in the family. We’re not neurotypical. Took the T’holin to show us, though.”

She swirled the ice in her glass. “You look like your father,” she said “That’s not a bad thing. Same dark hair and arched brows. But you have Melia’s hand—” She sighed. “Sorry,” she said. “I miss them both, every single day.”

“Were you and my mother...close?” I asked.

“Right up till the end,” she said.

“The pandemic?” I asked.

“Is that what you were told?” Lita asked. “There could be worse fictions.” She rocked back in her chair and stared at the bouquets of herbs, flowers and bulbs hung from the overhang and then shielded her eyes and looked outward. “The sun’s low enough for a walk in the garden,” she said. “Are you up for it? If I get a hat for you?” She got up and slipped into the house, returning with a broad-brimmed hat much like the one I’d worn in Hadera with Ria.

I put it on and followed her into the yellow and blue afternoon. Lita took off her sandals as we approached a path formed by smooth, matted, rust-colored grass.

I raised my eyebrows in question.

She nodded. “Barefoot, please,” she said. “The grass will give its yes, but taking off our shoes is our ask.”

Pondering her statement, I struggled out of my boots. Lita didn’t rush to help, but her quiet patience somehow gave me dignity.

Lita stretched one foot over the grass and raised her hands, palms up. Her eyes closed, and she planted the foot, touching the middle finger of her right hand into her left palm, and repeating the process, touching the middle finger of her left hand to her right palm.

“Hand chakras hold the yes,” she said. “This grass adapted for this purpose. It lays down and grows sideways, weaving itself together, giving us a safe place to walk while it protects the soil. It’s a nice metaphor, don’t you think, for the yes of this planet.”

We passed flowers with open blossoms and heavy seed cones, and grasses with long, spiky heads. Lita rested her hands on them, murmuring, “grace and peace, blessing and honor. Grace and peace, blessing and honor.”

My journeystone thrummed and my whole body resonated, in tune with the zyphs. The colors of the sunlight and flowers vibrated on my retina with a compatible frequency, and my breath and pulse slowed.

“I feel your questions,” Lita said. “You recognize the Discipline and wonder why the T’holin didn’t show you how to access it in this way? Am I right?”

I didn’t want to respond, afraid I’d break the spell. And then I realized I knew the answer. “I just now reached this node on the shape path,” I murmured. “I had to find the node before I could resonate.”

We stood in the enfolding sunlight until Lita announced it was the best now to return to the house.

She took my hat and directed me to a pillow near a window. “Sit, please,” she said, as she pulled a Riff from her skirt pocket. “Your resonance tells me why the Unfolding brought you here.” She tilted her head and one corner of her mouth turned up. “Sometimes, even the Advocate does the Unfolding’s bidding.”

She projected a hologram,

“Now, dear one, now, you will know.”

The crisp, high resolution hologram showed four children playing on a mat.

One child, a boy, taller than the others, with soft chestnut curls and speaking Clipped and Basic in complete sentences; a boy and a girl with dark skin and nappy, braided hair: the girl was the smallest in the whole group; a fourth child, a girl with shoulder-length brown braids who darted from toy to toy, chattering a mix of T’holin and Clipped and Basic.

Two woman and two T’holin watched at the edge of the mat: a younger Cinaia with Melia and SsLissa and CcT’holner.

The child with the long, brown braids jumped into Melia’s lap.

SsLissa reached for the child. The child lisped something in T’holin. SsLissa touched the child’s chest. The child’s brows furrowed and she looked intently into SsLissa’s eyes. SsLissa gave the T’holin chin dip for yes.

“Who do you see?” Lita asked. I looked again, and recognized my toddler self.

With Pavi and Hadrian and Davin.

Pavi and Hadrian and Davin and I, all together.

Pavi already knew how to use her eyes and lips to pout and charm. Davin's behavior proved his dignity and reserve were innate, not imposed by the Honor Guard. Each time he spoke, he grew quiet for a moment before, as if composing his sentences.

"You, of everyone in the group, were the first to master your journeystone," Lita said.

"Before Pavi?" I asked.

Lita tilted her head in thought. "Much before Pavi," she said. "That's why you're her Guardian." She took a deep breath. "This was recorded the day before the Gatherer came to take Cinaia and Hadrian and Davin to Hadera," she said. "It was the last day we were all together. "



I replayed the holo many times, hoping the images would replace the white hot hole in my memory, or unleash the grief I felt obligated to endure after Lita explained the complicated story. Instead, I was numb, perhaps even relieved to learn my parents were scientists working with SsLissa and CcT'holner and Gregor Wong on research into human compatibility with T'holin neural implants.

It was an accident that I was even made part of the project. The other children were orphaned in the pandemic, and in the care of T'holin, chosen for certain neural profiles.

They became my playmates, and my parents included me in the cognitive and neurological tests along with the control group cohort. That is, until my synesthesia manifested and other compatibility markers emerged.

Lita said the research led some T'holin to accuse SsLissa of usurping her power as *O'o'o'sl'h'* of *O'o'o'sl'h'* and manipulating the Unfolding. SsLissa reminded them that no one questioned her long-past predecessor when the neural implants were introduced as extensions to T'holin consciousness in the wake of The First Death. But humans aren't T'holin, the detractors said. Humans will never awaken to the Unfolding. SsLissa promised to find such a human, a Waker, within a generation. The Founders sided with SsLissa, but the *O'o'o'sl'h'* split into factions. Under an agreement with the Founders, the faction that became the *XxO'o'o'sl'h'* agreed to wait 31 octal years (25 decimal years) for the Waker to emerge, even though everyone feared the Collaborative was on a course that would reach a tipping point in entropy cost before that deadline.

After the split, SsLissa deemed it too dangerous to continue all the research in one location. She'd already earmarked Pavi and me for our unusual compatibility with the journeystones. CcT'holner Cinaia took Davin and Hadrian to Hadera. SsLissa made preparations to hide Pavi and me in Farside. But while my parents were securing the lab, a swarm of spinners attacked. Lita said she'd never seen anything like it before or since, and she believes the *XxO'o'o'sl'h'* abused their shape paths to summon them. Before SsLissa could sillage to protect Pavi and me, my left hand was devoured in bites. SsLissa bit it off to save me.

The spinners killed my parents.

I spent two more days with Lita and began to feel more whole, just by having the truth. I thanked her for reliving it with me.

‘I don’t begrudge the pain,” she said. “It’s not often I get the chance to honor your parents’ memory.”

In Lita’s office, where an array of Riffs tracked various activities, I realized she might be able to help me understand some of the raw data the Archive had given me.

“The Archive is trying to give you some stepping stones for the shape path you’re on,” she said. “For example, if you know Stellan is culling male T’holin for the Phalanx. and T’holin birth rates are falling and lots of pups are born with clipped wings, you’ll look at the shape path and see what the XxO’o’o’sl’h are afraid of.”

For the first time, I realized that clipped wings was an idiom referring to a variety of developmental disabilities.

“If you know Stellan is drafting young men and Makers into the work force to produce airplanes and bombs, and the Valors are skimming supply chains and diverting resources to mitigate the damage,” Lita said, “you’ll be forced to look ahead on the shape path and face the possibility that this world can’t bear the entropy cost if Stellan ousts the Advocate and comes to full power.”

“But, Stellan already has working prototypes of airplanes and bombs,” I said. “Why aren’t the Valors stopping the supply chain?”

“Because stopping them would lead him to us,” she said. “We have to take some losses.” She stared at a wall for a moment. “But it’s hell. Believe me, it’s hell. Just ask the Gatherer. Always caught in the hell of the losses.”

“Does the Gatherer work with the Principle of 12. Or 10, for humans?”

“My mind doesn’t work that way,” Lita said. “I can see the fabric of this planet’s soul, but I don’t cipher quantities in the

abstract. But I think you're on to something. It takes a certain thread count for the fabric to have enough nodes to resonate. Maybe that's what the T'holin mean. A certain thread count of humans and T'holin working together."

"My mind is like that, too," I said.

"You'd think we were related, then," Lita quipped.

I asked Lita if she knew the T'holin were storing vast vats of spinner venom. "It's confusing," I said. "I saw it with Lady Ria. I couldn't believe it. I thought Lady Ria was on the side of the *O'o'o'sl'h*."

She pursed her lips. "You must understand, the Contradiction can hold the venom," she said.

I replayed the statement in my head. "Don't you mean the venom can hold the Contradiction?"

"Dear girl," Lita said. "Look at the shape path and tell me where you hold the Contradiction."

Unbidden, mathematical equations formed in my mind showing me that even resonance held a Contradiction. In some patterns it was good and necessary and in others it disrupted the shape path. Something to do with a number called Euler.

My journeystone jangled with the competing *O'o'o'sl'h* and *XxO'o'o'sl'h* signals, and my hand flew to my sternum.

"That is where you must hold it. That's where the Valor Network must hold it. That's where Lady Ria must hold it, although at great cost. It's tempting to think the solution to the conflict is stopping Stellan."

My heart skipped a beat and I considered Pavi's gamble, putting her life at risk to make sure Stellan came to power.

"Getting rid of Stellan would not solve the problem," she said. "We are the problem. We humans."

“What is the solution, then? Will the T’holin get rid of us?”

“There’s another alternative more in line with the T’holin nature,” Lita said. “You know it, but you can’t bring yourself to consider it. You don’t believe you’re enough. Grace and peace. Grace and peace. No matter. One step forward and two steps back, then two steps forward and one step back. Perhaps three steps forward and four steps back. No step is wasted on the shape path.” She touched my shoulder. “What you need is a day or two with Ty, checking on the grazing zyphs. It will do you good. Grace and peace.”

The next morning, Ty and I rode out, after a long blessing by Lita. We found the herd by noon, and picnicked in the shadows of sunflowers. We shared stories of our childhood and how limited options steered us into our livelihoods.

“At least I get to tend zyphs,” I said.

“Helps that you’re good at lots of things,” Ty said. “I may be able to herd zyphs but I can’t see myself keeping young-uns corralled. But I have to ‘fess something. I know a lot of things, but I never saw a karabon before our trip to Hadera. I was right amazed at how calm you were.”

“I have something to ‘fess, too,” I said. “As much as I know about zyphs, I didn’t know they control spinners.”

“They don’t control spinners,” he said. “They remind spinners to give their yes.”

“I get that,” I said. “But I haven’t seen it. We don’t have that many spinners in Farside. We do have spores, but not thick like here.”

“Zyphs just have the skin song that reminds the spinners how we’re all connected,” Ty said. “All the living things on Chaalis have their ways of saying yes to their place. Spinners have the biggest yes, since they have so much power

together, with their venom and silk. It takes the zyph song just to temper it. Humans can't understand. We aren't capable of that kind of yes. What's the fancy word...?

"Consent?" I asked.

"That's it," Ty said. "Humans don't understand how to say yes or no to life and death like the rest of life on Chaalis."

He said it with awe-choked breathiness.

I was still preoccupied with that statement when we returned to Lita's house and she asked me to update my Riff with all the Millennial Event celebrations scheduled in Provence and Danladi.

"But I'm going all the way to Horizon, recruiting..."

"I've been pondering your T'holin number puzzle," Lita said. "I realized, it's been solved for a while, just waiting for the best now. I've called four of those puzzle pieces here to meet you. You don't need go any farther to satisfy the Advocate's demands."

At dinner that night, Lita introduced me to Jemma and Lance and Reba and Paulo, two Rounder/Broker pairs. My name had barely left her lips before they launched into tales about their experience with "minor" acquisitions and success in satisfying the Collaborative's quota for wild Tholin and strategically creating the demand for T'holin so the Valors could plant Makers and *O'o'o'sl'h* where they were needed, all spoken as casually as if they were filling me in on a week at the office and they were going to Hadera with me on a joy ride.

Until Lita reined them in. "You're like bees in a flower patch," she said. "Buzzing around the Gillis's head like she knows your jargon and backstory."

Reba leaned forward and braced her sharp elbows on the table to peer more closely at me. “Beg pardon,” she said. “We’re too damn excited to have our wits about us.”

“You’ll need your wits and more,” Lita said. She looked over her shoulder toward the doorway as if she was afraid someone might walk through it, and then held up her Riff. “You’re going straight to the Capitol to play your part in the Advocate’s last gasp.”

Lance’s prominent Adam’s apple bobbed as he took a drink of water.

“Don’t worry,” Lita said. “The Advocate’s last gasp will make room for something new. Everything we’ve worked is converging on the shape path. There will be more losses. More threats. The Valors will do their best to smooth the way for you. You’ll leave in the morning.”

“Is it enough?” Jemma asked. Her almond-colored complexion was a shade paler than before.

“We are enough,” Paulo said. “Our numbers surpass the principle of 12.”

I dropped my fork.

“And our hope is here,” Reba said. “The Gillis has come.”

CHAPTER 20



“A secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers, and through which they have learned that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them most truly.” – Jacques Lacan, “Écrits”

We traveled all day through Provence, a temperate region where rows and rows of crops flashed by with hypnotic monotony. Ty jabbered about the Valors’ networks of settlements using T’holin methods, off the beaten path. Ironically, he said, the paychecks sent home by the men conscripted to factories and farms and military service helped pay the tax on local, ad hoc production. “It’s a crazy economic model,” he said. “I don’t know how supply and demand works. Everything we produce in the factories and on the corporate farms goes to city snobs. We couldn’t afford that stuff even if we wanted it. But they’re happy to conscript us for low wages and tax us for what we produce ourselves and the city folk are willing to pay through the nose for our rustic art and pottery.”

He looked at me to gauge my reaction. I nodded, wide eyed, and he continued, more animated than before.

“Mam says the Collaborative thinks none of us held on to the lessons from Earth because we’re all descended from the Mars Colony. Like what was good about democracy. And how to survive the collapse of late capitalism.”

Ty stopped to take a breath. In the lull, my head buzzed with information from the Archive and the subjects I’d taught my students. I stared at him, wondering why I thought he was just a simple zyph herder. “Tell me what you know,” I said.

He grinned. “Are you goin’ all school teacher on me?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe I really want to learn from you.”

“Here’s what I’ve been taught,” he said. “About decade or so before the Mars Colony launched—I guess that’s 600 years ago by now—Earth’s markets had become so unstable—you know; most people blame climate extremes, water shortages, armed conflicts and pandemics and such—but the real culprit was the impossible demands of international finance capital.”

“You learned about neoliberal capitalism?” I asked.

“Mam says knowledge is a survival skill. I don’t know how the system lasted as long as it did. The bubble and bust cycles kept getting longer on the busts with less rebound on the bubbles, yet the corporate-financial power suckers kept siphoning off the wealth. People had work harder and harder to make do with a lot less. In other words, the magic elixir that promised prosperity based on individuals making rational decisions in the marketplace dried up, and people woke up to the lie. In the developed countries, regular folks who weren’t entirely beaten down began to figure out home-based and local production. They organized informal and mostly underground exchange networks that—surprise, surprise—distributed resources a lot more fair. They started

taking care of each other right under the noses of the increasingly fascist governments.”

Ty grabbed his canteen without taking his eyes off the road. “Are you tired of hearing me yammer? Did I pass the quiz?”

“Go on,” I said. “I want to get back to your mom’s notions about surviving.”

“Mam says the first colonists brought that notion with them to Mars and kept it running along like an underground spring. Everyone paid lip service to the propaganda that kept the Collaborative dynasty in place.”

“Which was...”

“That the hierarchical corporate oligarchy was the best system to keep order in the fragile, artificial biosphere of Mars.”

“Corporate oligarchy?” I sputtered.

“Hey, what do you think we do our spare time. Studying is a competitive sport. Personally, I’m an expert the history of the Valors. They started on Mars, you know. The brainstorm of a bunch of feminist Jews. They really took a hold here on Chaalis because...” he shrugged.

“Because they fit with the T’holin ways,” I said.

“Then, add in the fact that lots of folks never forgot how the T’holin saved us during the Pandemic,” Ty said “That’s all it took for people to put their faith in the Unfolding. My mam is one. But it’s a hard Contradiction, Mam says. Now there’s enough of humans to hold it, but it might too late. Some of the T’holin are willing die if it comes to it. Some humans, too. It may be time to leave the planet to the spinners and the zyphs and the croy.”

Ty braked behind a slow-moving chemical hauler.

“Fuckin’ chemicals,” he said. “At least there’s no petrol products to poison the soil.”

“Thanks, Ty,” I said, sobered and humbled and chastened by his spiel. I fingered my headband, my thoughts and emotions jumbled like they were organizing to send me over a cliff of self-doubt. Ty was more qualified to be a Patternbearer than me. At least as qualified to have a journeystone.

We reached the city where we planned to spend the night. “Sunfield is jumping.” He glanced at the Riff mounted on the dashboard. “We’re just in time for the parade,” he said. “Which means, the main route’s blocked. Good thing mam reserved rooms for us.”

“It’s the only stop where we couldn’t avoid the Celebration,” I said.

As the app guided us through narrow side streets to our inn, Ty kept looking at the rear view mirror to make sure the other two runabouts were keeping up. He parked, and they pulled in beside us. After hooking the vehicles to the charging stations, Ty checked us in and sent the room key codes to our Riffs. “One room for boys, one room for girls,” he said.

Reba posed like a racer on the starting block. “First call for the shower,” she said.

“Make it quick,” Ty said. “I’m hungry.”

Our room was small and clean, furnished with a double bed and a couch.

Jemma looked around and sighed. “Pick your poison,” she said. “Sleep with a partner or have a lumpy couch to yourself.”

We took turns rinsing the road-weariness from our skin, and were barely dressed before Ty pinged, asking us if we were ready to find food.

Uneasy leaving my knapsack in the room, I grabbed it on the way out.

We headed for the main thoroughfare on foot, and discovered everything was closed for the parade.

“Might as well watch the damn thing,” Ty said. We climbed to the the top row of risers in time to watch the last of the elaborate floats depicting various scenes from The Event.

“I’ve haven’t watched a parade since I was a kid,” Jemma said “Back home, I always get pegged to play Ijemma Danladi. Not because I can act— it’s because I trace my line back to her, and she’s my namesake.”

“Feast your eyes on this, then,” Reba said, pointing to the small retinue of men passing by dressed only in athletic briefs. Somehow, they were able to perform martial arts while keeping up with the flow of the parade between a float and a flatbed truck.

“Soldiers?” Lance asked.

I shaded my eyes and squinted. The men moved with grace and precision. Their bodies were lean and their physique was the result of years of discipline.

“That’s the Honor Guard,” I said, barely able to form the words. “Former Honor Guard,” I corrected myself, imagining their nakedness covered with ivory dress uniforms; their cropped hair with a long queue; and their rough-shaven faces with neatly trimmed beards. One of them, a redhead, might have been Cinaia’s former honor guard Fillan.

My heart clenched for Davin. I looked for him until an amplified voice drew my attention to the flatbed truck where a ranked officer was announcing a exhibition of hand-to-hand combat. He swept his arm toward a man standing in the middle of the flatbed who faced a long line of opponents.

Poised with his knees bent and his arms slightly spread, the man was wearing only an athletic strap...and a blue T'holin slave collar. My heart skipped several beats. His hair looked like it had been chopped with dull scissors that were no match for his thick curls. The arch of his brows was familiar, now furrowed in concentration. Only the shadow of his beard remained.

One by one, his opponents charged, and one by one, he dispatched them.

My journeystone, muted for so long, hummed to life. I grabbed Reba's arm to steady myself, but she barely noticed, and my co-travelers continued to chatter.

I stared as the flatbed truck receded, until Paulo announced what I was too preoccupied to notice.

"That's the end of the parade. Let's eat."

"And fight this crowd?" Lance said. "We might as well wait out the rush."

We retreated to the sidelines, and were lucky enough to grab drinks from a vendor selling out of a cart.

Our Riffs chimed. Jemma pulled hers out and flicked through the links. She knit her brows and her face turned a shade paler. "Everyone, check the updates from the secure networks," she said. "It's critical. But no comments, please."

I brushed away a niggling doubt. How I could trust the sources? How good were they if they'd failed to warn us about crossing paths with Collaborative's Infantry? I kept

those thoughts to myself and followed the links, discovering the source of Jemma's pallor.

Bombs in the desert. Rumors of T'holin casualties.

My throat went dry and tight. I looked up from my Riff. Soldiers dressed in fatigues mingled in the crowd under the watchful eyes of Phalanx. Most of the soldiers were paired with sex workers, and the Phalanx weren't interfering. They were rank and file, not members of the former honor guard, but, torn between the hope that I'd see Davin, or worse, that I'd see him with a woman, I couldn't bear to look at them.

The crowd noise buffeted my ears. The heat and humidity were stifling. My stomach gripped with hunger. I tensed with the urge to ditch Ty and Jemma and Lance and Paulo and just run away. I breathed through it.

And then Reba let out a whoop. "There's a fighting chance at the gyro place!" she said. "Race you there!"

I got in line behind Lance. My journeystone grew warm and I turned to seek the cause.

My eyes were level with a blue T'holin slave collar above olive drab military fatigues. I looked up, past a prominent Adam's apple, to a lean, hard jaw; wide, bowed lips, a long, straight nose, and eyes with dark-rimmed, hazel irises.

Davin stared back at me and I froze, trying to take in his naked face.

Ty sidled up to him and said, "Good to see you, man."

It was just a whisper, but it jolted me to attention. I dashed from the line.

Reba rushed to my side.

"I can't be seen with him," I said through clenched teeth. "None of us can."

"Who is he?" she asked.

But I couldn't answer because Ty was creating a scene.

"Hey," Ty bellowed, loud enough to draw attention. To my dismay, he clapped Davin's shoulder and cried, "Aren't you that hand-to-hand champion?"

A nearby Phalanx wing guard took a step closer.

Davin glared at the wing guard as he answered Ty slowly and deliberately. "I was trying blend with the crowd," he said.

"Is that why you're alone?" Ty said, with exaggerated naivety. A few people turned to gawk. "Why don't you join us? Let us buy your dinner, show our gratitude for your service," Ty said.

I wagged my head at him, but it was useless. I was out of his direct line of sight.

And then the wing guard bobbed his chin with a "yes".

Davin hesitated, his eyes hard and narrow and still fixed on the wing guard. And then he took a breath and shrugged. "The least I can do is find us a place to sit," he said.

"Take the women to help save seats," Ty said, pointing at Reba and me. "We'll need two tables."

Davin looked in our direction and walked toward us.

I backed into the shadows, but Reba blocked me.

"It's too late," Davin hissed, glancing upward as he reached my side. "Cameras are everywhere. Our only choice now is to give them a good show. Rub their faces in it."

I recoiled in horror that he would say such a thing out loud, anywhere, let alone in public. My muscles contracted and released and before I could curtail the reflex, I sprinted toward the crowd.

Davin grabbed my shoulders and pinned me against his chest. I panted, breathing the scent of his freshly washed skin.

“You’re fast,” he said. “Put your reflexes to use. There’s a pair of tables at the edge of the food court.”

Cheeks flaming, I followed him and Reba to claim the tables. I sat down, but couldn’t raise my eyes to look at him.

“Is my face that much of a shock?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“About what?”

“That they did that to you,” I said.

“It’s not the worst indignity,” he said. He tilted his head toward Reba. “Davin Roan,” he said.

“Reba Joist,” Reba said.

“Rounder?” he asked.

“I hope so,” she answered.

“Then I won’t mince words,” Davin said. The dark, hard look returned to his eyes. He glared at the wing guard, who was standing two meters away. “Did you know the Phalanx are too clumsy to fly airplanes?” he said. “The Collaborative needs humans for that. It’s messy and inconvenient, especially when passenger trains and desert rooks are the targets.”

My head was light and Davin seemed far away.

“Then, it’s true,” Reba said.

He kept talking, no longer whispering. “Of course, the ones giving the orders are eating steak in Hadera tonight,” he said. “I thought they’d wait until they usurped the Succession to commit another atrocity. That shows how stupid I am.”

It was out of character for Davin to babble on and on, and he wasn’t finished.

“Makes me wonder what stunt they’re planning for the actual Millennial Anniversary,” he said, looking up for the cameras. “Stellan is using the honor guard—especially me—

for his freak show. To rally the masses. Create a diversion. You should see how the officers are preening for his favor. They can't wait for the scandal to break."

And then he looked straight at me.

"The Advocate knows where your loyalty is," he said. "Stellan was never going to allow you to bring in new Rounders and Brokers."

"I think you should change the subject," I said, craning my neck for any sign of Ty and the others. To my relief, I saw them and waved.

My hands shook a bit as I unwrapped my sandwich, but I began to breathe easier as Ty steered the conversation toward banalities, savvy beyond his years, leaving me to wonder why he'd gone out of his way to create this situation in the first place.

The low sun threw long red-orange rays and a band of musicians began to play. Couples got up to dance. Reluctantly, I took turns with Lance and Paulo, but Davin didn't budge until Reba grabbed his hand and threatened to drag the wing guard onto the dance floor if Davin refused. She got an actual chuckle from him.

When we paused for a break and returned to our table, a waiter pounced at the chance to take our drink order.

"I'll buy this round," Lance said. "Beer or wine, Davin? I figure we'd better get you buzzed so you can move on with the evening. Soldierly morale building and all that."

Davin turned as pink as the sunset and looked around at the gyrating dancers. Most of them were soldiers with sex workers. "Wine," he said. "Red. But I may have missed my chance."

"All the good ones already taken?" Paulo asked.

“From what I hear, there’s no such thing as a bad one,” Lance said.

Davin’s gaze brushed me and he looked down at his hands. “I wouldn’t know,” he said. “The honor guard code is hard to shake.”

“What about the soldier’s code?” Paulo asked.

“Oh, I keep up appearances,” Davin said, with a wry twist of his mouth. “I tell them a story about my heart belonging to someone. That I can’t be untrue to her because of the honor guard code.” He stared at his feet. “Works every time. They weep and fall asleep, relieved to get a night off. I pay them double.”

“The honor guard code really goes that deep?” Paulo asked. “How can you turn down a chance like that every night?”

“Enough, already,” Reba said. “A man’s got a right to his own code, honor guard or no.”

The drinks came and Reba announced, “I propose a toast to honor codes.”

My throat was tight, but the wine warmed my stomach.

Reba stood and pulled me out of my chair. “Let’s dance some more,” she said, and everyone got up, including a hesitant Davin.

There was no point pairing off for the raucous music. We faced each other and I started to enjoy twirling my arms and moving my hips.

The torch lights were flickering when the music finally slowed with a plaintive melody.

“Ah, the Heartweaver dance,” Jemma said.

“I’ll sit this one out,” Ty said. “I’m too young,”

Everyone laughed, and Davin turned to join Ty on the sidelines, but Jemma and Paulo and Reba and Lance were already paired, leaving me alone on the floor.

“Hey, guys,” Lance said, “Somebody step up for Aleya.”

I shook my head. “It’s all right,” I said. “I don’t know the Heartweaver dance.”

Davin’s gaze softened. “You do,” he said. “Listen.”

Dear Valor in Training, I later learned that the Heartweaver dance is based on T’holin foreplay. Its slow rhythm builds a pattern: coming close to weave arms and hands and fingers together and then pulling apart, creating tension and anticipation.

But in that moment, I recognized its variation on the embodiment song.

Davin stepped onto the dance floor.

“Hurry, or you’ll miss the call for consent,” Reba urged.

Davin leaned in and whispered, “May I let down your hair?”

I started to question why, but my journeystone began to throb. I nodded, and Davin released the clasp and raked his fingers through my tresses to let them spill over my shoulders.

The world grew still, except for the music, my journeystone and our breath. The torch light glowed behind Davin’s head and in his eyes. His arms and hands and fingers were warm, and his skin hummed like a zyph’s. When we pulled apart, our journeystones drew us back together.

The last fluty note faded and we stepped back to catch our breath, finding ourselves alone on the dance floor. The only sound was crickets and night birds.

I barely remember returning to our table, where a man dressed in a bright tunic waited, holding a basket of wine, goblets and candles.

“It is our pleasure to award you with this gift,” he announced, offering the basket to Davin. Seeing our look of surprise, he said, “It’s the tradition of the house to award a gift to the couple who best dances the Heartweaver.” He smiled. “Don’t be so modest. It’s very scientific. We have sensors and cameras, and a software program that judges. Technology doesn’t lie. Now, go make the best of it.”

The wing guard stepped forward and told Davin the time was, in fact, nearing curfew.

The crowd was still silent, as if holding its breath. Soldiers with their sex workers shifted their eyes as if trying not to stare at Davin.

I knew what I had to do. I slid my hand into his.

“You know how to find us in the morning?” Ty asked me.

I didn’t know how to answer.

“I’ll ping your Riff,” Ty said.

Davin draped his arm lightly around my shoulders. The gesture was awkward and comforting at the same time. He gave a farewell nod to our group and we left without another word.

The wing guard led us into the thickening dusk.

Davin’s hand slipped to my waist. His touch was firm, to guide me, I guessed, but under the lingering affects of the dance, my skin might as well have been bare.

A few blocks later, we came to a multistory building guarded by Apex Phalanx. The wing guard halted while Davin’s badge cleared the security scanner. We entered and

passed through a corridor where music and voices leaked from closed doors.

We climbed three flights of stairs and the noise receded as we entered a quiet, empty hallway. Davin's badge opened the door to a room halfway down the hall.

The Phalanx took its position outside the door and closed its nictitating membranes.

I followed Davin inside, where the light seeped under the hem of a curtain across the room.

Davin shut the door and faced me with his hands spread. "I didn't mean to make a spectacle of you," he said, and his voice was still husky from the dance.

He pressed his hand to the bed's mattress, testing its firmness. "I'll sleep on the floor," he said, and his voice was clearer. "The bathroom is down the hall. You can freshen up if you want."

I stole a glance at his face. Without the beard, it was still unfamiliar and I couldn't take it all in, even in the dim light. I hadn't seen his whole face since—"I knew you when we were small," I blurted, blaming the dance for my unfiltered boundaries, but unable to take back the words.

He shook his head.

The story Lita shared began to pour out. Davin sat on the bed and pulled me down beside him.

I told him I was glad to know the truth, that maybe someday it would all seem real and I'd cry or something, but for the time being, I was worried for him and Pavi and SsLissa.

He said my story answered some questions but raised others, because it didn't line up with his, and then our journeystones synced and he began to talk as if his life

depended on telling me every detail he'd suppressed since I saw him last.

He stopped in the middle of a sentence about the infantry's lack of discipline and training, and how predictably elitist it was that the honor guard was so well honed but the field soldiers were expected to put themselves on the line with shoddy equipment and rudimentary skills—"I can't believe you're still listening," he said.

"I've never heard you say so much at once."

He sighed. "I've been trained my whole life to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open," he said. "But, with you..."

"Maybe it's the dance," I said.

He shook his head and touched his journeystone. "Or the journeystone," he said. "No other journeystone does this to mine."

My stump throbbed. I rubbed it. We sat in silence and I realized we were still wearing our knapsacks.

I slipped mine off, and Davin did the same. The bed creaked as he got up and laid the knapsacks on the nightstand and opened the curtain.

The sky was indigo, muddled with the glow of street lights. Davin returned to the bed and slipped one finger under my chin, turning my face toward his, and my eyes closed under his direct gaze. The journeystones charged the air between us.

I tried meet his eyes. They were too beautiful, and I stared at my lap.

"Aleya, please look at me," he said. "I know I have nothing to offer you. Nothing but this best now."

My heart clenched. He thought I looked away because he wasn't enough. "That's not true," I said. "Remember what you

told me?" I raised my stump. "You said there are some things we must hide, but this isn't one of them."

He nodded slowly.

"It was the first time I felt like I was enough," I said. I tried again to meet his eyes, and failed. "But I can't hang on to it. I've been told all my life that no one would ever want me." I glanced up and saw the pucker in his brow. "But you are so...why don't you think you're enough?"

"Enough," he repeated, turning the word in his mouth as if deciding whether to swallow it or spit it out. "It takes everything I have to keep up with the demands I was born into," he said. "I'm always on the verge of running out of—of — whatever the hell it takes. So how could I be enough for you? You can't even look at me."

I managed a flicker of direct eye contact. "That's because...you're...too...it's like looking at the sun," I said.

"Aleya, Aleya, Aleya," he said, throwing his hands in the air. "What are we doing? Why did you come with me tonight?"

"What was I supposed to do?" I asked, twisting the folds of my skirt. "People thought we were a couple. I couldn't let them think I didn't...want you."

"So that's it? You wanted to protect my pride? That's all?"

I forced myself to look steadily into his eyes. His pupils reflected the window pane so clearly, it seemed I could step into his world through them.

Go ahead, I told myself. Step into his world. What do you have to lose?

But Pavi, the Waker, hangs by a thread and if I lose myself, I will lose her...if he breaks me open like the T'holin said he would...what will become of...

And my mind flashed with Archer's violet eyes, his forelegs pounding the ground before he reared, tossing his head, so close to freedom, no matter the cost.

"I do want you," I said. "I want you to...want me...I want to be enough for you."

His face began to glow in a blue light as the signet grew warm and whispered with the *O'o'o'sl'h's* links.

He leaned in and touched my forehead. "I think this may be bigger than us," he said. "Am I right?"

I nodded.

He took my hand and laid it on his chest over his journeystone and I tipped my lips to meet his.

The kiss was long, with its own arc of desire and mystery, not just a precursor to something more.

At some unspoken signal, he lit the candles and I took my cue to pour the wine. We sipped and nibbled cheese and our journeystones hummed.

He fumbled in his pocket and placed a packet on the nightstand. "Military-issue condoms," he said. "I never dreamed I'd use them. May the Unfolding help us. We've been in the throes of foreplay since we met." He pulled my hand to his shirt and I helped him take it off.

"I can't compete with the spores," he said.

"I don't think it's a competition."

He touched the top button of my blouse. "May I," he asked.

I nodded and held my breath while he loosened the buttons and slipped the blouse from my shoulders. I closed my eyes as his fingers brushed the soft swell of my breasts over the top of my camisole.

We took turns removing our clothing piece by piece until we were naked and he pulled me down beside him.

I focused on the candlelight in his eyes as his fingers traced my shoulders, breasts, ribs, the dip of my waist and the rise of my hips. He smoothed his palm down my thigh and slid his fingers across my pubic hair.

I tried to reciprocate, beginning with his lips, but my fingers lingered there until he pressed his mouth to mine, capturing my fingers, and I lost myself in the pliant, moist, warm textures.

I pulled away, overcome with the urge to look at him. He lay on his side. His shoulder and torso tapered to slim hips and muscled thighs hard-earned from the rigors of the Honor Guard. A patch of brown ringlets nestled in the cleft of his sternum. I laid my hand there, seeking the thrum of his journeystone

Our fingers tangled as we slipped a condom over the tip of his penis and rolled it down the shaft. We laughed, and I expected more awkwardness to follow, forgetting Davin's meticulousness and his patient perfectionism as we floated in the pleasure of touching and being touched.

His lips savored my nipples, carrying me to a high plateau. I wanted to stay there, but a warm current surged in my pelvis, like a craving in my womb. My hips relaxed and my legs fell apart. He slid his finger into the silky cleft of my vulva and murmured a question about my readiness. My stump throbbed, but not in pain. I touched it to his penis and I used my hand to guide him inside me.

There was a brief, stretching pain; tender, exquisite and aching with promise. The embodiment practice took over my

breath and something deep in me spasmed and broke open, as if it was meant to be released.

I expanded into the unveiled best now and our journeystones began to hum.

I couldn't have spoken to save my life, but my journeystone sensed a tide of urgency building in him.

Don't hold back, I linked.

His eyes met mine; their pupils dilated. The candlelight carved his face into planes of gold and shadow as he tentatively pushed harder. I wasn't sure whether to hold still or move with him, but it seemed right to raise my hips to meet him. I gasped with his fullness, and linked my next thought to him. *I'm made for this, don't hold back.*

With his eyes still holding mine, he clasped my thighs around his waist. He pushed until his whole body shuddered.

After a moment, he rolled us onto our sides without pulling out of me.

I knew he couldn't speak yet. His eyes told me so. It was then I realized that our journeystones had fully linked. *I'm not alone anymore*, he said. *For the first time in my life, I'm not alone.*

CHAPTER 21



“Our relationships live in the space between us, which is sacred.” – Martin Buber

It seemed I’d just drifted to sleep when a knock on the door jolted me awake. I couldn’t move to respond; my head was in the crook of Davin’s shoulder and his arms were wrapped around me.

He stirred, and tightened his hold on me. “It can’t be morning,” he said.

But it was. The sky was blushing with early light.

Davin released me and rolled out of bed. “I’m up,” he shouted at the door. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the table, which told the story of our three-act love play: an empty wine bottle and goblets, the candle, burned to a stub; wrappers from food Davin sent the wing guard to fetch in the middle of the night.

I sat up slowly and Davin turned to me and then looked up at the ceiling and clenched his fists. His chest heaved, and I realized he was holding back tears.

At least we have our journeystones, I said through the link.

“What kind of hellish torture will that be?” he answered. “We’ll both be in Hadera in a few days, but we might as well be on different planets.”

I remembered snippets of talk during the night, ranging from state secrets to intimate trivia.

He told me his retinue was heading to Hadera to get ready for the formal exhibition at the final Millennial ceremony. “Leander will show off his Air Force in a big flyover, and the Advocate will trot out his martial arts circus at the Gala,” he said.

We tried to unpack the nested intrigue between the Advocate and the Chancellor, and to guess how Leander might exploit the scandal of Arden and Hadrian.

“It can’t be a surprise to the Advocate,” I’d said. “Or Cinaia.”

“Of course they know,” Davin had said. “And Stellan Leander knows they know. The Advocate knows Leander knows. The Advocate also knows Leander knows the Advocate knows. But the public doesn’t know. That’s the issue.”

We didn’t talk about the consequences to Arden and Hadrian, nor did we discuss SsLissa or Pavi, perhaps because Davin knew my heart couldn’t bear it.

And that was still true in the morning light, but everything else had changed. I felt as old as time, yet the world looked new. I was groggy from lack of sleep, but exhilarated. My body ached in all the places one would expect, but I did not begrudge the soreness.

My journeystone was active, connected to Davin’s, and the signet was warm.

We showered together, committing the textures and shapes of each other's body to memory, and he used his last condom, hoisting me up to wrap my legs around him while he sucked my wet lips and gripped my buttocks and pressed my back against the shower stall as the warm water sprayed over us. His angle of penetration stretched and filled me. My body spasmed and my boundaries dissolved into colors.

We couldn't speak while we dressed. Davin braided my hair with shaking hands.

My Riff pinged. It was Ty, pinning my location so I could find my way back to the inn.

Davin took my hand and my stump. "I'll walk with you," he said.

I nodded, and we stepped into the hallway and then out into a day that was already warm and sticky. The wing guard kept pace, two meters behind us.

The inn was only six blocks away. We kept our silence, but our journeystones weaved hushed, ambient signals that were more comforting than words.

At the inn's front door, Davin caressed my stump with one hand and touched my lips with the fingers of the other.

We know the best now, he said and his link sang it in T'holin. *Hold it with me on your shape path*.

It felt like I was spinning a few centimeters off the ground. *I will hold it with you on the shape path*, I said.

And then he turned and walked away. I watched until he disappeared around the corner.



Ty was waiting for me in the lobby. “The others are already loaded,” he said. “I have muffins and kafee if you’re hungry.” His gaze flickered as if he didn’t know where to land it.

“I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” I said.

“Oh, no,” he said. “We’re right on schedule. The others will follow behind us.”

The way he said it, a bit too quickly, but with a hint of pride, settled a question and raised three more.

He had created the scene with Davin. Did Lita put him up to it? Or did he come up with it himself? And why?

I started to get in the front beside him, but the empty back seat was too inviting.

“Go ahead,” Ty said. “Stretch out. Get some rest.” He seemed relieved.

I ate a muffin and saved the kafee, and I slept with my head on my knapsack until I sensed the runabout turning a corner and stopping.

“Charging station,” Ty said. “The others are here, too.”

I headed to the rest area, and Reba and Jemma dashed to greet me. Inside the cool, white restroom, they stroked my hair and cheeks and clucked over me. It was too much, and I fell into Reba’s arms and sobbed.

Jemma recombined and braided my hair and Reba got sandwiches and drinks. We sat on a bench in the shade of a palmetto, and I realized we were close to Hadera.

That’s when my journeystone hummed with SsLissa’s link. It was subtle, and cryptic, like a tap on the shoulder to let me know she was there.

My signet warmed, with echos of the *O'o'o'sl'h's* links. But I couldn't discern which faction. Maybe the point was irrelevant by now.

An idea swam to the surface.

"Jemma," I said. "The cohort you spoke of... is it prepared to come to Hadera?" *Is it ready for AnyWhen?*

Jemma grew still, her brown eyes large and solemn. "Give me your Riff," she said. "The call should come from you."

She guided my fingers through the app. "The Valors will put everything in place," she said.

I sat up front with Ty for the remainder of the trip, watching the angle of the light change as the day waned. We reached Hadera just past dark, but even before the skyline came into view, I saw how much had changed in the month of my absence.

Every light pole, bannister and balcony flaunted some symbol for the Event, and armored military vehicles clogged major intersections.

We breezed through two security checkpoints, but as we approached the last one, my journeystone generated an icy tingle.

An Apex Phalanx exited the booth and came alongside our runabout. His dull eyes barely reflected glare of the floodlights. He nodded to a slow-moving wing guard who asked for our Riffs in barely intelligible Clipped.

Ty kept one arm stretched outside the window to retrieve the Riffs after the scan, but the wing guard slung them into the booth and ordered us out of the runabout.

I stepped onto the pavement, more peeved than afraid, and planted my feet as if my force of will would be enough to deter the Phalanx.

The wing guard snarled. It took a moment for me to realize he'd spoken an actual word. "Move," he repeated. His digits writhed as he pointed to a spot beside the booth.

Blinded by the floodlights, I pressed my back against the booth beside Ty, unable to move as terror and rage gripped me.

The wing guard ripped our knapsacks from our shoulders.

The second runabout pulled up behind ours, and the Apex confronted Lance and Paulo and Reba and Jemma.

The Phalanx herded us into the back of a military carrier. None of us had the presence of mind to ask about our rights.

I crouched on the bare metal floor and hugged my knees.

Ty's freckles stamped his pale face like dark stars in a reverse-colored sky. His eyes were large and round, like he'd just seen his first karabon.

Ashen faced, Lance and Paulo tumbled into the carrier with Reba and Jemma nearly on top of them. Lance gritted his teeth, Paulo worked his jaw from side to side, and Jemma narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. Their seething anger was palpable, and Reba was wide-eyed with shock, like Ty.

My journeystone warmed to Davin's link.

It seemed risky to engage. I didn't know where he was, or who was with him. What if the Phalanx had cracked the journeystone links?

Stay calm, Davin said. Link with SsLissa.

But I couldn't muster the courage to reach out to her.

The carrier didn't go far before it rocked to a halt. A wing guard opened the flap and waved us out. Three more wing guards and an Apex escorted us across a concrete platform into a boxy building.

The air inside was cool and dank. The walls were dark, sparsely lit, and our footsteps echoed in the bare space. The corridor widened and the Apex ordered us to strip. I squinted and made out the shape of shower stalls.

We stood under a cold spray of pungent chemicals. Coughing and choking, we dried with coarse towels and dressed in gray jumpsuits. The women barely had time to roll up the pant cuffs and sleeves before we were marched into the corridor again.

It sloped downward, and the air grew colder and damper.

All five of us were shoved into a cell, just large enough for five thin sleeping mats and an exposed toilet pit.

The two faint LED lamps winked out and my eyes strained to find light where there was none. We sat in silence, too afraid to speak, and my thoughts began to careen as if I'd never known the Discipline.

I linked to Davin. *I should have kept running.*

There was nowhere to run, he said. *This was always the plan.*

Then I was stupid to go along with it.

Not stupid, he said. *It's the shape path.*

SsLissa's link warmed my journeystone, and I sensed an undertone of sadness. I'd known her angry and frustrated, but never sad.

I lost track of time in the gray monotone of featureless walls and the weak, sporadic illumination of the LEDs. When I slept, my dreams took me back to Davin. When I woke, it was like falling from heaven.

My signet and my stump and my journeystone throbbed as if they were building up for something bigger than me. My head hurt as much as my heart.

When my teeth turned fuzzy from lack of hygiene, the indignity felt as severe as the pissing and shitting in mixed company.

Jemma's menses came, and I realized I didn't know when mine was due. No one offered Jemma any solution to her dilemma. The blood caked her pants and they dried to her legs. She hung her head and sobbed until she collapsed from dry heaves.

At least the lights were on when an Apex opened the door and ordered us to follow him through endless corridors. The shock of cool tiles under my bare helped revive me to keep pace until we came to the entrance to the Capitol atrium, a few meters from the edge of a crowd of splendidly dressed elites holding goblets of wine and champagne.

I ducked behind Lance and Paulo, clinging to Jemma and Reba until the Apex wrenched us apart and shoved us into the mix. With a rustle of fine fabric and a few gasps, the crowd parted, stiffly and immediately, to let us pass.

The Apex marched us all the way to the front of the meeting room and stationed us behind a curtain near the podium just as the din of conversation swept closer and a string quartet began to play.

Dear Valor in Training, I must include a disclaimer here: I retrieved many of the details that follow from the Archive. At that moment, I felt more like a worm or a slug than a human. My eyeballs ached from lack of sleep, my mind was dull from hunger, and my nerves were taut with stale adrenaline. Only when I heard the Advocate's voice from the other side of the curtain did the realization creep into my awareness that this was the Event Gala, and we were positioned as some kind of presentation for the program.

My stomach turned at the ceremonious cadence of the Advocate's recitation of the Collaborative motto and his toast inviting the guests to be seated.

"Tonight's Gala is the Collaborative's most hopeful celebration since the Pandemic years," he said, to generous applause. "Prepare to be astounded by the progress we've made in our T'holin acquisition program and in our military organization. In fact, our top brass is celebrating with us, along with the Consultancy and the full Consortium. Enjoy the meal."

The string quartet struck up a melody that floated above the hum of conversation and clinking tableware. SsLissa's link began to pulse in my sternum, cutting through my stupor. My ears rang with the Advocate's last statement and I gasped.

The military leaders were present. The Consultancy was present. The Consortium was present. The entire power structure of the Collaborative was amassed in that room.

My hand trembled, poised at the seam between the curtain panels, but I didn't dare peek out. Ambient echoes of Cinaia's link and Davin's helped steady my hand.

Beside me, Jemma sank to the floor. The Apex yanked her back to her feet. She tipped toward the curtain, and I held her arm to steady her, wondering how close we were to the head table, wishing I could hear the table talk, hoping Arden was witting with his parents.

I thought I caught a waft of SsLissa's faint pepper and clove scent mingling with the lavender of Cinaia's signature perfume.

It must have taken an hour for all the courses to be served. My legs ached from standing and my head felt detached from my body.

Finally, the string quartet stopped playing. Chair legs grated on the terrazzo floor. Fabric swished and footsteps shuffled and clicked. The Advocate cleared his throat.

“Many, if not all of you, have T’holin in your homes and estates and factories,” he said. “I’m sure you appreciate their dependability, their endurance, their skill and their efficiency. That’s why it was crucial to strengthen our domestic T’holin population. Please welcome Complement Cinaia Cardiff, who is far more qualified to tell you about the Acquisition Program than I am.”

After the applause died down, Cinaia spoke, with a tremor in her voice that only someone who knew her well would notice. “My experience and the patience of the T’holin are my only qualifications to speak on this issue,” she said. “I’m not a scientist, although I am trained in the healing arts. The real expert is this notable T’holin Patternbearer beside me.”

The rustles of movement and a few dampened coughs suggested people were shifting in their chairs.

Cinaia spoke up in a steadier tone. “I’m grateful for the Rounder and Broker who secured her services. Her name is SsLissa *O’o’o’sl*. Her title is *O’o’o’sl’h’* of *O’o’o’sl’h’*. I know that means nothing to you, but it means everything to the T’holin.”

I closed my eyes and imagined SsLissa standing tall and regal and utterly T’holin before the audience.

“What we’re about to show you has never been seen by humans,” Cinaia said. “SsLissa prepared the presentation with information and technology from the T’holin Archive, which is older and deeper than humans can apprehend.”

My signet flamed. The fractals weaving the holographic presentation surged through me, despite the heavy curtain,

as Cinaia described the effects of captivity on T'holin heritable phenotypes, relating them to the decline in T'holin health and birth rates.

"It will take time to reverse these trends," she said. "But the Acquisition is forging new alliances with the wild T'holin, not just for breeding purposes, but for deepening our understanding—"

A stiff chuckle upstaged her, followed by one person's slow clap.

"That was impressive."

Stellan Leander's voice. "Let's show our appreciation," he said.

The audience responded with tentative applause.

"Chancellor, the presentation isn't finished," Cinaia said.

"And I was hoping to introduce Rounder Gillis," the Advocate said.

"You've not been informed?" Stellan asked. "Rounder Gillis has been detained."

"Oh, that's unfortunate," the Advocate said. "I wanted to —"

"No, really," Stellan said. "I don't mean she was detained in the sense of an inconvenient delay."

"Dear citizens, will you give us a moment?" Cinaia said. "We seem to have a miscommunication about the program."

"No miscommunication," Stellan said. "The program is well in hand. Our citizens will be interested in the new information I'm about to share. Footage captured in Sunfield a few days ago."

A flute melody filled the awkward pause: the Heartweaver song.

“Do you recognize the young woman dancing?” Stellan asked. “And can you identify her partner?”

I covered my face, and Reba wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“Let me remind the Chancellor that the Collaborative has laws protecting the privacy of its citizens,” Cinaia said.

“And let me remind the Complement that citizens who commit acts of treason are not protected. The young woman is the Rounder Aleya Gillis and her partner is Davin Roan. The same Davin Roan you arrested for betraying the Collaborative by impersonating a broker. For tampering with the Acquisition. Shall I also show the footage of Gillis entering and leaving Roan’s room? Correct me if I’m out of line, but if Gillis is consorting with Roan, isn’t she also guilty?” He snapped his fingers. “Ah, that reminds me. You interrupted before I could explain how she was detained.”

The curtain swooshed open and the Apex Guard waved us out to the podium.

The audience’s collective gasp sucked the air from the room.

I couldn’t feel my feet underneath me. There was only a raw pain and a weight like a stone in my chest. I blinked to clear the blurred shapes and colors swimming in my tears, and looked for Arden. I found him sitting alone. Everyone else from the head table was at the podium.

Cinaia was an ambush to the senses in a dress of sapphire blue cut within an inch of her nipples. Her face was strained, but her chin was level and her shoulders square.

Beside her, the Advocate was impeccable in an amethyst jacket, but his cheeks were more hollow and his eyes more hooded than I remembered.

The hologram display was frozen in the scene at the door of the inn, with Davin caressing my stump and touching my lips with his fingers, but the audience's attention was on my flesh and blood presence.

I could see the condition of my companions, and I didn't need a mirror to know my appearance was appalling. Strands of hair from my disheveled braid fell into my eyes. My lips were dry and cracked. I'd grown immune to the smell of my unwashed body, but my skin crawled and the stiff jump suit chafed my arm pits and crotch.

"This is the condition of the Acquisition program now," Stellan said.

The Advocate cleared his throat. "I had no—"

"I sympathize, Advocate," Stellan said. "Such a setback when you're this close to announcing the Succession!" Stellan held up his thumb and index finger to illustrate the tiny increment. "Which brings me to more bad news," he said.

A new hologram took shape: Arden in Hadrian's arms on the beach.

"I believe our guests will recognize the comely gentleman consorting with Arden Cardiff," Stellan said. "He is the former Chamberlain and overseer of the Honor Guard."

"This gala... is not the proper venue...for airing grievances before due process has been served," the Advocate sputtered.

Stellan stroked his chin. "Due process," he said. "You were quite satisfied with the level of due process I used to dismiss the Honor Guard and make the radical changes required to bring the Collaborative into the new century." Stellan raised his hands to the audience. "Isn't that why we're here? To demonstrate our independence from the T'holin?"

The Advocate waved his Apex honor guard forward and stepped to the podium, but Stellan's Apex advanced with weapons drawn.

"Has it come to this?" The Advocate asked. He lowered his arm and his honor guard retreated.

"It seems I have the floor," Stellan said. "And it seems the Heir has been caught in a Capital offense. Which means, according to protocol, the Advocate and the Complement must be retained as persons of interest while the Consultancy investigates. It falls to me, then, to salvage the dignity of this event. Please be seated, Advocate and Complement."

Stellan's Apex honor guard lumbered closer to Cinaia and the Advocate, but Cinaia touched her husband's arm and the pair took its seats at the head table and the Apexes retreated. Arden did not make eye contact.

SsLissa remained standing alone beside Stellan. He waved an arm in her direction. "Step aside, T'holin," he said.

He snapped his fingers and called for the wait staff. "Another round of drinks," he said. "And bring seats for our detainees. I want them to watch." He gestured to a table where decorated military officers were seated. Two of them stood and joined him at the podium.

I gripped the sides of my chair, grateful for something solid and real.

Amid the bustle, Stellan raised his glass and took a long drink. "You may have noticed my beloved bride's absence," he said. "She's due to give birth to our son. Fitting, I believe for the renaissance I'm bringing to the Collaborative's Peace Force on land, sea and air, with the help of General Maxwell Butara of the General Peace Force, and General Brigham Foxworthy of the Air Force. I trust you'll find these

demonstrations, beginning with the Infantry, worthy of this Gala. I say again: we must become independent of the T’holin.”

Davin’s link hit mine with a raw jolt. The exhibition retinue filed into the room, with Davin in the lead. His jaw hardened when he saw me.

My cheeks flamed and I wanted the floor to open and swallow me. I shrank behind Jemma.

“Until recently, the elite Honor Guard was wasted on private security,” Butara said. “No more! We’ve integrated the Honor Guard with our Infantry. For the first time in Hadera, we will demonstrate the Honor Guard’s hand- to-hand combat skills.”

Through our link I felt Davin’s searing fury. It seemed to sharpen his skills. Trying to keep his balance before he fell in defeat, the final contender grasped at Davin’s briefs and tore them away. Davin didn’t flinch. Instead, he straightened slowly, naked, and stared straight at Stellan.

Stellan raised his arms. “So much for restoring dignity,” he said. “Fitting for a traitor. Davin Roan was once honor guard to Arden Cardiff, the Advocate’s son, who is, or was, heir to the succession.” Stellan paused. “What shall we do with Arden Cardiff? While the Advocate languishes in T’holin limitations and his successor perpetrates moral crimes, it falls to me to launch the Collaborative into a new era of human primacy.”

The holodeck reconfigured. The audience shrank from the image. An air fleet soaring over the ocean.

“In four hours, my Air Force will demonstrate its reach and power by claiming Continuum,” Foxworthy said. “What

passes for a T'holin government...will be forced to acquiesce."

Cinaia sprang from her chair and stood beside Davin.

"We've already endured...and caused...enough needless death," she said, as one of the Stellan's Apex swooped in to restrain her. "Earth, the First death of Chaalis, and the chronic death meted by the Collaborative," she said, allowing the Apex to wrench her arms behind her back.

Stellan raised his arms. "You have no voice in this matter. There is no Succession." He faced the Consultancy table. "I'm your leader now."

"Chancellor Leander had news for the Advocate," Cinaia cried. "I have bad news for Chancellor Leander." She tipped her chin to Davin. "There's a Riff in the pocket of my dress," she said.

Before the slow-moving Phalanx could block him, Davin retrieved the Riff and held it up for Cinaia to voice-activate.

She turned to the Advocate as a document bearing the Official Collaborative Seal rotated in the air in front of her.

"Let the record show this as Davin Roan's DNA and parentage," she said.

The Advocate's face slowly flamed red. He raised his arm and struck Cinaia's face.

Davin's knees buckled, and two soldiers ran to his side.

The lights blinked out and the subtle whine of the ventilation system ceased, replaced by gasps and shrieks and panicked shuffling followed by a new sound, like tiny grains of sand sifting across the floor.

My skin pricked and tingled, and then went faintly numb. But my signet threw a wide swath of blue light that SsLissa's

signet caught and augmented. The glow revealed a tide of spinners washing over every human and T'holin.

A calm like the afterglow of ecstasy settled in my core. The floor rumbled and four karabon bounded to my side, flanked by eight croy, and then a pair of zyphs.

CHAPTER 22



“I think no human being can give more than this. Making life possible for the other, if only for a moment.” –Martin Buber. Martin Buber, Judith Buber Agassi (1999). “Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue”, p.261, Syracuse University Press

My mind saw Glory Falls and the hydroelectric mega plant. The falls were blocked by trees and rocks. Shadowy shapes like karabon stood guard.

SsToola’s link jangled my journeystone. *The spinners are asking for our consent to release the venom into the water grid. Who will speak for us? Will the O’o’o’sl’h’ of O’o’o’sl’h’ have the courage?*

My stump throbbed. I breathed until I could sink into the pain, and it was as if I was in my bed, in my domicile, in the Fold, responding to a silent query from SsLissa.

What color is the pain in this now?

Blue. Like a Patternbearer signet. Like the open sky, I answered.

What is its shape path?

The sky has no shape. Only possibility.

Where do you feel the pain?

In the phantom hand. And in my heart.

Does anything good unfold in the pain?

I am compelled to follow it.

I stepped forward in my filthy jumpsuit with my matted hair and raised my stump. I took my place beside Davin, who stood naked and beautiful in the dim light of my signet.

Although I stood still, the room swirled, as if I was dancing the Cataclysm dance. The signet flared, shooting light fractals to reveal a crowd of men and women and a flock of T'holin triads that coalesced out of thin air in the middle of the room.

Screams rang in my ears. Davin caught me and I leaned against him. Stellan climbed onto a table and crouched like a threatened animal.

SsLissa spread her wings and the male T'holin began to drone the bass tone. The females and neuters added harmonic layers, and the Patternbearers augmented the light fractals from my signet, illuminating the room like a silent lightening storm.

The spinners dispersed to the perimeter of the room where they climbed the walls as if in waiting, while the croy, zyphs and karabons flanked Cinaia and SsLissa.

Stellan flailed his arms and ordered his Phalanx to charge. Lulled by the droning, they turned to him with dull eyes and drooping wings.

Stellan stumbled off the table and bellowed to the Advocate's Phalanx, but they spread their wings to block him.

Spinning on his heels to face the generals, Stellan shouted, "Call your troops!"

Butara shook his head and waived his hands at the light fractals. "Coms are jammed," he said.

SsLissa called me by name. “Aleya Gillis *W’h’uu O’o’o’sl’h*,” she said. “I will speak and you will translate my words for the people.” She keened, and for a moment, time seemed to halt.

“The T’heexx cohort is strong,” she sang in high T’holin.

When I could breathe again, I translated.

“Here is a fraction, a percent as human figure, of the humans and T’holin loyal to the Unfolding,” SsLissa said, and I repeated in Basic.

The curtain opened and Ria swooshed through it with an arm resting on the shelf of her pregnant belly and a hand grasping Valor Farrah’s elbow. She lifted her chin to Stellan as she came to SsLissa’s side. “I am among this cohort,” she said.

Stellan snatched her by the shoulders. “Wake up from this nightmare,” he cried, as a croy crept to his side and a zyph nipped his arms. He dropped his hands and stumbled backward into the ribs of a karabon.

Ria touched the zyph’s humming skin. “This is no nightmare for those who know the Yes,” she said. “That’s all this world requires. And if humanity can’t share consent with the rest of life here, the cohort is ready to sacrifice itself.”

With a sound like the whisper of sea foam on sand, the spinners reconfigured, standing out from the wall on tiny, straightened legs.

“The spinners are here to help us,” Ria said. “It will be painless. Perhaps blissful. And then the T’holin will release the venom into the water system for the rest of you. The death won’t be immediate. Some might even enjoy it—there’s giddy affect, a desire to sit and look at clouds, while the children are unattended and the garbage piles up and everyone starves because no one has the gumption to eat.”

Stellan gaped at her. He turned to the Advocate and to Cinaia and then to General Foxworthy. "Is my fleet is still on target to Continuum?" he asked.

Foxworthy's nod was tentative.

SsLissa took my hand. "Not for long," she said. "The Waker is here." Her link sang through my journeystone. "Lead the *O'o'o'sl'h*," she said. "Bring us together. Journeyfold the air fleet back to Hadera."

I shivered. Davin's journeystone joined Cinaia's and SsLissa's, with CcT'holner and his triad far away on Continuum, and with SsToola's in Horizon with Pavi.

The *O'o'o'sl'h* factions converged their links, surging in a majestic signal that mingled the embodiment song with blinding fractals. The melee resolved into a visual display of the aircraft flying over the ocean and disappearing without a trace to reconverge at their Base near the Gulf of Danladi.

The spinners swarmed to hedge Stellan, and the karabon flanked him so there was no escape.

Gregor Wong stepped to the podium and the spinners parted to let him pass. "The natural forces in this room don't seem to be on your side," he said. "If Davin Roan is the true heir, you have no claim to leadership, Chancellor."

"But Davin Roan is a traitor," Stellan said.

"He wasn't impersonating a Broker, he was commissioned," Gregor said. "Who do you think funded the Acquisition program? The InterProvince Monetary Fund. Your accusations have no merit."

A Valor from the cohort stepped forward. I recognized her as the vendor from the market in Horizon. She bowed to Gregor and said, "Is it time, Gatherer?"

SsLissa moved to Gregor's side and CcT'holner joined her. "It is time," Gregor said. "T'holin and Valors have worked together to Gather the best now, through pain and loss. The true Waker is here, and we must hurry to relieve the true Guardian. Do the Valors and *O'o'o'sl'h* approve of the Advocate's true successor?

"We do," the Valor said.

"We do," SsLissa said.

"Then I call upon Cinaia, the Complement, to robe the Successor. She reached into her robe, pulled out a bag and placed it in Cinaia's hands.

Davin bent his head as she slipped the white robe over his shoulders. Arden rushed to help and his forehead touched Davin's for a charged moment.

Cinaia stepped back. "The Advocate in Waiting must present his Complement in Waiting," she said.

The Valor probed the bag and pulled out a white mound of fabric.

Davin took it and shook out its folds. He held it out to me and began to sing the Call to Consent.

SsLissa steadied me and then spread her wings to shield me from the audience.

I looked into Davin's eyes and gave my yes.

In the shelter of SsLissa's wings, Davin peeled off my jumpsuit and draped me in a white robe that matched his.

The fabric was spinner silk. It sang on my skin.

The *O'o'o'sl'h* echoed my yes.



Dear Valor in Training, the days that followed are still a blur in my memory, but the Archive tells me the spinners were persuasive in the Consultancy's decision to support Davin as Advocate in Waiting, especially when there was no longer anyone willing to hide the extent of Stellan's crimes against human rights in the provinces.

The Advocate aged 10 years overnight, and the Consultancy assented to Davin's baseline reforms. Of course, Davin did not act unilaterally. He brought Arden, Cinaia and me alongside SsLissa and her triad.

The Generals balked at disbanding the Peace Forces, but after a few days of drinking water laced with spinner venom, they relented. Corporate leaders and investors held out for a week, until their children began to stumble and slur their words, and then they agreed with the Consultancy to temporarily halt the sur tax on non-corporate enterprises.

Hadrian resumed his role as Chamberlain, and ordered the Phalanx to be treated with spinner elixir. It mitigated their toxic traits without diminishing their strength. Arden made plans to use them for the slow work of rebuilding and redesigning infrastructure more aligned with T'holin ways.

Cinaia kept me at Hadera until I regained my strength. I won't pretend it was long enough for me to come to terms with the dizzying new reality that I would be Davin's wife, the Complement in Waiting, and that I was now the O'o'osl'h' of O'o'osl'h' for humanity: the Waker, but it was long enough for me to see Ria give birth.

As hard as it was to leave Davin, I returned to Pavi as soon as I was able to travel.



A few yellow leaves dropped lazily from the tree in Valor Miri's courtyard, as if summer had drawn on too long and they were tired of hanging on.

Pavi sat on the bench, thin, but radiant, and her restored link thrummed steadily with my journeystone. Perrin was beside her, with his arm around her shoulder, as if that's where he'd always belonged.

SsToola said the story of his escape and recovery from the T'holin could wait for another time, and that Pavi had called for him. The Xx' o'o'o'sl'h' spent a journeyfold to bring him to her.

I knelt in front of her and took her hands.

"Now you know why I did it," she said. "I had to make the shape path for the Waker."

"When did you know?" I asked.

"When you danced," she said. "That's when you Woke me."

POST LOG

“Every idea extended into eternity becomes its own opposite.” – George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Pavi rode beside me on Archer’s mate Sylvan, on a golden autumn afternoon in Farside.

Tobin wasn’t far behind. He’d become quite attached to Archer, and I was able to offer him a plausible excuse for accompanying us on our trip to the Archive. It would be a full-time job keeping Davin, Arden and Hadrian mounted, even with Ty’s help, I told him.

Perrin held his own, however, and his mount seemed to know his place was beside Pavi.

We were only a kilometer up the slope when Arden turned to me. “I can see why we walked for our first trip to the Archive,” he said.

“And we would be walking now, if Pavi and Hadrian were up to it,” I said.

“No one has given me a good reason for this trip,” Pavi said.

“I promised I’d come back after it all unfolded,” Arden said.

“Promised whom?” Pavi asked. “As if the Archive is a person?”

Arden knit his brow and shook his head. “I may not have a journeystone, but I’ve interacted with the Archive and lived to tell,” he said.

“And here we go, acting as if we’re going to be allowed inside,” Pavi said.

My journeystone thrummed in sync with Archer’s skin. “It’s different now,” I said.

“Because you’re the Waker,” Pavi said.

“Something like that,” I said.

Pavi threw back her head and laughed. “Funny how hindsight makes everything clear,” she said.

Arden reached over the slap Davin’s shoulder. “Now that we know what we’re looking at,” he said, smiling at Davin with new appreciation.

I saw the men with fresh eyes, too. Each brother brought a different blend of features from their shared parentage, but the shape of the forehead, the cant of the eyes, and the curve of the lower lip was the same.

“It’s still a long road ahead,” Davin said.

“It’s only a couple kilometers more—” Pavi said.

“I’m talking about the shape path,” Davin said.

“Aleya should just keep dancing the shape path,” Pavi said. “Like she did with the Cataclysm Dance.”

“I didn’t do it by myself,” I said. “Can’t you feel it? The whole world is thrumming with the Yes.”

“It’s still a long road ahead,” Perrin said. “We’re too young and naive to govern on our own.”

“But we have the T’holin and the Valors,” I said. “And thousands of people who support us.”

“Far more than the Principle of 12,” Perrin said, using base eight. “Yet we know we’re always going to be a heartbeat away from another power grab.”

“Always the pessimist,” Pavi said. “That’s why I love you.”

“Ha!” Hadrian said. “I can top that. I don’t believe it will ever be possible to win over the corporations and reform the social order underpinning the economy. And don’t threaten me with spinners. How will we prove to the T’holin that humanity is awake?”

“The Waker arrived,” Pavi said. “That’s all the T’holin were waiting for.”

“Don’t place the whole future on the Waker’s shoulders,” I said. “For one thing, the T’holin aren’t so simplistic. The Waker is just a milestone. Marking the possibility of humans and T’holin working together. Learning together.”

“What do the T’holin possibly need to learn?” Arden asked.

“Your question wouldn’t even make sense to a T’holin,” I said. “But, I do know that the rift in the O’o’o’sl’h’ and the struggles humans faced adapting to this planet showed the T’holin how much they over-corrected after the First Death.” “CcT’holner says technology is a part of nature just like all adaptations. We just need to learn to integrate it wisely. And that’s just one thing to learn, from a Maker’s perspective. There will be other perspectives from the Enfolders and the Patternbearers.”

“But how will we learn?” Hadrian asked.

“Perrin will appreciate this,” I said. “We’ll learn by refusing to pretend there’s no antagonism—and that everything will always work out the way we want it,” I said. “By relishing the struggle.”

Hadrian shook his head. “You always say the strangest things.”

“You hardly know me,” I said.

“I remember,” he said. “So do you.”



The Archive sat like a slab on my chest, burning my link and searing my signet before it abruptly cooled and a male voice with a jaunty lilt burst into laughter.

“You’re finally here,” the voice said. “I’m Riff. The original Artificial Intelligence from the UMC Bluetooth. In anthropomorphic terms, I’ve been waiting for you.”

After a pause, Riff said. “Actually, I’ve been quite busy, searching the shape path for the descendants of The Don Quixote and The Asimov. I’ve found them. With the Archive’s help and some sophisticated algorithms based on Euler’s number.”

“It took you 400 years?” Arden asked.

“Of course not,” Riff said. “I found them as soon as they reached their destination. But it took 400 years for humanity to be ready for the news. SsLissa says it’s worth the entropy cost to journeyfold to the other side of the galaxy. But only if the Waker approves.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kathy McClurken Hanson has been falling upward since