

Antidote



Lee Willard

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The following is a work of fiction, any resemblance to any real people places or things is purely coincidental. The planet Kassidor at 61 Cygni and the premise that the hippies came from there is a creation of Lee Willard.

This is dedicated to Loreena McKennitt, Azam Ali, Lucia Wong, Little Wolf, Shiva in Exile and Andreas Vollenweider for the music this was written to.

Background information on the planet Kassidor and many more stories set there can be found at www.kassidor.com

Cover by Lee Willard

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Maps of the area can be found at www.kassidor.com/handbook/geography/ydlontrostl.htm

Antidote

In the year 5881 the politics of the day is all about the Knights, the Senate, the Guild and the Emperor. The popular Demoy Numek has recently been deposed by House Kardash, causing the Gatekeepers to intervene and install a new Emperor who's court is on a deathstar and not on any world. He is elevating the military to a much more active role in the Empire's rule.

Meanwhile on the ancient, impoverished and primitive planet of Kassidor, the wilds of the huge Ydlontrostl basin have become a haven for many Centorins, as all residents of the Empire are called by the natives of Kassidor. They are here to escape the strife and dominance of their home worlds. The lure is a contagious genetic modification to the population of Kassidor called the Instinct that prevents one human from using force on another.

The people of the basin worry a little about the Centorin presence only a few thousand miles away, but they have not been seriously effected as yet. Dyoniss and Kessil are seriously affected when his father is accused of smuggling large quantities of the antidote to the Instinct, and bodies start appearing close to home.

Foreword

A Few Notes on the Translation

Please understand that the natives of Kassidor do not actually speak English, or Centish as the language of the Empire is called at the time. As much as possible we have tried to translate the native language into English of similar formality, slanginess and correctness but there are some places where that is difficult.

To be true to the Romance and Mystery genres we really should translate all names to the closest Earth equivalent, so our main characters would be Ethel and Jonas, but we have remained true to the Sci-fi genre and left almost everyone's name in their native language. Place names are translated if they are used in lower case by their residents, if not, they are not translated. For those of you who have never been to a primitive planet using a different language it may seem a little confusing at first.

For the average Centish speaker the pronunciation of many Kassidorian words can be difficult. Pronounce them however you like, even if you have to add syllables. (Ydlontrostl is actually a two syllable word) Should you ever encounter a native speaker, he or she will notice your accent, but will probably understand you.

Kassidor is one of the few planets of the Empire with its own

biology so the animals and plants native to the planet are completely different and have no ready translations into English. In cases where the name translates without changing it's meaning, it is translated or half translated, when the name won't translate well, the name in Kassidor's Common Tongue is used. Specific species translate well like Banded Yellowtail and Pink-rimmed Layerleaf. Larger classes of animals such as the inglethors, don't have a ready English equivalent. Any English animal names but 'horse' are actually a local life form which is similar enough to the equivalent from Earth.

Idiomatic expressions have been substituted in both directions. Where an English idiom sounds more appropriate, it has been substituted, even if there was none in the original. Slang expressions may be substituted or half translated. The translations have tried to reflect the character's manner of speech as closely as possible. Some thought was given to having the translation evoke the same emotions as the original, even if it is a less literal translation.

This translation makes use of some English words that don't translate very well. Abstract units of measure that physically arbitrary have been translated to the USA standard. Smaller intervals of time that are physically arbitrary have been translated to hours, minutes, seconds. The exception is when we speak of times of day such as thirtieth hour, we really mean the native hour which is a little more than 47 minutes, and thirtieth is really eighteenth. The 'day' and 'year' however have implications of light and dark and seasons.

These are vastly different on the planet Kassidor. The following describes some of the terms we will use thruout the text. To further the confusion, most numbers dealing with these natural units of time are left in base six because it translates much easier.

- day** The time from waking up, to waking up again. This happens three times a week in the Kassidorian calender. The word 'day' is also used to mean the time when one is awake.
- sleep** The period of time when one is asleep. Note that this is independent of whether it is dark or light on the planet Kassidor.
- week** The time Kassidor takes to rotate on it's axis. 84hr. 39 min. relative to Kortrax as seen from the surface. Divided into three 'days' (Morningday, Afternoonday and Nightday) and three 'sleeps' (Dawnsleep, Noonsleep and Dusksleep)
- year** A period of time, 64.46 standard days, that Kassidor takes to orbit Kortrax. There are 18 or 19 weeks in the year, each with a name, but in conversation this will be 30 or 31. Seasons are three to six weeks long. A calendar is available at www.kassidor.com/handbook/calendar.htm.

noonmeal Dinner of Morningday, beginning of the evening

of Morningday.

duskmeal Dinner of Afternoonday, beginning of evening of Afternoonday.

darkmeal Dinner of Nightday, beginning of evening of Nightday.

decade A period of time equal to about $6\frac{1}{2}$ standard years. 36 years of the planet Kassidor, 100 in base 6.

century A period of time that is actually equal to 229 standard years. This is 36 decades, 100 decades in base 6. This is 1296 years of the planet Kassidor.

Instinct This word, capitalized, refers to a genetic modification that prevents any human from using force or violence on another. Any part of the body one attempts to use in harming someone becomes paralyzed for minutes. This is ‘blamed’ on the Kassikan but the Kassikan knows it was made in the labs of Brancetrabble, half a world away. It is virulently contagious using an airborne virus as a vector.

kayak 2-person boat grown from a floating pod in the lon phylum of the native biology.

variety Because of the economic disruption caused by the gulf between those who could afford youth and those who could not, the wizard Brancetrabble had his labs develop a sexually contagious cure for aging called the Species Immunity Complex, which turns sex into something more like conjugation instead of reproduction. To function effectively one must have some variety in one's sex life. The encounters one has in pursuing this medical necessity are called by the word that translates literally to 'variety.'

The following terms from the local language will be used thruout.

Cynd A gas giant noticeably bigger than Jupiter with some glowing spots and bands like a tiny brown dwarf. It has two moons larger than any other planet of Kortrax but Kassidor. It circles the sky approximately once a decade, and is the third brightest object in the night sky.

Karasis The name of god or the sacred symbols of god in the religion of the Ydlontrostl basin. Today the word is often used to refer to anything sacred. Also used as the name of the temple buildings in their faith. Finally, the people of Ydlontrostl believe that god is us, so the word can be used to mean all the believers of the church. This is the

most common usage among members.

- Kassidor** Literally ‘All the lands’ or ‘Everythingland’ in Kassidorian Common Tongue. Name of the planet in it’s main language. Most properly translated as ‘The complete set of lands.’
- Kortrax** Native name for 61 Cygni A, their sun. It is a proper noun and addressed in the sentient gender.
- Kunae** 61 Cygni B, the brightest star in the sky by far when it is up, a bright orange point which circles the night sky every three Kassidorian centuries.
- Lon** An aquatic plant with floating leaves similar to water lilies. They grow prolifically and are a staple crop.
- Mrang** A local class of animals, if you picture an eight legged protoceratops or triceratops the size of a cow you’d recognize a real one if it wandered thru your yard.
- Narrulla** The planet’s largest and closest moon, a 100 mile egg that is less than half as bright as Earth’s moon. It crosses the sky just over twice a week. It goes into eclipse and transit every week. In the culture where this happened, having Narrulla in transit at

sunrise or sunset was considered to be an omen.

Yaag

Kassidorian intoxicant with effects more like cannabis than alcohol. Common everywhere.

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1. In the Marsh

“No my friend, Karasis does not deny me wealth, he denies me harming others to get that wealth,” Shingharm said as they glided into a quiet opening in the lon. He would not have this garden float if he weren’t a man of wealth. They were out among the lon over five miles from the center of Vnassvuur, which was a tight knot of archwood towers in the grey distance.

“And you believe you have gained this wealth by harming no one?” Starkey asked.

“Are you going to accuse me of harming my crews because I allow them a little yaag?” He’d already noticed that Centorin ways were strong with Starkey, sometimes they surprised him. Centorins were colored by their lack of the Instinct, they were aggressive and dominating. With the collapse of their Republic after the Mechanoid Wars, their planet had lost its place as the Empire’s capital. The new Emperor’s location was formally unknown, but most people knew it was on one of the death stars.

“You never had to strong-arm a supplier, you never hurt a competitor?”

“Karasis allows us to compete in business as long as it’s fairly. If one of my competitors wants to spend money from a contract that was not yet won, I can offer condolences, but not culpability.”

Starkey looked around. Centorins were often avid sport fishermen and this was the closest good spot to town. It had

taken almost an hour to get out here from his place, which was a two acre estate on a quiet bayou of the Tveidor River less than two miles from the heart of the city. Of course Starkey had to brag of bigger boats farther out on deeper water on Centorin, but Shingharm let it pass. He'd like to see him take that sport fishing boat of his out on the Tuidain, but no doubt he knew better already, he had been in this basin two centuries now. It does not serve the greater good to compete with a braggart. This pond and bighead ensal were all he had to offer. The Tuidain was another day on the tubes to the east. This pond was the beginning of fifty miles of lon that reached upstream, making the river miles wide but only a few feet deep. There were numerous islands, many with lon pickers camps, now grown into fanciful homes with lacy woodwork and long fronds. There were a few about in their flatboats as dusk approached.

“You say the best fishing here is at dusk?” Starkey asked. His tales were of mid day and bright sun on the southern Altaic ocean of Centorin.

“Yes,” Shingharm told him. He knew that sooner or later their conversation of yesterday would come up. He knew Starkey was watching him for any sign that he'd lied. He probably hadn't found it in talk of his religion. Karasis was diligent at staying free of lies. Shingharm was confident in his faith, that there is an entity made up of human beings, as human beings are made up of cells. This greater entity may be called a civilization, a belief system, a hive mind, or whatever one likes. He knew it was real and knew that there was a system of pheromones and other cues in the subconscious mind that were the mechanism that united society into that

greater entity. His people called it Karasis, and they treasured it and called it holy. He might also believe in the Elvish god of Mother Nature, or Mother Earth, but they were larger aggregates made up of more than just we human beings.

The Centorins have little faith; money and power are their gods. They have a God they personify as male and aged, and believe in divine prophets or teachers. They use Him as an endorsement for what those in power want to do. Maybe he should say, Starkey had little faith, because he hadn't spoken with many Centorins and none in any depth about their religion.

“What does your god say about this fishing spot?” Starkey asked as Shingharm released the anchor.

Shingharm knew he was being sarcastic, but chose not to rise to it. “Karasis evolved to help our species get more joy and security in our lives. Karasis encourages the joy of simple everyday beauty.”

“This scene is not simple or everyday,” he said.

It was a study in red and black, the red sky reflected on the water, the black silhouettes of city and shoreline reflected on the red water. The bands and swirls of Kortrax black upon his red face, and the black of Narrulla in transit like the sun's open mouth. He wondered what Narrulla in transit foretold and worried that it might not be favorable with this Centorin here. The millions of lon leaves were further dark on the water.

“This is a beautiful planet,” Starkey said.

“You have seen the Ydlontrostl Cities and Hardensburg. You are only here in Vnassvuur as a tourist.”

“I’ve seen a lot of this planet as a tourist,” Starkey said. “I’ve been back to Kassidor City since I’ve had the wealth, and stopped in many places in between. Naiho has nothing to compare with any basin on this planet, only Earth and Centorin have anything as close to beauty to a human eye. Oh yeah, Kiandutan is nice but it is all the same.”

“What about Kitane?”

“Never been there,” he spat. True Centorins probably opposed the ascendancy of Kitane now that the gatekeepers were no longer based on Centorin. Shingharm had seen pictures from Kitane, the peaks were still jagged from recent terraforming, there were no fallen trunks in the forests. Instead of speaking of Kitane he said, “This is an impressive planet,” Starkey went on, “it deserves to be much more in the Empire.”

“We are primitive and old-fashioned. We have practiced sustainability for a hundred centuries and don’t want to change.” Sustainability was impossible in their economic system, Shingharm knew that, and knew it was a core belief Starkey would never change, like Shingharm would never give up his belief in Karasis.

“A good kick in the butt may do you some good,” Starkey said.

Shingharm chose not to reply, chose to think only of his breathing for a bit. As soon as he could, he busied himself getting out the fishing gear. He tried not to say, ‘If we need a kick, why are you coming here for recreation?’ because it would just get into the arguments they’d had already, and quickly revert to accusations over the sabotage to the

Motorways.

It was a challenge entertaining this Centorin after the accusations yesterday. Lies are taken lightly by Centorins, and accusations of lying are common. It seems they expect everyone to lie, like lies are the only purpose for speech. Starkey may have been in the Ydlontrostl for two centuries, but he had never adapted to the culture. He had learned enough about it to try and manipulate the people, but Shingharm could tell he never felt it in his heart. He didn't know how important an accusation of lying could be. In the ancient ways, the liar can be put out on the plain, shunned and banished to fend for himself on the prairie. Among the Centorins lying is a sport and they compete at it enthusiastically any chance they get.

They were going after bighead ensals, and they had about an hour before they needed to start heading back. The tackle needed to be substantial, anything less than twenty pounds is just a juvenile. The line needed to be long, they are bottom dwellers, lurking among the lon stems to catch unwary chileeth, and they are wary, one must cast far from the boat to entice them.

The trick to fishing for bighead is to cast into a clear path between the leaves so your bait get's tangled with as few stems as possible. They were using minnow chileeth, which bigheads consume by the billions in these ponds. They had netted a few dozen minnows in the shallows just off a beach on the way out. While Shingharm netted the bait, Starkey focused on the women on that beach for it was one of the quieter ones around the city and he was able to look without

embarrassment. He liked to complain about the open sexuality of our people, yet he pays close attention.

The lonsmen were glad to see them fishing for bigheads, the chileeth eat the korlup, tiny tentacloids that chew holes in the lon from the bottom. They are the most serious lon pest. He noticed one of them who waved was actually a beautiful woman, at least in silhouette. Were he with anyone but Starkey, he might have welcomed her aboard. But Starkey wanted to dominate their last interaction with women, and tried getting his way with money. Shigharm didn't want to even be around anything like that.

Starkey had already cast a minnow, before he got to tell him about seeking a clear lane. He reeled too fast and snagged several lon in the process. He was repeating the process while Shingharm was letting his first cast settle.

“So how did you build your business?” Starkey asked.

“Over time,” Shingharm answered. “In the 53rd and 54th I only owned one boat and I did the route from here to Ninavek and back every two or three years. I didn't have a fleet until I helped one of my permanent crew buy his own boat. Most of my crews were vagabonds even then. He kept coming to me for advice so I set up a shipping company to schedule our cargoes. I got two more captains to join at two separate times in the 55th and that's how we stayed til the 104th. That's when I came ashore and bought my home and got more into the business end of shipping. Since then we've signed a lot more captains. We didn't have company policies til the 111th and ever since then I've been taking ownership of the boats once

they come up for sale. I've still got eight independent captain's working for me."

"How did you sign up captains?"

"Since the 104th we've had forms, a written agreement spelling everything out in plain speech."

"You didn't coerce them to join in any way?"

"The two guys in the 55th, I had to sell them on it. After the 104th when we started accepting new captains, they have applied to us."

"And now?"

"The captain is a contracted employee but does not own the vessel. We use much the same forms."

"They join voluntarily?"

"We have many more applicants than positions to fill I'm afraid. Contracted employment opportunities are not as common in Vnassvuur as in the Ydlontrostl Cities."

He had done two more casts. Pretty soon he would have a lane clear of lon to cast in. The leaves Starkey's line detached were floating over onto Shingharm's side. He turned around in the boat to find another lane on the other side. His was a small garden float, no cabins in the pontoons, no crew, only a half-cabin with the rear half of the deck open. There were two stools, but neither one of them was using one, they are more useful when going after big water chileeth, and he had not had the boat that far downstream yet.

"How do you enforce your contracts?"

"Withhold payment, report them to the Temple in extreme cases."

“What can the Temple do?”

“First they hear both sides and query anyone else involved. If they decide in my favor, they can threaten shunning.”

“And if the captain is not a member of your Karasis thing?”

“Then he wouldn’t be my captain. I would never even take his application. We were all in Karasis in the 111th when we made it company policy. We don’t ask if you are a member, we will speak with your acolyte.”

“So one has to be a member in this society?” Starkey asked. He was casting about three times as often as Shingharm.

“Not as much as in the Ydlontrostl cities, the Temple is very strong there. There are many who will offer contract employment to non Karasis here in Vnassvuur, but not so many in the Cities. Piecework is open to all, here and there, at least most places. And seriously, I don’t ask my people to be devout, just to follow the moral code and rules of conduct. If they are a member, at least I know they know what the rules are.”

“It sounds like a state religion,” Starkey said.

“There is no state,” Shingharm said, aware of what he meant only from the studying he had done when Starkey first asked for a meeting. Centorin society retains coercive power over the individual. Individuals don’t have the choice of whether to participate. It means that a transaction need not be perceived as beneficial by all parties for it to happen. That fact shapes their society in many not-so-subtle ways such as

forced conscription into wars, violent crime, distrust, fear and conditions like that for the little people in the population. “No one has any coercive power,” he told Starkey, rather than giving him a long lecture he would interrupt.

“It sounds coercive to me.”

“There are nearly a million Elves and Nordics in Vnassvuur,” he said and gestured toward its towers on the horizon, “and few of them are in Karasis. They don’t work for me, but I work with them. It is hard for them, the Elves especially, to give up their own religion and take up Karasis. Some can recognize that they are complimentary and participate in both, but too many think there is an either/or relationship between Karasis and Mother Nature.”

“But being Karasis certainly helps someone.”

“That is the purpose of Karasis, to help each other, to form a team.”

“And who decides who leads the team?”

“Karasis is too static for that. The first serious change in the form of Karasis was when the first caravans reached the Ydlontrostl bluffs. Those of us who obtained our freedom declared we did not need an emperor to represent Karasis, that Karasis is in all of us and we are all in Karasis. The last serious change in the ceremony was the closeness of bodies added in the 42nd.”

“There is a great Temple in Yuhal, who’s in charge of that?”

“In what way? In charge of the janitorial service? In charge of research priorities?”

“For instance,” Starkey said, “research priorities.”

“There are petition forms that members may submit. There is a room full of acolytes who read them and judge their merits. There are initiates who they talk to, who post their distillation for the scientists to see.”

“So those initiates may form their own opinions?”

“They do, and the scientists know their biases and act accordingly.”

“But who gives the Temple scientists their actual assignments?”

“The scientists themselves.”

“So the Temple pays scientists to do whatever they want?”

“In theory. There are lots of personalities involved and the Temple posting board can be lively, but in the final analysis a tenured Temple scientist has final say over his work. They can only be discharged if they break the tenets.”

“No wonder this planet is so primitive.”

“So you believe the only way to achieve an end is by coercion?” Shingharm asked.

“If you don’t want to wait a thousand years to see it happen.”

Shingharm had to think to figure out what he meant by a thousand years. That would be a century if he really meant hundred hundred by ‘thousand’. Many times Centorins use the word to mean ten hundred. That would be ten decades, about the time it took to grow a small home with today’s fast growing gnarl. He might mean a thousand Empire years using their number system, 4342 Empire years in our numbers. That was over four centuries, about as long as a big apartment tree

took to grow, but nowhere near as long as it had taken him to build his business.

The pretty woman in the flat boat had come up near them. She was too light skinned to be pureblood, she might have some Nordic in her. She had a really nice face and figure, and a blue wrap that was open to her waist. Her hair was sleek and straight and lighter than average, her eyes were amber. She had a good load of lon on her flat boat.

“If you’re after bighead, they’re down by the mouth of that little bay this dusk. If you give me a tow I’ll show you just where.”

“Very kind of you,” Shingharm said. “Come on aboard, tie in the middle if you would.”

“Sure,” she said, and moved the bow of her boat under their deck so she could tie off without falling over the bow.

While she did that, Starkey leaned over and said to him, “She’s just mooching a ride because she’s a knockout.”

“She might be right, I haven’t gotten anything yet, of course you might have scared them all off by now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t let your bait sink, and you haul it at twice the speed a chileeth minnow can make in a panic.”

“I guess I’m thinking bass.”

“A bighead is not a bass my friend. I’ve never met a bass, but I’ve met many a bighead and most dusks I’d have one on the boat by now.”

“They’re getting wary,” the girl said as she climbed

aboard. The bottom of her wrap was just long enough to let her bend over politely, a bright blue fallos weave with buttons down the front, every one of which was open above her belly button. No doubt she had only recently grown her magnificent figure and was still having fun showing them off. “You’ll want to let me off a little upwind of where they are and let me paddle around and away.”

He lit the motors and they began sliding toward the mouth of the bay. He was going to have to watch carefully to keep from getting bogged down in lon. He threw a bait over to troll, though it would probably get hung up because it looked like there was some thubbrush in the water ahead.

The girl turned to Starkey, walked over to him, no doubt having noticed him admiring her. She turned in front of him to give him a good look, Shingharm couldn’t hear what she said, but he wouldn’t be surprised if she was telling him about the pill she had taken and asked him what he thought of the results. Starkey looked a little embarrassed and tried to take his eyes off her chest but wasn’t very successful, especially because she was doing about all she could to keep his eyes on it. That made him more sure she’d just taken something for them and was proud to catch his interest.

Starkey’s embarrassment overcame him and he came to this side of the deck. She followed.

“So you harvest lon for a living?” Starkey asked, taking the bench nearest Shingharm.

She laughed, knowing she wouldn’t be dressed as well or enhancing her body if she did. “No, I harvest lon for supper, I’m a clothing designer’s artist for a living. I take a streetcar

into town five or ten times a year to turn in work and pick up new sketches and pick up a nickel or two,” making her modestly affluent, one who could certainly afford to buy her lon if she chose, but who picked it for the exercise and to get the choice leaves.

“You work for a clothing designer?”

“He’s more of a media personality than designer. He scribbles some ideas on a nude photo and I turn them into drawings that a pattern maker can work from. Sometimes I think I’m as much the designer as he is, but I wouldn’t want to have to work with the media so much.”

“But you’re beautiful?”

“Not like he is; and I’d only attract the lesbians. Now if I was doing men’s clothes, beautiful could be an asset.”

“You have great assets,” Starkey told her.

“Thanks, but they’re just for fun,” she said, wiggling a little, “I don’t want to have to make my living with them, and I’m the type that could get used to expensive tastes all too quickly.” Starkey didn’t reply to that. He had taken a seat in one of the deck stools. “This is his boat right?” she asked Starkey.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Because he’s driving but not in uniform.”

“He owns a shipping company, he likes to drive boats.”

She turned to him, “Shingharm,” he introduced himself.

Her big amber eyes got a little wider. “THE Shingharm.”

“Yes, and glad to make your acquaintance, but we must be getting close to where you want to get off.”

“Yeah. I’m the third house on the point, the one with the wider stairway to the beach. You want to go into that opening just beyond the next lon patch, the one with all the flowers. You can see their bubbles now. Drift in from here, don’t let them hear the props.”

She gave Starkey a kiss and a squeeze and she slipped back into her flatboat and gently paddled away.

Her house was like most of those in the area, a six trunk archwood, elevated almost six feet above the water, very little glass but bird screen and roll mats for walls. She had a little yard, a few panips around the house, a kayak as well as the flatboat, and a muscular man to greet her as she pulled ashore.

Shingharm let the boat drift into the area she indicated. He saw the bubbles from at least three bigheads and showed them to Starkey. “Put your bait right there,” he said, “give it time to sink almost to the bottom and then start to reel slow. I’m going to toss mine over that way toward the one over there.”

Starkey nodded, readied his cast, launched it. Shingharm held his until it was time for Starkey to start reeling. He motioned for him to go slower yet. Once he was moving his bait at a speed a chileeth might use when it was not alarmed, he flipped his own cast, let it settle, and started to reel his own.

When a bighead strikes it’s a lot like getting your line hooked on a submerged log or boulder. They gulp it and lay on the bottom with it. They digest their prey in their mouths,

so they will sit there until the prey is digested, an hour or more. The way you can tell if you've hooked one or not is: when you try to free your line from the log, the log slowly moves away.

Bigheads are not strong swimmers, so you can eventually crank them to the surface and net them, but Starkey was looking like he really had caught a log. By the time Shingharm was reeled in, he could see that the log was moving, slowly, but taking the whole boat with it.

"I don't know what you've hooked, but if it's a bighead it's going to be a record breaker," Shingharm told him.

"I can't get it closer without breaking the line."

"Let it tow us," he said, "We have almost two hours of dusk left," but if they used it they'd need the lantern to get home. Kortrax was gone from the sky now, but the red glow remained and was slowly fading. Pink puffballs were appearing about two miles up, too few and far between to worry about before Nightday.

The bighead was making for deeper water in the middle of the bay. The bay was surrounded by homes like that of the girl they had just met, some with big enough gardens to grow what they needed, most of them with a dock and a bit of beach in their twelve to forty feet of waterfront. There was at least a hundred feet free of lon from the shore, most of it dredged too deep for lon to grow. The lon was thin up to a quarter mile from shore because of people picking it for supper. The bay was a little over a mile and a half across, so there was a mile of healthy lon in the center, pretty much free of thubbrush. There were about ten flatboats out in it still

working it.

“This is a very fine fishing trip,” Starkey said. “You’ve definitely gotten me hooked on something, but it could be a mini-sub for all I know. You got me a look at some of the finest tits I’ve seen all week, and you’ve showed me the beauty of the Bottomlands.”

“Just trying to be hospitable.”

“You haven’t done anything to help me with my problem however.”

Shingharm concentrated on a couple breaths, dropped into meditation, calmly asked, “Which problem are you referring to?”

“The sabotage of course.”

“Are you still accusing me of lying?” Shingharm asked as calmly as he could.

“If you are not lying, then you should be helping get it stopped.”

“I don’t see how that follows?” Shingharm asked.

“Your god should compel you, to do otherwise is unfair competition.”

“Karasis does not compel me to make up for your failure to understand the disadvantages of the transport mode you have chosen.”

“It is a disadvantage only because your people chose to bomb my roadways.”

“You are calling me a liar again. That is a serious insult and I don’t take it lightly.”

“Your people, the same rabble that crew your ships have

been involved, I've had them watched."

"They are passengers, working their way, my captains ask where they are going and what shipping skills they have."

"You cannot prove they are not given instruction on your ships," Starkey said.

"And there you are, calling me a liar again," Shingharm could stand no more, he went to the tackle box, took out the knife and calmly cut Starkey's line. "We have to leave now," he said as he put the knife back.

Starkey grabbed his arm, as hard as the instinct allowed. "I'm not done here, I took a week of my time to come here, and I mean to see these attacks stopped."

"You want me, who have nothing to do with it, to make it stop. Why don't you consult the locals? Why don't you listen to the men who have roamed those prairies since before Centorin was settled, or the herds that have roamed them since multicellular life first evolved on Earth. The Elves give more consideration to the bugs in any place they settle than you do to the peoples that believe it is their land that you defile."

"So you support them?"

"I have not changed my mind since yesterday, I support them ideologically, but I don't even know who they are. I imagine they are plains nomads, so do you. No doubt you have harassed the local tribes to the extent the Instinct allows, maybe even beyond I hear, aye?" Shingharm was not going to back down from this man, even if he would have caught a record bighead.

Starkey frowned, nodded, and brought up a small vial.

“What are you accusing me of?” Starkey said, putting the empty pole in it’s cradle. He popped a small pill from the vial, dry swallowed it and capped the vial and put it back in the hip pocket of his denims.

“I believe you are are not only trying to enrich yourself to the detriment of others, I believe you are trying to use force to do so.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“And built one of the largest businesses in the basin by being so.”

“Yeah, but it’s taken you since the Jamestown colony to do it.”

“The 53rd, if that’s how you measure it.”

“I hardly have that long.”

“Why? Are you ephemeral?”

“Impatient,” Starkey said. “I need that sabotage stopped.”

“The tribesmen need those motorways stopped. Will you send robots to exterminate them? Your engineers will be paralyzed when they attempt to program them.”

“If you’re not helping me, you’re hurting me.”

Shingharm saw Centorin’s Imperial Sardukar, blasters snapping, converging on him in that sentence. But Shingharm didn’t get to where he was today, third on the business council of Vnassvuur, by backing down from anyone, and a Centorin barbarian, who’s planet hadn’t been settled until he was on the Vnassvuur business council as an inductee, certainly wasn’t going to change that trend. “Spoken like a true native of a primitive, simplistic and brutal civilization.”

“So your true colors show.”

“I tried to be polite,” he said, “for that is something Karasis asks of me. I should have let you stew in the waiting room for about four hours yesterday. I should have had you escorted from the property as soon as you uttered your ridiculous, preposterous claims. Your motorways have hurt my competition, not me. I’ll be hauling brine jars with vagabonds til long after Hardensburg and Dlon dai and all the cities of Centorin civilization have fallen to dust.”

“The hell you will you smug ass,” Starkey said. He turned to the tackle box, turned back with the knife.

Too late Shingharm realized what that pill was, and how quickly it might take effect. There was nowhere to run on this boat, there was nothing to do but go over the side. He tried to do so, but wasn’t fast enough. The problem really was, his reflexes just weren’t prepared for an attack from another human being, and couldn’t cause him to react as fast as he would have should it have been a gleep or hyadune or coriax that was attacking him.

He had been alive over thirty centuries now, but he had never in all that time encountered a dangerous human being. He’d been protected by the Instinct every day of his life. He would never have said what he did just now if he would have been able to feel this was possible. Of course it wouldn’t have been so easy if he was able to fight back, he could hold his own against this man if he wasn’t paralyzed by the attempt.

As he died of the effects of that pill and his own fishing knife, he thought of how stupid he was to pick Starkey up at a public dock where no one knew who they were. Now no one

would ever know who had done this.

2. The Girl From MkenetWind

Dyoniss stared at the globe of Kortrax, red on the horizon, his banding at a maximum in recent years. Narrulla in transit like an open mouth shouting celebration for this view. From the seventy eighth floor, silhouettes of slender towers slit the face of the sun for a hundred miles, for the Old Canal lead toward the setting sun in the height of summer.

The office was empty, but he stayed more for the thrill of the view than the need to be here. It was a thrill and an honor to have this space. He could never afford to live in an elevator building like this. Maybe he could afford the home, but never the elevator service. Kyonmeere gave all his employees one free pass per week on the elevator to get up here, and even let them keep the penny they earned on the way down. Dyoniss was more fortunate, he was a case operative and could come and go as he pleased, but what his weight earned him on the way down went back into the company account.

There was one case he had open that he could pretend might send him a message even this late in the week. That was connected to a fusion reactor furball coil that had disappeared en route to Hardensburg, a Centorin settlement two thousand miles beyond the horizon Kortrax was sliding behind. Hardensburg would be in daylight for many more hours and would not have to pay dark rates for the Eyes if they were to message him now.

The office owned two pocket eyes, besides Kyonmeere's personal one. He could take one of them home if he wanted,

just in case he wanted to pay dark rates on a message that wouldn't come in anyway. There had never been a message during the dark from Hardensburg except on the Centorin system. He was trying to convince Kyonmeere they needed a device on that system.

Dyoniss had a bad feeling about that case as soon as Centorins got involved. Though his father was Centorin, he was still not convinced that their presence was a good thing. Some of them hated the Instinct for one thing, and there had been several incidents of antidotes to it being used in the far west in the past three years. Most people weren't as concerned as they should be because it was Centorin on Centorin violence, and that had been in the news since the suntowers first contacted that planet twenty centuries ago. The far end of this basin was still so far away that it seemed as distant as any of the Centorin planets, but in reality there was extensive Centorin settlement as close as two thousand miles from here, and at least a hundred thousand full-blooded Centorins in the Ydlontrostl Cities themselves.

After Narrulla came out of transit but before Kortrax disappeared, Dyoniss closed his cabinets and locked up his new office. He had to look at it one last time. Even way out here in the east of Hdengragger Principate, a private work space was normal in the 123rd century, but one with a window was rare. Kyonmeere had purchased a home in the residential shell of this ancient crystal tower and added it to the office space he occupied in the commercial core of the tower. Kyonmeere's own office was the main room of that residence, the two bedrooms were Gaicher's and now his offices. The back closets and a whole section of hallway had been taken

out and added to the commercial space. Fifteen more career people worked for them, using the commercial space on the seventy eighth and seventy seventh floors.

Kyonmeere must think more highly of him than he let on in words. Their relationship was cordial enough, and they got along well in the office, but their friendship did not extend outside it. Kyonmeere was a playboy who lived in the tower and loved the thrill of the clubs. Dyoniss was a quieter type, he'd go to the Blue Kite if a caravan or haunt act was playing, but he'd be in the balcony more often than on the floor, while Kyonmeere would have a party table as close to the action as he could get and be filling the cups of any enhanced babes who would sit there. Dyoniss loved the fields, a long paddle on a new canal, or a beach vacation down at the river. He lived with his mother in an ancient hangleaf less than a mile from the base of the tower.

He made his way to the elevator, the device that made this tower possible. He thought of the Centorin fusion generator that made the elevator possible. That meant that the view from his new office was made possible by Centorins. But he also knew the tower predated the stargate by centuries, so at one time some other power source must have run this elevator. Even now the hulking, ancient tower was festooned with windwheels and windtraps, suntraps and relay eyes. The tower was started before a human foot first touched Centorin, even in a space suit.

He was soon down to street level. The bottom four floors of the tower is the Blue Kite, the club for which the tower is

named, an ultimate power club currently ranked number four in the basin, featuring the 'lectroshok' musical genre but with an occasional caravan or even haunt superstar. It's hall was all crystal and mirror with holographic projectors, moving floors, steps, benches and walls, with hallucinogenics in the ventilation system, a hundred trysting suites for ten penny and up, half a floor of gambling machines under the balcony, three matchmaking booths and a two-level basement of eye-rooms, game-rooms, video and audio editing machines, graphic displays, screening rooms and photo studios. It published three magazines, four network music feeds, three labels of yaag, seven of ale, and tolerated quite an assortment of free-lance pill men on it's floor, especially when it got crowded. Dress was optional, especially on the floor when it was crowded. Technically sex was not permitted on the dance floor but there were times when it was too crowded to prevent.

He saw only the view across the dance floor to the stage, not very crowded yet with a very monotonous, thumpy, yuh-yuh band hammering away. Opposite that, the path lead under the balcony and passed rows of gambling machines, magazine stands, taps and grills, til it got to the outdoors. This path was the commercial court of the club floor, as well as the path to the elevator. It was lined with the huge crystal pillars of the great tower, with cooks and kegmen between them and another row of gambling machines behind them. It was pretty busy with people finding an early duskmeal or enjoying a cup or two before. The evening of dusk seems to be a natural time to turn up the party all over the Ydlontrostl cities.

The tower is not on the canal, but on Howling Chorus

Avenue just a mile east of the Eastern Terminus of the Old Canal and a few blocks east of a modern canal. This location was fine, because it was only a short walk home. The Tower of the Blue Kite had been standing about twenty four centuries, depending on when you wanted to start calling it a tower and not a roadhouse. The city had transformed many times while it stood lofty and immovable above it all. Some still thought the Eastern Terminus was Hdengragger center when the Blue Kite first opened. The city of that age had fallen to ruin and the stones had been carted off. The great crystal tower of Blue Kite and the slender needle of TworganicMagic were monuments to that age, unscratched by the centuries and looming above smaller shops and smallholds grown of low-lying cheeseapple, gnarl and coachstick, laced by avenues of hangleaf townhomes.

There was still plenty of commercial activity all around the base of the tower. It was in a wide courtyard in the shape of a many pointed star, now paved with natural flat stone on which an ever-changing gaggle of booths and cooks set up. Town homes grew above the floor or two of reclaimed cut-stone commercial space that rimmed the tower courtyard. He was glad to see that today it wasn't so crowded that it was hard to get by. There had been times when the crush of the crowd was a flood that carried all before it.

Besides Howling Chorus Avenue, there were lots of small streets converging on the tower's plaza, the tower was the city to this whole neighborhood. In the northeast corner of the tower plaza was Avenue Nemo. It's a few short blocks between sturdy four story townhomes out that way to Saseraik Walk.

Zestin's is the first storefront on Saseraik. It's planked in under the back rooms of the hangleaf above that fronts on Avenue Nemo. Zestin's two front wall panels tilt up to become roof panels for the tables that might get dragged out onto the path a few feet. You won't hit your head if you stay in your seat. Lorry and Partil, some neighbors of his, were sitting at one of those tables trading funny stories about canal men they had known. They were washing them down with twenty ounce ales, maybe more than one because they were drowning out Zestin's little speakers. Byiroi was at the bar with Zestin, with a cup of green going already. Esmin was chatting up a stranger farther down the bar, Mypra and Toolon had their heads together at an inside table but they waved. He didn't see Yashmi, she would be sitting at the bar with Byiroi and Zestin if it was this quiet here. Lorry and Partil called him a few names and he called a few back. There weren't enough people here to get much of that drinking game started, but just enough to make him stop by and borrow a house cup for a quick one.

He might as well keep his cup here because this was about the only place he used one. Instead he had a house cup that was almost his. It was a twenty ounce with a rootball handle. He had to put it together because the bowl was still in the drainer. He took a penny's worth of yellow and asked Byiroi how it was going, got an earful about SleepingFourth, his fat and lazy keda.

The only other person here was a girl that must be new to the area because he'd seen her here with Esmin when he'd

come down to walk Yashmi home a couple evenings ago. A guy he barely knew had just walked off and left her sitting by herself at the street end of the bar. She was cute, really nice hair, long and curly and off-black, really pretty face and eyes with a hint of elf in them, fit, with nice even coloring. She was in a blue and maroon print street-wrap, pretty short and down off one shoulder.

He knew he'd met her before, but couldn't place it. He was going thru all the new landowner parties in his mind, anywhere along Saseraik walk in the last decade or so, because he knew it wasn't recent. He could see that she was going over him the same way, and was probably trying to place him also. He would have to speak with her anyway, whether he could remember or not because they were giving each other more than just casual glances.

As he started in her direction, it finally came to him. "MkennitWind, back in '2153," he told her. Her eyes told him it clicked in her mind too. "It was delightful," he said, "we had the room on the fifth floor with the leather knotwork in the window." The whole evening had been perfect, and mainly because of her. He had always wished he could have seen her again.

"Yeah," she said, "after a very nice slow dance." He remembered that as soon as she said it, how his boner had ached for her. "*It was* delightful wasn't it," she said. She wasn't very demonstrative, now, but her smile looked heartfelt, and she had been much more demonstrative that evening.

He should have tried harder to find her after they became

separated, he worried that she might have thought he blew her off. “Kessil, am I right?”

“Yes,” she said, “you actually remember me after almost a decade?”

“You made an impression,” he said, and she had. He wished she had looked him up after he turned in her notebook, he’d written his name and address. He wished he had kept it and used it as an excuse to track her down. He could have done so, he was a detective after all.

“And how many girls have you encountered in the Blue Kite since then?” she asked.

“Oh, maybe four?” None of them had seemed interesting after Kessil, he had almost given up going there for companionship and stuck with the neighbors on their variety evenings.

Instead of snapping back in surprise, her head snapped forward, “Are you that picky or you don’t go there much?”

“Too big and busy, I don’t like lecktroschock that much.”

“So I guess it’s not so strange that I never saw you again.”

That must mean she had actually looked, he allowed himself to hope that she felt at least a little of what he did that evening. “Even if we were there at the same time, ten times we might not see each other,” he said. There might be ten thousand there in an evening like the one of their encounter.

“I’ve probably been there a hundred times in a decade, I work on the modern canal just a couple blocks down from the Howling Chorus bridge.”

“I wish I remembered that, I would have stopped by.”

“Oh?” she asked. “You had my notebook.”

“I turned it in...”

“Then I couldn’t identify it because I asked before I went home.”

“I turned it in the next day, I went to my office on Nightday and turned it in to the club on the way.”

“I should have gone back,” she said. “Did you put your name and address in it? I admit I don’t remember your name even.”

“Dyoniss, but Centorins pronounce it Joniss. I might not have ever told you, I don’t remember that you asked. I thought that might be part of the magic, that you were really some prairie sprite that made that evening magic.”

There was a certain melancholy about her but it lifted slightly. “It was for me, but you didn’t remember me at first.”

“I couldn’t place you at first, I think it’s because the picture I remember of you is nude with sweaty hair.”

She laughed once, “I had this same sheath on that day, it’s just a little more faded now,” she teased.

“I’m sorry it took me a minute to place you.” He moved the next stool closer to hers and took it. “I’m serious, that was a really nice evening.” He really regretted that the stampede had prevented them meeting again. “I’m glad fate brought us together that dusk.”

“I’m sure MKennetWind had something to do with it.”

“Well, of course, but I thought you were there for the show also?”

“Yeah,” she said, “but since then I’ve kept an eye open for you.”

“Really?” he asked.

“You have some depth to you, you weren’t just there because she’s a celebrity.”

“Oh no, I was there in spite of the celebrity.”

“Me too,” she said. “So are you stopping for one or settling in for the evening?” She held up her cup, he remembered it from that evening. It had a tall, sixteen ounce parabolic bowl, blue at the rim fading to prairie green at the bottom, very clear and transparent, hooked in a base made up of the skulls of hatchling three-horned mrang, bound in stretched mrang leather bindings. He had a cast plastic imitation of it at home that he took out for special occasions. He’d had it that night.

“Probably just one, I’m expected home, but that’s very nice,” he said about her cup, which was still two thirds full of Zestin’s yellow. “Where’d you get that?”

“Now there’s something you forgot. My grandfather gave it to me when I left home. He says he made it himself.”

“Quite the craftsman,” he said. He moved the stool a little closer to her, but didn’t want to start anything because Yashmi was expecting him home to help eat a goulash she was making. On the other hand he didn’t want to let her get away again. “So you must be new to the area?” he asked.

“I guess you could say I’m house sitting with option to buy.”

“That’s interesting.”

“The owner wants to sell it, I can either buy it or stay til it’s sold.”

“Are you going to buy?”

“I’ve only been there two weeks. I wanted to get some garden space and there isn’t much. Besides that, the house is too small and below ground in the back.”

“Where are you now?”

“Was I. Two weeks ago I was down the North Modern Canal about a mile, I had the top two floors of a subdivided townhouse. Didn’t I tell you that back then?”

“I remembered you, but I don’t remember every word of everything we said. I know we each said, ‘are you ready for another?’ more often than I’m used to.”

“Me too,” she laughed. “I was afraid you thought I was a wasted party girl.”

They had watched most of the show from their feet, near the back of the dance floor, in the keg lines, holding each other closer as the evening progressed. Maybe it was MkenetWind, but it had been such a perfect encounter that he was too absorbed in the moment to think about the future. That was a party evening, but he wasn’t looking for a party girl most of the time. He already had one of those to take care of. “You haven’t met my mother,” he said.

“No, not yet,” she said, like it was only a matter of time. If she came here often, she would, whether she got to know Dyoniss or not.

“She’s what keeps Zestin in business.”

“Yashmi?” Zestin overheard. “Lorry drinks almost as much as she does.”

“Yashmi is your mother?” Kessil asked, obviously knowing her.

“You’ve met my mother,” Dyoniss said, hoping she

wouldn't hold it against him. After all, they had gotten pretty wasted at that show, she might think he was the sot.

“Yeah, the first time I was here. She's a live one all right but we got along great. She introduced me to Esmin.”

Esmin had someone at home, that would have just been some variety, but he was quite the variety hound about the neighborhood and had a nest above the garden shed at the far end of his property that he could use. Kessil had been sitting with Esmin when Dyoniss came to get Yashmi last Nightday. “I can introduce you to everyone here,” Dyoniss said.

“No need, I've been introduced to them all at least once, I can ease into the neighborhood gradually.”

“Sure,” he said, wondering what that was about. But he could imagine himself in the situation and knew he would be overwhelmed and not remember all the names. “So it sounds like you must have a career?”

“I'm a maintenance engineer with Mbeshna Power.”

“Isn't that...” he started to say, not suave enough to think that someone who worked for the company might not want to discuss it.

“The one with the windwheel operator that escaped from his spouse,” she groaned.

“Yeah,” he said a bit sheepishly.

“I know less than what's in the media because I don't read the media reports about it.” He didn't know what to say, it was obvious she wasn't happy about the situation. He wished he could think before he spoke sometimes. She went on, “it sort-of proves what I've been saying for decades.”

“What's that?”

“That we need to get more wheels working,” she answered.

“They don’t listen to you?”

“They listen to what’s financed.” He laughed. “Are you contracted?” she asked.

“With the Kyonmeere agency, we investigate thievery and vandalism under contract.”

“You work Afternoondays?”

“Not usually,” he said. He couldn’t resist getting close to her, she put her hand on his knee, which he noticed a lot more from her than most girls he met. Other than the good time they’d had at that show, there was something about her that grabbed his attention, and while she was cute, she wasn’t a spectacle, not actually as sexy as the one Esmin was working on today. “I usually have the whole day free except for what Yashmi needs help with in the garden.”

“I thought I heard you say you were coming from the office?”

He didn’t want to sound like he was bragging, “I was called in to move my office,” was all he said.

“Ah, I hope it wasn’t into a stuffy loft like mine.”

“Actually, it’s almost too good to be true, like meeting up with you again.” The memories were pretty clear actually, blurred more by the drink than the time that had passed. It had been one of those magic evenings from, ‘mind if I lean on the wall next to you?’ to a long psychedelic grind in a fifth floor trysting suite while some of the most sultry songs in the whole beautiful concert serenaded them from the fine speakers built into every suite.

“It’s just random chance,” she said, “as long as we’re both in this area it had to happen eventually, but I’m glad it finally did. What did we talk about that evening that we know so little about each other?”

“How good you felt, how I had to stop dancing for a minute so I didn’t get us wet, things like that.”

“We just cuddled together listening a lot in a few different places. I remember looking up at the fifty foot tall holoprojection from right near her feet.

“We talked about MkenetWind as I remember,” he said, “to start with any way. A few other groups like them, recording sales and the way we had our recordings arranged. Later we discussed your eyes, your lips...” It had been one of those magical moments when neither of them held back. He had been attracted to her from first glance, and finding her responding had been thrilling.

“Your chin,” she said, “and chest.”

“Centorins are adapted to thinner air.”

“We were too limp by the time we parted to resist the stampede,” she said, “at least I was.”

“We should have exchanged info earlier in the evening,” Dyoniss said.

“Like this early,” she said and whipped a big pocket-eye from her shoulderbag, which was currently sitting on the bar. “What’s yours?”

He gave it to her, “Fifth house left on fifteenth right off Sarseraik.” Her pocket eye had as many keyholes as a desk board and though her fingers really weren’t thin and dainty, she used it easily. He remembered she hadn’t been delicate in

bed either, but that had been a passionate evening. He shouldn't have told Yashmi he would be home, he hoped he would get the office, hoped he would have something to celebrate this dusk. He could think of no better way to celebrate than to spend another evening with this girl.

“Not too far, that's just a little path ain't it? Does it have a name?”

“Not really, maybe Yashmi's Walk since she sold most of the land on it.”

“That's down deeper in the dell.”

“Yeah, but we still get enough sun, the hangleaf the house is in gives more shade than the slope does.” He had his own shoulderpocket, sewn to his office worker. He always carried his notepad in that, he flipped it to the address page. “And you, where are you staying and since you have a pocket eye, you must have a mailbox.”

“On the eye I'm just Yd-Hd-Mb-Eng-Kessil, my alias is VerseM'lOryElfEye.”

He could believe the ElfEye, her eyes were hypnotically beautiful, when he looked in her eyes he was afraid to fall in. “I just love your eyes, you could sell that look for a fortune.”

“It doesn't work that way. The look is coded different for each individual. It is a sum of all alleles in the genotype. That's why they need to give you a reader pill the day before to gather your metagenetic settings. The whole problem in selling a mod is programming the analysis synthesis matrix to adapt to whatever the population throws at it.”

“You sound educated.”

“I like reading, and I don't usually drink as much as we

did that evening...”

“Neither do I,” he said.

“...So I can retain some of it,” she finished.

“I guess neither of us can afford to be a wastrel.”

“But I still like an evening like the one when we met,” she turned, as if inviting him to put his other arm around her.

He did, but knew that to be fair he should bring up his plans before he gave the wrong impression. “Have you seen Yashmi today?” he asked.

“No, should she be here?”

“Actually she said she was making goulash today,” Dyoniss said, “and expected me to help her eat it.”

Kessil frowned.

“What?”

“I was just trying to find the courage to ask you about duskmeal.”

3. The One Who Got Away

Kessil was hoping she had made as good an impression on this guy as he was saying. She hoped she wasn't losing him or putting him off by giving him information on the genetics of eye appearance. Her look wasn't marketable, even if it was natural. She was just glad he liked them. She had gambled by sending the other guy on his way. She thought she knew this man, and had guessed right. He wasn't quite as classically beautiful as the one who was chatting with her a few minutes ago, but she thought she remembered a fantastic encounter with him in the past and was glad that she had been right.

"You sound educated," he said.

She wished she was good enough at people to know whether he said it with admiration or chagrin. If he knew what an engineer was, he knew she had to have some education. "I like reading, and I don't usually drink as much as we did that evening..."

"Neither do I," he said.

"...So I can retain some of it," she finished. She wouldn't want to live a life where every evening was like the one of the MkenitWind show.

"I guess neither of us can afford to be a wastrel," he said.

Neither did she want to live a life without evenings like that one. "But I still like an evening like the one when we met," she turned, hoping he would put his other arm around her also.

He did and she was encouraged, enjoyed the warmth of hormones starting to flow. Since he hadn't tracked her down, she figured their encounter had been just another one sleep affair and tried to put it out of her mind. After years of variety lists and one sleep affairs, even a few she wished were something more, she had never forgotten that evening. He might be interested in just another encounter, but she couldn't let that fear stop her.

He changed the subject by asking, "Have you seen Yashmi today?"

"No, should she be here?"

"Actually she said she was making goulash today," Dyoniss said, "and expected me to help her eat it." Her disappointment must have shown because he looked at her and asked, "What?"

It would be senseless to try and hide anything, she knew he could read people the night of that show. She leaned back and put her head on his shoulder to tell him. "I was just trying to find the courage to ask you about duskmeal."

She could see he was torn by that, "I'm sure there will be enough for three."

She sighed, "I'd feel like a waif." She didn't know if she could go to Yashmi's for dinner. She didn't know how much of their little chat Yashmi would remember, and certainly didn't know how she had taken it. Kessil was trying to laugh with her, because Yashmi was laughing, along with almost everyone who was here at the time. Two of whom, plus Zestin, were here now. It had been hours later when Dyoniss came down. By then Kessil was well into getting acquainted

with Esmin, and though Yashmi introduced Kessil to Esmin, Esmin had teased her more than anyone.

“Don’t feel like that, I’m inviting you and you said you’ve already met Yashmi.”

“That doesn’t mean I know how she feels about me.”

“She loves everyone,” Dyoniss said. “She said there was a ‘cute new girl, kinda quiet but she’s new’ that she talked to.”

“She must have said more than that about that evening?” she asked. Maybe mother and son don’t talk, but if he talked to any of the neighbors he must have heard something.

“Oh yeah, she talked all about it. She usually gets naked if she’s down here on Afternoondays, Nightdays not so much but Zestin had the wood stove going and Byiroi was cheering her on.”

“So you know?” Kessil asked.

“Yeah, she’s been like that as long as I can remember.”

“He’s been walking her home the best part of two centuries,” Zestin said.

“So come on down,” he said, squeezing her a little closer.

She wished he would move his hands up a little, but wasn’t going to rush him, and noticed that there wasn’t much real eroticism in here. “Don’t you think it’s a little early in our relationship to be bringing me home to dinner with your mother?”

“What’d’a mean? We’ve known each other almost a decade now.”

She just lost it laughing. She hadn’t dwelled on him these fifty years, but had thought of him more than once and kept

her eye open in public places. “Wouldv’e been nice,” she said. She had no serious relationship going on, then or now, just some male friends she could call on at any time. Some were Vailiss’ part timers, a couple were cooks, some were encounters at the regional office. Enough of a sex life to stay healthy, but nothing she would call a love life. Of all those chance encounters, Dyoniss was one of the few she wanted to follow up with. More often than not, she had to avoid the attentions of chance encounters who wanted to follow up with her.

“So drink up, lets go see what we can do to that goulash,” he said to her.

“I’ll follow you down while you go up and ask if it’s really all right with her.”

“It’s my home as much as hers now. I’ve been living there two centuries.”

She did remember he was born in the 121st. Neither one of them should be stupidly love-struck at this age, but she had to try to avoid swooning like a three decade youth as he held her, even in this chaste way. “I’m going to have to hear that it’s all right with her,” Kessil said, “if you can’t promise me that, I’ll sit here.”

“You’re a ruthless negotiator,” he said, and kissed her.

It surprised her, and so did her reaction. They got into it more than she really wanted to in a neighborhood place like this, especially if it was going to be her neighborhood and the other customers were going to cheer. Perhaps she thought a little too much about the setting and not enough about the kiss itself. As kisses go it was great, but she wished it was a more

private place because she suddenly wanted a lot more than a tongue-wrestle.

“So you’ll go up and ask her?” Kessil asked.

“I’ll go home and tell her I’m sorry but I’ve got other plans if you’ll wait for me.”

“That would be cruel,” Kessil said. The sensible thing to do would be to make arrangements to meet another time.

“When’s the next time you’ll be here?” she asked.

“I’ll go up and ask her,” he said, with an air of total capitulation.

She did say she would agree to that, she couldn’t very well back out of it. She downed the remainder of the yaag and picked up her shoulder bag. Dyoniss downed his and took the house cup back, he separated bowl and handle, put the bowl in the dishwater and the handle back on the rack. Zestin barely glanced at him with a tiny nod as he did. That meant he was a regular here. That meant he was probably a quiet guy, maybe he had a short list of women he saw regularly.

For now Saseraik Walk was wide enough for two. She remembered he hadn’t been put off by her modest size, so she enjoyed his elbow while she could. Saseraik Walk is little more than a path paved with modest sized cut stone, lined with smallholds of a half acre or less, and sloping very gently down into a small hollow on the flank of Hdengragger bluff. Most homes along this walk grew only what they were fond of or what grew well or easily. A good deal of them gardened only for the beauty and fragrance of the blooms.

Most homes were set into the hillside with the door on the

downhill side. Most display the number one, a circle, the number of Karasis, somewhere above the door. Most set their house back behind some shrubbery, often more ornamental than edible, with a honeydrop trellis or some other sweet enticement over the path to the front door. They had to duck into one of those doorpaths twice because of people coming by with big handcarts. He told her that was not unusual because many sold the extra of their favorite crop and many cooks were setting up for duskmeal now. The grazing karga that kept the path open were not unusual either. He knew most of them without reading their tags, some were familiar enough to rub against his shins and get petted.

“These guys just keep the path trimmed,” he told her. “Few of these will ever wind up on a table and if they do the owner of the house will probably yell at them to get down. Most of these are older than the families who keep them.”

The animal is not native to the basin, the Ydlontrostl is the home of the mrang, a class of much more brutish animals. Hunting, herding and butchering mrang had not been as difficult a moral dilemma as butchering karga or even thongga and lenta. Even so it was part of the reason she'd given up that life. She could eat karga because it was delicious, but she could never raise them for food or hunt them. She could tell just from the way he touched them and talked to them that he felt the same way. He knew them as life, knew their souls. If the path wasn't so narrow that they had to walk single file at this point, she might have given in to the urge to kiss him again.

A quarter mile up Saseraik Walk, a smaller path branches off to the left, dropping a bit more steeply into the dell, and Dyoniss lead the way onto that. She held back, wondering if she should bring this up now or wait and see how the evening developed. It was not that long a walk from here to the place she was sitting, but she didn't have her torch with her. Since Narrulla was just rising now, it would still be high in early Nightday, she could probably get home without the torch. If she stayed she'd want a toothbrush and a couple other toiletries, an outer wrap. She looked at the sky and thought she could forgo the rain gear, in summer it usually waited til later in Nightday to cloud up.

“What? Did you change your mind?” he asked.

“No, actually I'm wondering if I should stop and pick up a few things?”

“Like what,” he asked.

“That depends on how long I'm staying and where I'm sleeping.”

“Ah,” a smile came to his face. “I'd really like it if it was with me.”

So she knew he wanted her for at least the whole sleep, that was good, she wanted at least that. Actually she wanted to get on his list of regulars. “I would too,” she said, and pulled his arm to her as she remembered that evening. It might not have been the most uncontrollable lust she ever experienced, but it had been nice. She wasn't going to need a long seduction to be ready to repeat it, even if it was just one sleep again. “But I can't invite myself to your place, and I don't know if I would be comfortable there.”

“You will, unless you’ve completely changed in the last decade.”

“Then it would be easier if I got a couple things now while there’s light.” Some part of her mind had slipped into the ‘going home with a guy for dinner and the sleep’ behavior and forgotten his mother was Yashmi.

She led him a little farther down Saseraik walk and to a path on the right. It was the third house down. Both its house and garden were in the space once occupied by a storage shed of the house beside it. The house was too close to the path, the front yard was right on it. The garden overhung the roof and was a half level up from the kitchen, which was in the back part of the house and didn’t get much light.

Dyoniss looked around while she stuffed what she needed in her shoulder bag. She got in a light night-wrap just in case she stayed over til late in the day. Who knows, if it went as well as their encounter at the MkenetWind concert, she might be there til dawn. Why not spend the whole dark together and get to know each other? After a day and two sleeps together they’ll know if they want to be friends, regulars, or maybe even more. She was tempted to leave her pocket-eye here, but this place wasn’t very secure and she would feel guilty if she cut herself off from contact.

She could understand her physical attraction to him, he was decent looking, tall and broad shouldered with such pretty eyes and mouth, thick hair in a neat tail, a beard just a little too small for his chin. What she didn’t understand was why she was already thinking of something more than another breathless encounter.

“I see what you mean,” he said, “I’ve had bigger rooms at inns.”

“I really think I want more than this,” she said.

“My room at Yashmi’s isn’t this big, but the gathering room is.”

The floor of the house was only a couple inches above the nearest paving stones of the path. The front yard had an outdoor table and a trellis against the path. The trellis was thick with old larorlie and there were a half dozen yearling pods and a like number of new flowers about to pop on each rosette. There were hundreds of rosettes on the trellis, such a crop would give her plenty of yaag to spare, even steeping it down to gold.

“There’s more pods here than I can use,” Dyoniss told her.

“I’d probably go thru two or three rosettes in a year.” She probably wouldn’t drink much at home even if she had it.

“But Yashmi could get thru the rest of the trellis if she tried.”

Kessil didn’t want to say how she believed it, instead she hoisted her bag. “Want to see the garden while you’re here?”

“Just a peek, I don’t have to go thru it. It’s starting to get dark anyway.”

Kortrax had been below the horizon almost an hour now and the purple of the sky was getting deep. Narrulla was a fingernail in the west as they got to the top of the kitchen stairs. There was a drain for this stairwell that went under the house, she knew that would be a constant problem. Tarrek thought he was going to get fifty coppers for this place, but she wouldn’t give him thirty. Maybe someone with no more

than thirty would, but only if they had friends and family very close by. She knew there was going to be a scene when she told him that she wasn't going to try and sell it for more than thirty coppers.

While he looked over her garden, she wrapped her arms around him from behind. He turned and caressed her. They got a chance for a much more satisfying kiss than back at Zestin's tap. She really didn't think it was a real kiss if she didn't also get squeezed, and she only had to caress his chest to give him the idea. She remembered something else about that night, when she asked him to forgive her for not having more for him to get his hands into. 'I'll just have to handle them more to make up for it,' he had said and he had done just that.

She wound her hand around his bottom, enjoying the meat and letting him do the same with her. "If it wasn't getting late," he said, "we might have to stop here for a half hour or so if we keep this up."

She wondered if she should tell him she could be quicker than that if she had to? Some of the guys she met at conferences were quicker than lumins it seemed. She'd had one that had been under five minutes from fully dressed to fully dressed again. She didn't, she didn't want it to be like that. She imagined Yashmi passing out at the kitchen table and them going up to his bedroom for a whole sleep of what they'd had at that concert. Between the kiss, the petting, and reminisces, she could feel the heat between her legs already. She got in motion before she did have to delay him here to test this bed. She hadn't had anyone in it yet, and to be

honest, she probably never would. Tarreck would be back to talk to her before winter, week Kivundeer at the latest.

The path Dyoniss lead her down had no posted name, it was just a back path that lead between gardens. There were quite a few around like it that just lead to some back gardens where people had their cash crop. There would be no parts of this path where they could walk side by side. This path was only a single row of paving stones, munched clear by karga and lined most of the way with sprayberry bound by bean vines. They were all in bloom and in twilight, birds were everywhere. Kessil immediately recognized Yashmi as she was standing in the path with her rather angular hip sticking out and grinning. She was naked in the last light of the week and looked to have a pretty good buzz going, judging from her wide grin.

“I was wondering if you were going to make it,” was her greeting, “and I’m happy to see you’ve brought our new neighbor with you.”

She hadn’t planned for Yashmi being out on the path. “As long as you don’t mind?” Kessil asked.

“I sent him off with instructions that he would have to help eat this goulash I made. He asked me to make it, if he didn’t tell you.”

“I didn’t say it had to be today,” he said.

“I was ready to make it today. I was already starting the sauce when he left,” she told Kessil. To them all she said, “If we all team up on it, we should be able to clean the crock.”

“I’m grateful to you,” Kesssil said, “but I feel like a

waif.”

“You look like the guest of honor to me,” Yashmi said. “I’m honored to have you with us. I’m glad to see you weren’t too disgusted to come over. Glad you met Dyoniss by the way, I’m real proud of my cub,” she said.

“She’s an engineer with Mbeshna,” Dyoniss told her.

Kessil guessed that Yashmi had some idea what the word ‘engineer’ meant, but didn’t know the specifics. “What does that involve?” she asked.

“A lot of day-to-day paperwork, but the most interesting thing has been trying to figure out why quarter-inch gasket rings are failing on package sorters all over the cities.”

“That sounds like the kind of thing Dyoniss investigates,” Yashmi said. “What did you have to go in for today?” she asked Dyoniss. She felt immediately accepted by Yashmi, partly because she wasn’t being made the center of attention. She thought she even knew where Yashmi was coming from, wanting to show the better side of her personality, as opposed to the blotto side.

“To move my office,” Dyoniss answered her. “Kyonmeere gave me the window office on the left,” he told her, “now that Hdaiya’s all moved out.” She’d never actually let him get to that had she? There had always been an immediate distraction before he got to the details of moving his office.

When she thought of him, she dreamed of him being a quality person, one who at least worked as a temp regularly, not a mooch she would have to support. He would only be given an office with a window if he was one of the agency’s top investigators. He had said he worked for the agency, she

imagined he pulled cables in the eye room or leg work in libraries. She understood from this that he was modest, a quality valued by Karasis, and/or he wanted to maintain a cover.

It was evident that Yashmi knew what it meant from her reaction. Her hands went to her mouth, then she grabbed him in her arms, “Fantastic, you make me so proud of my baby.” He held her and patted her back.

“What happened to Hdaiya?” Kessil asked.

“Just a few weeks ago he left to start his own agency, with some rancor, rumor has it. He and Kyonmeere were close friends when the agency started, that’s another reason I was a little surprised to get his office,” Dyoniss told her.

“Let me congratulate you also,” she said and took him in a hug that only started like the one he gave Yashmi. She clung to him harder than she should, hoping that she wasn’t acting too desperate, but it might have been his boner that pried them apart.

Yashmi smiled at them like she was going to make some comment but said, “Oh yeah, there was a guy here to see you earlier,” as soon as they took a step toward the stairs. “He said it was about the Hardensburg case so I told him the way to your office. Did he come up?”

“No; and it won’t be the last time we’ll lose a tip because a promise to reimburse the cost of the elevator doesn’t help the guy who doesn’t have it in the first place.”

“I gave him good directions, I didn’t start drinking til I was done with the chores and that wasn’t til after lunch.”

“At least you’re still upright,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I’m just happy,” she steered him toward the house. “I haven’t even forgotten the goulash yet, it’s still on the flame.”

The house was an ancient single-trunk hangleaf, it’s three half flights up to the main floor, which is in the breaks of the lowest limbs. It’s only a few steps from the path to the bottom of the stairs and the limbs overhang the path a bit. She could see that there were two levels enclosed inside, but there were some half levels in between. Its walls were roll mats, good thick ones with clamp boards and wind straps. The roofs were leaf, the same as the tree but in fuse-frond. It branched widely from every corner in the house, and the fronds were long and thick, barely starting to retract for the dark. Kessil could see that it is easily the oldest house in the neighborhood, the compact and low-lying cheeseapple and gnarlwood that grew modern homes hadn’t even been developed when this hangleaf took root. No doubt some of its leaves were older than she was. There was a lot of intricate grafting in the framework of the house. It would have been done many centuries ago when that style was popular. If Yashmi was that old she was one of the oldest around here. When the days of youth and peace began, there were only a few million people in the cities, far less than Tosdoytl had at the time.

At the top of the stairs was a door that came out on a landing. On one side was the table, on the other a large room with a deck overlooking the fields. Straight across was a cooking area with a large free-standing burner on which a small cauldron was bubbling. Over the stairway an alcove

with a large bay window was lined with bookcases and had a couple reclining chairs with reading lamps and a generous cupstand between them. She could see a ladder and the corner of a loft on the opposite side of the gathering room. It was all random sizes and angles, built onto where the tree grew but making good use of the space and getting plenty of light to the cooking area. The decorations and furnishings were a little more ornate and busy than average, but the colors were subtle, mostly wood and a few fabric accents.

The table overlooks the front path thru bird-lattice windows, but they had not let down the mats yet. It was still warm and not dark enough for the birds to swarm the lanterns. There were lanterns on the path below, one could dine in here by their light alone. There were three stools and a long bench around the bay window overlooking the front path. Eight could sit at this table without finding another stool.

Yashmi immediately turned off the cooking flame. Dyoniss went to get bowls. She was enthralled by the house. Before coming to the table, she wandered thru the gathering room and out to the deck. The deck was above the farm sheds, but was level and steady. There was a railing all the way around, overgrown with larorlie, but still with less clusters than on the trellis at Tarreck's house.

The garden was extensive, in the shape of a fat 'L' extending behind the next four houses. There was a small irrigation pond beyond the far end of the garden that would probably be big enough for a swim. This was the kind of property she wanted to buy. If she was to find something just

like this, it would be out of her price range, but any of the low-slung houses around it would be fine. This was more the type of neighborhood she should be looking in. She went to the other side of the deck, looked around the house toward the west.

Dyoniss came up behind her, took her in his arms and held her quite erotically. “It’s still a pretty sunset,” he said.

“It is.” There were a few pink and purple puffballs on the horizon, probably out over Kyoith or Hest somewhere, too far in the distance to be over Boomig. He was stirring her up again, she let it go because she was confident of the coming satisfaction. Her only worry had been Yashmi’s reaction, and knowing she had no hard feelings about last Nightday had allowed Kessil to fully relax into the pleasure. Knowing he was much more, not less, than he seemed had let her relax even more. She sank against him, he sank into her. She looked to the expanding sliver of Narrulla in the sky and wondered what that catch was going to be.

She turned her head for another kiss. It was hard on her neck but worth it. She turned in his arms to the east and saw dozens of fertile gardens in view and farther in the distance, over a dozen windwheels. She knew one of them was Old Fifty One, lazily turning, just a ghostly shadow in the last of the light.

Yashmi called from the door, “It’s ready, but I can keep it warm if you need to bang one off before we eat.”

Kessil giggled, “at least your mother’s not a prude,” she said.

“No, I don’t have that problem.”

“But lets eat first,” Kessil said, “I don’t know about you, but what I want to do with you is a bit more than ‘bang one off’.”

“Exactly,” he said, and it felt like he meant it. Then he called to Yashmi, “We’ll be right in,” but then leaned in to kiss her one more time. That was when she knew her heart was given and whatever that catch was that kept him free of a housemate, she would have to overcome it.

4. A Dinner Guest

Dyoniss actually had to wait a minute to let his boner go down before he went in to supper. He wanted to give thanks for his good fortune in meeting Kessil again and convincing her to come home with him. It was as if Karasis knew he wanted someone to share his life with once more and she was what Narrulla in transit was really heralding. Having her in his arms brought back all the memories of that magical evening. He wanted this sleep to be special, he was sure it would be. Quick and dirty was not how he wanted to make love to her this time. He wanted to show her that he'd been thinking of her. He really hoped they could be more to each other than an encounter in a club. He wondered if she was open to more than a brief encounter. He thought about what he should ask her that would let him know her without seeming to pry. He was too infatuated with her already, and knew nothing more about her than she liked MkenetWind, had a good career and was very compatible sexually. Asking about her interests should be a good place to start.

They were just sliding around the bench of the front table when he saw someone coming up the path. He was looking back more often than one would expect and once he got in front of their place, stopped to look around again before coming over to their side. It was a minute before they heard anything. Dyoniss was beginning to wonder if it was someone sneaking around to rob the garden tools when they finally heard a voice. He was using the speaking tube but that came

out in the front hall on the reading landing between floors, they heard him better direct thru the window than thru that.

“Is there a Dyoniss at this residence?” he said.

He could lean backward out the window and see him.

“Come on up,” Dyoniss called down to him.

“I’ll get you a bowl,” Yashmi called also, “just come right up here to the table.”

With a last look around, he mounted the stairs. The house is open enough with the mats up that he had no trouble finding his way. The dim pale blue in the sky still gave enough light. Yashmi sat him on the stool beside her and put a bowl in front of him before he could even introduce himself.

“It smells delicious but I’m not here to mooch dinner.”

“Maybe we won’t have so much left over,” Yashmi said. She was very much the manager of the chiller and never wanted to see it overfilled.

“You don’t know me?” he asked Dyoniss.

“No,” Dyoniss admitted, “but my memory’s not that great.”

“You probably wouldn’t,” he said, “What about you?” he asked Yashmi.

“Mine’s worse than his,” she said.

He didn’t ask Kessil, so Dyoniss presumed he knew both him and Yashmi. He could see Kessil didn’t feel included in this, but looked like she was trying to appear politely attentive. This was not how he wanted the meal to go.

“My name is Ragnar,” he said. “I don’t think we were introduced at the time, I don’t think Mikal even knew who I

was or that I even existed at that time.”

“Mikal,” Yashmi said, “I remember that name, he might have been your father,” she told Dyoniss.

“I’m rather convinced of it,” Ragnar said. “Before I would presume to trouble you,” he told Dyoniss, “I picked up one of your hairs from the cafe on Blue Kite Plaza where you had lunch on Morningday of Kveshnat.” That was earlier in the summer. “It told me that we are half brothers.”

Dyoniss looked more carefully at him. Then looked to Yashmi, “What color hair did Mikal have?”

“It was black,” she answered.

“He dyes it,” Ragnar said, “without the dye, it’s lighter than mine, like a Nordic brown.”

“Why would he do that?” Dyoniss asked. “This is great by the way,” he said to Yashmi, “you should dig in,” to Ragnar. Kessil wasn’t too shy to eat, and she seemed genuinely interested.

“To blend in,” Ragnar said, trying to ignore the goulash. “When he’s in Hardensburg he doesn’t bother, but back then, when he came here, he felt he had to blend in.”

He nodded, but had nothing more to ask on that subject. The important info was that Mikal’s hair color was what he wanted it to be. “So we are half brothers,” he said, and laced fingers. Dyoniss would appear to accept his story at face value but would reserve judgment until he saw how much money he asked for.

“That’s why I’m coming to you for help, that and the fact that you’re an investigator.”

He wasn’t going to waste time getting to the pitch, that

was good in a way. “You should have come to the office.”

He looked down, looked like he was tempted by the excellent goulash Yashmi made, but still hadn’t touched the spoon. “I don’t exactly have funding to come to the office. I could have paid the elevator, but I couldn’t pay the fee.”

“I see,” Dyoniss said. He saw Kessil look at him also. Her head seemed to slide forward, he wondered if her mooch alert had come on. “Well if you’re here for dinner it’s a personal matter, but if you can’t have dinner with us then this meeting will have to be business.” Ragnar finally picked up a spoon.

“I’m worried about what he’s doing,” Ragnar said.

“Fathering sons among the natives?” Yashmi asked.

“No, though I wonder about that sometimes too. Did you know there have been at least eight of us? Did you really want to get pregnant when you did?” he asked Yashmi.

“Certainly,” she said, “I wanted to get pregnant before I even met your father,” she looked to Dyoniss. There were a few things she remembered clearly from the distant past, and this had always been one of them. She wants to get pregnant any time she doesn’t already have a child living with her in the house. “He looked so lost when we met, he was rattled from weeks on the tube, he didn’t really know where he was going, and he was trying so hard not to show it. He barely knew any of the language, he really didn’t know where he was. He’d paid dearly for the most out-of-the-way tube address in the Empire and the Eastern Terminus station in Hdengragger was what he got.”

She continued, this story was memorized and she always played the whole recording, “He was clearly a victim of

culture shock. I found out he had seen nothing but the inside of a tube car since the Kassikan. He couldn't read Kassidorian, he didn't know he was stopping for air, he thought the tubes were sending him back and forth across the planet. When he finally understood that he'd come that far on a single planet, he was pretty stricken." She turned to Dyoniss, "You might not remember him, but I remember he stayed until you were one." Old enough for day school. "He left us a good pouch of copper also, I've still got some of that so you can't say he doesn't tend his crop." She nodded forcefully and picked up a spoonful to say she was done.

"He was a different man when he was with my mother," Ragnar said. "He had been here in the cities a few decades by then. He was super confident, but he never gave her more than that semen, and maybe the conception hormones, she swears she never took them. When asked about it, he very confidently remembered that he had never met her before, but a snifter said he was lying."

"He was that by the time he left here," Yashmi said, "or should I say by the time I threw him out. He had been a pup when we met, but in a decade he thought he should take control of my life."

"He's still that way," Ragnar said. "He runs a transport company now. He's trying to get a lock on the farm transport business into Hardensburg."

"He probably should have found his way out there," Yashmi said.

Hardensburg was nearly a Centorin city in the western end of the basin. There were lots of fusion plants, electric

lights and motor vehicles. Why the biggest Centorin colony in all the worlds of Kassidor was so far from the gatehead he had no idea. Maybe it was because most of the Centorins there were trying to escape something back in the Empire and they wanted to be as far from the gatehead as possible.

He could tell Kessil knew of Hardensburg also. Anyone who isn't a recluse or continually lost in vapors must know about it. He felt bad inviting her here and then getting interrupted by something that left her on the sidelines. He held her knee to show her he was still thinking of her. She gave him a quick smile but kept her attention on the conversation.

"This is excellent, as everyone told me," Ragnar said. "You're an artist," he told Yashmi.

"It's just stuff from the garden," she said.

She had sold some of her land over the centuries, but they still had an acre in crops and he didn't really need his career. He would never give it up however, he needed it just for the mental challenge. "Did you want me to track him down out in Hardensburg?" he asked Ragnar. It was possible he could wrangle a few coppers for a tube ride out there, after all, if he was worth a window office, and he was working on a case with problems there already, he should be worth sending out there. He didn't want to go now that he had just met Kessil again, he really didn't want this interruption in their reunion because he could tell she felt left out, even if it was interesting.

"I've had no trouble finding him in Hardensburg, he's in a big mansion with walls and gates and big men at them, just

like he's back on Centorin."

"People have a hard time giving up the styles they were born with, but give me the address." He had a notepad here in the dining room and pointed to it so Yashmi could hand it over.

"I'm thinking it's more than just styles, I'm afraid he's brought in a quantity of antidote to the Instinct." That opened a cold hole inside him. No doubt Ragnar could see he needed more than just his say-so to believe that. "He had me physically removed from the property when I confronted him about my mother for one thing. Three people who oppose his monopoly have died under mysterious circumstances in the year."

"They were all Centorins," Dyoniss said.

"They aren't exactly a lower form of life, we are half brothers by a Centorin father after all. A father who may be doing something unthinkable."

Dyoniss looked across the table at him. "So you think it is up to us to stop him?"

"Don't you agree? Surely you don't think you have no responsibility in this? He's your father as much as mine."

"Do you have any evidence, other than people who opposed him died?"

"His goons were rougher with me than the Instinct should allow."

"Were you actually hurt?"

"No, but they hustled me right out of his presence, one on each arm."

"The Instinct kicks in when you know you are using

violence on another,” Dyoniss said.

“You were on their property, is that correct?” Kessil asked, trying to take part.

“I came in the front peaceably.”

“The Instinct and the conscious do funny things when protecting one’s self or property is concerned,” Kessil said. “I was able to pull hard enough on a wrap someone once tried to steal from me that I hurt her, but I wasn’t paralyzed.”

He’d have to ask her about that someday, he wanted to know her whole background and wished that was what they were talking about rather than a horror story about his father. It wouldn’t be right to ask here and now however. “I’ve often wondered if the Instinct doesn’t work on some Centorins because they don’t think violence is wrong,” Dyoniss said. “Have those people that opposed him died violent deaths?”

“Two of them did, one fell from the sixth floor bridge over the canal at Noostook,” that was a town about fifty miles out of Hardensburg that was notorious as the worst of the Centorin colony, “one drowned in his kayak in the ways of Rages harbor when a motor barge ran him down.” That was the old river port city adjoining Hardensburg. “The other died in his sleep after an extreme binge. They know about the binge because he had it in him, but no one saw him drinking it. He was on Kivatorn Pass,” an eight lane avenue with quite a few crystal towers along it that was several principates down the canal, “on a bench about eight miles from home.”

“I’ve known people who could drink amazing amounts and never show it til they passed out cold right in front of you,” Dyoniss said.

“If you want to be like that,” Ragnar said.

“What do you mean?” Dyoniss asked.

“Making excuses, working hard to find ways it could be something else. Why not face the facts?”

“So far you’ve postulated he may have a motive for these deaths. Has he been there? The guy who was drinking was here in the cities, that’s all day on the tubes from Hardensburg.”

“He doesn’t kill people himself, he purchases and smuggles in the antidote, then hands out doses to his men. They down one and commit the act in the time after it takes effect and before they get reinfected.”

“Ah, so he’s not alone in this?”

“There are seventy five million Centorins in the west basin and another fifty million locals serving them. When were you last out there?” he asked.

Dyoniss had never been there, had never been west of Eldadn in his life, “I only saw that documentary that was going around about ten decades ago.”

“It’s a Centorin colony,” Ragnar said, “like Marsalis. They’ll do anything to get by the Instinct, there’s reactors all over the place, free elevators in every building. There’s talk about a nation of a million square miles, they’re building motor vehicles as big as riverboats and now have over a thousand miles of levrail track and almost ten thousand of tarstone motorway.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know what I can do about that. The Kassikan might take an interest, the Temple hasn’t said much.”

“The Temple is worried, I know an acolyte.”

Dyoniss knew three active and two relapsed, but he didn't bring that up. None of them had ever mentioned Centorins in any conversation he'd had with them. No doubt the Temple did have a team keeping an eye on the Centorin colony. So far most Centorins were out on the plains in the far west where very few people cared. A nation of a million square miles might fit in there without disturbing more than a few thousand people. Most of the herdsmen who had been out there were glad to get the money, and data service, and those who didn't want Centorin influence still had three million other square miles of wild prairie in the basin they could roam. “They haven't started preaching about them yet.”

“But they're watching,” Ragnar said.

“So what should we do?” Kessil asked, no doubt hoping to get the conversation out of this loop.

“His shipments come thru here, somewhere in the cities, they don't come straight to Hardensburg because that would be too obvious, even the usual smuggling routes would be too obvious. I've heard that the bottles are stolen from the regular smugglers by someone who transships them to another contact in the Hardensburg area who hand carries them to Mikal.”

“You have it all figured out.”

“All I can figure out from the Hardensburg end. It's been a long time since I was here, in the cities I mean, over a century, I was hoping you would know your way around.”

He did, he knew the usual smuggling routes, not every one, but he knew how they worked. He only nodded to say

yes to that, but asked, “You must have some names, an address, something to go after?”

“I know the transshipment involves a trip along the canal.”

“But the long distance is all on the tubes?” Dyoniss asked. There was a lot of data to be had about shipments on the tubes, and their agency had a guy who had some software that could access the tube car’s track sheet register, a data structure in the tube control computer with links to just about all the data there was about a shipment and everything in it. The tube car’s manifest is the track sheet without the system data. With the track sheet, he could trace a lot of packages thru the tubes that people thought were untraceable.

“Yeah, Centorin’s don’t know there are any other ways of moving things but motor vehicles,” Ragnar said. “I’m shocked he thought to use the canal.”

“He spent decades in the cities, he has to know about the canal,” Yashmi said.

The cities of Ydlontrostl are joined into one by the canal. It was there long before the avenues, as they were long before the tubes, though there is hardly a person alive now who remembers the time before tubes for they have been here fourteen centuries. The Canal had been there in the times of legend and restored in the time of youth and peace, when the avenues were built.

“I find I have forgotten much about the cities,” Ragnar said.

“You haven’t forgotten the canal.”

“I knew it was there.”

It was true many saw little of it in modern times. Those who hauled heavy freight saw it. Now a small furball reactor often provided the power instead of large draft animals of bygone centuries, but the barges were about the same size and the men and women who drove them still looked and talked the same. He knew few of them, and none of them well. Few swam in the canals these days when there were so many pools.

They had finished the pot of goulash while they talked, and Yashmi got up to soak it.

“Do you have anything specific?” Dyoniss asked him. It wasn’t really late yet and if they could wrap this up he might rescue some of the evening with Kessil.

“Hyonimus,” Ragnar said, “that’s the name one shipment was originally addressed to.”

“At least it’s something,” Dyoniss said. He wrote the name down, his memory wasn’t perfect. He labeled it ‘addressed to’ so as to not take up too much of the note paper. He really should get his own pocket eye with note capability, but paper was so much easier to use and lasted longer.

“Where are you staying?” Yashmi asked him.

“I hadn’t decided on a place yet, I was hoping you could give me some guidance.”

“I’ve got room in my bed,” Yashmi said, “so long as you don’t snore too loud.” He was a little taken aback. “If it’s a problem for you that I also slept with your father, I’ll understand, but you and I are not related in any way.”

“I guess you’re right,” he said. She’s not the most beautiful woman in the city, or the house for that matter, this

evening Kessil is, but Yashmi is by no means ugly. She's a bit angular and her bangs make her face look wide, but she's fit and has nice even coloring because she never thinks about clothes til she gets cold. "But I don't want to have a child," Ragnar said.

"You won't," she said, "I've still got one here."

5. The Gasket Failure

Because of her position with Mbeshna Power, Kessil had to keep a pocket eye, and had to face the fact that it would sometimes call her. Late in Dusksleep of Zawmathii was one of those times. It was from the shift officer of Maintenance and he was calling her out. She thought of disputing his authority to do so, but knew she wouldn't if she wasn't here with Dyoniss.

There had been another failure, this time all the way down in Aitol where it would take forty minutes on the tube just to get out there. At least some cooks might be up by then. She had the right to say no, but she knew that if she did it would only be because of Dyoniss. The way they talked before they slept made her pretty confident that she had a future with him, pretty confident of her side at least. She knew enough about him to know that he would expect her to follow her sense of responsibility.

She tried to explain to Dyoniss, got some mumbles, a kiss and a nice squeeze for a reply. He sleepily said, "please come back, or I'll come see you."

"I'm free next Afternoonday," she said, "all day."

"So am I," he said. "Come as early as you can, we'll go down to the pond, there's a good beach at the dam."

"I'll see you then," she said, "I'm really sorry I have to go."

"And I'm really sorry we stayed up so late talking," he said.

“I’m not, I’m as interested to know you as to join with you.”

“And I’m glad to know you also, I’m thankful for that time, but we could have talked about my father and the Hardensburg case another time.”

“We thought we would have the whole dark,” Kessil said, they had already agreed to that, “and for the sake of Karasis we should be concerned,”

“There’s a lot to like about you,” he said and kissed her again. She thought about delaying, but knew they would be at least an hour and she would be delayed enough. She had to go back to her place to get notes and fresh clothes if nothing else. She dragged herself into the bathroom. She could hear that Ragnar didn’t snore anywhere near as loud as Yashmi, who sounded like a broken piston compressor. She and Dyoniss had spent too much time talking and fallen asleep without consummating their reunion. That left her a bit frustrated, but happy all the same because they had reconnected. They had gotten to know each other a lot better this evening than the first one and that only made her feel better.

She thought Dyoniss would step up and take some responsibility about his father, he sounded committed to it. He didn’t seem to be a guilt-driven guy, but because he was half Centorin and because he worked as an investigator, he took an interest in the Centorins. He knew what a threat they could be if they chose to be but they both understood that those Centorins that moved here were doing so precisely because of the Instinct and the escape from coercion it

offered. He would look into it, she was confident of that. If there was something that could be done about it, he would do it. She was attracted to him by his sense of responsibility.

She was glad he was active in Karasis, she didn't think she could share her life with someone who wasn't. She was not one who would try to convert someone, she learned that the hard way a century ago. A person wants to be part of the meta-creature of civilization, or they don't. No matter how attractive or how exciting they might be, if they weren't willing to do their part in civilization, she couldn't love them.

When she got back to Tarreck's place, she didn't take the time for a full shower, but she washed and picked a clean sheath, one long enough to look businesslike, a fitted print with ruffles that started three inches below the bottom of her cheeks. She would have a long tube ride, so she brought a book she'd been meaning to get to, as well as her notes and pocket-eye.

She got a reply back from her initial questions about the eye-message that woke her, yes, the failure was a ring gasket once again, once again it had a void in the material, and once again it was on the supply to a package sorter in a shipper who used the tubes. She was trying not to get suspicious of all the coincidence, and not being too successful.

The technician had saved the gasket, that was the important news and the reason she really had to get there. In the others the gasket itself had been discarded or been shipped back to Yellgnoskn without a good examination. Two pictures from Shermie's ring-cam were all they had so far.

She got a clarification of the address, it was way out, closer to Elervaik Bridge than Klnaitol, her trip would be faster on the Ridge Line rather than Canal Line tubes. That ride would be prettier if it was daylight, in the dark one sees little of the lights of the cities from the Ridge Line.

It was too warm for a Nightcoat yet, but she would need it before she got back. She took her light one and would put it on later. She had to be prepared to not make it back for the sleep, the company wasn't going to pay for two tube rides when one would do, so she had to bring toiletries and a spare sheath. With her Nightcoat in it, the bag was big enough to call duffel and put on shoulder-straps. She wondered if she would need leggings, but figured she would be indoors most of the time.

She had really been hoping for a good romp this wakeup, since they missed it at dusk. She felt that all thru her body and that wasn't good. She knew how her body worked, she would be on sexual alert until satisfied and Afternoonday was a long way off. It was almost an hour walk to the tube station in the thick dark of early Nightday and she thought of little else while she walked along alone. The only other thing she thought about was Yashmi's house and how she'd much rather have that than Tarreck's. Only along the Boomig could you find a full sized garden closer to a tube station, and though she was relatively affluent, she couldn't afford a closet anywhere in that principate.

There are three stations along the shore of the Eastern Terminus of the Old Canal. The terminus is a round pool about a third of a mile in diameter. It was completely finished

off in a precise stone circle sometime in the 14th century, but those stones and the stones of several restorations have eroded so completely that there is now a nice beach and any casual observer would think the pool was a small crater today. A modern canal empties into it, the precision cuts of it's stones looking every one of those hundred centuries newer, though it too had been patched with lime-wort several times. It was barely visible in the sparse lantern light of Nightday, but she knew it so well she didn't actually need photons to see it. The ancient canal had been re-lined on the far side where it exited, the blocks of it's banks were no more than three centuries old. The water of the pool was clean enough that on Afternoondays many came here to swim.

There were quite a few skinny little docks built out into the water, but they were bringing supplies to the cooks and shops along the shore and not heavy cargo. All were deserted and dark at this time of the week. At one time this had been the center of the principate of Hdengragger and one of the biggest ports on the canal, but in the hundred and five centuries that had elapsed since the canal was first built, the main business center of the principate had moved seven miles down the canal and it's stones had been re-used a few times since. This area had been rebuilt on a smaller scale, the street circling the pond had been re-paved and fronted with well-kept and leafy townhomes of burly old hangleaf above a floor or two of shops. Very few were lit at this hour, but Narrulla and Kunae were high enough to give enough light to see their shape if not detail.

Even though they were still in the fifty fourth hour of Dusksleep, Tamton was almost done setting up for breakfast

and she was glad to stop at a cook she knew. He usually sets up in front of a magazine shop with his grill just outside their awning. She helped by laying out his condiments while he lit his grill. The magazine shop wouldn't open til almost lunch time, so he had his own lantern lit. "You're dressed nice today," he said, "going anywhere special?"

"Out on the tube again," she answered, "almost to Ekervaik Bridge along the Aitol." Most weeks she took a needleboat from here to the regional meeting so they had known each other for decades.

"You're the most frequent tube rider I know."

"It seems like it these days. There's gaskets blowing all over the cities and now they're looking at my machines."

"Why blame you?" he asked.

"My machines, not me. They pay me to make sure those machines stay in line. Sometimes I wish the time didn't have to be so inconvenient, but I want to get it fixed, we're lucky no one's been hurt by one of these blowouts yet." There was some machinery that needed pressure to be safe, and there were some customers that didn't set up proper reserve tanks. She wanted to cut them off if they didn't but she wasn't in control of that. She could file a complaint with the Temple, but all that would do is rile both companies and maybe get one more reserve tank installed. Karasis taught that it also wasn't right to make people safer than they wanted to be.

He nodded at that but said, "This grill will be ready in a minute. What should I put on it?"

"No doubt this will be the calmest meal of the day so if you've got any of those mrang hatchling chops smothered in

rinko?”

“Yep, three eggs opened up last dusk. They were a bit small so I’ll put two chops on. The rinko is light so I’ll boil it down a little. I’m sure they’ll be others by to use it too.”

She really shouldn’t take the time to wait for him to boil rinko down, “I can take mine light, I can do chops on a pile if you want.” She knew he washed his rinko well so she wasn’t worried about picking up something off the bottom of it. She thought he grew his rinko thick enough that he never had to use a bottom leaf anyway. That was probably why it was light. “Don’t tell anyone from the shop that I stopped for breakfast at all.”

“Sure thing, but I’m going to boil some down anyway.”

He put the chops on first however. Tamton rented plates for another penny, and she thought it was well worth it. He had a couple she liked, a clear photoglass of Yurikon Falls was her favorite, and as she was his first customer, it was available. The luxury of letting someone else wash the dishes was why she had a career that got her up from a warm man’s bed at fifty second hour of dusksleep.

She wondered what he was doing now, if he was even up yet. He’d said he didn’t have to go in today, so he could sleep until Ragnar and Yashmi woke him. Yashmi and Ragnar did not spend the late hours of the day discussing their histories and pondering what damage an antidote to the Instinct could do to Karasis the way she and Dyoniss had. She wondered what Dyoniss would do today, if he would begin looking into the antidote.

“I won’t tell either,” Hendly said as he dragged his kayak up on the pavement and dragged her back to the present. Hendly was a guy who often did piecework assembly and casting in the shop beneath her office. She’d offered him a shop supervisor role about a decade ago, but he didn’t want to be tied to a contract. Vailiss had taken the spot instead and seemed to really want it, so that had been for the best.

“You stopping for breakfast?” she asked, patting the space beside her on the bench.

“Yeah, it looks like you’re going out today,” he said as he swung his leg over the bench next to her.

She better not look at how snug and sheer his inner wrap was, she really didn’t have time for breakfast, much less anything else and Hendly was probably her second most common partner in the last few years. He was probably the ‘hunkiest’ guy on her list but also the most self-centered.

“Yeah, trouble in West Aitol,” she told him. “They want me to look into the gasketing wheels and look at the damaged parts. If you’re going to the shop today, there’s a couple batches of valve balls that need casting, I think Vailiss is putting up forty four percent today, so you could make an iron in half a shift. They’re holding back all the gasketing wheels til I find out what’s going on.”

“I can put in a half shift,” he said, “but I won’t make it til well after lunch.”

“If you want it, drop by and tell Vailiss to hold it for you, Packma or Kuuzie could be by and take it if you don’t.”

Her shop was in a small building along the modern canal, not even a mile from here. It was a plank-in under some fine

town homes, but there was a single bay of dock and a lightwell that lit it during the light. Mbeshna was a cities-wide utility with local facilities in all the larger principates. She was actually the highest ranking person at that little service shop, but not the direct supervisor of any of them, though Vailiss asked her advice a lot.

“I can let them have it,” he said, “I wasn’t headed that way, I need to get downtown before lunch.”

“That will be a workout paddling.”

“I need to pick up a new digester core,” he said. He lived on a small plot, but he still had his own digester and bought only his vedn, thesh and onions. The digester core would take up the other seat in his kayak. Hendly is quite well built, but even he couldn’t carry that all the way from Hdengragger center. He placed his order for breakfast, a couple more of the mrang chops. “I’ll need to have a light lunch because the paddling will be harder coming back.”

If he was going to get there and back for a half-shift after lunch, he would have to break the athletic record for a racing kayak. For her, downtown and back in a kayak was all day, with several stops, and she felt it the next. He actually had farther to go on a modern canal, but no lock to contend with. On the Old Canal there are enough lanterns to see, at least til the center. Some of the modern canals don’t have that luxury, and the one in Hdengragger was one of them for a stretch he had to pass. “Too bad we can’t share the tube car to the center,” she said. It was not even two minutes, even though the car never got up to full speed on a trip that short.

“If we could take the ‘yak.” he said. He could take the

digester core and put it on the other seat if she could give him a ticket for the ride back, but his kayak was probably five feet longer than the car. “But it’s too short a tube ride to have any fun,” he added, reminding her once again of the missed opportunity and the fact that she didn’t have time to make up for it.

She noticed she wasn’t at all tempted, it was Dyoniss, not sex, that she was missing. She was polite, and didn’t refrain from contact, but offered no invitations. She didn’t make him an offer every time she saw him anyway, and he knew she didn’t have time. What was different is this time she didn’t have to talk herself out of it, she had to apologize to her old self for not being more stirred by Hendly’s presence. As soon as she finished breakfast, she headed to the kiosk, smiling and wishing him well, but feeling the tiniest bit phoney because she wasn’t lit up with him this time. Maybe he would just think it was the hour.

As the tube car pulled away, she wondered what she wanted. She wanted Hendly to be one of three or four on this year’s variety list is what she really wanted. She knew she would never be more to him than an entry on his list. She knew she didn’t want to share his life, but she knew she would share a life with Dyoniss in a heartbeat. And she knew, with more certainty than ever, that she was once again ready to share her life.

Soon the tube is moving too fast to see the scenery, especially in the dark. She picked at that sore in her memory when the townhouse became divided, she got the top, he got

the bottom. That was how it ended, the last time she shared her life. She still wasn't ready to remember his name. For years she took a guy from the Blue Kite every sleep to forget him, bury him under a pile of names so deep he would never dig his way out. She remembered the decades when she was sure she could never share her life again, except for what it took to remain in Karasis.

The memories were dim, but she knew she had been around this cycle many times, and that there had been a stage of being burnt out living in her kayak once again, somewhere along the way. She still remembered getting re-hired after that burn-out, and that she had lived in some dingy town in Hest at the time. She knew herself well enough to know that she was in the phase of looking for someone to share her life with once again. There would be several trials, with their attendant heartbreaks, before she settled on one again.

She pitied the thousands of generations of ephemerals in ancient times who really had only one shot at finding a compatible partner and getting offspring raised while they still could. If she was ephemeral, the bet she was willing to make on Dyoniss, to share her life with him if she could, would be of unbelievable importance. That one decision could determine whether she had viable descendants. Kessil had to leave a woman child with the tribe to leave with honor, she had done that, she had the plains knife to prove it. Her daughter had three more female children before getting herself killed raiding a nest of one-horned mrang. Karasis needs the rule that it is wrong to make one safer than he wants to be to include the tribes of the plains in his fold.

The tube ride was boring, in spite of the three irons each way this trip would cost. It took no more time than the walk, but seemed much longer. She did go by the ridge line as she suspected. In the dark, she saw almost nothing, just a few well-lit avenues that ran toward the ancient city of Orazig Hest. One of them was Kivatorn Pass, reminding her of trouble Ragnar had mentioned. The ridge line went thru a few great towers, some of them much older than the tubes. The Lightning Ball was at the top of one of them and she saw it out the top of the car for miles before reaching it. She hadn't been there yet, but always meant to go. She could stop on the way back, but noticed that she wanted Dyoniss with her, and another great concert to draw them.

Most of the time she whizzed over small plots deep in the city where there are miles and miles of crooked, narrow streets, small shops and tiny gardens, no functional difference from their own neighborhood, but many different styles. It was a cute ride in the light, and there were some places with expansive views across the infinitude of lush smallholds dotted with towers that is most of the Ydlontrostl cities today, but in the dark all she saw was the reflections from the plastic of the tube and car most of the time.

She eventually got her mind off Dyoniss and got a few chapters into the book, it turned out to be a really strange fantasy where a small fernwood grew pods that hatched out pseudo-people who looked just like humans except they couldn't speak, were immune to the Instinct and committed horrible deeds. The heroine was a laboratory scientist who

was on the verge of developing a virus that would wipe them out. She kept getting paralyzed by the Instinct because she saw them as human and couldn't key in the final codes to finish that virus because she knew that would kill them. The story was really getting off the ground, the silently staring pod people were surrounding her lab while her hands were paralyzed over the keys. Kessil had to put it down at that point in the story because the tube car started slowing for her station.

The station was above all but the roof fronds of the low-slung neighborhood where she stopped. It was chilly and windy when she emerged from the tube car. There was only one other guy on the platform and he already had a calf-length oversheath and a short nightcoat on, one with pockets for his hands. He was quite tall and slim and his hair was very light but long and in a pony tail. He had a beard even fuller than Dyoniss, like a Dwarf or a Nordic. He must be Nordic to be that tall and have eyes that blue. But she thought Dyoniss had even prettier eyes than his, though they were dark as old polished wood.

"You must be Kessil?" he asked, "from Machinery?"

"Yes, you must be Haipon?" he was the site guy at this installation. The Dusksleep dispatcher had sent his file but she had never met him. His snapshot didn't do him justice.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, and laced fingers rather than just slapping palms. "No one mentioned that you're seriously beautiful." He wouldn't have seen her file.

"I guess I look OK for someone so serious," she replied.

She knew he was kissing up, she knew what she looked like, it was OK but nothing special. Dark shiny hair, pretty curly, figure a bit buff but a bit understated, a smile that was a hint mischievous, a hint of Elf in her eyes and nose, the gift of a great grandfather. She looked good enough that her appearance was not a hindrance to her life and she hadn't needed to change anything.

“That's *not* how I meant it.”

She just laughed, a little, to get him to lighten up, then added, “You're pretty easy on the eyes yourself.” He nodded his thanks but didn't reply. “So where are we going?” she asked.

“It's not far at all, the local office is just a quarter mile down the Old Canal. It's not much more than a workshop and parts crib, but we've got a desk eye, a toilet and a lock box. There's quite a bit of stairs on the way, want me to carry your bag?”

“It's not heavy, and if we're going to be in this wind, I think I want my nightcoat now.”

“You might, it gets cold along here early in the dark.”

She remembered hearing that about the Aitol. It was very open, the houses kept their limbs low and they were twisted from the wind. The rooms were often set among the roots in reclaimed finished stone, fences were low and thick with tiny leaves. She wondered again if she should have brought leggings. She dug out her nightcoat and put it on, it was a bit longer than her sheath, but not much below her knees. She took his arm where she could, though she's not built in such a way that doing so is any big deal, but the motion was fun for

her at least. She didn't want him to think of her as a cold inquisitor from headquarters. Even though she had an engineering position now, she still thought of herself as a field person.

He told a few jokes about Old Eleven, as his way of showing her that he was lightening up. She tried to laugh politely. She didn't know why that situation embarrassed her so, she'd been telling anyone she could that they needed more wheels in service.

They walked a wide street, but a steep one, with frequent flights of steps, all leading down. There were few elevator buildings on this avenue, but lots of workshops, some big enough to call factories, with multiple floors of grown residence above, either townhomes or flats. There was a brook following the street, and it went from pool to pool compressing a little air, but it was too small to get any serious power from, too small to float kayaks until it finally got all the way down to the level of the canal. The power was used to run aerators and filters, the pools would be busy on Afternoonday. The street had plenty of nightblooms on it, and clatter birds sipping at them.

In this area the ancient canal had been rebuilt less than four centuries ago and its route had changed a little. For awhile they walked on what must have been the wharf some centuries ago, but at one point was two blocks from the water. The canal was wider and straighter now, and the towpaths were wide enough for two kedas abreast, though more than half the barges were motorized in recent centuries. The

towpath was a couple steps down from the pedestrian path, but not on a separate level like in the city centers. There were big phosphor lamps along the steps that lead to the towpaths, a row on each side of the canal. The only other light was lanterns on the barges. As is common all along the Aitol, the steps on the far side of the canal lead down. In daylight one could sit on a boat on the canal and look down every street to a view across the plains, for most of the thirty three miles that the ancient canal follows the Aitol face.

Haipon told her quite a bit about the neighborhoods they passed thru, and she tried to use it as an opening to find out something about him by asking, “you must live nearby?”

“It’s in a neighborhood like the one we came down thru, four blocks the other side of the shop and up the hill halfway to the tube line. There’s no station on my street, but other than that it’s the same kind of neighborhood. There’s a used clothing warehouse under my place, his roof is the yard for my block.”

“Have you been there long?”

“Longer than I can remember,” he answered, “and the place is pretty old.”

“You must like it?” she asked.

“Ah? I have it. I have no garden, that is a blessing and a curse. I don’t suffer the anxiety and guilt, but I have to work a day and a half to live as I do.”

“You’d spend that half day in the garden if you had one,” Kessil said.

“There’s no garden space anywhere within five blocks of the canal, even on the far side,” he waved at the apartments in

the hangleaves over the commercial space. “There is actually a third floor street a half-block back from the canal.” It was over the alley behind the buildings along the canal front, she had seen it on the way down.

There were very few towers this far down the Aitol, but she saw a few lights far enough above the horizon that they could have come from nothing else, far down the canal, probably at the next bridge.

The sounds of Nightday filled the air along the canal. The squeak of the tow-wheels on curbstones was constant. Along the pedestrian street the businesses serving people had awnings in front, and those with produce were noisier this time of the week than any other as the cooks stocked up. Those serving cargo had crates, bails and boxes out front and the squeal and growl of tackle was heard.

They stayed close enough, but it was still hard for her to tell if he was actually pleased with her person, or being polite. If he was doing that, he was very studious about it. She was beginning to worry that he was trying too hard to pass inspection and she was trying too hard to lighten him up.

He turned into an alley, then up a stairway to the second floor. There was a window in the room but it looked out onto that alley and was closed by two inch wooden trunks grafted into a grate instead of glass. Not enough light came in there during Nightday to even see that but she could feel the air and knew there was no heat in this room and now she was sure she should have brought leggings. He turned on the glow ceiling, it was enough. There were three big tables taking up three of the walls. There were two chairs and three stools. The

tables were covered with five gasketing wheels, three of them, one of each size, in various states of disassembly. There were cases containing spare fittings, several valves and gauges, a valve pin mold set and the usual assortment of tool cases. There was a little more glue slopped around than she really liked to see, but nothing she was going to complain about.

Because they had plenty of time to get acquainted on the walk down, it wouldn't be impolite to get right to business now that she was here. She knew the basics of the situation from the initial eye message, so before he could repeat that, she wanted to see the machinery. The stretcher teeth are the critical parts in any gasketing wheel, they stretch the gasket ring enough to get it on the male fitting. It isn't much, and it's a delicate job because the gasket must not be damaged. It doesn't take much damage to cause a failure at a thousand psi. She had seen the type of failure assembly damage can cause thousands of times in her career. She had been a site tech like this as long ago as the 121st. She had been a contracted air handling engineer since the 122nd and been with Mbeshna all of that time.

“What size was it that failed?” she asked, not that she really had any doubt.

“The quarter inch, it was just a small package sorter that was hooked up. It was in one of those fittings with the data pin in the same fitting. That's the wheel I use on all the quarter inch.”

The fitting was significant, the other five ring gaskets that

had failed had all been in such fittings. Still too much coincidence. She wrote that down, asked, “are you sure you changed the gasket on that fitting regularly?”

“I keep a full log, nothing goes over it’s time.”

She was running her fingertips over the stretcher teeth of that gasket wheel while he told her that. She could feel not even the smallest burr, and her fingertips are very sensitive and a lot cheaper and easier to use than a microscope. She was satisfied the teeth were not the problem. “Where’s that log?” she asked.

“Up there,” he pointed to the bookshelf above her. She put the wheel down and grabbed the log. There was nothing on top of it and it wasn’t dusty.

“These are in order by when they’re due up?” she asked as soon as she looked at a few pages.

“Yep,” he said, “I find it easiest.”

“That’s how I did it when I had a field office,” she said and tried to make her smile warm. She was actually positively impressed with this guy. It would be nice if he wasn’t so nervous, so many field offices are chaos where the tech spends all his time repairing failures and is surly with anyone from engineering. She was scanning up the record for the number of the coupling that had failed. She went back two decades before she looked up. “That gasket’s never been changed.”

“I’m very careful, Kessil.”

“Then you’ll have installation records. When did that sorter go in? Was this a new fitting for it?”

“Right, it could be. It wasn’t that long ago. Next book

over is my installations. We'll have to go thru them for the last decade, but if I never serviced that gasket, that fitting is less than a decade old."

"Lets take every other page," she said.

She let her side brush his as they did that, to try and soften her demeanor a little. She had never been one for flowery speech, she needed a guy who didn't need a lot of flowery seduction and sweet talk. Dyoniss seemed to be that, she guessed he didn't hear a lot of flowery sweet talk growing up.

This wasn't the busiest part of the cities and they only went back fourteen installs before she saw the serial number. "Here it is, Thlollala of 123,21,54, so it wasn't due for service yet."

"That takes the heat off your machines," he said.

"For this one, but the one that failed in Hdengragger a few weeks ago was an old fitting that had been there since the 121st and he'd been changing all his gaskets with the same wheel all that time, it was sharp as a razor by then." She had cut her finger when she examined that gasketing wheel without thinking.

He grimaced but went on, "Still, if it isn't the machine, maybe it's the gasket?"

"That's what I think, but we weren't the first to think of that. The gaskets are from Yellgnoskn, on the old and new fittings." He nodded as if he knew that already. "They went over their whole production line after the second failure, and again after the third. There's been extreme testing going on in their main lab. After Hdengragger they started to look elsewhere.

“So what I don’t see is the gasket,” Kessil finished.

“Because I want to be sure an impartial investigator gets to see it before a Yellgnoskn agent gets his hands on it. It’s in the safe. I’d like to know you have a commitment to use your person to defend that evidence if you have to because somehow all the others wound up in his labs. That includes one in the hands of a home office supervisor.”

“You don’t trust Yellgnoskn?” Kessil asked.

“Not completely. I think Mbeshna took Yellgnoskn’s tale with too little salt. No one knows what testing he’s really doing, no one knows what he’s using for machinery in his main plant. Our people went on some staged walk-thrus, there was no ‘joint testing’ or any such thing.”

She’d been on those walk-thrus at several different suppliers, not just Yellgnoskn. “That’s true of any company, what would they have labs for if not to develop secret technology?”

“And what if that secret technology is faulty? There are other gasket ring manufacturers, Mbeshna doesn’t have to get them from Yellgnoskn.”

“If you think I have the ear of Mbeshna’s purchasing advisers, you are badly out of focus.”

“Sorry, but you must be closer than I am.”

“I might be able to find someone who knows one, but we do have a case that this gasket has never been replaced, and your records have proved that. This failure has nothing to do with the maintenance equipment.” She put all the paperwork and prints down, turned to him. “Your meticulous record keeping has made this an easy trip, at least if all I wanted to

do was defend my own turf. I'm grateful."

"I'm glad, thank you. I'm trying to do my part."

"You'll get compliments in my report, now all this customer's details, are they written down?"

"I don't dare. Scrounges might find the note and sell that information to Yellgnoskn."

She was taken aback by his paranoia. "I'm not a character in an espionage thriller," Kessil said, "I'm a maintenance engineer. I need to write it all down, and no one has ever questioned my readiness to guard my notes with my person."

They sat and he repeated the names and places and other specifics. The package sorter wasn't just another package sorter, it was a package sorter used by a company shipping small express packages by tube, as it had been in Hdengragger center. He probably didn't know that and she wasn't going to fuel his paranoia with it. Once she had addresses and contact information, she had one more thing to ask.

"And now I need to see that failed gasket."

There was much too long a pause. "Ah," he said. "Well, You never actually gave me the assurance I need."

"What assurance?" she asked.

"That you will use the Instinct if you have to, to protect this evidence, and that you will not destroy it, no matter what you think it proves or doesn't prove, and you will get it to our labs."

"Sure, that's one of the reasons I was sent, but what's the big deal about it?" she asked.

He didn't say anything, he opened the safe. He took out

the miniscule ring of high strength, high elasticity plastic, holding it with a pair of forceps. “Just look, show me I can trust you by not reaching for it.” She frowned, but put her arm down. “Tell me what you think, but before you do, let me tell you I have been looking at blown ring gaskets for more than a few decades now. I don’t know what I’d see with a microscope, but even with the naked eye on such a small part I can see that is no normal blow-out.”

“Yeah?” she said, “It’s not, and you’re the not the first field tech to notice, two others have so far. You’re the first to be so suspicious of it. This tiny spherical cavity is why we’ve been back and forth with Yellgnoskn so many times. This is just like all the others, too spherical to be a blow-out. No one is covering anything like that up.”

“Why didn’t I know?”

“It’s posted, but it can be hard to notice. It’s at least a half hour ride on the tube for you to attend engineering meetings at the main lab, if they gave you a ticket for it. Guys like us either comb all company postings meticulously, or we hear about it eventually, and they hear from us eventually.”

“This isn’t anything about the gasket wheel,” he said. “I checked them all out myself, they’re as smooth as your bottom, every one of them...”

“You don’t know that,” she said with a smile, “you haven’t even seen it, much less felt it.” She was going thru the motions, but didn’t really feel it. Normally a chance encounter would be welcome today, and he was well within her acceptable limits for chance encounters, even with no intoxicants involved.

He was supposed to say he'd be glad to at that point, but he didn't, he said, "A figure of speech, it doesn't have to be any smoother than the cheeks of your face." He might have been a little embarrassed. Maybe it was that obvious that her mind was on Dyoniss and she was just trying to be polite? "What I'm saying," he continued, "is these wheels are fine. If I had a microscope I don't think I'd know more than I know by feel. I saw you feeling it, you know it's fine."

"What if it's a different problem and not the stretcher jaws? Something with the pusher ring?"

"It's fine too," he said. "We would see a much more normal failure if anything like that was the case. That cavity is real."

"Do you have a theory?" she asked.

"Some new kind of defect we've never seen before, maybe a bacteria that eats this plastic, or some kind of spontaneous molecular decay or reaction."

She was actually about wrapped up by lunch time. She was always pretty sure it wasn't the maintenance machinery, but she wanted to find out what it really was. She had a microscope back at her shop, she could get back there in time to use it on this ring. She hadn't had the other rings in her hands before, she had been told they weren't normal failures, and had some pictures on her pocket-eye. They looked more like a void in the ring and not damage.

She could start poking in the outline of her report into the pocket eye on the ride home. She could finish her report on the desk eye at the shop.

Haipon joined her for lunch on the walk back toward the tube station. The place they picked was a block back of the canal, just uphill of the stairs to that third floor street. They sat indoors. It was a big room scattered with tables and heaters, only a couple were lit. She picked the closest table to a lit one because the hours in the unheated shop had given her a deep chill and her feet were starting to cramp.

“I’ll go get it,” she offered, wanting an excuse to get close to the grill and keep her feet moving. “What do you want?”

“Just an inglethor basket and greens,” he said.

While in line she wondered how much she should come on to him. She didn’t want to make it seem like she was aloof, and he was attractive, but he didn’t seem to be really asking for it, again; like he was just trying to be polite and not make her think she was physically offensive. But if she was to make him an offer, she would just be doing it to be polite, just to acknowledge his attractiveness. It was a dilemma she wouldn’t have fretted about yesterday.

She wasn’t thinking about what she wanted so two inglethor baskets on greens got ordered. She noticed they were really breaded here and quite a lemon chili in color. The breading was toasted crunchy, the inglethor was perfectly done and fell off the bones. As she was getting it she was thinking she’d grab some of his greens while he ate the other two thirds of this big pile of breaded inglethors. What actually happened was she finished first.

“These are awesome,” she said. “If I had aluminum I’d take a spin down here on the tubes on a night out just for one of these baskets.”

“The best around.”

“What else is going on around here?” she asked. “I noticed a Haunted Windchime hall on the way down.”

“They never come here themselves, they get bands that play a few of their songs,” he said, “but they either aren’t great, or they really want to play Space Drone and the hallman keeps after them to liven it up.”

“What’s good?” he asked.

“You’ve got a tube ticket, make a long stop in Orazig Hest or take the Ridge Line and stop at the Lighting Ball if you want to go clubbing.”

“What if you live here and don’t have a tube ticket?”

“If you like music you get a good speaker setup in your house and load up your cube with all the performances you want to hear.”

“What about local clubs?” she asked.

“They usually have great sound, better than most people at home, but they play whatever makes people drink and screw so they can keep selling more clean sheets and brew.”

“So it’s pretty basic?”

“Way up the other side of Klnaitol itself there are some towers with major power-clubs on the first two or three floors. There’s another one of those along the canal just over a mile from the Ekervaik, that’s closer from here, but they play mostly Caravan. What about where you’re from?”

“There’s the Blue Kite. The sound is good in the middle, between the rows of columns. In the balconies it’s not as good except right across from the stage. They get all the big city tours and play either caravan, lectroshok or haunt and the

lights are the same crew no matter who the band is.”

“The Blue Kite huh, don’t move down here if you’re used to that.”

She wasn’t surprised that he’d heard of it, it was one of the top ten superclubs in the cities. As for the here and now, there was nothing much more to say, she had to either ask him or not. She wasn’t driven to, so she got up and said, “Well, I guess I should get going so I don’t hold you up.”

“I figured this would take all day,” he said, “so I got everything done yesterday. You’re giving me the rest of the day off?”

Maybe he was hoping for something? “As far as I know, what will you do with it?” she asked.

“Probably go see my boyfriend,” he said. “He wouldn’t be expecting me this early, so we can have some recreation before darkmeal.”

“Sounds like fun,” Kessil said, trying to keep her face neutral, “enjoy.” She picked up her bag, put her notes in it and swung it over her shoulder.

“You too,” he said, “it was a pleasure working with you,” he reached out to lace fingers again.

“A pleasure,” she said, and half hugged him as well as lacing fingers. Then, with a wry smile, she was off.

6. Korshii

“So you’re going to use the system in your office to look up all the Hyonimus’s you can find,” Ragnar said as he stood by the door on his way out into the early part of Nightday, “and I’m going to put my ear to the local taps to see if I can find a trail to anyone with an antidote to the Instinct.”

“Sounds good,” Dyoniss said, and laced fingers with Ragnar. Yashmi laced her body with Ragnar’s in a most unmotherly way before sending him out on the path to Nightday. He felt a pang of envy because of Kessil being called out. One problem with living out this far is the lack of light on Nightday. The tower still loomed a quarter of the way up the sky from here, and the ghostly light of its lanterns was enough to navigate by, but not enough to see by. On the main avenues and upscale side streets one doesn’t need to even carry a torch because of all the lanterns, but back here, Ragnar was lucky both Kunae and Narrulla were up because he didn’t have a torch. He still looked all around, even though all was dark but a lantern or two in some of the nearby houses.

Quite a few people around here went out for Nightday, took a temp job for a few hours and ate someone else’s cooking for darkmeal, then spent the rest of their earnings at the taps afterward. Ragnar made it to the end of their path OK, that was all Dyoniss could see and all he was going to worry about.

“You’re not going to go in and look that stuff up today are

you?” Yashmi asked.

“Dark rates for charity work? I don’t think so.” On the Empire’s most primitive planet, most of the data systems in even the most advanced cities, such as these, are run on direct solar power. Even in these days of cheap reactors and motors from the Centorin planets, no one used a metal wire more than six inches long and each electronic substrate was connected with fiber-optics and had an on-chip solar panel for it’s power. Data rates during the dark were six times as much as during light. After sunset the light was mantled alcohol lanterns or phosphors instead of sunlight unless one really did have a fusion plant.

“Then lets have some tea,” she said, and set the faucet temp to boiling. She was still wrapped in her quilt with nothing under it. She filled her teabag, picked up another and asked, “What kind?”

“The brick,” Dyoniss said, “I’ll crush it.” He grabbed the mortar and pestle from the high shelf, blew the dust out, and crushed a small brick of jarvis tea. It’s not as strong as yaag, but it’s in that direction. Yashmi preferred jormlop, which was a little more energetic and a little more mood lifting, and with a much more flowery taste. He had to admit, brick tea taste did have something in common with old bark.

“So,” she said as she put the water in both cups, “is he what he says?”

“I would hardly think so,” Dyoniss said while he poured the grounds into the bag.

“I saved a few of his hairs, we can verify that half brother statement. I kept a viable sperm sample also, he was most

generous with that.”

“No need to brag.” She should save those stories to tell to her girlfriends.

“I hope you don’t mind that I had fun. If you do, I don’t have to tell you what he talked about.”

“You know you have to tell, it will eat your brain out from the inside if you don’t, like a thousand little millitenticloids clawing to get free.” He scratched her head briskly as he said it, on his way to the seat across from her.

“But the least you could do is appreciate it.”

“I do mom, I do.” He reached over and held her hand.

“Thank you for all you’ve told me already, all the info you’ve gathered, and all the cum-gathering you’ve subjected yourself to on my behalf for all the years we’ve spent together.”

“That part was my pleasure,” she said.

“So what did he say?” Dyoniss asked.

“That I was very fit and smooth, that I had great skin and...”

“That has any relevance to what we’re talking about.”

“Which was, whether or not I’m allowed to have fun doing this.”

“I’m glad you had fun but you can do better than him.”

“I’d need to get my hips more rounded and my tits more even, so they’re both like the left one.”

“I’d pay for that if you let me,” he said.

“But this is me, this is what I am. This flesh was good enough for your father, it was good enough for Ragnar. What’s wrong with him? And what if he’s right about your

father?”

“If my father, your mate of the distant past, is attempting to cheat the Instinct and use force to dominate agricultural transport in the western basin?”

“That seems to sum it up better than I could,” she said.

“So what did he say?”

“That his crewmen are grumbling, talking about, ‘I thought we were leaving all this behind,’ and ‘what did I come to Kassidor for anyway?’ things like that. He never got close enough to any of them to get them to confide in him, so it was only things he overheard in diners all over Hardensburg.”

“I wish there was something more definite,” Dyoniss said, “I wish we had a name...”

“He gave you a name,” she said.

“And something to narrow it down would be nice,” he said. He really wanted the track sheet of the shipment. “There could be five thousand guys named Hyonimus in the cities today.”

“I bet it’s not a tenth of that,” she said, “and you must have some magic program back at the office that can find out which Hyonimuses have been getting packages from Centorin.”

Actually, that might be possible, but it wasn’t something that would get done during Nightday. He might as well try and do something productive on the case. At least something more productive than sitting with his mother and drinking, if he did, he knew they wouldn’t stick with tea very long.

Even though she’d sold off half of her original three acres

over the centuries and the house shaded half of what was left, there was still a lot of garden work around here that he should help her with, but once again, that was almost impossible on Nightday. He could re-cast some edges by lantern light, but he'd done it recently, it would just be a waste of firestick.

The other case that involved Hardensburg was a paying case, a thievery case. A package sent from central Hdengragger in the Ydlontrostl cities to Hardensburg had come up missing. It now hinged on whether the party on the far side had received an empty box or nothing at all. The shipper on this side, Picktish-Pickam, claimed to have made the shipment, there is a signed document that has the box checked that it went out on the tube and some photos of the box and sender that Dyoniss had copies of. Much of the labeling was in Centish, but Dyoniss was one of the few in the cities who was actually fluent in the language, written as well as spoken.

It had now been dark for hours in Hardensburg, he wasn't going to hear from Betten today. From what Ragnar had said about conditions there, he felt it was more likely the problem was in Hardensburg, as long as he had no evidence. If Betten could at least say someone picked up the box and it was empty, he would believe the theft had happened on this side and an empty box was shipped. If they say there was no box, either this uninvolved shipper was lying and faking documentation, or the receiver in Hardensburg was lying.

He wondered if he was just being prejudiced, thinking if there is dishonesty and crime involved, it must certainly be the Centorins. Maybe he was just hoping for an excuse to go

and see Hardensburg. There was no chance he would ever get to Centorin, but a three copper round trip to Hardensburg was actually something he could do himself if he really wanted to.

But he wouldn't do that today, he really intended to be here for Afternoon. Who could he investigate on this end? Pinktish-Pickam was a gritty little tubeway express shipping office serving the Varshan-Vrluuva shopping district at the base of the tower of the same name near the center of this principate. They were the one the client accused, but after investigating them, he didn't think they were involved. If Kessil had stayed, they would have spent Nightday together and he would have waited another day to hear from Betten, but with nothing better to do he could get ahead of himself and assume the box had been shipped but it was empty, and investigate the woman who had shipped that package.

Pinktish-Pickam had a picture from their transaction camera, and they had the name and address of the sender on the label. As far as he knew, no one from the office had been to see her yet, they had been waiting to hear from Betten. Truthfully, since he was half Centorin and spoke the language, he got all the cases involving Centorins the whole Kyonmeere agency picked up. Since Centorins were disproportionately represented in the criminal world, there were a lot of them and he stayed busy. Rather than wait another day, at least, to hear from Betten, he could go out and look her up today.

Yashmi detained him only til the end of the first cup of tea. She had no more information relevant to his supposed half brother, other than she seemed to have a good time

sexually, but couldn't quite bring herself to actually share the details with her son. No doubt she'd find a neighbor interested once he left her alone.

He left off the hair at the geneticist the agency always used, also in the tower, on the ninth floor. He was thankful for his unlimited elevator card even for that much stairs. He didn't need to give them a hair for comparison, everyone at the agency was on file. The girl who works there was pretty cute and flirtatious, but he had only been with her a few times in the few years she had worked with them. Her presence did remind him that the evening with Kessil had not worked out the way they planned, and he still had Dawnsleep and Noonsleep before Afternoonday began. He found he didn't really have much interest. With only a couple days to go before they continued what Ragnar interrupted, he had no need of idle dalliance. Another agent from their office also had samples to bring in so he slipped away before she got around to asking him.

The woman who shipped the missing package was named Vemnya and she lived in 31d of the TworganicMagic, a megastructure less than two miles away just beyond the ancient canal terminus. He could see the building from his new office and knew exactly where it was. He wondered why she had gone all the way down to the center to send it, that in itself was a little fishy, but the package had originally arrived in the cities near the Eastern Terminus, so she could have been the first handoff and hopped a needleboat to put some distance between the incoming and outgoing stations. That

reminded him of something Ragnar had said, ‘part of the trip is on the canal,’ but that was about the antidote and not a stolen furball coil.

The hike was interesting, the streets were crowded this dark as everyone came to the lighted streets, so it took twice as long as he thought it would. He had to press among the crowds and the soft curves of several of the warm bodies reminded him that Kessil had been called out early. He had to cross two modern canals, both on footbridges two floors up. Once he got to the tower of TworganicMagic and paid the three penny in elevator, he found there were only three doors on the thirty first floor, they were numbered one, two and three, and they all had name plates beneath them. Two of them bore two names, the other bore three. None of them was Vemnya.

In spite of that, he thought it was worth it to sit in the lobby and ask people who came in if they had seen her. It was something to do while he thought of something that made more sense. Most people just said ‘no’ without *really* looking, one of the guys who actually looked at the picture gave the best answer.

“I’d have to say no, not that there aren’t plenty of pretty girls in the building with sleek hair and nice nightcoats. I’ve seen a few girls that look enough like this that it might be them as far as I can tell from this picture, but none I can be sure of from this picture.”

In other words, the picture isn’t good enough to recognize anyone. But by lunch time he showed it to someone who did recognize her by the nightcoat. She was a street cook grilling

theriopsooid strips in front of the building where Pinktish-Pickam had their shop. It was a leafy spot right in front of the entrance to the Varshan-Vrluuva tower, on the same plaza as the tube station. Her lantern in the tree above her was her sign, all it said was ‘grill.’ It was a bit early for lunch by the time the streetcar got him this far and she wasn’t busy. She had plenty of time to look at the picture but it didn’t take her long.

“Yeah, she was here Ekendosa, just like you, she had the strips without the mash.”

“I don’t have a plate,” Dyoniss said.

“She didn’t either that day. I’ve got some druumes, let me give you one of those so you can dip, at least you’ll get some soom.” They are a small blue fruit in the groundberry family, very juicy, and when halved they make their own dipping bowl. Her knife was thin and very sharp because it slipped right thru the tough skin to the pit. She put half down for him to dip with, threw the pit in the fire and folded the other half of the fruit up on itself and fed it to him, not giving him any time to object. It’s pretty sweet all at once, and he took a bite of theiropsooid strip to counteract the sugar shock. “She stops here pretty often.”

“Did she ever tell you where she lives?”

“Never had to, she lives in that fifth townhouse down Yorshovn street, you can see it from here. It’s the one where they used green sap-seal when they cut the door free about ten decades ago.” She pointed, and Dyoniss could indeed see the house because there was a lantern on the one beyond it. “Her name’s Korshii and she’s a good kid, do anything for

you.”

“You sound like a good friend.”

“She might not know it. We talk, but not real deep if you know what I mean. I know the flashy guy she was high on lately hasn’t been living with her the last couple weeks, but she hasn’t talked about that. I know she shops for produce, so there’s probably not much garden with that house.”

After finishing that bit of lunch, Dyoniss paid a visit to that house, asking for Korshii, not Vemnya. He got a pretty warm answer thru the speaking tube and a pretty warm feeling when she came to the door. She had the same basic build as Yashmi, maybe a little fuller on top, with hips a bit more rounded. Her hair was every bit as black, shiny and straight but a bit finer. Her eyes were turned as much as Kessil’s, her nose was a little long but she was actually quite a pretty girl with perfect skin and coloring and dressed in netting loose enough that he thought it enhanced the view of her body inside it, making her more nude than naked. She had a colorful quilt wrapped over her back and shoulders, but that wasn’t hiding much of her either.

“Yes, I’m Korshii,” she said, tossing her hair and leaning on the doorframe, showing off a fine chin line and smooth throat. “but I don’t think I know you?”

“I’m Dyoniss,” he replied, “an investigator for the Kyonmeere agency. Do you remember shipping this package?” he showed the picture of her at Picktish-Pickam, standing at the counter with the package in her hand, wearing the nightcoat that was on a hook right inside the door.

Of course the picture could be faked, her face said she knew it wasn't. She stood up and said, "Ah?" she looked at it again, then at him. "Perhaps you should come in," she said with some chagrin.

Her front room on the street floor was just a little den wrapped in the wide stairway to the floor above, but it had enough room for them to sit in a bay window that looked onto this small street. There were bookshelves and cases and a slightly cluttered work table in the room. The smallest wall was decorated with a knotcraft medallion. She produced a small jug of yellow and set it on the cupstand between the cushions they sat on. "So you do remember that package and I'm guessing there may be quite a story involved."

"He was a guy a lot like you," she began, leaning toward him on the stand cushion diagonally facing the cupstand as she drew her feet under her. "In the chin anyway, I seem to be attracted to that. Anyway, he was here a couple weeks, and they were like riding a twister, fun weeks and serious weeks, talking about living here and where he would put his stuff. He had me drop that package by the shippers one day in the middle of that. I've got a position in a little gem grinding shop behind that shipping office so it's right on my way and I never thought anything of it. He stayed another week after that, even moved in some old clothes, ones he wanted to get rid of no doubt. Then he went out and just vanished like he jumped a tube to Norbin. I tried to look him up, just to ask 'what the fuck?' you know. That's when I found out his address was fake. You can tell I'm still pissed or I wouldn't be inviting you in and ratting him out like this."

“I appreciate it. Can you tell me anything more about him than he looked a little like me. I’m sure he gave you a name.”

“You have his name,” she said, “as least as much as I know of it.”

“Surely you must have learned more about him in three or four weeks?”

“Yeah, if any of it is true,” she said. “Can I get you anything? I’ve got this morning yellow.” She was already filling an elegantly plain stem-cup.

“Sure,” he said. While she was busy with that, his eyes roamed the room. There was enough correspondence on the work table to convince him this girl really was named Korshii. The books on her open shelves did include a couple relating to gem cutting, but most of them were novels, a little on the risqué side of literature, but nothing that would be called trash, many that were called classics.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?” she asked as she handed him an identical cup, “It’s more comfortable up there.”

“I guess you do know quite a bit more,” he said, starting to get up. If it was worth enough time to go upstairs, it must be a tale of some length.

“I have the heater on up there,” she said as she lead him up the stairs. Her wrap was too short for the office but she didn’t seem to worry about that at home. In this context it is ambiguous whether she was sending him an invitation or not.

The next level of her home was dining and kitchen. The kitchen was big, the dining area cozy, but could probably fit eight in another bay window above and a little larger than the one in the room below. The kitchen had steps down to the

garden, but he could see nothing in the dark. She had turned two chairs next to a little alcohol heater that was already lit. Dyoniss had his light nightcoat on, but Zawmathii is still summer so next to the heater he wouldn't need even that. He put it over the back of the chair. The yellow they had was very light, but some of them can be deceptive.

“Thank you,” he said while raising his glass. She had a captivating smile as she raised hers. “So what more can you tell me about him?” he asked as he took a sip. It was very sweet and sunny with a hint of sparkle, but his initial sense was that it wouldn't be very strong, which was good if he was going to count this as working time.

“I could tell you quite a lot about his lovemaking, but I would guess that's not going to interest you.”

There were several things he could say at this point. He was thinking she might be about to make him an offer, and he would probably take it if he thought it would gain him any info at all. He didn't want to seem to be asking for it however, so he said, “I'm here about that box.”

“Why?” she asked, “although I'm suspicious myself, what with the fake address and the way he dropped me without warning when we were really hot together.”

That little box should have had fourteen pounds of highly crafted copper alloy as well as a superconducting refrigeration system. It should have weighed twenty five pounds. Not that she wasn't fit enough to toss twenty five pounds around, but she would have mentioned it's weight if it had it's intended cargo when it went thru her hands.

Picktish-Pickam had photos of the box, showing the

labels especially. "Is this the box?" he asked.

She leaned into him to look at the pictures. He was very aware of her body. She was quite firm, and her nipples pointed thru the net from just that little touch. Even after she sat up, she stayed close enough that they were in contact and he felt quite a bit of life flowing between them, probably enough that they were going to have to deal with it soon.

"This is the weight," he told her, and pointed.

That gave her an opportunity to get a point on the back of his hand and she took advantage of it. "But that's in Centish, at least I think it's Centish."

"Yes, it is," he said and took the opportunity to gently crush that point against her chest with the back of his hand.

Centish was the only foreign script seen in the basin today outside a museum. The ancient Ydlon script had disappeared even before the language. Ancient Ydlon was used in a few of the inner temple ceremonies, but it was written with Elvish characters today. The ancient ideograms in inscriptions on the relics can no longer be read.

"I can only guess," she said. "I don't know which are the numbers and which are letters, they all look like some kind of numbers to me."

"It is hard to tell," he said. Her hand was on his where he was holding the picture. He was a bit reluctant to put it back in the folder, passed it to his other hand to do that. They looked at each other, her smile was very loaded. "So about your friend..." Dyoniss started.

"I haven't seen him, or anyone else for that matter, since a week ago Morningday." She was very close to him now, her

breath was moist and sweet. She was stroking the back of his hand.

“When did you first see that package?” he asked, noticing that her eyes were very bright.

“How much is it worth to you?” she asked with a raised eyebrow, and started to caress the inside of his thigh.

Now he was sure she was thinking of sexual favors, and he had to admit that he had been very aroused for an evening with Kessil. This was the kind of chance encounter that he rarely turned down. The girl was attractive and definitely lighting his fire, in spite of being only a substitute. “It might be worth whatever you need,” he said, as politely as he could. He touched her chin lightly as he did, but let his forearm graze her nipple on the way by.

She grinned and said, “I think the first thing I need is to get a little closer,” and slid onto his chair, pulling his arm around her.

It didn't stop there, and as he suspected, after a kiss and only a few minutes of rapidly escalating petting, she invited him to go upstairs and get it on. Her bed was in a big open loft on the fourth floor, but with dormer windows that let them look down on the street and the back gardens from the bed. They were there awhile, but he didn't count that as career time. Some did, some agents thought they should earn extra for having to grant sexual favors, but in this case Dyoniss thought their encounter was a welcome bonus, even if he thought of Kessil the whole time. It was a great romp, and if Korshii noticed his distraction, she didn't care.

She was back from the bathroom before she would tell him much more. “He said his name was Vemnya, but I never did check any paperwork about that, except the Common Tongue on the shipping label. I never even thought about it at the time. We met down at Higgy’s taps out there on Peckamaya.” Avenue Peckamaya is the main streetcar route from Hdengragger center to the Eastern terminus. “He said he was new in the area, said he liked my look. As soon as I invited him, he was all over me, wow was I wooed. He had plenty of money, bought me darkmeal and several cups, probably too many. We went kind of crazy that first week, I hardly came up for air til I had to go back to work.”

“Sounds like you had fun.” He could attest to the fact that she could have fun in bed.

“Yeah, while it lasted,” she said. It was too cold to hang around nude, she wrapped back up in her quilt. As the dark progressed she would need to light the heater in whatever room she occupied.

“That’s still not telling me much that will help me find him.”

“Why do you want to find him?”

“Did you notice the package was a little light?”

“Yeah, like it was empty. He said it had seven of some kind of ornamental glass bulb that Centorin’s use in some kind of tree ceremony, packed in foam.”

“Was he Centorin?”

“He had a thick accent, even thicker than yours.”

“I was born right here in Hdengragger Principate.”

“Oh?” she didn’t look like she believed that.

He'd never heard that he had an accent before, he'd spoken Centish twice in the past month, both over voice channels to Hardensburg. He hoped that little bit didn't give him an accent already. "What did he look like?"

"Hair as light as yours, maybe even lighter, not as long, but with a bigger beard, the full width of his chin, but short. He had a strong chin like yours, maybe even a bit wider. He took several pictures of us, he had a pocket eye, but of course he took that with him."

"Did he upload them anywhere?" Dyoniss asked her.

"They were inside his pocket eye somewhere," she said, "They never came out of it, just when he projected them."

She had probably never seen a pocket eye before. "It was one of our pocket eyes, not a Centorin one?"

"They have different pocket eyes?" she asked.

"They usually get one of ours when they get here, but on their own planets ours don't work. Ours work from the suntowers, not the motionless stars."

"It was normal, I've seen pocket eyes before. The guy that owns our shop has one."

Pocket eyes manufactured here look like a big hard seed pod with a marble on one end and some holes drilled in the sides. Centorin ones are made of metal painted to look like plastic and are either covered with viewing screen or project holographic images into the air. "So what was his accent like?" he asked.

"Maybe it's not an accent but a tone, something like yours, maybe it has to do with the chin but it's like a little reverb, but deeper. I know a guy who has a mic with that

effect, it's called 'baritone' and he patches it to his pinkie button because he uses it a lot when he sings."

He was wondering if Vemnya was really Ragnar, so far the description fit, but it fit millions of others too. He needed to think of something distinctive about him. "Did he look around a lot like he was afraid someone might be watching and he didn't want to be seen?"

"Never, he wanted to be seen, way more than I did. He would have gone to Bouncers if I was willing." That was a club featuring professional and amateur sex performers. It was located in the MuonPinnacle tower on the heights of Hdengragger center. "I'm really not, I went once, but I could only watch."

"He said he was new to the area, did he say where he was from?"

"You have the address," she said, "it's not that far from the Blue Kite."

Dyoniss had pictures of the box from Picketish-Pickham's files. There was a lot of Centish labeling, it probably meant nothing to her. He read Centish, he knew it had the addresses, he recognized the Centish for Hdengragger easily enough. It named the contents and the weight as #24.79. He could see from the denting of the package that at one time it did have some weight in it.

The value of those coils was such that no amount of effort on the thief's part was too great. Whole villages could be bought and sold as part of a plot to take it. It's value was measured in titanium. There was no doubt that the plot to steal that coil was many levels deep, he wondered how many

levels deep this girl went in it? He would appear to accept her lonely simpleton persona at face value for the time being, but he would always keep in mind that she could be very much more.

“When he moved his things here, where did he move them from?” Dyoniss asked.

“From his backpack. As far as I knew they were coming from 31d in TworganicMagic. I hadn’t been up in that tower at that time.”

“You didn’t help him?”

“He did most of it while I was at work,” she said.

“Did he ever give you any other address?”

“Not that I remember, but it would have been fake. I’m going to stir up some lunch. I’ve got some loiss leaves I need to use up and I can put in either axiomites or mooliuk?”

Since the strips and druum had been small, he didn’t say he already had lunch.

She wouldn’t hear of going out, instead she whipped up a stir-fry using a commercial sauce while grilling him about the case. He knew better than to disclose anything significant, but he let her work out the outline of the case. A box had been shipped to a middle man somewhere in the Hdengragger principate. It was not sent to Vemnya, he let her learn that, he could not disclose the name, but he had showed her the Centish for it.

What he did tell her about was something that anyone who is interested in this business soon learns. Many of the Centorin immigrants to the worlds of Kassidor, and to the

basin of Ydlontrostl in particular, have one or more enemies out in the Empire and wish to remain hidden in the depths of one of the widest, emptiest basins on this vast, ancient and primitive planet. They do have people working for them, in the Empire, and in various basins of Kassidor. Packages and messages sent back and forth have untraceable go-betweens who meet in person to make the handoffs.

He also told her that most Centorin immigrants arrive with implants in their bodies that can be tracked by the Centorin motionless stars, three artificial moons that orbit the planet exactly once a week so they appeared to remain motionless in the sky. That meant that these go-betweens were almost always natives of the planet Kassidor, who are almost always free of implants. He didn't get to tell her that most Centorins who come here get those implants removed, most of them while they are still in the Yakhan.

"So that's what you got caught up in," he said.

"He has no right to use a person like that," she said.

"It is common among the Centorins. They think we are all simpletons because we expect people to be honest and open, especially about their feelings."

"He never said he was Centorin," she said.

"And Vemnya is certainly not a Centorin name."

She snorted, no doubt aware that in the Temple scripts it is the name of one of the holy caravan masters who lead our ancestors to freedom deep in ancient times. It is used too often today however, something Dyoniss felt it was a bit sacrilegious.

A few minutes later they were finishing up a very fine

lunch, she was still trying to find out more specifics, “You’re acting like you’re the detective,” he said, as he finished the last tasty axiomites.

“I want to help you find that bastard, I hope it’s something that you can give him a lot of trouble about. I don’t appreciate being used and lied to like that.”

Breaking her heart had not been a wise move on Vemnya’s part. “The contents of that box were actually quite valuable.” He hadn’t given her a number, he could scarcely count that high. It was certainly valuable enough to invest all that was needed to woo this lady for as many weeks as it took to pull this off.

“So all we really know is that Vemnya stole the parts that were supposed to be in there and passed the empty box on to me?”

“That’s about it,” he admitted.

7. Parts Chaser

Kessil was the only one upstairs this Nightday. A newbie had come in to try his hand at casting valve balls while she was away in Aitol and managed to earn an iron, in spite of paying off the materials of two failures. Vailiss was doing her best to turn him into a regular for the fringe benefits she might provide, for he was quite a good looking guy, reminding her once again that her hormones were still on full alert from anticipation with Dyoniss.

She had a phosphor globe to power her desk eye in the dark. She retrieved it from the office back porch and went up the short steps to the upper level. She put the fibershroud on it first to capture the light and conduct it into the base of her desk eye. She shook the globe hard enough to keep it lit for at least an hour. She wouldn't finish by then, but the Bordzvekian phosphor globes ran longer altogether if you gave them smaller but more frequent shakes.

It ran the desk eye well enough that it didn't make mistakes, but it was a little dim and hard to see and you had to really lean on the pointer key compared to how it worked during the light. She couldn't type quite as fast as during the light either, but she could get it all typed up and entered. She couldn't say that this call proved or disproved the maintenance machinery and procedures because they hadn't come into play. That meant this was still an infant mortality claim, and that went back to Yellgnoskn once again. She hated to do this to them because they really had mounted a

lavish PR campaign in their defense and that had been fun until the late hours at the mansion on the last day.

She got as far as describing the evidence when she remembered the microscope, and got up to dig it out. She had been sort of hoping to get home early. Doing this would pretty much preclude that, but she knew that if she didn't do this additional work, all she would have is a 'no it's not my problem' report.

As always, it was all in getting light on the subject. To the naked eye the tiny ring has a fuzzy hole in it at the failure. Once she could finally get the microscope on it, and a reflector to get enough lantern light onto it, she saw it looked like a microscopic bomb had gone off inside it, right in the middle of the ring. There was a spherical hole shredded and burned into the material. She wished she had the other rings so she could see how they compared with this. She wondered if they were also so exactly centered as this one was. That seemed suspicious if it was a bacterial colony or something like that. But as she looked over the micro landscape on the end of that gasket ring, she became more and more convinced it was a tiny explosion, and not a bacteria that could eat Yellgnoskn plastic.

If she was to put that in her report, it would be a political flash point. How could she say 'looks like an explosion?' without setting off one? Would it be some additive that Yellgnoskn is using that causes a reaction? She couldn't see any other reason, but she knew that was because her mind had already anchored in one possible reason. She knew she might miss them, but she had to remember that those other possible

reasons were out there. At least she had one possible explanation to put in the report.

With quite a bit more effort, she was able to get a few pictures from the microscope to her desk eye, and add some labeling and narration to go with them.

‘This is the lesion in the gasket ring, to me it looks like a bomb crater.’

‘This is the pressure entry wound at the failure site. All the numbered tears are consistent with entry to the gasket. You can see that the ‘explosion’ damage to the gasket had to occur prior to the inrush damage.’

‘This is the exit wound of the gasket failure. Damage is consistent with about half the amount of debris that is missing from the gasket ring.’

She miked the diameter in a few places to be sure that hadn’t been altered and taken up some of the material. The gasket was still within tolerance everywhere but the break. But the volume of the tolerance band was enough to account for the volume of missing material. To be complete she put that in her report also, went back and changed the wording of the previous statements.

She had an elastic analysis program in her desk eye that could investigate for vibrational resonance. There was just enough left in the phosphor globe to tell her that there were no modes of resonance that could cause the phenomenon, but there wasn’t enough left to add that to her report.

She could tell Vailiss had shut down the shop. There was still an outside door open but it lead only to the stairs to this mezzanine. Vailiss stopped by on her way out. All she has to

do is lean around the partition from her office and she is in Kessil's.

"How'd it go today?" Kessil asked.

"Production wise, OK. Before you got back he ruined a couple balls but he caught on after that. Socially, not so good. It's hard to ask without making him think it will effect his employment, so I was real casual about it, 'got plans for darkmeal?' and like that."

"I guess he does." Kessil said.

"He's kind of a homebody he says, but he's homeless at the moment. Too bad neither one of us can take him in. I can take him to darkmeal, but then we'd have to get a room." Vailiss had a guy named Mahone at home, at least some of the time.

"Cuura's got room in her bed, she'd let you be his first choice for variety." She was a girl who sometimes came in part time. She had big tits but not such a pretty face and nothing she took seemed to help very much.

"I can't see him with Cuura."

"I didn't meet him," Kessil said, but if he turned Vailiss down he probably wouldn't want to share a home bed with Cuura, not even as infrequently as Mahone shared Vailiss's bed. Vailiss is the rare blond in these parts, with a Nordic father from the region of Kln. Her body is a bit thick but she has a really pretty face and looks good enough that her appearance is not a problem. Mahone keeps Vailiss as a toy, in Kessil's opinion, but Vailiss doesn't want to admit that and Kessil doesn't belabor the point any more. Perhaps she admitted it to herself, and admitted she liked being a toy. It

got her into a very nice house, one she would never live in on a shop foreman's pay. Mahone is the East Hdengragger bureau chief for Lightning News, easily earning ten times Vailiss' two and a half coppers.

"I don't know Cuura that well," Vailiss said, "and I'd still have to rent a room to see him."

"Mahone is hardly ever home, if he comes home and finds you on someone, what of it?"

"He never brings anyone home so neither do I, that's our deal."

"So you're limited to the guy's place or renting a room."

"I wish I'd kept my old place," she said. It was on the other side of the Eastern Terminus, an attic in a townhouse in a sagging old hangleaf. A lot like the place Kessil had sold, but older and smaller. It was fine as a trysting suite, Vailiss could afford to furnish it. "I guess I'll have to go out this evening," she sighed.

"You'll meet someone with space you can go to, and if you don't, a room won't kill you."

"I know," she sighed.

"Is there anyone still here?" a man said from the door below. His voice was familiar but Kessil didn't place it at first. Vailiss was sitting on the edge of Kessil's work table by now, she got up and went to the top of the stairs, about a step and a half.

"There's a couple of us here," she said, "but the shop is closed."

"I know it's late, but I was hoping I might catch Kessil,

chief of maintenance machinery for Mbeshna Power? I was told she has an office in here.”

She got up and and went around her table to the door, “I’m still here.”

“Hi, Mysrath of Yellgnoskn, you might remember me from the conference.”

“I’m not so jaded that I would forget someone I had on a catwalk railing over a busy conference room,” she said.

Vailiss howled with incredulous laughter at that. No doubt she would have had fun there also, she was looking him over intently because he really was quite a piece of bait with sleek black hair in a jeweled braid, big shoulders and biceps, tight ass and bulging thighs.

“There were lots of banners in the ceiling,” Kessil told Vailiss, “nobody could see us unless they were against the wall and they had all the paperwork boxes piled there.” She spoke up to include Mysrath as he ascended the steps, “He was the one who needed the adventure, I was willing to save it for later.”

“Hey, if a woman shows me something, I expect she means something by it.”

“I would have settled for later,” Kessil teased, “but I kept right up with you.”

“Yes you did,” he said. He entered the room and sank into the guest chair, Vailiss got back on the end of the table.

“So is this visit personal or business?” Kessil asked.

“I do have business. I understand you have another failure?”

“Yeah, way down in Aitol,” she said. Mysrath had a home

in Boomig not far from the sumptuous estate where Yellghoskn lived and the conference had been held. He probably took a needleboat to get here, it was about three hours, but she wouldn't be shocked to learn he had come on the tube, it's less than iron to get to a terminus pond station from anywhere in Boomig.

“And you have the gasket?” he asked, “and the gasket wheel that installed it?”

She stopped, Haipon's voice in her ear, warning her she might have to protect it with the Instinct. Without looking anywhere but her memory, she saw herself putting it in the drawer after looking at it with the microscope. She knew the microscope was still out, she would have to explain that if asked. They had it to look at things like gasket wheels.

“I dropped it off at the company lab on the way by,” she said. She wouldn't bring up the microscope, or the fact that the phosphor globe was hooked her desk eye. She wondered if Vailiss knew she was lying. She hadn't been in here when she was using the microscope, but she could have looked over the partition if she wanted to.

“We need it at our labs, for our testing. You've seen the kind of testing we do.”

“So this is business?” Vailiss said, trying not to groan.

He put his hand on her calf, “I just have to pick up that gasket and then I can get personal,” he said.

Kessil knew he was a club rat with the stamina for both of them. “We don't have it here,” Kessil told him, “so you might as well get personal now.” She didn't move to him however. If Vailiss wanted him, Kessil would rather go home. They'd

had fun at first, but the way that conference had ended hadn't endeared him to her.

She started tidying up her table, she put some papers in the drawer with the gasket ring in it and locked the drawer like it was part of her everyday habit. She hoped she could find a key for it tomorrow, if not she would have to take the desk apart before the regional meeting. She put a couple books up and then slipped the microscope back in it's case.

Meanwhile Vailiss asked what his plans for darkmeal were. He countered by asking both of them. Vailiss waited for Kessil to answer. She was just putting the microscope on it's shelf by then. "I was just thinking I'd go home. I've got enough stuff ripe to make a meal and I was up early today and late yesterday so I'm not fit to party.

"So we're out of here?" Vailiss said.

"I'm just going to put this phosphor globe back out for next week," Kessil said, "You two go on, I'll get the door."

Mysrath was clearly searching for some excuse to stay and toss the office for that gasket, but not coming up with one. He paused to rub up on Vailiss by the front door, but by the time Kessil came back from the back door he had four breasts bumping him out the door. She pulled it closed behind her and locked it. She noticed that he watched her put the key in her pouch.

"Kessil, I'm sorry but I need to know when I can pick up that specimen?"

"Come to the regional meeting in the Hdengragger office, it's in the third floor conference room that overlooks Oldwater Street."

“When?”

“Right after breakfast, third hour if you have the time.” She knew he did, she could see the ring on his left middle finger.

“Morningday?” he asked.

Kessil and Vailiss had waved, Kessil went down the back street from here to get to Saseraik. “Yes,” she said while they were still within speaking distance.

Vailiss and Mysrath crossed the plaza to the modern canal where they could get a needleboat toward Boomig, unless he took her on the tube. On the tube the price is the same for one or two, or three if the third is a babe in arms. It was at least a three hour trip to his place if you didn’t take the tube. She took a couple steep little back streets and was soon going down the little path toward the place she would always call Tarreck’s.

She had only her own torch for light, the little puffballs that had been pretty at the last of dusk yesterday were a thick blanket over the stars by now so Kunae and Cynd couldn’t be seen even if they weren’t already low in the sky. Narrulla was gone and the path was still not familiar to her. It was chilly and misty and she pulled her nightcoat close. She wished for leggings once again and she was only a few feet from home. The path is narrow and the leaves of the vines are close in the torchlight. It was a very quiet Nightday evening, the lumins were almost silent, no doubt getting ready for the rain of Dawnsleep.

She wondered if something really was up with her gaskets. She couldn’t believe that there were now six that had

blown, and five of them had been powering package sorters that handled tubeway mail. She had been around this for a century now and knew that when something that co-incidental happens, it's not a coincidence. Somebody was doing something, and she just had to hope it wasn't someone high ranking in Mbeshna Power or she had no one to turn to.

"Kessil," a voice hissed and something tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped right up in the air with a yelp. "Shh, please," he hissed. It was Ragnar.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a much more normal tone.

"Shhh, shh, shh, shh. It might not be safe over at Yashmi's, so tell Dyoniss if you see him."

"I won't see..." 'him til Afternoonday,' she started to say but Ragnar didn't give her a chance.

"I won't come in, just listen, I've been asking around all day, not right here but in some seamier places, I spent a lot on yaag and ale, but that's OK. I found out two things. That guy who supposedly O.D.d on Kivatorn Pass was done by a guy with the antidote, and there's a guy from out west who's come into the cities. They say he works for a Centorin criminal House, and he has a vial of the antidote, they say he pops a pill every now and then just to see what it feels like. They said he beat up seventeen people down in Mefmun two weeks ago at a waterfront ale house. But I gotta go, write all that down, tell Dyoniss I hope he has something for me soon."

With that he disappeared into the dark of late Nightday, his foam soled sandals barely making sounds as he slunk away. She stood there a few seconds wondering how

frightened she should be. He'd heard rumors from bums he bought drinks for, in seamy places. Ragnar certainly hadn't been to the waterfront in Mefmun today unless he rode the tubes. If he didn't have pennies for elevators he certainly wouldn't have iron for tubes. She figured he walked the Old Canal for a few miles. It's pretty much all ruins along there once you get a half mile or so from the terminus pond. Those ruins have been rebuilt or planked over, but it's probably the seamiest section in the area. He probably heard a thousand other rumors also, but they didn't prove what he was trying to say so he left those at the taps. She used that to help get her adrenaline level back closer to normal before she could go on up the path to Tarreck's.

She was thinking of Afternoonday as she walked, and got warm from the thought. She was both frustrated and inflamed. Her body was urging her to go out and find some action to relieve the hormonal pressure, but her soul was willing to wait til Afternoonday. That magical evening at MkenetWind stood apart from all encounters since. She was willing to forgo a little casual pleasure just to be sure she had nothing on her mind to interfere with her appreciation of Dyoniss.

Another thought troubled her, if there was antidote to the Instinct around, it could be dangerous to meet a guy to spend the sleep with. In a world with the antidote, that could make her like the victims in Centorin crime stories. If that was possible, she could not go out to meet someone. Was that why the Species Immunity Complex was not eliminating ephemerality thruout the Empire? Would fear of each other bring ephemerality back here?

8. The Weight of the Box

Dyoniss couldn't tell Korshii the name and address of the initial recipient of the package in the Ydlontrostl cities, but that didn't mean he didn't know who he was, and couldn't stop to interview him once again. Last week Gegais had started out denying all knowledge of the package, saying anyone with a word processor can make up a shipping label. It had taken half a day and two cups of yaag, one of them blue, to get him to understand that Dyoniss was working *for* the guy Gegais was trying to protect, and that the shipment had never reached its destination. It had taken all that for him to give up the fact that he had received the package. He would not give up the name of his hand-off and Dyoniss was considering reading him, but hadn't threatened him with it yet.

This was an industry fraught with deception and subterfuge. Communication channels set up to serve those who fled such an all-powerful force as the Empire and its great Houses were going to be secretive by nature. So much of his work involved protecting them from various forces of the Empire, but that was not obvious to the people he helped. Few knew how serious this game was becoming.

Only the oldest nine of the major planets remained on the Centorin tube system. Few planets still had stargates on the ground after the planet Lambeth in the 112th and then Hargereemon in the 122nd went down their wormholes. Most planets were using the gatekeeper's highliners now. Only the

Kassikan and the stargate they kept protected this planet from the Empire at large. He knew that the highliners being built today were large enough to take warships, and he knew a Highliner was forcing it's way in their direction already, so he knew just how vulnerable they were. Being backward and primitive and beneath notice was this world's only real protection.

Gegais lived near the top of the hill this principate wrapped around. There was no streetcar up here and the hour hike up the hill was pretty tiring. Gegais had a big spread of more than three acres and a cut stone house that was set into the ledge just back of the very peak of the Hdengragger outcrop, the highest in the cities. It was cold, windy and raw up here in late Nightday, the overcast was thickening and there was no street lantern within three blocks of his place. The path was rocky and lined with low stone walls that scamps instead of karga grazed. Five great windwheels lined the peak, one of them fourteen centuries old. Their whoosh and creak was a constant background, more noticeable in a dark like this.

The lanterns and phosphors in the towers of Hdengragger center could be seen about four miles away. Only a few of those towers and the Tower of the Blue Kite were above him here. The roof of TworganicMagic was just below him, but six miles away. The towers were visible into the distance, til they were too far to see as more than dim glow on the horizon.

Gegais' field girl came to the door at his call, he didn't remember her name from last week, she had been busy and

had only waved. He should have made note of it, she looked OK across the fields, but much better up close, lean and buff with a magnificent figure, a sea of burnt bronze hair and a face of classic beauty.

Inside there was a cheery fire going in a big glass stove and the walls were lined with thick hides of snowy mrang so the big stone cabin was actually pretty cozy. They both had button-front denim wraps on, but both were open. Genais was losing his hard when Dyoniss entered the room.

“I’m really sorry to interrupt...” Dyoniss began as he reached the couch next to the door.

“No problem,” the girl said, “get undressed and join us.”

“I don’t want to forget what I came here for,” he said. Besides that, Korshii had already drained him pretty dry. He brought out his pocket eye, looked up the receipt Gegais had signed and held the eyepiece out to him, “Notice the time on there,” he asked.

He had too look hard, the pocket eye barely worked in this light. “Third hour and five of Ekendosa Afternoonday, that seems right to me.”

“Did you make a special trip out to pick it up?”

“No, I was out early to get some drip tubing and a roll of mulch. I’m always up early on Afternoonday.”

“You must have been expecting it, it arrived only three minutes before.”

“I got a message, I stopped at the tube station on the way.”

He hadn’t noticed the small desk eye on a cupstand in the back corner of the room. That also meant someone involved

had access to the tube schedules, more than likely had a link to the track sheet. Most of these handoff channels don't have that kind of access. He wondered if the one who tipped him off about the package's arrival was involved in the theft. "Do you know who messaged you?"

"I never do. There's never a personal word, only the time, place and size."

"Did they load the box on your cart for you?"

"Nah, it's a little box, you've got the picture, he just passed it over the counter."

"So you're claiming the box was already light when you got it?"

"Wasn't it supposed to be? I never ask what's in the stuff I transship, that's what this is about, anonymity. There are bad people back there on Centorin and the people that come here have good reasons for it."

Most people think of the thousand or so planets in the Empire as 'Centorin' and don't really care which planet the immigrants are actually from. For the most part it doesn't matter, Centorin is the Common Tongue name for the Empire. Of all the planets, only Earth, Kinunde and Naiho have one or more cultures of their own. Less than a hundred planets have over a hundred million inhabitants. Most of their cities are as alike as Vnassvuur and Tosdoytl, not as different from each other as the Ydlontrostl cities are from Terassadrán.

"We went over that," Dyoniss told him, "I'm on your side, remember." He took the pocket-eye back, brought up the label and the weight. "Did you see this?"

"The part of the shipping label that's in Centish?" he

asked, using a voice that said he wouldn't know Centish from inglethor tracks.

“Yeah, the part that says it weighs twenty five pounds.”

“What?” he clearly hadn't read that, or was broadly acting that he hadn't. Even though he was working for Centorins, it was actually unlikely that he knew any Centish. “It was nowhere near that. It was maybe five, certainly not more than seven.”

“So it wasn't so light it was empty?”

“No, no way. I never look at what I transship, I never ask what's in the package. If the Kassikan lets it onto their property, that's good enough for me. Sometimes the wrapping isn't the best and I can see it's a sack of underwear or a cooler full of salami or some other thing you can't get here. People send whiskey all the time and I figured that's what it was. It felt like a box with a bottle in it.”

Dyoniss made note of that. If this was true, the furball coil had either never even made it off Centorin or it had been intercepted in the Yakahn. He had the tube system sheet log, the cargo car went nonstop from the Kassikan's huge second canal station in the Yakhan to the second station on the Old Canal in the Hdengragger Principate of Ydlontrostl and the shipping company where Gegais picked it up. Unlike people, cargo doesn't have to stop for food, water, air and restrooms and always routes thru.

He briefly thought of chasing to the Yakhan about this. He would have to track it thru incoming quarantine in the Kassikan, but knew that would be insanity. It took over a week on the tubes to get there and would cost several

coppers. He didn't know anyone there and that bureaucracy was almost as old as the Temple's. They would make jokes about him and laugh to them on the courts of the pyramid.

What didn't make sense is that the weight he received, while wrong, was not the same as the weight Korshii received, if he could believe her. That meant the package contents may have been changed again on its way to Hardensburg, or Gegais might be lying, though his snifter said he didn't seem to be. He wondered how significant that was? No doubt New West Trucking just wanted their furball coils and didn't really care how many times the package had been stolen after that.

Last week Dyoniss had gone over the package getting off the tubes. It had been scanned out of the car and at pick up. It was there only three minutes and the place was busy and supervised. There was no chance to slip something out of the package and replace it with something else on that busy sorting floor. The supervisor has the manifest on a beat-up old portable screen and checks it all off. That is one of the biggest cargo stops on the tubes in this basin, so there is a lot of automation. Dyoniss was pretty sure the package that was put into the tube car in the Yakhan was the one placed into Gegais' hands.

Once again, the real problem was to protect the integrity of the secret pathways that connected the exiles to their homeland. The woman whom he had introduced as his 'field girl' was waiting patiently next to Gegais. The way she was sitting, he could see that she was one to hold the heat. She had an awesome body, but her classically beautiful face

seemed quite a bit plainer than Kessil's. It seemed like any time he saw a woman now, he thought of Kessil. Was it just because they got interrupted and never got to consummate finding each other? Or was it Kessil herself? Or was it Karasis speaking thru his endocrine system?

"I can tell this isn't the right time..." Dyoniss started to say.

"It's a fine time," the girl said.

"She was mad when I didn't let her hang out with you last week," Gegais said.

"You weren't moved to be this civil last week," Dyoniss replied.

"I don't know that I am now," Gegais said.

"I'm here to protect the integrity of the service you perform," Dyoniss said. "The package you helped deliver did not arrive. I want to find the weak link in your chain to aid the exiles. I also believe there are bad people out there and while many of these people have come here to escape coercion, there are those preying on them."

"Maybe I'll ask the guy I hand off to if he wants to talk to you," Gegais said. "If he does, we know he's innocent so you have no reason to talk to him. If he doesn't want to talk to you, maybe he's got something to hide so I'll give you his name."

"If he's willing to talk to me, please let him. Have I been less than fair with you?"

"You kept coming," he said. "I would have had to tell you to leave."

"You have information I need, it is my job to be

determined.”

The girl had some fun with Gegais’s arm while he thought about it. Dyoniss let him take all the time he wanted, he was sufficiently entertained watching Shreihin (he finally remembered her name) entertain herself. She was superbly equipped to do so and obviously got off on Dyoniss watching, and didn’t mind showing him that she was getting off. He hoped he wasn’t going to have to provide more favors to find out what he needed to know.

“I won’t tell you his name,” Gegais said once he decided to speak again, “but I’ll take you to meet him. He always has darkmeal at Leihoe’s.”

He could see Shreihin liked the idea, so she figured she would be going. “I can’t afford the place,” Dyoniss said.

“You could probably buy the place if you put your back into it,” Gegais said. “If a simple farmer can go there, I’m sure you can join us.”

“I know the transshipping business isn’t glamorous, but I know it’s well paid, and I believe that meeting would be a business expense.”

“It should be for you too,” Gegais said.

“He knows both of you?” Dyoniss asked Shreihin.

“Since long before we got into transshipping,” Shreihin said.

“I’ve known him since before the Kassikan had a stargate,” Gegais said.

After bundling up against the late Nightday chill, they spent an hour hiking down the steep hill to the modern canal

and another hour on a needleboat on South Modern Canal getting to Terminus Pond. From there it was only a five minute walk back up the Terminus Promenade to Leihoe's. They found the man they were looking for was expected, but had not yet arrived, would they like to wait in the bar? Starting with Korshii's morning yellow and proceeding thru a cup at Gegais's, he'd had more than his normal total on a day off and this was supposed to be a day devoted to his career, and still early yet, not even the start of darkmeal, about the earliest he normally drank.

He wondered what Yashmi was doing right now. He knew she would not wait darkmeal on him because his schedule was too unreliable. This would be an early darkmeal, but even if he hurried home after, he would be too late.

He wondered if Kessil was still on site or had she been able to come back today? He wondered what she would be doing? There was a good chance she would go out this evening. There was a good chance she had one or more male friends who meant a lot to her. From their conversation yesterday, he knew she was a quality person who would have no trouble finding serious relationships. He knew he would love to have one with her, he hoped he would know this Afternoonday if such a dream was possible.

Shreihin wasn't being very decorous with Gegais, he remembered being with voluptuous women like that who like to work them on you and remembered how hard it was so stay soft at a time like that. He could imagine he would find it at least as hard with Kessil, but she wouldn't be pressing like that in public.

The yaag in here was two pennies, but it was potent. The house yellow was beyond any gold he'd had lately and Shreihin got the green for three pennies and had to be lead by the hand from then on, giggling all the while. Gegais left Dyoniss with her and asked them to remain inconspicuous and went to sit at the bar by himself.

Shreihin already had enough of a buzz that she didn't do much but lean back on him and space, which was fine because she had such a fabulous body. She got a little casual petting out of him but honestly, she was too well built to be casual about. If he was here like this with Kessil, he wondered if he could do this. He remembered getting even more aroused when he did this with Kessil. When she leaned in Dyoniss thought maybe she was going to kiss, but instead she whispered, "He's here. Don't look," she said, "look under the table."

Dyoniss slipped under the table and looked out at the guy Gegais was talking with. He hid his face behind her thigh, but that was because he had a clear view of him over her hip. He wasn't someone he would remember easily or be able to describe well. About his only distinguishing feature was his corpulence, but he wasn't fat enough that you would notice unless you were looking for it.

Dyoniss got up and pantomimed putting something back in his pouch, like he was down there because of dropped coins. That was more for the Leihoe staff than the one he wanted to meet. He noticed Gegais look over their way. It was tough not turning around and looking, but Shreihin was pleasant enough to cuddle.

Gegais was at their table in minutes, he leaned over and said, “Himid would like to have you join him for supper,” letting Dyoniss know his name. He wrote it on his case sheet as they followed him.

They went to a table in another room. It was in its own little alcove, with a hanging candlantern over the table and a foot heater beneath it that was on, but turned low. The room wasn’t cold enough to really need it, but many women liked to remove their outer clothing so more of their beauty can show. Dyoniss liked to keep his on, but that would be sweaty in here. It was a round table and he sat opposite Gegais.

“What are we having for dinner?” Shreihin asked.

At a place like this it is usually understood that there is one dinner per table. To order separate, and make two different meals be prepared, would cost extra. The meal would be about an iron, and three pennies extra per plate. They took little time to decide, Dyoniss was buying, he got to decide. Himid was the one familiar with the premises, Dyoniss deferred to him.

They ordered a segment of roast, stuffed mrangle, which Himid swore by. Dyoniss hoped it was special, because even though it was the totem animal of the basin, he had never liked it as well as karga, a beast originally from Elf country. While the idle small talk went on, his thoughts wandered to thinking they really ought to invite the neighbors for a karga roast this year. Yashmi would love it and it was time the panip bed was re-done anyway, so they could build the firepit there.

He almost missed it when Himid asked, “So there was a problem with one of our deliveries?”

“Yes,” Dyoniss said. “It seems like there may have been multiple problems.”

“What?” Himid asked.

“Just tell me this, when you got the box, what did it weigh?”

“About five pounds. I could tell it was a handle, a half gallon, in a foiled gift box and packaged for shipment. I knew it came from out there because the oldest labels were in Centish.” No doubt he knew the years that were in the Centorin gift giving season because these routes to the exiles were much more active during those years.

“And you brought it where?”

“Do you really think we should trust this guy?” he asked Gegais. “He looks like a Centorin, even sounds a little like one.”

“You are working for Centorins,” Dyoniss told him. “The owner of the company the shipment was going to, is Centorin. With that said, I was born down in the first dell behind the Blue Kite and still live there.”

“There are a lot of bad people out there,” Himid said.

“And one or more of them, I now suspect more, tampered with your package.” He brought his folder out again, showed the picture of the package as it arrived at Picktish-Pickam.

“So you know what package it is?” he said dismissively.

“What would convince you?” Dyoniss asked.

“Generally nothing but a few decades of personal history.” He turned to Gegais, “Why do you think we should trust him?”

“If the shipment is already stolen, what harm can it do?”

“Lead him to the one in hiding at the end of this trail.”

“That’s New West Trucking, the company that hired us, I was sent BY the one hiding at the end of this trail to find the stolen contents of that package.” Dyoniss said. “The shipment did not arrive.” He didn’t tell him it hadn’t even reached him, let him learn that from Gegais on his time.

Their food arrived. If this had been cooked from scratch since they sat down to the table, the cooks were idle at the time. He had to admit that the way it was marinated, it tasted and felt more like a theiropsoid than anything in the mrang class, even a carnivorous one. It was probably brined and ready to broil, the stuffing was probably kept hot, they probably used the stuffing in more than one dish. Still it was excellent, and he toasted Himid on his choice. He wasn’t lying when he said it was the best mrang he’d ever had.

Himid lectured awhile on the mrangle, a smaller and daintier family of the class, many of which are carnivores, such as this one. Most were hornless and had only light shells on the back of each segment and a slightly heavier face shell. Himid swore they had better flavor than any of the others. Dyoniss agreed, he didn’t use mrang meat for anything but filler in trap mix or meat loaf.

When the feast was done, he bought another round of cups, Shreihin was even ready for another by now. They had a four penny special, since this was a business expense, Dyoniss went all the way and ordered it. The stuff was purple and the fumes were thick. He couldn’t resist a long inhale. None of the others resisted either.

“Where did the package seem so light it was empty?” Gegais asked.

Dyoniss wasn't sure what planet he was on at the time and went ahead and answered. “At Picketish-Pickam, when it was being placed on a tube to Hardensburg.”

“And when you sent it?” Gegais asked Himid.

“The half gallon was still in the box.”

Dyoniss had to make sure he had that written down, even if he couldn't get the syllables evenly sized and spaced. He had no evidence that it was true, and made note of that also.

Dyoniss beseeched him once again, “Please, I know you want to drink that up, I'd like to take a ride too, but I need to know the next step on that route of that package. You don't want thieves on your routes any more than your customers do.”

Himid was still able to look at Dyoniss and say, “I shipped it by needleboat courier, I only had it in my hand two minutes. Remember, he handed it off to me right outside the tube depot. I sent it to a box number at Relmen's.”

“What courier?” Dyonis asked.

“First one by. He had a green and white striped boat and a cap like it.”

Getting home after that cup, even hours later, was a little abstract. He knew the way, and the way was all familiar, but he was so stoned it wasn't familiar. The streets seemed narrower and more crooked. The businesses looked more downbeat than they had on the way. He came to the canal and knew he'd made a wrong turn, and had to look up over

everything to find the tower to get his bearings. He was only blocks from where he knew, but the crooked streets brought him back to the canal again, even though he kept the tower in sight. He followed the canal and followed the shore of the Terminus Pool all the way around til the modern canal and the lock.

He felt like his eyes were crossed the whole time, or he had tunnel vision. His body felt a thousand feet tall and it took calls by pocket-eye to the helmsman to turn it. He couldn't recognize people fast enough, they said hi and went by before he could react. All would understand that he was stoned, but they weren't used to seeing him this stoned and might say something about it. If any did, he missed it. There might be gossip, but few of the people he ran into hung out at Zestin's so he wouldn't have to take a lot of razz.

The Blue Kite was packed and the music was thumping. If Kessil had come down here this evening he had a very small chance of finding her in the throngs. He felt he didn't need to, they had plans for Afternoonday and he was pretty sure that would include Dusksleep. Besides that, he was too far gone to keep partying. There were people out in the plaza all around the tower, including one party around a huge bong. Most of the produce stands were packed away, but the cooks were still busy, and the kegmen out here had larger cups for your penny than the ones inside the club. He was glad he didn't have his cup with him, afraid he would be stupid enough to fill it.

On the smaller paths, he was by himself. He could hear that people were home, many had music on, quite a few had

private screens in the 123rd and lanterns to play recorded cinema. For awhile he was so stoned he was sure he could see in the dark, until he tripped over a varmint fence where the path turned around a garden. He landed in a bemeth patch, but mostly on the path with his legs among the vines. He didn't think he smashed any of the gourds. He didn't know these people, it was far enough from Yashmi's home that they had not been invited to the last transaction on this property.

A slim little woman came out of the house with a lantern. "What happened?" she asked. She was sleek with lustrous long hair and a demure white wrap that reached below her knees, but it was probably within a few degrees of freezing by now. She had a thick scamp nightfur around her shoulders that she was holding with one hand.

"I was lost in thought and didn't need my torch because I thought I knew this path so well, but I tripped over your fence that I've seen one million times. I don't think I hurt the blemeth too bad, I didn't feel any gourds crush under me."

"What about you, are you hurt?"

"Nah, if a klutz like me got hurt in a fall I wouldn't have survived long enough to trouble you this evening." Dyoniss was out of the patch by now and at the varmint fence. "I'm really sorry to disturb you," he said and stepped over.

"It must have been something interesting you were thinking about?" she asked.

"I was just trying to figure out when the package was stolen the second time," he said, and stopped to set her fence back up where he'd knocked it down. It wasn't as simple as it should be in this condition.

“What package?”

“The one that never made it to Hardensburg,” he said while he got up. “Sorry to disturb you,” he said again and left her with that much as he continued down the path. Someday he would stop and be neighborly, but he was late getting home already and too blithered to make the impression he would like.

“Well look what the milliclamp dragged in,” was the way Yashmi greeted him when he came up the last half-flight of steps. “And look at the eyes on you, you can’t fool your mother, you’ve stared into the depths of many a cup tonight.”

“It was all in the line of duty,” he said. “I learned the next step on the path of the package that was stolen. I learned that it was stolen twice.”

“I hope you still know all those things in the morning.”

“I wrote them down. If I can read the scratches I made when I was really out there, I’ll remember.”

“It’s not that late yet, I was thinking of going down to Zestin’s for a couple. Since you’ve got such a good buzz going, want to come down and maintain it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Kessil might be there.”

“We’re scheduled for Afternoonday,” he said, he didn’t want her to see him in this condition unless they’d gotten into this condition together like they did at MkenetWind. “You ate?” he asked.

“Just a mash and trap; you?”

“Too much, Liehoe’s. I’m going to have to expense it, it was two irons and twelve altogether.”

“Guh!” she clutched at her chest like a spear shaft had just appeared in it.

“That was for four of us.”

“You better be able to expense it, I know what that did to your pouch.”

“Sucked it drier than my social pouch,” Dyoniss said.

“No need to brag.”

“It was in the line of duty too,” he said. “I ran into horny women today. I couldn’t get anything out of one of them without sexual favors, and I’m sure the other would have demanded too, but it’s her boyfriend I had to talk to.”

“Well I can’t ask you for any, so I’m heading down to Zestin’s. If Kessil’s there I’ll tell her you’re home, should I tell her you’re spent?”

“No part of our relationship will be built on lies. But can I borrow your headphones?”

She laughed but said ‘sure’ as she found her nightcoat and leggings. She had on a splashy party wrap that actually made her look pretty good.

“You have fun and don’t get hurt,” he said and kissed her cheek.

9. Company Meeting

Kessil didn't really mind the fact that she got to take a public needleboat on the canal instead of the tube to the Morningday meeting. She didn't get to go to the meeting at headquarters, but the regional meeting for the principate which was in the main conference room of the district headquarters building. Actually it wasn't a building, it was the commercial section of floors seven, eight and nine in the Tower of Great Destiny, a pretentious name for a twenty century old tower that was seventh tallest in central Hdengragger and still had a coin-op elevator.

It hadn't taken long at all to find a key to her desk, so she had time to get breakfast with Tamton, some panip hash-fries and pem berry patters. She hadn't had much darkmeal because she had to pick it by torch light. Tamton gave her an eyebrow and said, "You must have something going on at that meeting."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"You've got that glow."

"I got a full night's sleep for once," she said. It had been the first good Dawnsleep in that house since she moved. No animals had walked over her to wake her up, no rain dripped on her, and she hadn't woken up cold enough to need a second quilt.

"Who will you be meeting with?" he asked.

"Guys who run the tube shops around town, the district supervisor, maybe a Yellgnoskn representative."

“Well you look fetching,” he said.

“Thanks,” was all she could think to say. She’d given him invites from time to time, but knew he was busy with breakfast and lunch and she had to get to the meeting. He had more customers to tend anyway. He wasn’t one to talk about his feelings a lot. She was afraid he wanted more from her than she had for him. Once a year, for the sake of Karasis more than anything, was all he could be to her. It wasn’t his body, he was only a little sligher than Dyoniss, a better than average body she thought. No, it was because his feelings were so hidden and so silent it made her uncomfortable.

She wondered who she would come on to if she was to come on to someone at the meeting, not that she was in the least mood for it. The meeting would have to run long, so an encounter would last until lunch time and she could get another public back in time to arrange her notes, check mail and get any other eye work done while it was light, because she hoped to spend tomorrow naked in the sun with Dyoniss. It promised to be hot.

Just as Tamton went to handle the new arrivals, Ragnar slid into the table across from her. He was at least as nervous as when he first arrived at the house.

“Has Dyoniss found out anything about Hyonimus yet?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen him,” she said. “I tried to tell you I won’t see him til Afternoonday,” she said.

“I was hoping to meet him here.”

“If he has breakfast out, it would probably be at Blue Kite Plaza, I’ve never seen him down here.” If she had she would

have approached him years ago. “What are you so antsy about?” she asked.

“What do you mean.”

She laughed once, she thought he was going to bolt and stifled it. “Like *that*,” she said, “you almost ran.”

“You heard what this is about didn’t you?”

“Your father smuggling antidote for the Instinct,” she remembered perfectly.

“And you’re not scared?” he asked. Before she could reply he went on, “You don’t know how to be scared, you’ve never imagined what it’s like without the Instinct.”

“Oh yes I have. I’ve seen Centorin movies in Centish, I admit I needed to read the subtitles, but I understood what the story was.”

“Then you should be as scared as I am.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because Mikal has to cover what he’s doing. Because there’s no police force here, he doesn’t care what kind of trail of bodies he leaves. I’ve seen it happen.”

“Three suspicious deaths?” she said.

“That was last dusk, there were four more during this past dark, only two were in Hardensburg. One was in Vnassvuur, the other was in Parkstance Principate,” one of the tiny and most ancient principates across the canal from Hest, “so we know he can work anywhere in the basin.”

“And he is behind all of it?”

“We pray there are not more evil men trying to bring the antidote to the basin.”

She circled her fingers about that. He took another careful look around. He was too nervous for her to even think about offering him any of her hash, but she was powering thru it the best she could. She wanted to get on a needleboat early enough that she didn't have to jostle for position in line. "I see your point," she said.

He must have seen something because he said, "Sorry, I got to go," and ducked down behind the table and behind her, behind a planter, behind the next table and took off running in a crouch.

Kessil got up and looked after him, amazed. Two seconds and he was nowhere in sight. She stepped out into the path a few steps and still couldn't see him though she looked all around. Suddenly someone ran into her from behind, shoving her forward, then gripped her arms and pulled her back.

"That guy who was just with you, where did he go?" the man demanded. He was very tall, taller than Dyoniss or Ragnar, maybe even six feet. His cheekbones were like the prow of a warship, his chin was as square as a stone block and he had a beard but it had been sheared to small stubble with a mechanical implement. He had a perfume smell that was out of place on such a big, rough man.

"I don't know," she said, "and who are you to demand that? Let go of me," she said and wrenched herself free. It took more force than the Instinct should have allowed.

He roughly shoved her aside as he ran off down the street Ragnar must have taken. His parting words were "You're lucky I don't have time for you."

She was pretty rattled as she rode the needleboat. It's hard to talk when everyone sits in a line, that's what's better about a streetcar, but they are usually slower and most times she doesn't want to have to chat people up on the way to the meeting. Usually she thinks about what she needs to give and get at the upcoming meeting, often with her eye to the pocket-eye with it.

Today she was shivering with the fear that everything Ragnar said was true, and that guy chasing him had taken the antidote. If he had, he could have done anything to her, she might be lucky to be alive. She was glad this happened in the light, if it had happened yesterday she might be too shook up to go to the meeting.

She had to get her mind on the meeting and not on Dyoniss and the trouble his father might be causing. But she had to think about what she might be getting into. He seemed like a person who's life she wanted to share, but if his life included a father who smuggled the antidote and a half brother who attracted violence, did she want to get mixed up in that?

As the needleboat slid into the ancient canal, she thought about that. If Dyoniss took on the responsibility to attempt to stop the antidote, she was favorably impressed, in fact she would do what she could to help him. She had to remember to talk to him about it tomorrow. She didn't know what she could do to help, but if he would try to stop it, she wanted him to know he had her support.

So again she tried to get her mind back on the upcoming meeting. She had her notes with her, she had the gasket

securely taped into a scrap of paper in her pouch. She had everything on her pocket eye, she didn't even have a way to print to paper at her office. She could get a paper copy at the regional office if her manager OK'd it.

The canal banks are quite run down for a mile or so, not far from the terminus pool. In this area the canal banks were now nothing but sand eroded from the blocks that lined it centuries ago. There was dredging going on. The canal is long enough that Kortrax pulls tides thru the canal, and at this time of week the needleboat fought the current where the sand had built up.

For the next couple miles ruins dominate. What were once palaces and armories and bureaucratic warrens were now reclaimed by the poor. A little farther along it was reclaimed by artists and artisans, a little farther, some experimental cooks and then a hall called ShockMe. It was once a legislative chamber. The canal used to detour around the rest of that bygone parliament building, but half of the building was gone and the canal now went straight thru. The towpath went thru what was once the central hall of the building. The old central hall walls were now facing the canal and were a graffiti contest and large parts of them had been preserved. The other hall of the legislature had been re-built into the world center of the Lectroshock genre and the basin center of Collapse.

After that the canal goes around two sides of the site of ancient Karasis Hdengragger, a much smaller replica of the Karasis Yuhal, being only two thousand by four thousand feet. The only trace of that temple that remained today was

the straight path of the canal and the square corner where the corner of the temple used to be. Now the area was stylish townhomes on both sides of the canal with whimsical crystal bridges every other block that were fun to glide under in the nearly silent needleboat. A few upscale eateries and booksellers were in the shops and there were farmer's carts at every corner.

From there, it got more urban and there were more and bigger businesses along the canal. The main city center in the principate is still called Hdengragger, even though it had taken her an hour to get this far. She got to read more of that book on the way, it was starting to get really weird because the main character had been killed by the pod people and was in the process of waking up as one of them, so presumably she would be one for the remaining two thirds of the book. The stop where she got off was on the towpath, the boatman had to come to land in between tows. There were only curb-level handgrips here to get out of the needleboat, but she was used to it from the century or more she had been getting off here.

The pedestrian level is a plankway cantilevered over the towpath at this point. Today's downtown is in what was once the quarry for the RoingBoomig aqueduct and bridge. The cut had shortened the canal by several miles, but it caused the city center to be dense and narrow. The towers just outside downtown were on the high ground and had tunnels from the busy and steep streets of the center to the bottoms of their elevator shafts and the penny-hungry slots of their 103rd century elevators.

As she walked into the conference room, she could tell that some discussion had already started. Mysrath was already there, she heard his voice before she even entered the room, "...appreciate being given the runaround on this. You blame the failures on us, yet you won't let us have the materials..." This was where she got to the door. Hamthish saw her, but Mysrath's back was to her so he continued, "...that you claim are defective. How do you..." This was when Mysrath noticed that Hamthish had seen something and turned to see Kessil getting to her seat at the table.

Mysrath turned to her, "they deny all knowledge of you stopping here to drop off the sample."

"I said I dropped it at the main lab, that's in Kyoith," she said. "I said you would meet someone here who could make a decision on when you can have it. I see someone has been nice enough to print copies of my field report," she said and passed one to Mysrath. That was a sign that it had probably set off the explosion she was afraid of. At least she would have a paper copy now.

She knew everyone else in the room, said hi and took her usual seat. Vailiss was not here yet but all the other parts-shop foremen were. "Do you know when Vailiss will be in?" Hamthish asked.

"I last saw her with Mysrath," Kessil said, "about thirty third hour of Nightday."

Hamthish gave one of his, 'I can't believe I'm playing in this soap opera' eye rolls and looked to Mysrath, not actually saying anything.

“She was going home before she came here,” he said, “so she could be another half hour.”

“I’ll take notes for her,” Kessil said.

“Very well,” Hamthish said and picked up his paperwork. “Let’s get this gasket thing disposed of shall we? Have we all read Kessil’s report?”

“No,” Mysrath said.

“We’ll let everyone refresh themselves of it.”

It was only two pages of text plus the pictures. Most of the guys here run one of the hose and fitting shops that dot all the canals of Hdengragger Principate. They flipped thru it bored since they were never concerned with a removable connection and thus never needed gasket rings. A couple of them had side conversations going on about who had hit on them lately. It wasn’t her.

“You want to know when the lab will be done with the ring?” Hamthish asked Mysrath when he was done reading the report. It didn’t seem to contain anything he didn’t know.

“Yes sir.”

“I’ve give them a call and ask.”

“Don’t bother sir,” Kessil said.

“Why not?”

“Actually I lied to him,” she said, and blushed a little as she looked in his direction, “I have the ring,” and she held it up between the nails of her thumb and forefinger. “I also have some photos on this cube,” she held that up, “that were taken thru a microscope.”

“Then do we know what we need to know? Are we done

with it?”

“We really haven’t started, in my opinion,” Kessil said. “I think Tuuklon should look at this at headquarters.” She kept an eye on Mysrath, she wouldn’t put it past him to convince his conscious that he wasn’t going to hurt her, just grab the ring. He wasn’t going to do it. She knew him intimately and knew what his physical capabilities were.

“Why?” Mysrath whined, acting it out like she’d betrayed a forty-decade partnership.

“Yes,” Hamthish asked, “why did you feel you had to do such a melodramatic thing?”

“I didn’t want to make a scene and maybe queer Vailiss out of a sleep in Boomig.” She turned to Mysrath, “You were prepared to be very insistent.”

“I was willing to go the distance with you,” he replied.

“Good grief people,” Hamthish said, “we’d make more profit recording video of our meetings as humor.” That caused the crew to laugh, somebody mentioned it would be censored on Centorin and Hamthish had to say, “We’re getting off the subject.” He turned back to Kessil, “You want who to look at it?”

“Tuuklon; he’s in charge of the analysis labs at headquarters. I want his opinion on what caused this failure.”

“Is that all right with you?” he asked Mysrath.

“No sir, we need to get it to our lab as soon as possible.”

“Well it’s all right with me,” Hamthish said, “and I’m the chairman here and you’re one of our suppliers. One of the half dozen gasket ring suppliers in Hdengragger Principate.”

“Why’d you ask if you were going to send it to your lab

anyway?”

“To give you a chance to say, ‘By all means, the more scientists we have looking at the problem, the quicker we’ll find a solution,’ or to say, ‘I wish your support engineer hadn’t even seen it,’ like someone with something to hide.”

“I’ve got nothing to hide, my mission is to get the failed part to our quality control labs as soon as possible.”

“Those labs do put on a fine presentation,” Kessil said. She wanted to add, ‘and their P.R. sluts are quite skilled,’ but thought that would be a cheap shot at this point unless someone really was recording for a comedy skit.

“Just what is your position with Yellgnoskn,” Hamthish asked him.

“Parts chaser in plain talk. I am a qualified engineer but my missions are always to find the parts that we need.”

“Do you know Yellgnoskn personally?” Hamthish asked.

“Yes, we are practically neighbors, we play in the same kahble league.” That was a gentleman’s sport, a form of lawn bowling. Kessil actually liked to play it and was reasonably good, one of the best at the average picnic. Meanwhile Mysrath babbled on about his relationship with Yellgnoskn.

“I’ll explain all this to him when I see him.”

“When will you be meeting?” Mysrath asked, “I’ll probably see him first.”

“This evening at the Mist Valley Lawn Club. I guess he must be on two leagues.” Hamthish probably could afford to hop on a tube and play a casual game of kahble in Roing-Boomig on the evening of noon.

“While I should be back to the house an hour from now,”

he said. “Thank you for your time, sir,” he said to Hamthish. Kessil got only an evil stare, one that said he thought she had used him. She tried to give him the same stare back, but knew it didn’t work, knew all she was giving was the hurt that she felt because she had been used a few weeks ago. She wasn’t sorry to see him leave, not this meeting, not her life if it came to that. He was a sweet talker and a daring lover, but she didn’t even wave as he shut the door. Their eyes met and she gave a shudder as it clicked shut. That, mixed with Ragnar and the rough man who chased him had her on edge.

“See that the gasket does get to the main labs,” Hamthish told her. “I think there’s a needleboat courier who leaves about lunch time.”

That meant he should get there by the end of the day. She wondered how much she trusted the company courier right now. The look on Mysrath’s face was the kind that would use an antidote for the Instinct if one was around. There were spots on the canal where one could intercept a needleboat in a kayak because of the crowds. The RoingBoomig bridge is one of them. A third of a mile long and up to five hundred feet high, built of stones placed a hundred and five centuries ago. If the crystal patches of the modern restoration, now only twenty five centuries old, weren’t visible, she might not dare to cross it. She wondered at the faith of those who lived underneath it.

Hamthish went on with the meeting, tackling the next item like it was a varmint that had died in one of his traps last week. “So, next on the list is Fukai on the ongoing situation with Old Eleven.” The next oldest surviving windwheel was

number fifty one, and their newest one was one thirteen. The company had owned as many as twenty five at once, but only seven now and only three were working. The oldest one had been run by the same guy and his spouse for the last three centuries. His spouse had run it longer than that, it was said, but the company records had been burned twice since then, so no one was sure. Anyway the ladder to get up and down had failed over a century ago. The old man had repelled all attempts to fix it. The company continued to send supplies up the hundred fifty seven foot tower in a rope lift.

Two weeks ago the old man had escaped, as he said it, and let himself down in the bucket somehow. His ears were going to have to be regenned from scratch, he was deaf as a stone. All attempts to get the old woman down had failed and she was holding the wheel hostage, threatening to put sand in the bearing if they didn't let her stay on and operate Old Eleven. As it was just over a quarter of their source power, they were held hostage.

Last week they had tried to sneak a midget up in her kitchen supplies. That turned out to be too heavy for her, they had to 'lighten the load' and let the midget out and put her supplies back in. She came to the rail, there were all kinds of telephoto shots of her. She actually had a better figure than Kessil, on top anyway. Her hair looked like an animal's, top and bottom. It was all over the news and had resulted in three times the new inquiries. Some band had written a song about the 'Witch of the Ancient Windwheel.' and it was getting played in the clubs. There was even talk of a new company logo. Kessil hoped that was a joke.

Vailiss came in while they were still discussing that and sat with her, so she didn't leave the meeting early and had to stay til lunch time finding the courier and getting the gasket ring in his hands. She made sure to impress upon him the necessity that he not give it up to anyone on the way, using the Instinct if necessary to guard it. It was really hard to get him to take it seriously enough. She was worried that she should hand carry it herself. That would mean she would have to spend Noonsleep in Kyoith and get to Dyoniss' late in Afternoon. She didn't want that to happen, she second guessed her motivations, but gave the courier one last admonition that he could have trouble, and went to lunch.

While she was downtown she usually stopped for lunch at DockTwo, a restaurant that was a second floor planked up over a working dock. It was all open air for the weather was very pleasant this time of the week. The full heat of noon was not even hinted, even though Chezhervizhod is usually the last week of summer. The canyon that the modern city was in was rather scenic from out here. The towers in and over it gave it more vertical lines.

She had a generous bucket of steamed cottle shells for a penny a pound and all the crisped rinko or leshin she wanted to go with it.

While she was there, Mysrath approached. "Peace," he said and held up his hands.

She wasn't sure she wanted peace, this was probably going to be just one more scheme. "I'm not lying this time, I really don't have that gasket any more."

“I put it on a tube to the Kassikan, or to Centorin. I buried in in the ledges of the crest. I handed it to the first of a team of runners, I don’t care what you tell me, I’m not after it any more. I was told my place.”

“Then what are you here for?” she asked.

“Lunch,” he said.

“Or a ticket to the Kassikan, or Centorin.” She was not moved to be pleasant after the look he gave her when he left.

“Really,” he said. “Save me a place, I’ll be right back. Can I get you a cup?”

“Yellow; if you’re having one, but I have to get back, there are things I have to get done if I don’t want to come in tomorrow, and I don’t.”

“I won’t keep you much longer than those cottlesells would.”

“They’re good by the way, and there’s a lot.”

After what had gone on at the meeting she wasn’t sure she wanted to share lunch with him, but he wasn’t important enough to her to bother brushing him off. She wondered if she would have made peace with him if she wasn’t seeing Dyoniss first thing tomorrow. A couple of the other guys who had been at the meeting came in with Vailiss. She caught up with Mysrath in the chow line, it’s counter service here for lunch. Their greeting seemed warm enough, so obviously he didn’t mistreat her, but she didn’t leave the other guys for him either. Mysrath pointed to Kessil and they all waved.

“So what do you want this time?” Kessil asked once Mysrath was back with an anosec mold.

“I want to share my lunch, would you care for some?”

“And you want some of these?” she was slowing down, there were a lot. She accepted a bite of his anosec mold, axiomite and pieberry were mixed in densely.

“Peace,” he said.

“But why? it can’t be your all-consuming lust for my flesh,” she said sarcastically, “especially on a day when you know I don’t have time.”

“I want to share what we know,” he said.

“Oh?” she was a little surprised at this.

“You have my balls in your drawer with this, I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

“And you think you can trust me?” she said.

“Deep down, I think I can.”

She put her chin on the back of her hands. “I’m listening, or should I be taking notes.”

“Our lab thinks something is exploding inside the gaskets, and they think they have found an entry where a microscopic bomb could have been inserted.”

“Like with a needle or something?”

“A very fine one, a surgical nerve probe. It took an electron microscope to see it.”

“And when would such a thing have happened?” she asked.

“We actually have no proof, but we have been dye-glowing outgoing shipments one hundred percent and have seen no evidence of it in the factory. It is something that could easily be done in the field.”

“What sets it off?” she asked.

“It could be a signal from a pocket-eye for all we know, or a swift kick. We need to find a ring with the explosive in it that has not gone off.”

“How big a bomb are we talking about?” she asked.

“No more than ten microns, probably more like five.”

“That hole will be hard to find,” she said. She would tell Tuuklon about it, but she wasn’t going to remind Mysrath of his name.

“It took an electron microscope, but dye-glow works well enough if you’re very careful.”

She did whip out the pocket eye and key this stuff in.

“That a company eye or your own?” he asked.

“Company, but assigned to me. It’s a little clunky to carry but I like the fact that I can actually type on it.” She kept a shoulderbag so the size didn’t bother her. To be honest, she would like a full fingerboard with her quite often, connected to an eyewear display, but the company wasn’t doing well enough to give her anything like that. She sent the info on to Tuuklon, he would get it at his desk eye, probably as soon as he came back from lunch.

“So this is good info for you?” he asked.

“Yeah, everything is good to know,” she said. “I thank you for sharing it with me. By the way I didn’t name you in that message.”

“Three of your company’s people have seen us together here, about the time that message was sent.”

“If anyone cares that much,” Kessil said.

“Yellgnoskn will care that much if this gets out.”

“What? The pinhole? What do you think the odds are that we would have found it without the hint? I’m going to guess at least two thirds.”

“How secure is your message system?”

“It’s inside the suntower at headquarters by now and I know that has a floating address that changes pseudo-randomly sixteen times a second.”

“So there’s some chance Yellgnoskn won’t see your message. If he finds out that eye message exists, he’ll know I am the leak.”

“I’ll send him another message,” she said as she began to type it out, “telling him that my source’s job depends on that message remaining strictly confidential and that he insist,” she slowed her speech so her typing could keep up, “that he found this out through his own careful examination.”

“It might be more than a job,” Mysrath said.

“What do you mean?”

He leaned close like he was disclosing another company secret. “I’ve heard there is antidote for the Instinct going around, and if there was anyone who would be likely to use it, I think that would be Yellgnoskn.”

A chill shook her when she heard that. She tried to shake it off, but she could tell he had noticed. “How awful,” she said, and shuddered again, like the mere fact that there could be such a thing was enough to give her the shakes. “Where’d you hear that?” she asked.

“There was a guy found OD’d on Kivatorn Pass that a detective said was forced, and there was another guy killed in

Parkstance during the dark.”

Kessil knew she looked a little green. Again she was glad she was hearing this in a busy spot in central Hdengragger during lunch of Morningday rather than in some dive deep in the stones of some ruin on a stormy Nightday. She didn’t give Ragnar a lot of credibility, but with someone as uninvolved as Mysrath talking about it, she was really worried.

“Where did you see that?”

“On the news screen back near home while I was waiting for breakfast.”

So it wasn’t from some drunk he was buying cups for. “That is really scary, but you can’t seriously think Yellgnoskn would do something like that?”

“Who better, in your mind?” He had a point, Yellgnoskn admired the Centorin alphas and adopted a lot of their styles. “Who do you know? I’d put him as more likely than Mbeshna.”

“Mbeshna wouldn’t be interested in something like that, he would go out of his way to stop it.” She knew he was a faithful follower of Karasis who lived a life of near austerity. She just wished he didn’t wait for divine pronouncements to make engineering decisions.

“Whatever,” he said, “Just so you know, I could be in this for more than just a job. There’s two dead so far.”

That was the ones he knew about. “Do you know about the ones in Hardensburg?” she asked.

“No, I try to avoid listening to news about Centorins, I don’t want to be prejudiced, and the news is always showing the worst of them.”

“Yeah, well just so you know, there have been four or five suspicious deaths out there and one in Vnassvuur.”

He looked at her a long time, as if studying her face would tell him how true the information was. All that would tell him is that she believed it, but he was convincing her.

“I don’t mind telling you I’m scared,” he said. “There’s too much galactic influence around here today. I’m scared not just for you and me, but for everyone,” after a slight pause, “for Karasis.”

She was within an instant of telling him not to worry, Dyoniss was working on just that case. She knew the less everyone else knew, the better for Dyoniss as he tried to figure out who was shipping antidote to whom. During the hours they’d stayed up talking into Dusksleep, she learned that these smuggling routes were his bread and butter and that he would find it. But she didn’t know who was involved and how. She started with, “I’m pretty scared too,” and related selected parts of her incident on the way to the meeting. It took longer than she expected, the cottlesells and the cup of yellow were finished before she was.

“I’ve got to get going,” she said, “I’ve got things to do on my way home.”

“It should only be an hour, or do they make you take a you-paddle?”

“No, Mbeshna’s not doing great, but it’s not that bad yet. But I have to enter notes and grade parts and check over the work orders. This meeting isn’t *instead* of a before-lunch’s work, it is in addition to.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, it might be nice to...” he stopped

before becoming impolite.

“If it wasn’t for that look you gave me when you left the meeting, and the time, I might consider it. But you were ready to get the Instinct about that gasket, and you were going to get it because of what you wanted to do to me.”

“We always hurt the ones we love,” he said.

She wondered how many songs had used that line. “There was evil in that look.”

“I got over it, can you?”

“Not today,” she said, “sorry. And I really don’t have time.” She wouldn’t be rude enough to tell him she had too much of Dyoniss and Afternoonday on her mind to have much real interest in anyone. With all the talk of antidotes to the Instinct, she had no desire to spend any time with someone who might want to harm her, even if he *said* he changed his mind. She even worried that his talk was a veiled threat, maybe he knew more about Yellgnoskn than she did. All this made her wonder what it must be like for women on the Centorin planets?

By the time she got back from there and did what she needed to at the office, it was nearly Noonsleep and quite a few cooks had already put up their gear. She had food at Tarreck’s and it’s easy to find during noon, so she didn’t worry about that. She just headed home, but found there were still a few people at Zestin’s.

“Have you seen Ragnar?” was Yashmi’s greeting when Kessil went by.

“As it happens, I did, he was lurking in the pathway on

my way home yesterday, and I saw him again at breakfast.”

“He was supposed to meet me here,” Yashmi said.

“He thinks the Centorins are after him, he says he heard a rumor that there’s a Centorin assassin in town with a big bottle of antidote pills and that he tore up a public house in Mefmun.”

“I saw that,” Yashmi said. “It was on the screen earlier.” She pointed up at it. “Something like seventeen people were hurt. He blocked the door to a small club and punched anyone who came near.”

Kessil wondered if that meant there might be some credibility to the first rumor he heard, “He heard there was foul play in the overdose victim’s death. The one who had opposed Mikal back in Hardensburg.”

“What else did Ragnar say?” Yashmi asked.

“He said he had to go, and then slithered out behind everything. When I went to look for him, this big guy slams into me and asked me where he went. When I asked ‘Who the hell are you?’ he shoved me aside and said I was lucky he didn’t have time for me.”

“A big guy you say?”

“Big, over six feet, big chest and long legs like a Centorin. Also a huge square chin and a humpback nose with a bulbous tip even more than an Enurate. Mean eyes that didn’t miss anything, I know he’d know me if he saw me again.”

“You know I could see that in Mikal towards the end,” Yashmi said.

“Do you think that was him?”

“Only if he got his nose busted a few times, but if he did he’d have it fixed. He was very vain, always wanted to look the best and dress the best.”

“Did he talk about overcoming the Instinct?” Kessil asked.

“He said the Instinct was unnatural, that it was not how mankind was supposed to live.”

“What was he doing here?” Kessil asked.

“He meddled in politics, he was a supporter of the senate so he had to run somewhere. The gatekeepers blacklisted him, he had to travel on someone else’s finger.”

Interstellar civilian travel on land based tubes now required a blood sample as proof of identification thruout the Empire. No tube car on this planet ever asked any identification of it’s passengers, something the Empire’s military was trying to mandate.

“I see,” was all Kessil said. She wanted to kiss the ground again, she should get to a Temple this week and give thanks. More than five out of every six humans in the Empire today were on some other planet than this one, where they *never* had the Instinct and people had to keep concrete between themselves and any stranger. She knew political factions routinely thinned out their opponents with blaster fire on most planets of the Empire and most religions out there went to war. Karasis had not sent a believer to war in fifty centuries, but wept for the fallen for several more.

10. At the Office

Dyoniss was too tempted to stare at the view. He gave thanks once again to have it, but needed to take his eyes off it and get something done. Kyonmeere himself came in only for a few minutes on Morningdays. Since a good part of the legwork has to be done under cover of darkness, Nightday is the traditional day for legwork, and he came in every Morningday for a short meeting to hear what had transpired.

Dyoniss had been able to present his theory that the coil had been stolen before it even left Centorin, he was told to follow that up. With the data system up and a direct daylight link thru to the Yakhan and the tube, Morningday was the best time to research things on the Centorin data system.

The originating shipper was called simply Empire Package Express in Centish and the originating office was in the Centorin city of Dlon dai. He knew that was an endless sea of collapsed-metal towers and multi-level lev rails. He didn't know any more detail about it, he'd just seen it in a recent video docu-drama called The Clone Wars. Empire package Express had a network portal where he was able to find the package ID and get a copy of the labeling.

He had a photo of the labeling as it arrived at the Yakhan and there was one missing from the portal. It was a handwritten note in Centish, but it was legible enough in the photo for him to read it. "Merry Christmas Starkey – Lubinka."

He called their voice channel address to see if he could ask about that. It wasn't easy. Centorins complain about the

backwardness of this planet because of how long it takes to set up a voice channel using mail, but getting one set up to a remote village Eye in the Lumpral is nothing compared to getting thru to a human in even a middling Centorin House. Since this package company was Empire-wide it had many robots to get thru, it seemed like as many as fought in that docu-drama.

When he finally got to an interactive robot, he had to give all the package IDs and let it access the shipment records. The Centorin voice connection robots are so sickening sweet and perfect that they make a Bordzvekian sound like an orc.

When he finally got to a human, the first thing that human said was, “You have an accent, where are you calling from?”

“The destination address, Hdengragger Principate in the cities of Ydlontrostl of the planet Kassidor.” He had to leave the names in common tongue.

“I see, never heard of the planet before but I can understand you, That looks like what’s on here I guess, and it is interstellar ground. Go ahead with your question.”

Dyoniss wanted to tell him it was one of the closest planets but knew it wasn’t worth the bother and it is impolite to thrust information on those who don’t want it. Closeness to the average Centorin was how close the app was to the top of the front page on their comm. “There was a hand-written message on the package that is not shown on the labeling page of your network portal.”

“Then there wasn’t one. We don’t put any handwritten notes on our packages.”

“I have a photo of how it arrived here.”

“That is proof of nothing,” he said. All you can send me is an image file, an image file of that package with any new label on it you want is one of the easiest images to synthesize, even if it’s fancy and printed on semi-transparent tape and has glossy highlights, it’s an image file. If you don’t have the package in your hand, you don’t know if that label you’re asking about is actually there or not.”

Dyoniss endured that tirade without comment, looking for strength in Karasis to help prevent him rising to it. He was here to get information, not battle prejudices. He actually had several pictures of the package and another one showed that label. It was only in the last five centuries that Centorin law allowed video synthesis devices as potent as those in use on this ‘backward’ planet since the 100th. Instead of pointing that out, he asked, “How close to exit from your care, was your labeling image captured?”

“On the conveyor that leads to the tube car.”

That tube car was closed until it got to the Kassikan. Dyoniss asked, “And that shift was free from problems?”

“What kind of problems?”

“Visiting dignitaries, a madman with a blaster, a power failure, a company meeting.”

“Company meeting? Why would that be a problem.”

“That package could have been in that zone between the photo and the tube car door being sealed. I have the track sheet from your tube system also.” The tube systems were so different, but the software that ran them was nearly the same and had originated in Earth’s Pennsylvanian Age. “But during that time tampering was possible.”

“Preposterous.”

“Would you look it up please? I’m sure it would be logged.”

He gave a disgusted sigh, “Let me give you someone in maintenance at that site, please hold.”

There was music that made Bordzvekian Sugarpop sound like Zhindu Blast and behind it he could hear the noise that meant the system was shrieking for a human’s attention. On this world one would always send a message first asking, ‘when would be convenient to set up a voice channel?’ There the pocket eyes, which they call ‘comms,’ shriek, yell or sing, depending on what their owner wants, but shout for attention in some way. While they are doing that, they send a purring sound back to the caller. It seems that on Earth, the voice channel was invented before simply typing a message, and the whole message formatting had to originally all be done with audio bells and whistles, and that had stayed in their culture since the 54th and followed them from Earth to Centorin.

The syrupy, lobotomized music disappeared and a voice with an accent that made his Centish sound like he grew up in a newsroom in Kex said, “Maint’nince, wuhcha need?”

“I need you to look at the logs for loading bay seven on Tuesday, September twentieth.”

“Lawgs?” she asked.

“Yes, I need to know if there were any problems on that day?”

“Lass Toozdee yuh say?”

Dyoniss had a hard time with the calculation. It’s just

about two weeks to one, almost four weeks, should be almost two weeks, “Yes,” he pretty much guessed.

“Ah’z here thin. Weren’t much, lectrishin hadi fix in lessn haaf in are.”

He hoped she meant ‘half an hour.’ “Do you have his name?”

“Iz name’z Jake, ah think that’s short for Jay-cub.”

“Any other way I could identify him, a last name, number?”

“Ee’z probly got a last name an employi numba, but I neva askid. Ee’z just Jake. But wuhchu care?”

“I’m doing a story on unsung heroes like Jake.”

“Aww, see im at Lawnie’s afta werk.”

“A little difficult, I’m 13.4 light years away at the moment.”

“Huh?”

“Ever hear of Kassidor?”

“No, but ah dun a few pahties went ah’m not shu what all ah dun. Ah mite a dun sum dere.”

“It’s a dusty old planet at a star too small to see.”

She squeaked a little and then the phone went silent for a good fraction of a minute. “Ahz sorri, ah had tuh sneeze.”

“God bless you,” he thought was a Centorin phrase used about sneezing.

“Ah, not worried,” she said.

“Is there a number I can reach him at?”

“Tellya wut, gimme yertz, Ah’ll give it to im.”

Dyoniss was stuck here. If he wanted to talk, he would, if

he was guilty, he would not. The important thing, Dyoniss now knew there had been an opportunity to tamper with the package. He gave the office message address, explained what it was and explained that there was no such thing as a ‘phone number’ on the data systems of Kassidor. He was pretty sure she was getting some of the letters wrong because of the differences in accent.

That seemed to be as far as he could chase this in that direction, at least for the time being. He thought the odds of the Tuidain Sea rising two thirds of a mile to submerge the cities were better than Jake the ‘lectrishin’ contacting him.

Kyonmeere came into his office while he was outwardly just staring out the window. “Like the view?” he asked.

Dyoniss could say he was thinking about the case, but he was thinking about Kessil at least as much. “Absolutely, makes me feel like a millionaire.”

“Glad you like it.”

“Let me thank you again,” Dyoniss said, more than a little worried that he seemed to be just staring.

“You’ve earned it. Speaking of which, I was just stopping by on my way out for a quick chat about the New West Trucking case.”

“Yes?”

“The theory about the contents being stolen twice, any idea what that could be about?”

“I don’t know, it’s still in the ‘doesn’t add up’ column.” There was a distant angel whispering that it could be related to what Ragnar told him about. He didn’t know enough, he

didn't know if he could trust Ragnar and he didn't want Kyonmeere to think his attention might be divided.

“What else is in that column?”

“Well, the furball coil being stolen on Centorin is one thing.”

“It could have happened at the Kassikan,” Kyonmeere said.

“In a way that would make more sense, someone there is more likely to be looking for a large windfall of copper than someone on Centorin.”

“Too bad we don't have better operatives in there,” Kyonmeere said. “It's just about impossible to find out what's going on in there, at least what's below the surface.”

“Another thing that occurred to me,” Dyoniss said, “is that the contents might have been switched on Centorin because someone wanted to get something past the Kassikan.”

“Why would switching the contents of a package help with that? They screen every package anyway.”

“They are just looking for metals mainly,” Dyoniss said. “If the package is labeled for metal already, it gets in a secure que and gets surcharged, but isn't examined as closely because their viewer can't see thru metals. They only accept metals from a few known shippers, they open all others.”

“If the package weight was changed on Centorin, the Kassikan would have known. The weight is on the label.”

“I hadn't thought of that.”

“Yeah,” Kyonmeere said. “It only makes sense if someone opened it in the Kassikan. Even if they didn't, someone there

had to be in on it.”

“Seems that way,” Dyoniss said, hating to have to admit it. “If that’s the case, what do we tell the customer?”

“Good question. I wish we had someone in the Kassikan we could contact, but we do so little work there that we really don’t have anyone.”

“Surely the Temple has some contacts there, do you have an acolyte you can talk to?”

“I know Saint Englom,” Kyonmeere said. He was the bishop of Hdengragger and one of the highest ranking men of the faith outside the Karasis Yuhal, “If it comes to that.”

“Do you want to take that then, or should I see someone I know and see if they have a contact?”

“I’ll take that, see if you can find out anything more on this end.” He made a note to himself. “Anything else in the unknown column?” Kyonmeere asked.

“There’s a timing problem.”

“How?” Kyonmeere asked.

“The box left the tube station at the Eastern Terminus only fifty seven minutes before it entered the tube station bound for Hardensburg. The woman who sent it from the Varshan-Vrluuva said the package had been on her table all sleep. For her story to be true, it had to have been on her table hours before it arrived in the cities. In that time it’s weight had changed and it had moved from the tube station here, to the one at Varshan-Vrluuva in less than an hour.”

“If it went by needleboat, that is possible.”

“Yes,” Dyoniss said, “and during that needleboat ride the contents must have been stolen again.”

“Sounds confusing. I wonder if there was really more than one package?”

“Possible,” Dyoniss said. “It’s also possible Korshii is lying.”

“Korshii?” Kyonmeere asked.

“The girl who sent the package off from Picktish-Pickam.” He had seen the picture from there, but Dyoniss showed him again.

“Ah,” Kyonmeere said, looking her over casually. “What reason would she have to lie? From your report it sounded like some guy named Vemnya just used her and ditched her.”

“Then how did the package get on her table while the tube sheet says it was still in the Kassikan?”

“Like I said, two different packages. It had to be. Vemnya had one prepared ahead of time that he put on the table and asked her to send.”

“How did he get all the labeling identical?”

“He took an image, had them printed. He could have had the image while the package was still in inspection at the Kassikan and gotten it printed before it was even in the tube car on it’s way here.”

He knew it wasn’t as simple as that, to make it look real at Picktish-Pickam they would have to print labels separately and tape them on as closely to the tape job done on the first package as possible. They would also have to duplicate the dents in the packaging as it arrived in the Yakhan. “I’ll give that theory a lot of thought as I dig into this,” he said, but he thought with those facts in mind he would be able to prove that rather quickly.

A few minutes later Kyonmeere was gone and he was looking at images of the labels that had arrived and departed the cities, hoping he could spot some small difference that would give him some confidence that there really had been two packages. The naked eye didn't see it. He set up image compare windows to look for differences too small for the naked eye. The wrinkles in the packing tape are the hardest thing to get just right when making up a substitute package like this. It found nothing. Since he had the software set up, he tried it again with the other images he had from the package's journey. It did turn something up. The outgoing image at Empire Package Express had a difference in the dot coding from the package as it arrived in the Kassikan. When he looked very closely he still could not tell if a new dot code had been pasted over the old, but he could see no other explanation since the tape wrinkles were unchanged.

It took him awhile to find an application to read that dot code, and the thing just spit out a long string of numbers once he got it installed. Only a few were different, 2479 on the label leaving Centorin was replaced with 0727 on the one arriving at the Kassikan. He didn't need to get someone with the expertise to format the output of that dot code reader. He recognized the old weight and what must have been the new. This was how they got the package thru the automatic detection in the Kassikan. The machine did not read the human readable label, it read the dot code. Since humans could not read the dot code, the label that arrived in the Kassikan appeared unchanged. He looked at them with his naked eye and could not tell they were different until the

machine showed him the dots that had changed.

This was more evidence, almost irrefutable, that the furball coils had been stolen while on Centorin. That meant something else had been shipped from Centorin in it's place, something that the sender did not want scanned. Something that he wanted to slip into the security que unopened. No doubt it was still shielded in metal to look like the furball coil to the scanner, that would be easy enough to fake.

Earlier in the day he had heard the sound of a distant angel whispering that Ragnar's warning about the antidote and the stolen package to Hardensburg were related. Right now, that angel was close and shouting and using a fat piece of stick as a hearing aid. He looked out at the view once again, hoping that Kyonmeere would not chose this minute to walk in. But while he stared, a scenario came together in his mind.

The 'lectrishin' on Centorin sets a trap on the exit camera image to go off when the correct package arrives. He probably sends the package number from his comm soon after it is shipped. The line stops for a tripped breaker, he arrives and resets the trap, and slits the package. Out come the furball coils, in goes a foil-wrapped whiskey bottle but instead of whiskey, it contains a half gallon of the antidote to the Instinct, enough for thousands of tabs. At the same time he slaps a tag on the case, advising Starkey of his Christmas present, re-seals it with spray glue, and carefully places a new dot code label over the old one. The furball coils are no big deal on Centorin, he sells them on a used parts virtual bay for half what they were worth and earns bonus points from the

market site for their condition and prompt delivery. There's probably half a million stolen furball coils coming up somewhere on the Centorin data network every day.

Dyoniss' next task was to go down to Ehgsahr's area. He doesn't have a window, but he has a corner near the back and has enough big cabinets around it that it is like a private office. He has a big desk eye and two flat screens, he always has stuff moving on them, plots, charts, even video. He had been the one who got him the track sheets on the tube cars involved in the package.

As Dyoniss said 'hi,' Ehgsahr brought that graph back up. The first trip, from Dlon dai to the Kassikan, was shown on the map as a little tickmark because Centorin was not on his map. The other two legs of the journey took up significant sections of the map, from the Yakhan to the cities of Ydlontrostl, and from here to Hardensburg.

He noticed that Ehgsahr had been able to find out what Betten hadn't. The empty package had made it to a New West Trucking warehouse and been signed in only hours before the request had come in to Kyonmeere. He wondered why Betten hadn't been able to find it when he was right there? Of course what is 'right there' when you are talking about the data network? Ehgsahr had found it all from links attached to the track sheet register of the shipment going out of Picktish-Pickam.

There was a six mile gap in the route that he could now fill in. He spent a few minutes talking about the adventures of the previous Nightday, Engsahr seemed to be more interested

in Korshii than what he learned from Himid. "...so that's how I know it took a needleboat to the Varshan-Vrluuva area."

"But you don't know which one?"

"He didn't know, he said the boat had green and white stripes and the driver had a cap like it."

"Not one of the big companies," he said.

There are three big needleboat courier services operating on the canals of Hdengragger. Two of them cover all the cities, there are several other large ones that cover the central cities, but not Hdengragger, Yuhal or Tyi. They each have distinctive boats and caps. There are a few smaller ones with a few boats, and lots of one man, one boat services who also paint their boats and get caps to look professional.

"They should have stamped the package," Dyoniss said, "we might get lucky and find it on the label side when it came in at Picktisk-Pickam." Engsahr had that stored in his desk eye and brought it up. Sure enough, there was a stamp there, right next to the Kassikan's stamp. Most of the data was encoded in the ornate logos, but there were essentials in plain text. "I've seen that logo before," Engsahr said and soon brought up the data portal of the company. The entry picture was nice, a good picture of a short needleboat cutting thru the water, coming out from under the towrope of a big barge and sliding in front of leisurely paddlers out choking the water. It had nice green stripes painted on the bow and on his cap and the driver had a body that women would notice.

"So, I should take a look at their records. They're bound to have pointers I can follow in the data around these records. I'll twirl a few operators over the area and see what they turn

up.”

“I’ve got another favor I’d like to ask. I don’t actually have a job number for this, but I’ve heard some angels whisper that there might be some connection. I’ve heard that someone named Hyonimus received a package from Centorin that contained a large bottle of antidote for the Instinct.”

That got his attention, “Antidote for the Instinct you say?”

“That’s the rumor.”

“There was a guy found dead in Parkstance this dawn that looked like he had been blasted. It would require antidote for that.”

“As well as a blaster,” Dyoniss said.

“Now that’s a rumor I heard,” Ehgsahr said.

“What?”

“That there’s blasters around.”

“Ugly combination,” Dyoniss said. “So do you think you can find all the Hyonimus’ getting packages from Centorin?”

“I can work on it, it might take a little while, how far back should I go?”

“I hate to say this, but you better go back at least ten years.”

“I’ll start with all the shippers I already have taps in,” Engsahr said. “Running that won’t take more than a day as background priority. If I give it anything else, somebody who was held up is going to ask. If I have to account for it, I’m going to have to put it on the New West Trucking account.”

“That’s fine, it’s the closest thing to relevant. At least it involves Centorins.”

“I can probably get it thru without being asked. I could have a few names and addresses for you by tomorrow.”

“I have an important engagement tomorrow.”

“I thought you always got stuck doing farm chores when you stayed home.”

“There will be a few things Yashmi needs a hand with, but that’s not the engagement I’m staying home for.”

Engsahr got a look in his eye that told him Dyoniss must have a look in his own eye or be giving off a lot of musk because he cracked a little smile. “O.K. then Nightday,” he said, “I’ll send the results to your desk.” Engsahr was never in on Nightday, he tried to make dusk his Big Night Out, and hoped he would be very late coming home on Nightday. He even kept a little crash pad on the eleventh floor in the tower he could use on those Dusksleeps and Nightdays. He normally lived at Carroon’s house, when they weren’t fighting.

After a quick lunch, he went back to his office and wondered what he could do next. There were a couple other things he could work on, they had a woman looking for a lost lover they could try to track down, there were some vandalism cases open with some pretty hefty rewards, Kyonmeere would love to see something turn up in one of them, but Gaicher was much better at those than he was.

Before he even got a chance to be mesmerized by the view again, Kalhar lead a woman into his office, “She says she has something about the Hardensburg case, says you’ve already met.” Kalhar is their greeter, and skilled at weeding

out the frivolous. She wouldn't turn them away, but would warn them with her eyes.

"We have," Dyoniss told her as Korshii entered, "Please come in."

"Nice digs," she said, looking mainly at the view.

"I'm really grateful to have it," Dyoniss said. Kalhar rolled her eyes and closed the door behind her. "You know something more?" Dyoniss asked her.

"Yeah, I remembered something. It's a little warm for this formal wear, do you mind if I slip out of this?"

"As I remember, you can beautify a room with no help from clothing at all." He knew from their first meeting that she probably planned on an over-the-desk while she was here.

"Glad you feel that way." Her street wrap was a crosslace thinweave that reached her nipples on top and the top of her thighs below, but the laces ended a couple inches above that. Before she even took that off he knew her inner wrap was that same mesh large enough for her nipples to poke thru and for one as close as he was to see that she had only a tiny strip of pubic hair as big as an eyelash. Of course it was also easy enough to see that she had a very fine and fit body with fine and even dark adobe coloring. She lingered in his sight a little too long to be casual, but he shamelessly drank in every photon she would deflect his way. She took the closest end of the guest couch in his office. He tried not to look up inside the mesh as she leaned back on that couch.

"You asked when the box came into the apartment and I told you he moved it in with him on Ekendosa Morningday. Well I thought I better tell you he had several boxes like it,

and I can't be sure it was that one. There had been a box lying on the table before we went to bed for Noonsleep, but I did not check that box in detail. I assumed, since he was standing next to the table, that he was handing me that box as I went out the door. So today I remember that I did see a box, still on the table, as I went out the door with the box I took to Picketish-Pickam in my hand."

He squeezed her hand, he wanted her to think he didn't notice how suspicious it was that she was editing her story as soon as he mentioned how the timing was a problem. He wondered if she knew someone in this office. "You don't know how important this information is. Is there any chance that Vemnya could have been out of the house that wakeup without you knowing it?"

"He was out with me knowing it, he went down to pick up breakfast while I was in was in the shower. Why?"

"He could have picked up the package then. Let me ask you one more thing, would he have had time to switch the contents of the package between when he brought it home and when he handed it to you?"

"If he wanted to, why?" but she didn't even give him time to reply, "That means the contents was switched between when he picked it up and when he handed it to me. So he made off with the furball coil."

He wondered why he had mentioned that it was a furball coil, then he remembered the sex. "It seems he had the opportunity, what I don't understand is why he hung around an extra week with you. He should have disappeared as soon as he made the score, since he was only using you anyway."

“Maybe he wanted the package to appear uninvolved,” Korshii said, or maybe he just couldn’t give up the sex yet.”

“I could certainly understand that.”

“That was hot wasn’t it?” she said in a whisper. Her eyebrows asked if he wanted more.

“I’m promised for this sleep,” he said, though he really wasn’t til Afternoonday. He would take no chance that Korshii might be late from the breakfast table when Kessil showed up to get the best of noon at the pond. She might not know it but that irrigation pond is quite a bit cleaner than the modern canal. It doesn’t get as much tidal action stirring it up as the ancient canal does.

“I’m open whenever,” she said. He could see that. “You can lock that door right?”

“I can lock the door, but I’m promised.”

“Isn’t the information I just gave you worth even a little quickie?”

“I can’t today.” Kessil was too much on his mind already, it wouldn’t be fair to Korshii. After Afternoonday, he might be able to give her his full attention, “But if you can find out anything about Vemnya, I could stop by on Nightday for further questioning,” he said and lightly pinched one of the nipples that was poking thru the mesh.

“I’m not staying home on a maybe,” she said.

“I’ll be by on Nightday, surprise me and actually find out something about him.”

“I will,” she said. “See you Nightday,” she stood and flashed her sex at him as she did, “I’ll be ready.” She was half ready now. She grabbed her street wrap and headed for the

door.

“It would really be best if you put that on while walking thru the office,” he said, “especially if you want Ninya to reimburse you for the elevator.” Especially when that mesh is open enough to see any pink showing.

“Yeah, sorry, I guess I’m a little frustrated.”

He got up and looked over the main office from his door, “You could see that guy at the second table, or the one at the third in the next row...”

“I know,” she said, “maybe you’re special because you’re helping me get back at Vemnya.”

He gave her a hug and squeezed her ass on the way out, but that was all she got. He was taken for all of Afternoonday and all of Dusksleep he hoped. He would probably do a little garden work, but he didn’t plan on working on the case.

She is a pretty girl and the guys he pointed out did try to chat her up on the way out, they might have even got a promise of noonmeal, he really couldn’t hear. He wondered once again if she knew one or more of them already.

He wondered how hard it would be to find this Vemnya. He was pretty sure there was no such person. He wondered if it was someone involved in the smuggling of antidote, or someone who was probably pretty pissed to have done all that work for a bottle of Centorin holiday cheer instead of fourteen pounds of copper in a furball coil. He wondered what drinking a couple shots of the antidote would do.

At least it was now possible that it was the same box and label that left Centorin and wound up in Hardensburg. He still hadn’t heard from Betten.

11. Afternoon at Last

Kessil had already explored enough of the back paths in the area to come up to Yashmi and Dyoniss' house the back way, from a path up from deep in the dell that crosses the dam of that irrigation pond she had seen from their deck. There was a nice little beach here, big enough for a little party, clean enough to lay on. The water looked too clean to use for irrigation, one step down from mountain stream, but quite a bit warmer. Not warm enough to stay in and soak, but not so cold that a dip was heart-stopping.

She could see the house from here. She could see that no one was on the deck. If Dyoniss came out there she could yell to him, if he had an eye at the house she could message him, but as it was she would have to walk up to the house. She had a bag of duskwear with her, but at mid week she had on only a thin jersey sheath in a deep navy blue. That way it was good enough for public because it so dark her hair and nipples wouldn't show. At the far end of the dam was a barely-visible path along the shore that probably went to the back of Yashmi's garden. Kessil didn't take that because it obviously wasn't meant to be public, she went up the back path til it met Yashmi's Walk, and followed that to the house.

She could hear them at the table, they were probably there since breakfast. She worked very hard at keeping her voice casual, the anticipation made her want to go running up and jump him. "You wanna go down to the irrigation pool?" she called.

“That was the plan. I’ve got a basket packed, a couple towels, I’ll be right down.”

Yashmi leaned out, “Hi, welcome back. Want some tea?”

“Maybe later,” she said, “it’s too hot to climb them stairs, much less drink tea.”

“Must be cooler up here,” Yashmi said. “Toss your bag up, whatever you don’t need now.” She reached out the window from the bench behind the table. Kessil didn’t know if she could throw that high. There was nothing breakable in it but it could scatter.

Dyoniss was already coming out the door and rumbling down the steps. “If you need me for anything you know where to find me.” He was already naked except for the towels, which were slung over his arm. His color said he was used to being naked, and he was pretty normal in a very perfect way. She’d seen him before, but noon sunlight gives a more detailed view than low lanterns. Though there was no one else on the path, it was technically public with the rush that went with it. She pulled her sheath off as she stepped toward him, stuffed it in her bag.

“I may be down after I get the transplanting done, just to keep an eye on you,” Yashmi called down.

“Just don’t take pictures,” Dyoniss said as he came down the last few steps, taking pictures of her with his eyes, as she was taking pictures of him.

She couldn’t help taking him in a big hug, she wanted to know if the wait was worth it, was he really attracted to her? He hugged her back and kissed her, with some passion behind it. Her body responded. There seemed to be no one on the

path right now and Yashmi couldn't see them from here so she got into it and let her hands roam his body, lingering on his ass. He wasn't built like a hero, but what there was of him was toned. His shoulders were wide, but not abnormally big. He had the muscles that came from work, not pills. You might not see his picture on a bodice ripper, but then you wouldn't see hers either.

They didn't know what to say to each other when it was over. They just stood and looked at each other for long seconds. Finally, as the silence built toward awkward, she said inanely, "That was wow."

He didn't say anything, just drank her with his beautiful eyes and hugged her again. When he did speak he was hoarse, "Let me show you the back path to the pond."

"So you take me for a girl of the wilds?"

"This is still city according to the map, they don't show our property as green."

She knew why that was, "The map makers here don't use the same resolution as in the map of the Yakhan."

"Are you a city girl?" he asked.

"For the last two centuries, yeah. I've been back to see my mom a few times, but I'm always back to the cities and Mbeshna power within a half a decade at the most, usually a third."

"Where's your mom?"

"We are of the VerseM'lOry, somewhere on the Mid Basin Plains, about seven hundred miles west of here. Sometimes a two week ride from the nearest coach stop." They were passing thru the garden, they had just about

everything, most of it was doing well, they had lots of extra rinko, clean stuff with one or two untouched foundation layers.

“One of the people we see in the name of the basin and cities.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” she said, especially in the dark. “It’s smelly campsites in cold rain when you can’t keep the fire going. There’s hakken packs in the dark that’ll eat you as well as your beasts. There’s eighteen possible mates in your life, you’ve known them all since you were two.”

“I bet that can get intense.”

“Sometimes I thought it made Centorin movies and video games look like a little exercise on the way over.”

“We should see more movies of the plains.”

“But it’s all inside jokes. There’s nothing that really makes any sense unless you’ve been there all your life.”

The path was barely a path out the back of the garden, he had to part fronds to get thru. It ran behind the smaller gardens of their neighbors and the keda field that was behind them. The keda came over and wanted his chin scratched.

“This is Sleepingfour. To hear Byiroi talk, he’d have to be the laziest keda on the planet.”

“I’m guessing Byiroi is his human?” Kessil asked.

Dyoniss chuckled once, meaning he understood what she was saying, but not that he agreed. “Yeah, and he caught a real complainer of a human, but he keeps him fed and reasonably cared for.”

“He’s got two linnikin’s on him so far,” she said. They

were tiny blood sucking parasites in the same class as limps. “I coaxed this one off, but this one might be dead already.” Meaning it had extruded at least half a million eggs. Once they attached to a host they transformed most of their body weight to eggs in a matter of hours. She managed to pinch it loose. “If he spent a little more time with him, he might not be so lazy. “He could have a thousand more of these on him, that’ll make a keda lazy. If he finds many more he should take one down to a lab and get a dust for them, enough to do the whole field.”

“I’ll tell him,” Dyoniss said. “He was the guy sitting with Zestin last week.”

“No doubt I’ll see him before long,” she said. He would probably regale her with tales of the keda’s laziness if they were close to each other at those taps. As soon as she heard that she would remember this.

The dam was just three hundred feet from the end of their property, Dyoniss told her it had been on Yashmi’s land before she sold the lots at this end. She kept rights to the pond even though it was downstream of her land. The pond was just big enough for a good dip, at least five feet deep in the center, with a good forty by sixty foot oval that was over three feet deep. The dam was the only place fit to get in, the shore was mud and reeds everywhere else. The dam is the farthest end from the house, the back tip of the pond reached almost back to Yashmi’s property.

Now that the day was finally here she was very much at a loss for words. She just wanted to lay with him, just to be in

contact. He went to a rock at the end of the dam. It was in full sun and shaped into a crude seat by centuries of wear. He sat there to start, she sat beside him. He put his arm around her and she leaned into him.

“I’m so glad this moment is finally here,” he said.

“Me too,” she said, never a queen of eloquence. “I’ve been thinking about it all week.” Her hands went down his thighs, she leaned forward enough that her breasts reached his forearms.

“Me too,” he said, and took her in his hands.

“The sand looks comfortable, but we can sit like this awhile,” she said, “as long as we aren’t going to bother the neighbors.”

“There’s a few around here that will do it on this sand, or even on this rock. There’s been some pretty rowdy group gropes out here, so I don’t think anyone who comes by will even notice.”

“That’s one of the things that’s nice about being ordinary,” Kessil told him.

“And being ordinary is pretty much a job requirement for me.”

“I thought you were bait.”

He laughed loud enough so neighbors heard it.

“Kyonmeere’s the bait,” Dyoniss told her, “I’m the one who no one notices, at least when Centorins are involved.”

“You’re all the bait I need,” she said.

They had a very nice Afternoonday beforelunch at the

pond. She liked getting naked with him, but the fact that this was technically public made it a little more exciting. There wasn't a lot of traffic on these paths, not even three people an hour. The only people who stopped were a couple called Mypra and Toolon. He was a compact and husky guy, darker than her with curlier hair. His face was normal, but no more attractive than Dyoniss. They stopped for a dip and played around with each other a little. It was nice but didn't go beyond that.

Dyoniss walked back to the house for another skin of yaag before lunch since Mypra and Toolon had pulled pretty hard on the first. They lay on the sand with each other and got to know much more about each other. He talked about the neighborhood, some careers he'd had before he was an investigator, caravan music and Centorin. She talked about the plains, engineering school, living out of a kayak and what she found shallow about celebrities.

As the lazy heat teamed up with the yaag, they talked less and petted more. It had been an hour since anyone went by. They were unable to prevent getting too aroused. Maybe it was the laziness of early Afternoonday, maybe there was a bit of poi in this batch of yaag. Maybe it was just that their attraction had been too long denied. She knew meeting and playing with the other couple had added to her heat. Neither of them could hide their heat now.

Even though it seemed deserted, probably because everyone was at lunch, they still went out into the water. It was chest deep, enough to buoy them up and make it easy. She had never done this before and was very excited. There

was an edge of fear where water was involved, but he was strong and steady. She trusted him and took her feet off the bottom, wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. She had his erection trapped against her slit and she worked it that way until he lifted her and placed her on him.

He was the perfect fit she remembered from the MkenetWind concert, a normal stroke just brushed her womb, shedding sparks each time. If they pulled hard, he lay solidly against her, but she didn't have to stretch like with the really big boys. Being in the open in the pond was really exciting. Out on the prairie there is endless opportunity to make love in the outdoors, but few to make it with. This was one of the first times she'd made love outdoors in the cities that wasn't on someone's balcony or patio.

She leaned her head against his neck and said, "It's always so exciting with you." She was trying to slow it down a little, she was too close to coming, and he was too. This moment was so good that she wanted to live in it for as long as possible. It wasn't the long and intimate grind in his bed that she was still expecting, but it was a unique experience. At the same time she wanted to suspend time forever, she hungered for the maximum climax that she was leaning over the edge of. "I'm going to come so hard any second now," she told him as she felt herself falling into it.

"So am I," he said and twisted her hips in his hands.

She clung tighter to his hips with her legs and dived into the ecstasy, not caring if they splashed, if they shouted or even if they fell in the water. She fell into blind bliss, she couldn't open her eyes until he was spent, but she was

nowhere near done with her spasms.

“A guy can sure tell you’re not faking it,” he panted.

“Yeah,” she gasped, “but you’ve given me the hardest one I’ve ever had.” She panted again, leaned back a little, “Wow.”

They stared into each other’s eyes while the orgasm wound down. She wondered what he was thinking, probably wondering what she was thinking. She was thinking if this is just a quickie in the local irrigation pond, what is a special encounter like? The McKennetWind show was probably as special an evening as there was, but the sex had been in desperation at the end. They were just hanging out at the show, enough hormones between them to be pleasant, but not so much that they couldn’t enjoy the show; until that slow dance.

Now there were no distractions, but as she thought that, she heard small feet on the path. She got down, Dyoniss was soft enough to let her, but not to get out of the water. They stood there with their arms around each other. The feet were those of a child of a little more than a decade. She was naked but carrying a towel and a sand pail, so she must be a neighbor.

“Jenn’t” Dyoniss said, “is your mom coming down?”

“Not today,” the girl said. She dropped her things on the dry sand and skipped right out into the water, belly-flopping into it and splashing them both. “But you’ve got a lady here, and my mom’s got a guy there. I think they were hoping I’d go away for awhile so they can tear into each other.”

“Sometimes your mom and I just talk.”

“When I’m around,” the girl said.

Kessil didn't doubt that he would have all the offers he could want. She couldn't let herself get too hung up on him, she had to know more about his love life before she let herself get carried away.

The kid splashed back and forth a few times, then headed for shore. By then they were polite enough to come out of the water, even though it sounded like this girl already knew what those organs were really for.

"You ready for lunch yet?" Dyoniss asked.

"If it's not big."

"If I'm home for lunch in the light I usually find a few things ripe in the garden."

"Sounds good to me. That's what I did for noonmeal."

"What about breakfast?"

"Vedn and berries," she said.

So for lunch they just grazed their way thru the garden and joined Yashmi for a good long nap in the shade. The garden chores didn't get finished til just before duskmeal, when it was starting to cool off a little. Dyoniss made only a little noise about her being a guest when she did some too.

Dyoniss grilled some gleep kabobs and Yashmi made a dinner pie for duskmeal. Yashmi washed up after that and headed right to Zestin's, leaving them the house for the evening.

Kessil and Dyoniss were relaxing in the reading alcove. They weren't really petting, but touching arms and shoulders, with their legs over each other's. They had a good view of the garden from here and the sky still had enough purple in it to

see the whole neighborhood downhill of them. The air was still heavy and moist, there would probably be dew, but the temperature might not get very low this dark.

She was glad she felt so comfortable here. If today was a sample of his life, this was just what she wanted. She'd had this once, but it took decades to get this comfortable in that townhouse on the modern canal. This house was roomy and airy, but modest in style. Yashmi treated her more like family than her mother did, who fussed and entertained when she visited.

She leaned over and planted a kiss between his temple and his cheekbone, just below his hair. When he looked she said, "Thank you for such a wonderful day," she said.

"And thank you too, but where did the day go?" Dyoniss asked. "We wait all week for Afternoonday and it seems like it's gone in fifteen minutes."

It did seem that way, but it had been fun while it lasted. "So what about tomorrow?" she asked him.

"I really should go in," he said. "I asked people to leave me notes, I have to go interview the needleboat courier. The girl who mailed the package out wants to help so she can get back at the guy who used her. I have her looking into him, so I should go and see if she's found anything."

"From what Yashmi said, she's horny as hell."

"Yeah, from what I've seen so far, but she's only gotten one off me."

"Why would you deny her?"

"It was too close to the time I would spend with you."

She smiled up at him, touched at his beard, "You don't

need to deny others for me.”

“It would have been unfair to her if my mind was on you,” he said and kissed her again. By now he knew that she wanted to be caressed while she was kissed, and wanted to caress him.

“That’s very fair of you.”

“I’ve got no reason to disrespect her so far.”

“You are in Karasis,” she said. He had to be.

“And you are too, are you not?”

“Yes,” she said, “but maybe not as active as I should be.”

“I go often,” he said, “I enjoy it in the spirit that it is meant.”

“Want to go down to the Temple this evening? Together?”
Doing so is a step, it means you are willing to be seen in public with each other, you are not ashamed of each other.

“Sure,” he said, “as long as you promise it won’t change our plans for the sleep.”

Most people in day to day life only dealt with the Temple for business reasons. They were the arbiter of all business disputes and contracts, it was their rules that codified fair play. Only about one in ten come to Temple gatherings regularly these days, but Kessil always enjoyed it and from what he said on the walk down, it sounded like Dyoniss could almost be called devout.

In this neighborhood the gatherings were on the fifth floor of the tower, in a room that wasn’t very different inside from the center of the main room at the Blue Kite club. This room

had a lower ceiling and a floor covered with prayer mats, nowhere near as good a sound system and only a single video screen at the front that was rarely used.

There was never more than a third level acolyte leading the gatherings here. This evening he was someone Dyoniss knew personally and they talked a little before the meeting began, she thought she heard the word Instinct, but she couldn't really hear. Nembez had found her and was chatting away. Nembez was also trying to get as much cuddling done as possible before the gathering began with as many of her friends as came by. As the time got closer, most people tried to get among people they liked best, but that somewhat defeats the purpose of the whole ceremony.

This acolyte was pretty punctual and very close to the onset of 35th hour he held up his hands, palms pressed together and announced, "We are one," which the group all echoed. "Shall we come together and sing YowceKarasis?" he asked.

Coming together was what most people liked best about Temple gatherings. Everyone lined up boy-girl and squeezed together in tight clumps. The idea was to get as much contact with the four people surrounding you as possible. It wasn't supposed to turn into a sexual free-for-all, but most people want the contact to be pleasant and getting aroused was not considered a sin. Nembez had taken the other side of Dyoniss. Kessil didn't even know the guy on the other side of her. Weesin was in front of her, she barely knew him, but didn't mind pressing up against him. One is supposed to accept everyone and enjoy each others presence at a Temple

gathering. She had never seen the guy behind her before.

The group pressed in nice and tight, so tight it was actually a little hard to sing. The guy behind her put his hands on her more than anyone else, and he got a whale of a boner that he pressed firmly against her. It was way too big to actually ride, but it was quite a thrill to work her back on it, which he definitely wanted. People swayed with the music, although the song is really a rather simple round repeating the Temple's most basic belief, we are in god, god is in us. God is us, we are god. That god is the meta-soul of all people who believe in him.

This is always the opening song, discovering the god in us. They did a couple more, until they became too musically challenging for the group here this evening. Then they all sprawled on the mats, the idea is to get comfortable but to also be in contact with as many people as possible, but not to get so erotic that you can't pay attention. This time she made sure she got more contact with Dyoniss than anyone else by sitting in his arms. It's not fair to stroke genitals at this point in the ceremony, but the guy beside her came damn close on the inside of her thigh. She thought she would have to warn him that she already had plans for the sleep.

“It looks like you've all gotten comfortable?” The acolyte asked.

There was a chorus of ‘yes,’ a few a little more enthusiastic than careful religious reflection alone would require.

“What I would like to discuss today is the Instinct. Is

there anyone here who thinks the Instinct is a bad idea?"

There was not, she was glad to see that. If there was anyone in the group who thought so, they didn't say anything.

"I think we have all heard that there was a murder in Parkstance last week? I think we may have all heard about the people who were hurt in Mefmun last week also? We may not have heard about six people who have been killed in the Hardensburg area since the start of the year. I have not even heard of how many people have been injured by other people in the lands of Karasis in the last few years, but Karasis knows there have been many.

"In the last thirty three centuries we have come to take the Instinct for granted. We may watch media shows from the Centorin worlds, but we do not feel what their lives are like. We cannot feel what it is like to have everyone a possible source of danger. Feel your fellows in Karasis now, feel the pleasure of their skin on yours." He gave everyone time to do that. "Now try to imagine fearing that, or any touch of any of these lovely people of Karasis we share our lives with." As a member of Karasis you are expected to keep yourself well enough that contact with you is a pleasure. "Try to imagine a life with almost no contact with your fellows, only images on screens and voices over speakers, contact like they are in a distant city, not pressing their flesh to yours in our Temple. Imagine what it is really like if everyone was always clothed and armed, every encounter fraught with fear, every stranger a potential killer."

Of course the other thing he didn't mention is that so many of Centorin's or the Empire's population is ravaged by

age and their flesh is not pleasant to contact. That all the flesh they touched was firm and warm and healthy was a big part of the appeal of Karasis as it was practiced today. Karasis had been without the Emperor since the 12th century, but had used the current ceremony only since the 42nd.

“We could not be here like this, we could not live our lives like we do. We could not open our doors, we could not greet one another warmly and openly. Make no mistake, right behind violence is deceit, mistrust, alienation and all the evils Karasis prevents in our daily lives. Feel the pleasure that comes from trust and openness, the knowledge that all of Karasis is one great being that we are a part of, and is a part of us.

“The life of Karasis is in our hands. As we stand warm and united, trusting of one another, loving of one another, the holy soul of Karasis lives and we live in the way we have come to take for granted. If we mistrust each other, fear each other, bar our doors to each other, that greater being that is Karasis, that lifts us up to be the most contented people in all the worlds, could die.”

Kessil had heard of that survey he mentioned, it had been conducted in most of the big cities of this planet. All the cities of the Ydlontrostl Bluffs had been rolled into one, but even so it had lead all cities in ‘contentment with your life’ which may mean life is good or may mean the people are simple. It was some of both because the Pewpspway also rated high in contentment and that *had* to be because the people were simple.

The acolyte continued to make the point that violence, or

even the suspicion of violence would tear us apart and ruin the good life that we had here. It was a common theme in the Temple's teaching that we are in some sense in heaven already because we're eternally young and pretty and well fed. The old legends of heaven didn't include working, but life could get boring enough. If she didn't have anything else that had to get done, she was afraid she would degenerate into nothing but sex and drink, all day, every day.

If it was just this acolyte, she didn't think he would go on so long, but the first part of the sermon is sent down from Karasis Yuhal, and she was sure he wanted to add his own experiences to it. From the sheaf of papers he had in his hand, the sermon sent down was pretty long this week.

"So what is it we can do?" the acolyte eventually got to the important part. "It has come to our attention that antidotes to the Instinct have been coming into this basin and coming thru our cities. The latest information is that it is coming disguised as half gallon bottles of whiskey. If any of you are involved in the channels that Centorin exiles use, you must make sure that the whiskey really is whiskey, and beware that it may be stolen again. It is up to all of us to do what we can and not depend on those before and after us. 'We' is everyone, please open that package.

"For the rest of us, they need our moral support, our help and our vigilance. Each of us has a duty to Karasis to chase down and report any rumors of an antidote to the Instinct. This kind of thing cannot go on in public, so the Temple will make public anything we can learn about this trade so we can stamp it out. We will publicly shun anyone who uses the

antidote, and publish their picture basin wide.

“In addition, our brothers at the Kassikan and the keepers of the Elvish faith, have been notified of what is happening here. We have every confidence that they will use their considerable power to aid us in eliminating this danger to our way of life. In addition, we have updated the wizard Brancettrabble who’s laboratories originally created the Instinct, and he has promised to aide us. All interested parties will be kept up to date with all the information that Karasis collects.”

This kind of call from the Temple would get a lot of response. There would always be those too eager, no doubt a thousand false leads would be generated for every good one and some of the bad ones would be deliberately malicious, but they would have to sort thru them. This sermon also gave more credence to what Ragnar was saying when he said the Temple was worried. In a way she hated to believe what Ragnar said because it was so bleak, and because he was so terrified. He had the fear the acolyte talked of in his sermon. She wondered if he was the one Ragnar knew?

When the sermon is lighter, the time after will devolve into a make-out session and people will filter out by twos and fours. Today people were sitting up straighter and clinging for support more than making out. There was a buzz of conversation, someone asked, “If we find someone with an antidote to the Instinct, won’t we be in danger?”

“There is much more danger if this is allowed to continue. On the Centorin planets almost everyone is in danger at all

times. The poor are never secure, the rich pay millions for it. Our greatest danger is doing nothing, looking the other way, letting it be someone else's problem. As soon as we do that, Karasis dies and we are lost."

"But what can we do?"

"Observe and report," the acolyte said. "Take pictures if you can, write it down, come tell us verbally. Anyone at any Temple can direct you to someone who wants to hear what you've seen. When we learn of people or organizations that have helped bring the antidote into our worlds, we will make them known so we can withhold trade from them. They will be added to the blacklists."

The blacklists were the Temple's main enforcement means. They could publish the names of people or organizations that were shunned. It was often enough to make a business close or a person move away. If they were shunned by all the Temples, they might have to move far.

"If you see someone with the antidote, or acting like they have the antidote, shout warning, don't let them move at will. Stay away and stay safe, but spread the warning. You never know who his target is, or if he is like the one in Mefmun, just beating people at random."

They didn't bother waiting in the elevator line, but took the stairs to the base of the tower. The club was packed this dusk, as it usually was. VlemfBam was playing and they're on the rough side of lectroshock. Nembez caught up with them as they were working their way thru the crowd toward the door.

“Hey, gonna stop for one?” she held up her cup.

“I haven’t got mine with me,” she said, “and I’m up for someplace quieter.”

“Wait up,” she pressed thru the crowd toward them. The Blue Kite is not deafening like the ShockMe, especially here in the wings near the elevator courts, but it is not a quiet place to sit and chat either. She needed a Blue Kite ‘fix’ every few weeks, but not every other day. Nembez stopped in for at least one cup, then spent some time in an eye room, every day. “I’ll go with you, I can hang somewhere else.”

“The laws of physics allow it,” Kessil said.

“You’re such a dry one.” They made it out to the plaza. “So this is Dyoniss?” she said once again.

“Such as it is,” he said. He put his other arm around her and she tried to wrap up in it. Nembez has a club-girl’s body, slim but busty, with lavish hair and a very smooth, oval face. “I’m spoken for this sleep, just to warn you,” Dyoniss told her.

“Warn me this, are we going somewhere where everyone will be spoken for but the guy with one tooth who’s jerking off in the corner?”

“Zestin’s is nowhere near that bad,” Dyoniss said, “Yashmi meets people there whenever she wants. It’s a neighborhood place and it’s only a quarter mile so you can come back here after if you want.” She had to anyway since she lived in a tiny sliver of an apartment on the ninth floor of the building. “It’s four blocks down on Avenue Nemo.”

Walking into Zestin’s is like walking into a family party.

Yashmi hollered out “Where you been?” as they went to the taprail. Three or four of the people in here already knew Nembez and they took care of the introductions as she and Dyoniss took care of the cups. Nembez’s street wrap was a button front and her inner was stretchy enough to pull down and by the second table of guys, they had done that.

Zestin seemed to have a house cup reserved for Dyoniss. Kessil leaned back on the tap rail next to him. “I really mean to have just one, I don’t want to feel rushed this sleep.”

“Neither do I,” he said. He didn’t pause long before he said, “It was almost scary having that sermon come so soon after Ragnar’s warning.”

“Maybe he’s more than we thought,” Kessil said.

“I should have his genetics back tomorrow, if he’s not lying about the half-brother, I’ll feel even more sure about what he’s said.”

“Both the rumors he heard have been on the news,” Kessil said.

“He could have hung out at a place like this and saw it on the news also,” Dyoniss reminded her.

While Nembez was still getting introduced around their neighborhood hang out, something came on the news. There was no sound, but they showed scenes she knew were from the fighter run amok in Mefmun and then a picture of the guy who had been chasing Ragnar that day, the one who said she was lucky he didn’t have time for her.

Her legs gave out and she clutched at the rail and at Dyoniss. His arm went around her under her shoulders and caught her. She could only point at the screen, by the time he

looked, it was an announcement for some new horror movie and he gave a start, then started laughing at her.

“No, before that there was a picture of the people from that bar that got tore up by a madman with the antidote, and then a picture of the same guy who ran into me, the one who was after Ragnar.”

“Yuck,” was all he could find to say. Well, she shouldn’t criticize, she’s not the most eloquent bard that ever trod the planks either. He went on, “I guess we could see the bright side and say that so far as we know there is only one person in the cities who is using the antidote.”

“You think he’s responsible for the guy on Kivatorn Pass as well as the one in Parkstance?” she asked.

“Why not? He had time. If he’s got Centorin money he uses the tubes wherever he goes. He loves it here because they don’t even ask his name.”

“It’s possible,” Kessil had to admit.

Nembez finally made it thru her introductions to the guys at the table across the way, and got her clothing back together before coming over to them. “I already know those guys, you should have told me they hang out here,” she said. Kessil didn’t even bother to comment on that, how was she to know who Nembez knew and didn’t? All she knew about Nembez was how she hunted the Blue Kite. She wasn’t going to pursue it either, “Some sermon aye?” she said as she got to them.

“Spooky,” Kessil began. “But lets take a table, there’s one right over there.”

Kessil caught her up on the two additional visits from Ragnar and the guy who ran into her who was just on the news seconds ago. Nembez was wide-eyed thru all of it.

“He was on when I was having duskmeal. I think I saw that same guy,” Nembez said, “he was in the Blue Kite Morningday evening. He was watching someone like a nyobba and when that guy left, he did too. I saw him pop a pill as he left.”

“Did he see you watching?” Kessil asked.

“I don’t think he saw the guys he was standing with he was so locked onto his prey.”

“What did the guy he was after look like?”

“Really tall and thin, light hair chopped short, he had a big shirt on, really baggy.”

It sounded like a tech who worked out of the next office down the Old Canal, but that wouldn’t make any sense. At least it wasn’t Ragnar, but it could be anyone who looked a little like him, even a Centorin. She took out her pocket eye. She didn’t care if it was dark rates. She quickly keyed in her’s and Nembez’s info on the guy with the antidote, right down to the detail of him popping a pill. It cost her twenty two penny to get it all keyed in, but she thought it was worth it. Maybe they could get someone to steal his antidote supply.

Having his picture on the air would help, people would begin to point, then scream. He wouldn’t be able to lurk among the crowds any more. He might force a geneticist to change him, but the changes would take time to grow in.

“It was good of you to send that,” Nembez said, “You took that sermon to heart.”

“Plus I’m working on a related case,” Dyoniss added.

“Thanks for that also, I think I kind of took it to heart too, it would sure change my life if I thought people could hurt me. I wouldn’t have dared make plans with that guy in the yellowish wrap.”

“Esmin, good choice, you’ll have fun and breakfast will be good.”

“That’s what I say about you,” Dyoniss told her.

“So let’s drink up and get started on that,” Kessil said. She wondered who he thought would be cooking breakfast? She was so glad she was thinking about that rather than still worrying if they will have breakfast together.

12. Sent West

Dyoniss was glad he wasn't the first one up. Kessil didn't have to visit her office today, but she still got up before he did and cooked up a really nice noodle soup that he wished he could linger over. Kessil thinks she looks very ordinary, but it's a rather perfected ordinary. She had only a light nightcoat and leggings with nothing under it. Her nightcoat was supple and clung to her shape as she moved about the kitchen. He bet she was as skilled with a stove as with the machinery she was responsible for.

He came up behind her and circled her with his arms. She purred and pressed her head to his chin. "That sleep sure has reminded me of why I wanted to find you again," he said.

She pulled his hands across her chest a couple times. "I'm really glad to find you again. It's really comfortable here, I don't think I've ever cooked in a stranger's kitchen before."

"I don't think we're strangers any more. I've already talked a lot deeper with you than most of the women I know."

"That too, but that's just me," she said, "I'm not really good at small talk."

"I'm not either," he said, "I've always hated situations where I had to do it."

"You don't have to do it with me," she said. "I'm more interested in stellar mechanics than celebrity gossip."

"Good. I'll listen to garden tips if I have to," he said, "but I'd rather be with you." He caressed her some more and she covered his hands and leaned back on him, "even if you tire

me out.”

“Maybe I didn’t want you to have too much left to give Korshii.”

“I doubt I’m much of a blip on her sexual radar, especially since we’re seven miles apart.” In fact he wondered if she wasn’t just using him for the sex but had some further motive.

“How are you getting down there?” Kessil asked.

“Probably on a public, it’s only an hour each way. Maybe a streetcar, if I find one going that far.” He used the opportunity to caress her whole body. Not that he hadn’t done plenty over the last ten hours, but he thought he’d never get tired of it. Her hips were not as round as an Elf girl’s, but rounder than Yashmi’s, and her waist was smooth, not notched. She was firm and warm and he was very thankful to have the day with such a fine woman. He said a little prayer of thanks, and of pleas for it to continue.

Maybe it wasn’t silent after all because her hands came up to his face, “May our prayers be answered,” she said, and kissed him.

“When should we meet again?” he asked.

“When we get off work?”

“Thank you,” he said.

“I’ll have to stop over where I’m staying, so I can’t get back til at least thirtieth hour.”

“Take all the time you need, it is just so good to see you again. I dreamed of yesterday all week and the reality was better than the dream.”

She kissed him again and said, “You’re very sweet to me, maybe more than you need to be. But breakfast is getting

cold.”

It was at least another hour til he got to the tower. He wanted to stop at the office first, he hoped he had some results from Engsahr. It was too early in the day to check on Ragnar’s hair. Once again he was glad he had a forever pass to the elevator. The thought of climbing seventy eight floors into the lofty tower was impossible. When he got there, there were only two people in the office this Nightday, Gaicher and Kalhar. They were working together but not at anything job related. The only light was the ceiling in Kyonmeere’s office, but there was no evidence that he was around.

Dyoniss said “Hi,” and, “go ahead and finish up, don’t mind me,” as he went thru the main room and into his office.

Engsahr knew he would be reluctant to use his desk eye in the dark so he had provided some notesheet images. Dyoniss rubbed the pertinent parts onto permanent paper, cleared the notesheet and put it back in Engsahr’s bin.

Seventeen Hyonimuses had received packages from the stargate in the last ten years, some were nearby, one was all the way to Yuhalren, four irons and over an hour each way on the tube, more than a day by any other mode of transportation. The good news was, one Hyonimus had received four packages thru the stargate in the last ten years, and he was local, living on the sixty seventh floor in the Tower of the Blue Kite.

Gaicher and Kalhar were finished by the time he came back out of his office on the way to see the Hyonimus who lived in the tower. Kalhar was still in the bathroom but

Gaicher stopped him. “Have you heard from Betten lately?” he asked.

“No,” Dyoniss said, “I’ve been waiting over a week now for him to just tell me whether or not the empty box reached Hardensburg. I’ve left him three messages to get back to me and haven’t heard a thing.”

“I’ve been waiting to hear from him about those fiber markers. No one can find a manufacturer here in the cities, I’m thinking they might have been Centish or made out there. I’ve heard back from many of the Centorin manufacturers, but not a word from Betten.”

“All this time I thought he was spending all his time on your case,” Dyoniss said. “If it was anyone else I might have complained.”

“And I thought he was tied up with you so I haven’t complained.”

“Is there anything else going on out there?” Dyoniss asked.

“I don’t know. Have you been to Temple the last week or so?” Gaicher asked.

“Yes, the antidote sermon, I heard it at the one on the fifth floor, the 35th hour gathering of Afternoonday.”

“I wonder if someone has him tied up with that?”

“It would have to be Kyonmeere himself,” Dyoniss said, “No one else has mentioned Hardensburg, but you haven’t either til now.”

“Yeah, well he’s still reading his messages, I put a trace on that, he’s just not sending any of his own.”

“If he’s still spending his pay he should be sending some

replies.”

Gaicher nodded, “I agree. Two weeks ago he did say he’d gotten my request and would get back to me as soon as possible. He said he was really busy right now and it might take a little while.”

“Busy with what?” Dyoniss asked.

“Kyonmeere should be by later today, we should ask him.”

“I’ve got to go downtown, I hope I’m back in time.”

“I’ll wait around til you get back in case he comes in. I’ll write this down and leave him a note too.”

“Thanks, I was really just stopping by to pick up a note from Engsahr, I didn’t want to take any longer than I have to.”

Hyonimus from the sixty seventh floor was not at home when he got there, he went downstairs and found the geneticist was open. In just a few moments he was meeting with the tech who ran Ragnar’s hair. She wasn’t quite as sleek as Korshii but had a very similar look.

“Yes, you are half brothers from the Centorin side. Your mothers were both local but much different. Your mother is strong, caring, adventurous and maybe a little more in-the-moment than ideal.” He didn’t get a chance to tell her anything about how well he knew his mother, but she went right on, “...While your half brother’s mother was undernourished, nervous and has a poor self-image. Your half-brother has inherited the nervousness and probably the poor self-image. We can help him quite a bit at very little

cost, but he probably should spend some time with a counselor or at Temple as well as taking a pill. Is he nearby?"

"He comes and goes, he's seen someone I know on the street a couple times. We don't know where he lives or where he's staying." Dyoniss suspected he wasn't staying anywhere, that he was catching a nap in someone's deck chair out of sight and grabbing food from street venders or maybe raiding gardens.

"He really should come in, we can help him, along with a good counselor."

"I'll see what I can do, I don't know if I'll ever see him again."

"Well if you do, he's probably suffering from hyper anxiety, he's very susceptible to it. His mother was too, so his upbringing might not have been helpful. Maybe he can help us find her and help her. What about the Centorin father?" the girl asked.

"I don't believe he was present in his life. He was in my life til I was one, but that was two centuries ago so I don't remember him at all."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"He's become rich and powerful in the west since then."

"I can see that happening," she said, looking at the father's half of Ragnar's chart.

"Is there any such thing as a gene for violence and the love of violence?"

"Well," she said, leaning back against the wall in her office chair. Her shining black hair spilled over her shoulders and curved around her chest in a really pretty way. "There are

some that make people more prone to use force than others. If you know some ancient history you may have heard of the Peace Plague?”

“Yes, don’t know the code itself, but I know how it worked and when that happened.”

“Yes, it wasn’t til the 35th that it reached here, but it started in the 32nd in Elven lands. That eliminated three of the important violence related genes in humans, one in particular that had no purpose but as a dominance driver. Well that gene is still present in almost every Centorin. It is present in both of you. It is recessive, so you probably haven’t been fighting the Instinct all your life. But your father is probably diploid in it, it will take effect, and he has probably fought the Instinct since he arrived at the Kassikan’s dome.”

He believed that.

Right in Blue Kite plaza he saw a streetcar with the sign ‘downtown’ on it, so he decided to take that. It was one of the increasingly rare ones still actually pulled by a keda, but at least it had webbing seats instead of a plain board. It just about filled up right here in the plaza, he wound up on the end next to a cute little girl with a bob of curls and a nightwrap that was very well tailored and flexible.

“You’re Centorin aren’t you?” she asked.

“Half,” he admitted, “I was born right near the top of the second dell past the Blue Kite.”

“My neighborhood, have we met before?”

“I don’t think so.”

She was silent. Dyoniss wondered what she meant by

accusing him of being Centorin. Maybe being half Centorin made him an object of prejudice. She didn't stay silent long, "Have you heard the sermon?" she asked.

"About the antidote?" Dyoniss asked.

"Yes."

"Yes."

She seemed to soften a little, not enough to cuddle up to him, but her tone changed. Maybe that meant that if he went to Temple he was no longer an object of prejudice. "Can we do anything about it?"

"Well, right now I am on my way to interview someone regarding one of the smuggling routes that run thru the cities. I am attempting to prevent those routes being used to transport the antidote."

"Why are there any smuggling routes? We should shut them all down, they threaten all of us."

He wanted to say, 'don't get hysterical' but this was right after being told there were genes for nervous personalities. Maybe he should send this girl in there. "Most of the Centorins who come here have come here *because* of the Instinct. They would hate to find the antidote in use. In many cases the Empire and the Houses of Centorin are after those people so they cannot communicate openly with friends and family left behind."

"So they are exiled here?"

"Or hiding out here."

"They think we are primitive don't they?"

"To their hyper-rich we are. When they use stargates to have houses with rooms on many planets, fleets of

ornithopters and a hundred liveried flunkies lining the path to their throne, we look pretty primitive. But to their poor who've never eaten a bite that grew in a garden, never saw a living thing other than another like themselves, have never slept where they felt safe. To those who've never trusted a friend, never even seen the outdoors, but most of all, will live twenty decades or so because they are ephemeral and have no hope of ever seeing any medical care at all. To those people, our lives are much better than the heaven they hope awaits them after their brief mortal lives are over."

That made her pause awhile. "Is it really that bad out there?"

"Did you see the movie 'Hellraisers MMCLVII?' he asked.

"No," she said.

"There's a scene where a big levrail bus breaks containment and crushes a crowd of three hundred people standing in an allotment line."

"Sick," she said, "who would watch it?"

"I've just learned there's genes for that, we don't have them because of the Peace Plague."

"Was that another Centorin movie?"

"No, it was the Elvish plague from the 30's, the one that made women horny."

"Men make women horny," she said, and pulled his elbow to her, "but what does that have to do with the levrail bus?"

"They were real people. They weren't told, they weren't given anything but the most basic care and between two and three hundred were killed in each take. The Navorkensville

city government let it continue as a means to thin the support rolls. It took nine takes to get it right. The poor didn't find out it was happening til it got exposed in the cheap press."

"And you expect anyone to believe that?"

"I think you're proving my point," he said.

"Which is?"

"To the poor of Centorin, this is heaven."

"Why don't they come here?" she asked.

"Because interstellar travel is as unaffordable to them as it is to us."

She was going only as far as TworganicMagic, so the silence after that was not that long. He didn't let it bother him, he knew Korshii would use up all he had. The remainder of the ride was long. He couldn't imagine taking streetcars to the far end of the cities if he went all the way to Yuhalren looking for a Hyonimus. He would break into his savings and pay for the tube himself if he had to.

Korshii met him at the door with a quilt around her when he got there. He wondered if that meant she wasn't going to waste any time. She had that little heater on again, and didn't stop in the downstairs room this time, even though this dark wasn't quite as cold as last. Even here she kept the quilt over her shoulders and she had only a little knit band around her hips under it. She had cups all poured, but hers needed some serious topping up. There was a reading lamp focused on her chair.

"I thought you'd be here a little earlier," she said, "It's almost lunch time."

“I had to stop at the office and the streetcar left me off at the midtown bluff top.” It was almost a half mile walk from there and some of the streets were so steep his mock-socks nearly got holes from his toenails.

“No problem, I wasn’t going anywhere today anyway, I’m usually scheduled on Afternoondays this year.” She patted the chair next to her, “Now I wish I had been able to find out a lot more, but I’ll try to make the trip worth it with sex and lunch.”

“You don’t have to make anything up to me, I’m grateful if you tried at all.”

“Well I did find out some things,” she said.

He got out his notebook.

“I did manage to find a picture. One of my friends took this the night we met.” She handed him a quarter-page snapshot. “I know you can’t see his face very well.”

No, you couldn’t. At first glance it didn’t look like she had enough to bury your whole face in like that, but he was trying pretty hard. He was in a full-length leotard club costume, which was just about a disguise, so the picture really didn’t tell him anything more than Korshii could go wild in a club.

“That was the night we met, I guess we weren’t that decorous.” She gave him a little grin.

He took the picture, though it was a better picture of Korshii than of Vemnya. He wondered if that was why he kept it.

“I’m pretty good with an Eye,” she continued, “so I spent some time going thru all the registries close to

TworganicMagic looking for a Vemnya, but found none with the correct date that matches his description.” He hadn’t noticed one here before, but he hadn’t seen the whole house. She might have gone to a club to use one.

“So we know he didn’t own property or a business there, that’s all.”

“Yeah, but for my money, I bet the closest he’s ever been to TworganicMagic was when he learned to pronounce it.”

“You could be right, if he was going to lie at all, why give you anything we could follow up?”

“That’s what I think.”

“So did you find anything at all?”

“The cook where he said he picked up breakfast claimed he didn’t remember him,” she said, “so I’m starting to think about ghosts and Angels and that kind of thing.”

“No need to go there,” Dyoniss knew, “It just means someone’s lying. Most likely Vemnya lied about which cook he went to, possibly the cook was lying but why?”

“Why would he go so far as to do that?”

“Because I think that’s when he actually picked up the package he had you send. Was the cook he said he used down by the canal?”

“No, why?”

“Because that’s where I think he really was,” Dyoniss told her.

That was all he learned, and for that she claimed her shot of semen and gave him lunch afterward. They were both

excellent, but that didn't stop him from thinking of Kessil while Korshii was on him. He asked her to let him know if she found out anything more, she promised to do so. If she was going to keep this up, and actually help on the case, he should be glad to continue the arrangement.

The ride back to the office was uneventful, and it was still early enough that he might catch Kyonmeere. He got up to the office to find only Ralu in the main office, who waved but did not offer any words. As he went to his own office, he saw Kyonmeere's door was open and he was going over the finances. He looked up when he heard Dyoniss.

"Please come in, I found this note from Gaicher about problems in Hardensburg." Gaicher and Kalhar must have decided they were too hot to work this dark. They had been pawing at each other quite a bit lately. As he thought that, they came back from a late lunch, all smiles. It is fun when love blooms and he wished them well, but he didn't think they could live together very well.

As soon as Kyonmeere looked back at him, Dyoniss continued. "The operative we have out there just isn't getting it done," Dyoniss said.

"His name is Betten," Kyonmeere said.

"Yes," Dyoniss wondered if he knew him personally, he hoped it wasn't someone he cared about. He was into it now however and had no choice but to plunge ahead. "Did Gaicher's note say he hasn't been responding? He claims he's busy with something else, but neither one of us could think of what else he might be working on. Do you have him on something we don't know about?"

“If I did I wouldn’t be able to tell you about it now either, but I don’t. If he’s not responding, I’ll have to turn off his funds. Have you told him we need a status report?”

“Yes I have, as has Gaicher. It’s been two weeks since we’ve heard a thing from him, but Gaicher checked and saw that he is still reading messages.”

“I even gave him a pocket eye,” Kyonmeere muttered. “Dark rates or no, I need to hear from him.” He hammered out a message. Respond within the hour or we will have to take you off the payroll was the gist of it. “Can you wait around for an hour to see if he responds?”

“Of course,” he said.

The hour went by quickly. He was able to knock off a couple small items just by having the right reference materials, background checks only required him to see if the man had a file here, Kalhar could send those responses out with the dawn, if she came in. She was another who always took Afternoonday, and usually Nightday.

“So, no reponse,” Kyonmeere said when he came into Dyoniss’s office.

“I’m not surprised.”

“So?” Kyonmeere started, “we still have two important cases that we can’t service.”

“I guess I have to go to Hardensburg,” Dyoniss said, trying not to sound so reluctant. Now that he’d just met up with Kessil again, he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. It was a major ride out to Hardensburg, the car’s life support could not take one the whole distance, but it

could be done making only a single stop in Vnassvuur if one slept until then.

“Besides those cases, we either need to get him performing again, or line up a new agent in that area, one who wants to stay in touch.”

“Who should I hire?” Dyoniss asked, “an established investigator or someone who wants to get into it and seems to have talent?”

“I’ll trust your judgment on that, and I trust you’ll consult me. You’ll take one of the pocket-eyes of course. It’s two coppers on the tube there and back. Take four just in case, you might have to be there awhile.” Kyonmeere said as he got up to grip palms. “Keep them someplace private on your person, somewhere no woman’s going to look.”

“I keep myself from having places like that on my person,” Dyoniss said as he also got up, “but I’d protect less than that til the Instinct, you know that.”

“Not worried,” he said. “I’ll key in that note before you get to the cash window,” and with that Dyoniss was on his way to the Centorin colony.

13. Stood up by Ragnar

They tried to keep Dawnsleep calm, but the knowledge that Dyoniss was leaving for at least two weeks in Hardensburg must have given them both the urge to make up for it and they hadn't slept as much as they should have. Kessil was coming down the stairs way too early this Morningday, still warm and tingly, with a well-sated and happy body. Because Dyoniss was leaving, she didn't want to be still in his bed when he left. She was afraid he might be stuck out there until he found a new agent to work that end of the basin for Kyonmeere. She was afraid that could take closer to a year than a couple weeks. After a day and two sleeps, she was only growing more convinced that his was a life she wanted to share, the only problem so far, they each had careers that could get in the way.

She could smell the stir-fry Yashmi made for his breakfast and heard her slide a bowl in front of him, then sit down across from him. "I take it she won't be getting up for awhile?" Yashmi said as Kessil was making the turn in the stairs at the reading landing.

"She has the day off and probably doesn't feel like walking."

"Why's that?"

"Something about the curl of her toes," Dyoniss responded.

Yashmi tapped him on the arm and gave him a 'that's my boy' wink. Judging by the way she talked and he made love,

she probably hadn't neglected his sexual education as a child. He tucked into the plate, it was good because he wouldn't be eating as well as he should on this trip, no one does. At long line speeds he should be stopping for lunch in Vnassvuur, she knew the long line cars could make it at least that far. Yashmi sat across from him with a smaller bowl and a bigger cup of her awake and happy tea. "So what are you thinking about?" Yashmi asked.

Kessil just stopped for a minute on the steps, not wanting to interrupt them. So far they hadn't seen her since the sun was in the kitchen and she was in the shadows.

"I should be thinking about that extra label on the package and how I can figure out who Starkey is, but I'm giving more thought to what a great breakfast this is and what a great time Kessil and I just had."

"Did you say Starkey?"

"Yeah, it's a small or medium sized House based in Dlon dai. They are into light security; hostage negotiations, payoff delivery and that kind of thing."

Just then Kessil's pocket eye beeped with a message and he looked up and caught sight of her. She hadn't untangled her hair yet and she was trailing her quilt around her shoulders. She should have left the damn pocket-eye home, but a century of carrying it had conditioned her. He had one of the company pocket-eyes on this trip, he would get to see how annoying they can be. He had been practicing with it so he could key on it almost half as well as his desk board, but he didn't have it out now. She hissed at hers, gave it the evil eye as she came padding over.

“Bad news?” He asked as she fell into his arms.

She put it to her eye and scanned the text. “A failure back in Ekendosa was traced to one of our gaskets. It could be the same kind of failure I’ve been investigating. They’re only finding out about it now because the field guy didn’t know it was important. They also want me to come down to headquarters for fourteenth hour, but at least they’ll pay for the tube.” It was an appointment she had asked for, but they worded it as a summons.

“Where was that failure?” Dyoniss asked.

“Right here on the Eastern Terminus. It wasn’t a tube cargo sorter this time, just one used by Bintar’s package couriers.” The words from Ragnar came to her, the transfer uses the canal.

He might have thought the same thing because that obviously meant something to him. He asked, “do you know just when that failure was?”

She frowned, but brought up her pocket eye once again. It wasn’t in the message but there was a link to the lab report. It was only a paragraph, but he had attached the machine log. “It went down at three and forty one of Morningday.”

“And how long was it down?” he asked.

“We had a tech right there, he had the gasket changed and the pressure back on in just over seventeen minutes.”

“Wow, fast.”

“He was already in the building, otherwise we would have added an hour.”

Dyoniss got out his notes, while he was flipping thru them, Yashmi asked again, “You did say you were looking for

someone named Starkey?”

“Yes,” he said, then spoke to Kessil once again, “That’s the same hour when the package I’m working on was tampered with again, the time when it had to move seven miles across the city.”

“Awfully suspicious,” Kessil said.

Dyoniss paused, Yashmi finally got to say, “Your father was a Starkey.” They both looked at her. Why did it seem like in this whole basin of over two billion people, everything in all three cases lead back to the same four or five? It was too many coincidences to be coincidences. Yashmi explained, “I know about House Starkey and Houses as we translate the Centish. It was his own House that was after him,” she explained, “for getting them in trouble with the gatekeepers. Once the Senate lost the support of the gatekeepers, the Republic was doomed. The Houses can’t move their battle stars out of system without the gatekeepers, and now the Emperor is a gatekeeper.”

“When did you learn all of this?” Dyoniss asked.

“It’s in this year’s copy of Empire Observer. Lorry bought it second hand. I remember a little from Mikal but only because he cried about it so much.”

She watched Dyoniss make two entries in his notes, ‘Starkey = Mikal,’ that one was boxed in, and ‘power failure at needleboat sorter – second switch?’

While Dyoniss made his final preparations, she sat on the reading alcove waiting for him. She still had the inner wrap on and the quilt around her, but her legs were up as he came

by.

“Are you sitting like that just to remind me what I’ll be missing when I’m out in Hardensburg?”

“Or see if you have a few minutes left?” she asked with a laugh.

“I gave in the bedroom,” he said, “I need more than one meal to recharge after that one.”

“Yeah OK,” she said, “you were pretty accurate about the shape of my toes.” She stood up, leaving the quilt behind, put her arms around him and kissed him. He caressed her body, under the inner wrap for awhile, until they broke the kiss.

“Miss you,” she said.

“I’ll miss you,” he said, “but I will be back so please don’t get lost.”

“I won’t, you can count on that,” she said and meant it, even if it was several years. With one last squeeze of their hands, he was off. She felt like someone from the Energy Age waving someone off on a two thousand mile journey that was not supposed to take more than weeks. For the plains people, it was a journey of a decade to Ragess and back, Hardensburg had hardly been built when the tribe was there last, centuries before she was born.

She watched him down the path, she could see between houses a little ways up Saseraik Walk where he went by. She had never been on the tubes beyond Yuhal, and only there once, to see the great Temple and the greater one that lies in ruins. She did the climb of the north wall, a sheer sheet of stone and crystal hundreds of feet high, festooned with ropes

that one can climb with ratchets. She did it in one day, not ‘with ease’ but it wasn’t as bad as she expected it to be. It was all in trusting the rope and not looking down.

Silly thing to think about. She came back downstairs.

Since they were calling her in to headquarters, she was not required to go to the regional meeting today. To get there for fourteenth hour, she had to leave here by tenth, so she had three hours. Yashmi was still sitting at the table with a second cup of tea and invited Kessil to join her. She had a little time so Kessil grabbed a cup and filled it, threw the last of the leaves in.

“I’ve got more tea ready to come in,” Yashmi said. “I should probably ask around and see if anyone needs some, that and panips, we really should take that whole bed out and break it up. That soil’s gotten too hard for keda graze, much less a root crop.”

“This place must be a lot of work,” Kessil said.

“I keep busy. We were thinking of having a party this summer, digging up the panips and putting in a fire pit and have a karga roast. We need to see if we can borrow Byiroi’s keda field for kahble, we’ve got to get a pretty nice barrel. We thought we should do it this summer but I don’t think we can with him going away for who knows how long.”

“Yeah, they go by fast,” Kessil said. “You have to be all set up for a summer before it comes by in order to catch it.”

“I should still take those panips out now, there’s so many ready. I know nobody will give me anything for them this time of year but maybe someone can use them. We’ll save as many as we can, we’ll keep the best ones but we might put

some of them in the digester.”

“The gas pressure’s low?” Kessil asked.

“Kinda low, so we could use it. It’s more than halfway down the pipe.”

Kessil swished her tea around a little. The leaves had been well bruised and color was flowing out. She had been here for several meals and a shower already, that could have an effect on the level in the tank.

“Then we’ll let the ribbonleaves have the space til next summer,” Yashmi said. “Maybe we can buy a fast karga pup and fatten him up.”

Kessil was supposed to be the hardened one, raised on the hoof, schooled in the saddle with knife and rope. “I couldn’t keep some cute little karga pup for a year and then eat him. He would wind up with a name and I’d bring him in the house on cold darks.” Kargas can be very affectionate and are intelligent enough not to shit in the house, unlike anything in the mrang order.

“And you call yourself a plains woman,” Yashmi chided.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m in the cities today. It’s been two centuries since I was a plains woman.” There was another pause, there was enough color in her tea now to take a sip, a small one because it was mainly just hot at this point.

“Have you seen Ragnar lately?” Yashmi asked.

“Not since last week about now, on my way to the regional meeting.”

“I haven’t either. He promised to meet me at Zestin’s last Noonsleep, I fended everyone else off for him, then and both sleeps since.”

“I’m guessing that’s not the first time you made that mistake,” Kessil said.

“You’re such a smart one,” she said, with what Kessil hoped was genuine approval. “What if that guy who ran into you caught him?” Yashmi asked.

She felt a wave of cold more like Dawnsleep than sunup. Maybe this was the start of what the sermon was about, the first chill of fear of our fellows. The cold of the loneliness that must grip everyone on the Centorin worlds. “I hate to say it, but someone would have found him dead and we’d see it on the news,” Kessil said. She hoped that was true.

“Yeah I guess.”

“So did you like him?” Kessil asked.

“Yeah, yeah I did. He wasn’t like his father, he was like his father was at first, when he was lost here.”

“He was very frightened, he must have seen that guy who was on the news because he took off under the table.” She wouldn’t put it past the man that ran into her to cut Ragnar up into pieces too small to find. If Yashmi liked Ragnar, she wouldn’t want to talk about fears like that. Kessil hadn’t been good at conjuring fear most of her life, but she was starting to feel it often now. She didn’t say anything, but shook.

Yashmi looked at her.

“That was just a scary experience,” she hid behind her tea cup again, managed to inhale a little bit. She needed to put it down and let it fester.

“I bet it was,” Yashmi said. “I’m glad I didn’t have it or I’d probably be afraid to come out from under my bed.”

“You can’t hide there.”

“I wouldn’t be thinking that straight.”

Kessil didn’t really believe that, but knew what she was trying to say by it. Kessil tried not to let the fact that Ragnar had not showed up for last Noonsleep bother her too much. As skittish as Ragnar was, he was probably just afraid to appear in a place he might have been seen before. Dyoniss had shared his genetic report with them, with his anxiety problem, it was natural that he would over react.

“Dyoniss really likes you,” Yashmi said.

“What makes you say that?”

“I just know him, we’ve lived together so long I can’t help it. The way he talks to you, the way he looks at you, the way he talks about you all tell me that you are a lot more than a bit of variety to him.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Kessil said.

“I think you like him too.”

“Yeah,” Kessil sighed, “I do.”

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“Does he have anyone else?”

“No one special,” Yashmi said, “no one that’s been here two sleeps in a row in a long time.”

Yashmi seemed to be trying to play matchmaker, if so, could she confide what she was really after? “He seems like someone who would want to share his life.” She made it a statement, but it was the most important question on her mind.

“He does, and aren’t you the same?”

She wasn't surprised Yashmi could see that on her. People had sometimes called her 'window' because she was so transparent. "I'm afraid to fall too hard," Kessil said wistfully, "but I don't think I can help myself."

"Don't be, he won't break your heart. My Dyoniss doesn't know how to break a girl's heart. Girl's hearts are very precious to him."

"I'm sure he doesn't have to try."

It actually took some effort to take leave of Yashmi, she would have stayed and chatted till she was late. Kessil would have loved to, she was an interesting character, and very warm and welcoming.

She had to go back to Tarreck's before heading to the tube station. She already knew she wasn't going to buy that place, not even for thirty coppers. She had an aluminum and forty saved and if she needed to spend all of it, she would. She was going to get some signs posted, and she was going to message Tarreck that he was going to have to accept thirty or come back to sell it himself. She couldn't stand in front of it and ask more than that.

She might have to re-think her whole plan. If there was going to be antidote around, she might want to be in a tower and not in an isolated home in the plots. Either that, or she might want to be in a hide-out in the savannah. With all that she had heard of Hardensburg, she was scared for Dyoniss out there. It would be devastating if she should just start to fall in love and have something happen to him. She would feel it was her fault in some way if she didn't keep him safe.

14. Murder in Vnassvuur

Dyoniss watched the endless prairie hurtle by at three hundred miles per hour, the swiftest creatures stampeding were stationary compared to the tube. This was just an inter-valley connector in the basin's tube system but it made him numb to think that the mid basin plains are large enough that he could spend the entire ride lost in nowhere like this, with only an occasional safari to let him know there were any other humans on the planet. But as this was really only the connector between the east and west branches of the Eldadn, he was on the wild prairie only twenty minutes.

In a way it was bad timing to be on his way to Hardensburg now when he was starting to get together with Kessil. After only a couple days, he knew she was someone who already meant a lot more to him than Korshii, or the girl at the genetics office, or a few other girls he knew for various reasons. He could tell she was open to a serious relationship and was terrified that she would encounter someone else before he could get back and continue what they started. Still, they had been separated over fifty years and still remembered each other. This past week proved there was more between them than a good time at a great show, that he had been right about her then. He thought he might have overlooked other opportunities because of her, but whenever anyone got close, he had remembered the girl at the MkennetWind show and gently backed away. There was a bond between them that went well beyond immediate lust, though there was more than he needed of that.

It was also bad timing to be on his way to Hardensburg now when he was starting to piece things together back in Hdengragger. He really needed to get to Bintar's sorting room and line up the package that was tampered with and the power failure. He needed to find out where that package went next, that should be where Vemnya picked it up. Even with all of that, it didn't seem like there was enough time for Korshii to have breakfast, even a hurried one, between Vemnya's picking up the package and Korshii dropping it off at Picketish-Pickam.

He wouldn't get to make any progress on any of that for at least two weeks. He used the pocket eye to make notes about all of that, and record any thoughts and ideas he had on the case when he thought of them. Other than that he was free to watch the lush countryside of the farming valleys slide by.

The West Eldadn valley was just like the east, small towns, each with their pond and lock, their Temple on the main plaza, switching rings that slowed them to fifty miles per hour in places there would have only been one station on a long-line a few centuries ago. There was another spot of open prairie before the miles of smallholds around Dlochken. That was a city of millions that had more stations but no more tubes than any little town on the river back there. After that it was another hour to Vnassvuur.

Vnassvuur considers itself to be the biggest city in the west of the basin. The problem with that is that it is in the center of a fertile and swampy lowland more reminiscent of Tostdoytl than the plains. It's no higher in altitude than

Ydlontrostl and a bit farther south, so instead of the chill of the plains, it reminds one more of the southeast in climate, warm and humid, long dawns and dusks, fecund aromas.

And so it was when he got out. Early fall, mid-Morningday, but sunny, steamy and lazy. So lazy it wasn't easy to provoke a cook into fixing him some lunch. The only thing here that was like the west was the accent, and it was thick enough to almost be called put-on, and laced with Centorin words as slang. The city was dense and shady with tall archwoods, as deep and shady as the cities of the Ydlontrostl Bluffs were low and sunny. There were lon ponds right up to the harbors, tiny dark canals between the roots of the big archwoods and separate levels for pedestrians all over the central city.

He had never been here before, but he knew it was like Terassadran in that it had a lot of the look of an Elvish city. There were a few Elves here, not as many as Terassadran, but a few in every crowd. He got to share a lunch table with an Elf girl. She was very pretty, kind of dainty with beautiful smooth hips, luxurious golden hair and big, beautiful, amber eyes. She was quite well spoken and seemed to have a sharp eye on what was happening in the city.

Thus he thought it couldn't hurt to ask, "I understand there was a murder in the city the dark of Zawmathii?"

She looked at him suddenly, looked close. "I'm not sure if you're Centorin?" was her answer to that.

"I was born in Hdengragger Principate of the Ydlontrostl cities," he said, "but my father was Centorin and I do read and speak the language."

“The media is very sure a Centorin did it,” she said.

“They are susceptible to the Instinct,” Dyoniss said.

“Oh I know, I’ve met a few full-blooded born-under-a-white-sun Centorins and most of them are fine people, but you know how so many people are quick to jump to conclusions. The part that bothers me,” she said, “is the talk about antidotes to the Instinct. I’d hate to think of it, but it does explain how you can find the owner of the river’s largest freight fleet face down in the shallows with a knife in his kidney and his garden float abandoned at a private dock across the river.”

“I didn’t know who was murdered?” Dyoniss asked.

“Shingharm was his name. You see it on one out of every dozen sails moving cargo on all the open rivers of the basin.”

Dyoniss had heard of him, or at least his ships. He had seen those sails when he vacationed on the Ydlon above Ninavek. “Do his ships go as far as Hardensburg?”

“You’ve got more than a casual interest in this case?” she asked.

“So do you,” he answered.

“I’m a dock scheduler along West Wharf, I knew him personally as well as business.” Dyoniss found that after using snifter kits for a few years, he often didn’t need them any more, but he always kept one on him like the one he had in his wrist band now. Her pheromones told him her relationship with Shingharm was intimately personal.

“I’m an investigator, I believe the case I’m investigating may be related, tampering with shipping of items to Centorin exiles. I believe the antidote is being smuggled in. I can use

any info you have that might be relevant.”

“Well,” she said, “I’ll tell you what I know and you can throw out what’s not relevant. Shingharm was old fashioned. He’d built his company back before there were any motors on anything. In the 50’s if not the 40’s. His fleet is still under sail and they still underbid all the motorized competition, even the wind/solar hybrids. He crews his boats with vagabonds, there’s few creature comforts but he gives the crew all the yaag they can handle and still be functional, so they don’t mind the shabby old boats with porta-potties on the poop deck.

“Anyway, thru most of his life his main competition has been newer, faster boats with highly skilled crews. They charge a lot more, but because they are twice as fast, they think they are worth it. In this century their main competition in the west of the basin has been the big motor-trucks and motor roads that New West Trucking has been building.

“So the next thing is, the trucking companies build a lot of the roads on land that was always wild. They don’t build nice, they just plow the prairie with a huge machine and spread black tar-stone over it. Needless to say, many of the natives, herdsmen in particular, are not too keen on this idea and lonely areas of the truck routes have been damaged, resulting in transit times longer than by water.

“The day before Shingharm was killed, some official from the trucking company accused him of organizing the destruction of the truck road because they couldn’t stand the competition. In truth the competition was hurting Shingharm’s competitors with faster but more expensive

boats. He hadn't even paid attention to reports of road sabotage in the Hardensburg news.

"The week after the meeting with the guy from Hardensburg, Shingharm's body was found in a lon paddy less than six miles from the city, and his garden float was found abandoned at a private dock across the river. No one was home, no one knows how the boat got there, no one knows who was on it. When Shingharm left his home, he was alone on the garden float, on his way out after bighead. Anyone could have swum up and murdered him."

Dyoniss was using his own shorthand and abbreviations to get as much of that as he could onto the case sheet. He was going to need another sheet of paper before this was over, the back side was already half full and a lot of the notes on the front had details squeezed between the lines in the tiniest print he could draw. He didn't tell her that New West Trucking was their client or that his father was the one he suspected of smuggling in antidote. "This could turn out to be very helpful. It is all really deep background on the case that is paying for my trip, but I still think these murders could be related."

"That wasn't the only one?" she asked.

"The only one we know of in Vnassvuur, but there have been six in the Hardensburg area and two in the cities."

She looked like she was stricken, "It's like Centorin!" she said, "Where can we go?"

"The Temple is doing everything they can," he told her, "have you heard the sermon lately?"

"Actually I haven't."

He knew that some Elves considered the Temple to be a competitor to their own beliefs, while Dyoniss thought they should look at it as a supplement. He would refrain from proselytizing about how uniting in Karasis is independent of Mother Nature and just relay the information she missed. “They’re asking everyone to be vigilant for any rumors of an antidote to the Instinct. They are asking everyone transshipping whiskey to make sure it is really whiskey.”

“Good idea. If we see or hear something, who do we tell?”

“Any acolyte at any temple can direct you to the member who is taking that info.”

“Are you affiliated with them in any way?” she asked.

“As a believer, as we say, I am in Karasis.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that.”

Thru a long afterlunch he charged on across the basin. He did get to see a few patches of prairie again, but as seen from the tube routes, the basin looks like Total Freedom of the Endless Smallholds. It was actually four hundred miles from Vnassvuur where he reached the Ydlon River itself. The tube line had crossed tributaries hundreds of times, but the tube followed the curve of the bends in the river at full speed. Over two thousand miles upstream, the Ydlon is never less than two miles wide. Tide rules it’s current four times as much as slope. After less than an hour, the great river turned south but the tube kept on going straight, following the North Ydlon River toward Ragess and Hardensburg, now less than an hour away. Hardensburg was about twenty five miles from

the river at Ragess.

Before he left the river he was fed into the Hardensburg grid. Hardensburg is a Centorin city of nine million located at the entry to the Great Western Savannah. It differs from one on Centorin only in that yaag is available, the tubes are fifty one inches in diameter instead of a hundred fifty one and people have the Instinct. It is ALL electric lights, there are elevators in every building, even if they are only two floors. There are tube stations in many fashionable homes. Of course he had never been to Centorin to know for sure, but the images shown on screens of cities on Centorin planets looked no different from that of Hardensburg, even though the building material here was crystal instead of collapsed metal.

The station he was routed to was not what he expected. He thought Betten would have an office near the center of the city, probably in one of the gleaming towers, but probably not on a very high floor. Instead he only saw towers from a distance as the tube car sped by on a peripheral route. They were so different from the ones in the Ydlontrostl cities. These were all sheathed in glass, often gold colored, and undeniably birth new. The last great tower to be completed in the Ydlontrostl cities was nearly five centuries old, none were that old here. When his atlas was printed, Hardensburg had been twenty miles from Ragess, now neighborhoods on the tubes of Hardensburg were across the river from Ragess.

Ragess was a string of archwood groves, four to forty floors, with canals and a few lond ponds behind the sand bars. It was a hundred miles long along the river, but never more than ten blocks wide and seldom more than two. He had

flashed over it in seconds as he was shuttled into this circumferential route.

The station he exited was in a small retail center at least five miles from the nearest tower. Over half the signs, and all the biggest and brightest ones, were in Centish. There was a sound system in the plaza-like space where the station opened up. It was poor quality sound, and it was playing only syrupy advertizing jingles and announcements in Centish. Most of the shoppers were speaking Centish, but a lot of the service workers were speaking Common Tongue. He would have been at a serious disadvantage if he wasn't bilingual here.

The plaza was roofed over, but he didn't see any way to get to the upper floors. There were strange things for sale in the stores, lots of cosmetics and toiletries, uniform packages of processed foods that were meant to be loaded into autochefs, which were some sort of cooking robot. Centorin style clothing was on display, including the undergarments they were so fond of, along with elaborate nightwear and footwear. It was cold in here, more like Nightday than Afternoonday.

The pocket eye had detailed maps of Hardensburg, so he looked at where he had to go on foot. Betten's office was not on this market plaza, but outside on a nearby street. There was a wall of glass doors separating the plaza from the outdoors. It was the 24th hour of Morningday, so the weather outside was perfect, but still the Centorins used processed air and the doors opened and closed robotically as he passed. He had seen that on Centorin movies many times, but it was the first time he had encountered such a thing in real life. It was

much more disturbing in real life than on the screen.

The retail building was one sprawling floor. It was roofed over, blocking out the light of Kortrax, but the interior was lit with electric lights. All around it was not an outdoor plaza for small vendors, but a plaza for motor vehicles, covered in tarstone. The vehicles were huge, with uniformed pilots who stayed with them. He noticed most of the pilots were plains people and not Centorin. There was no real pedestrian path to the street with Betten's office, and he worried about walking among these big machines.

The street the office was on was built for motor vehicles, but it was lined with flimsy structures made of plastic coated pressboard, crap that would last only decades, like this was nothing but a temporary camp. He guessed that made sense because so many Centorins were fleeing the empire in this time of troubles and Hardensburg, in the back of the wild Ydlontrostl Basin on the little known and primitive planet Kassidor, was about as out-of-the-way as one could get. There were so many coming in that permanent housing couldn't be grown in time. These structures all had signs like they were commercial space, even the one that said Kyonmeere Investigations, in Centish, with the name also in Common Tongue under it and smaller.

The place was not what Kyonmeere thought he was paying for out here. What they paid for the space would have bought a nice place on a business street in central Hdengragger or a couple rooms in the tenth floor commercial space of the Tower of the Blue Kite. It looked deserted and he

found it was closed and locked. He was very glad he had a key. He was furious when it didn't work. He was glad that the lock wasn't as good as their Hardensburg office should have on it, he had an autokey that was able to open it in less than two minutes.

Inside was a shambles, but not bad enough to say it had been ransacked. It had just never been cleaned, organized or properly furnished. The notion that Betten was bringing clients to a place like this was disturbing. It was also disturbing to think that Kyonmeere had sent fifty coppers to secure space, this grubby little camp should have left him at least forty coppers change from that. He found himself guessing that Betten had pocketed those.

The space had a window overlooking the parking for three motor vehicles in front of the office. That window to the street opened into a small front room with a shabby standcushion, two office chairs and a low table. The table had some old magazines on it, a paper cup with what smelled like old rubber tea in it. Rubber tea had been introduced from Elven lands by the Centorins, even though they complained of it. There was a rack on the wall with a few agency brochures. The wall above the standcushion had a fading poster from the Etendur Lakes in a flimsy, cracked frame. The walls were plasterboard, there were some addresses on the Centorin data network written directly on the wall near one of the office chairs.

The other room had no window. It was just big enough for a desk and two office chairs, one on each side of the desk. There were some bookcases and one file rack and the better

of the office chairs behind the desk. The desk and shelves overflowed with junk, everything from binoculars to clothing, both plains and Centorin, piles of notes, many of them flopping over onto other things. There were two cameras, one of Centorin manufacture, some eykmelon rinds, a stuffed long-snouted purplestripe with a stubby rord pipe in his mouth, a few toy building blocks, the wheel from a hall cart. He wasn't going to get distracted with the cases those must have something to do with.

He went thru the office for evidence. He started with what's on top of the desk. Those would be the things he says he's working on. His case sheet and Gaichers. He didn't touch them, but got down at desktop level and checked the thickness of the dust. There was quite a bit more on those case sheets than there was in the center of the desktop, so neither one was really worked on lately.

There were sheets from a few more recent cases on the top layer of the desktop also, under them were sheets from earlier cases. Betten's filing system seemed to be derived from stratification theory. The cubbyholes in the desk held such things as a few more eykmelons, an autokey, a whole bunch of cheap clothing for disguises, a longer telescope, a bunch of data cubes, a stack of spare note paper, a few spare pens, a hole punch, a pair of shabby sandals and more junk of that kind as far back as he cared to dig. He pursued one cubbyhole to the back and found such things as a gardening trowel and a hammer.

The file rack held the agency info packet that they left with him when he was hired, the bare minimum business

papers, and lots of empty, unused folders and clips.

So the only paper was that on the desktop and that in the bookcase. He set to work on the details, knowing it was going to cut into noonmeal. There was no way he could go thru much of it and not let Betten know he had looked thru it. He had every right to do so, as Kyonmeere's representative, but it might be to his advantage if Betten was not aware that he had been thru the office.

So instead he tried to think of where in this mess Betten would put the paperwork that was really important to him. Probably in his shoulder pocket, but there must be something that he cared about that was left behind at the office. He had something here he wanted to hide enough to change the locks on the door and not update the home office about it.

He checked the depth of the dust in the cubbyholes, just behind the first layer of items. That technique clearly indicated that the one just to the right of center was used more often, so he dug that out. The first thing he came to was a small stash of rord. He wasn't going to worry about that, it explained the pipe in the stuffed purpletail's mouth. Then there was a collection of fishing lures, all beat up and dusty, but the dust was disturbed. Behind that was a folder rolled up.

In it was a couple photos of another big plastiboard shack out on the edge of the prairie. It was surrounded by an ugly nylon mesh fence filled with jagged crystal shards. There were several large motor vehicles near it, much bigger than the ones he had seen around the indoor market plaza. The shack was quite large, and there were a couple uniformed men marching around it.

Next there was a picture of a large packing crate full of cases, like road cases for a hand-held yandrille. One was opened and there was no yandrille in it but a very potent looking blaster, a roll of solar charge strip, a diagnostic box and tool kit. The picture certainly implied a large shipment of blasters.

At least Betten wrote all his notes in Common Tongue, but his penmanship was atrocious and his abbreviations so obscure that Dyoniss had a hard time with it. It looked like the first picture was a blaster factory and the other was a case of the end product. It looked like he was saying they were manufacturing ten cases a week.

There was something else that was distressing, his contact on that investigation was the Yellgnoskn anti-theft department. That meant Betten was drawing salary from more than one company. No doubt he had also drawn an office investment from more than one company.

On the one hand, he had discovered something very important. If both cases were with the Kyonmeere agency, Dyoniss would be the first to say that a blaster factory was much more important to investigate than a missing furball coil, even if antidote for the Instinct had been substituted for it. Of course the two went together didn't they? The antidote and the blasters. One does almost no good without the other.

He couldn't prove that the missing coil was involved in the smuggling of antidote, though he felt it was. He was pretty sure the smuggling of antidote was involved with the blaster factory. He didn't understand why Yellgnoskn would be involved, unless their anti-theft department was afraid they

would have to defend themselves against thieves with blasters.

He wondered how much the Temple knew in this area? Centorins were clearly dominant in this area, but they were not the majority. They employed lots of locals as serving people, people who's ancestors had lived here for a hundred centuries or more. They would not give up the Temple, there had to be ministries, there had to be neighborhoods of people who served the servants, there would be meeting rooms in there. He would be glad to share what he knew with them.

There were coordinates on the picture of the factory, his pocket-eye brought up an aerial view. The big temporary building showed clearly. It was about seventeen miles out of Hardensburg center on a big motorway, one of the mammoth farm roads built by New West Trucking, the company paying his bills. There would be a footpath across the prairie beside it he was sure, neither man nor keda was comfortable walking the tar stone brought from one of the moons of Cynd. He would have to invest a whole day getting out there on foot, and he wasn't really great on a saddle keda.

It might be more profitable to pay a courtesy visit to the head of New West Trucking, just to show his money hard at work. Thanks to Ragnar, he knew where to find him. That was a hike he could make, and near Twentifirst Way, which was a pedestrian friendly street that also had streetcars.

"I hope you were sent by the home office," someone said from behind him.

"Which one?" Dyoniss asked, looking up to see Betten

facing him thru the door.

15. At Company Headquarters

Kessil knew Tlasaiek wasn't that much of a tunnel compared to Cys Ungor, being only seventy something feet wide, a hundred and five high, and one half mile in length, in a cut that is less than three miles long, but it was still a thrill to go flying thru it at a hundred miles per hour.

She began to slow soon after getting thru it, the first station in central Kyoith wasn't far from the tunnel. The building the headquarters was in had a bridge that crossed the canal on the fifth floor, only four half-flights up from the tube station. There was bright sunshine up here and she had no shades with her, there were only vines on the rails and a few on the lampposts for shade.

The canal was pretty wide here, and there were some you-pedal tour boats in it. This area was restored very close to it's ancient size and shape, except for the giant crystal buildings like this and the bunch down in Kyoith-reh, which began only a mile from here. This great tower was actually closer to the ruins of ancient Kyoith, but that was a third of a mile from here toward modern Kyoith-reh. Ancient Kyoith was less than a quarter mile square, but it had been the capital of a powerful principate a hundred centuries ago.

The bridge lead to a great portal in the tower, three more stories tall with the names of the commercial organizations within carved above it. Mbeshna was almost fine print from this distance, but it was there, fourteenth floor. She had her company pin for the elevator, she was glad to see they had

thought to authorize her.

The door was guarded by an imposing man with the thickest neck and shoulders she had ever seen, and a golden Nymph who looked to be from Valindor in the Energy Age. Her hair shimmered almost enough to make Kessil wish for shades again. She was the one who asked, “Can we help you?”

“An appointment with Eleeson, I’m Kessil of the Hdengragger Four office.” She held up her pin, the girl looked at a list and didn’t ask to read it. “I’ll take you to his waiting room,” she said, and got up to lead her. It was two more floors up an interior stairway. No doubt the living space on the outside of this tower was taken up with people with a career within three or four floors of home, especially if they didn’t get free elevator. Those that did usually took a home another twenty floors up where they were bigger and there was no commercial space in the center of the building.

The waiting room wasn’t as lavish as she expected, but the standcushions were comfortable and clean. The room could hold a dozen, but she was the only one here apart from the girl who presided over the room. She was a pleasant enough in appearance, but no more so than Kessil, except for noticeably larger tits. She looked at a neat desk calender and greeted her, “Kessil, yes? I’m Lizabeth.”

“A pleasure, Lizabeth,” Kessil said.

“Eleeson is still at the Afternoonday finance meeting. It’s going really late today.”

“I’m not surprised,” Kessil said.

“So you’ve heard?”

“If you mean that witch of Old Eleven and the charge in the media that she’s refusing to let her latest liaison go?” After her picture in the media, men had come to the base of the tower to be winched up in the supply bucket to bed her. Yesterday that stopped and the charge was that she had found the one she wanted and was keeping him there against his will. Customers were either complaining or just dropping them. Distracted by her love interest, the witch hadn’t been doing the job well and power output from Old Eleven was down twenty eight percent.

“It’s such a media circus,” Lizabeth said.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Kessil said, “Ancient windwheel, ancient witch, the claim by the last guy that he was held against his will, a whole company held hostage, it’s gripping drama.”

“Why did it have to happen to us?”

“Because we’re the ones with the most ancient windwheels in the whole Ydlontrostl Cities area.” It had been her belief that, “We should invest in new machinery, or at least get some of the ruined machines working again, for backup if nothing else.”

“You’re not the only one with that argument, but if you’re here with that argument, you shouldn’t waste your time unless you also come with a source of funding. You might have a better time convincing them to put in a fusion plant.”

“No, I don’t presume to give direction to the company officers, I’m here about the gasket failures that have been happening at package sorter installations.”

“Yeah, there’s been a lot of talk about that. Everyone is

convinced it can't be a co-incidence any more, but no one can figure out what being attached to a package sorter would have to do with it. A couple of the engineering managers got into quite an argument about backpressure waves and tuned cavities."

"Sounds like they've got some interesting theories," Kessil said. "I would have loved to have been here for that argument."

"Yeah, and they think you're a hero for getting us that gasket so if they had known you wanted to be here they might have tubed you in last Afternoonday."

Kessil would not have come last Afternoonday, but she didn't want to get into that, she had a feeling the name Dyoniss would be in more places in Mbeshna than hers was by the end of the day if she mentioned it. She would talk about the gasket instead, "Oh? We didn't get any others?"

"Nope," Lizabeth said. "The other four wound up in Yellgnoskn's labs before we got a chance to look at them in ours."

"Is that right?" Kessil asked. "We had the one from the needleboat courier shop didn't we?"

"That field worker was so disorganized he didn't get the notes to us til much later, and he tossed the blown gasket in the trash when he changed it."

"So Tolleck doesn't pay any attention to field alerts?"

"I don't think he ever opened his messages," Lizabeth said.

"I trust he's off contract?"

"For sure," Lizabeth nodded, then said, "he was found drowned in the canal last Nightday."

Cold hit her. She hardly knew him, but knew he had always had problems with booze, it could have been fear of losing his job that caused him to get so drunk he fell in the canal. She didn't like him short changing his job, but she didn't want that for him either.

Before Kessil could process that a tall, big-headed man with long arms and short, sleek hair entered the room. "Kessil, for fourteenth hour," Lizabeth introduced her. This must be Eleeson, Mbeshna's purchasing adviser.

"Sorry I'm running late, that damn witch is driving us nuts. I have some messaging to do, so if you can give me another ten minutes we could have our meeting over lunch?" he asked Kessil.

"At your convenience," she said.

"Just a few minutes," he said with a bow of his head, and went to his inner office.

"Lunch," Lizabeth said once he was behind the door, not giving her a chance to ask anything more about Tolleck. "I'm going to have to turn a couple gladhandlers away, not that I mind doing that."

"So meeting thru lunch is important?" Kessil asked.

"Sure."

"Let me ask you something," she waited til she was sure she had Lizabeth's attention because it was important she do the right thing here, "will he expect an offer?"

"He won't be vindictive if he doesn't get one, but if he acts at all attracted, he'd probably appreciate one. You're a nice sturdy woman, so he'll certainly be attracted to you. His

housemates are both away for weeks to the Etendur Lakes, and he's too busy to go out."

Kessil wondered what she meant by the adjective 'sturdy' since no one had ever used that on her before. 'Ordinary' was how she described herself. "My most significant one is away for a couple weeks or more also," Kessil said, hoping she wasn't jinxing things by calling him 'most significant,' "so I'll keep my eyes open for any hints. What does he like?"

"Nothing too kinky, he'll take top or bottom. He's not long enough to come from behind, for me anyway, but face to face he's fine. He can take enough time so I always get off."

"So you have experience?"

"Oh yeah, sometimes when he's here around the clock he has a little pad on the forty third that he uses. Now and then we'll go up there for a break."

"Sounds like fun, I just have to use my office chair if I ever get a chance for an encounter at work."

"Yeah. How often does that happen?"

"Every two to four years," Kessil answered. "I could make it more, but I'm not pushy. I'm more likely to invite those who look like they need it more instead of the guys who are so sexy that they have to keep saying 'no' all day long to get anything done."

"Oh I know, there was a guy like that here yesterday. I had to ask him how he dealt..."

Such gossip went on for a lot longer than ten minutes before Eleeson was done with his messaging. She never found out more about how Tolleck drowned because Lizabeth

knew no more than that. It sounded like Eleeson had a voice channel for awhile, or maybe an intercom, because he was talking to someone. She and Lizabeth had quite a chat, comparing several large clubs in Kyoith-reh to the Blue Kite. They made tentative plans for Kessil to sleep over and accompany her to one or more of them this Morningday evening. Unless she made other plans over lunch, Lizabeth kept reminding her.

“Am I keeping you from anything?” Kessil asked after most of an hour had gone by and all Lizabeth had done was answer three messages and route seven more.

“You haven’t slowed me down at all. You understand when a message comes in I have to route it but I’m still listening.”

“I’ve got to carry this,” she held up the pocket eye, “but I only have to respond to my management, not the general public.”

“So you’re on contract right? This is career time?” Lizabeth asked.

“Yeah. Normally I’d be at the regional meeting til about now. But there’s a certain amount of stuff in my job that has to get done, so a lot of this trip will really wind up as extra hours somewhere else.”

“That stinks,” she said.

“What stinks?” Eleeson asked, finally emerging from the inner office.

“That even if I’m here as career time, there is just as much work that I have to do back in Hdengragger. It’s the same when I get called to a site.”

“No doubt you wouldn’t want my schedule,” he said, “If I find half a day most weeks it’s good. If I’m on vacation I may have to do half a day every day on the pocket eye.”

“I think we both like feeling needed,” she said.

He nodded, but didn’t say anything about that, he knew how talk of company needs went when engineers were involved. “We’ll be at Hyverstrol’s,” he told Lizabeth, then turned to Kessil, “if that’s all right with you?”

“As far as I know,” Kessil said. “It’s been so long since I was in Kyoith that I don’t think it was even there at the time.”

“He’s been there nearly a century.” He offered his elbow, she was glad to take it.

His street wrap was voluminous and light, so that even with its billowy sleeves, he should be able to let her have her fun and get a little of his own. “Shows you how often I get down this way.”

It was two floors to the nearest elevator landing, the elevators in this building were not coin-op only, they also had pin sockets and she was authorized to use it for the elevator also today, though it was Eleeson that got it.

“So why did you want to see me?” he asked once they were in that elevator.

“Because I’m concerned about the coincidences with the gasket failures we’re experiencing.”

“They’re all Yellgnoskn rings, but then most of our rings are.”

“They are all the same connector assembly, the one with the data pin included.” She had the specific part ID for it.

“I’d have to look it up, but I believe you. You think there

could be some kind of defect in that?”

The elevator stopped, but was not down to street level, it must have gotten delayed by the previous car. “That is one more thing that all the failures have in common.”

“I know we’ve ruled out your maintenance equipment as one of the things they have in common.”

“One of them could have been due to my equipment, but the old timer who was using it never brought it in.”

“The second incident,” Eleeson said. He might have been a member of the committee that ended that field worker’s contract.

The elevator had resumed its journey, and they proceeded smoothly to street level. The street was three stories below the bridge that she came in on. It was the second floor above the quays of the canal here along the eastern end of the main street of Kyoih-reh. It was only a block down to Hyverstrol’s, he prepared her for what she would see.

The walkway went either inland around his tables, or down to dock level and the freight traffic. They continued straight and went in. A hostess asked them a few questions about where they would like to be seated including how sexually decorous they would like. Kessil answered, “Friendly business meeting,” she watched his face, added, “or less.”

“Follow me,” she said, and provided all the scenery she could as they did. Kessil wished she was that rounded. She noticed Eleeson was following her lead closely. She put them on the dock side, overlooking it from the floor above. It wasn’t beauty, but it was activity. It was light cargo on roller

racks, mainly bales of thesh or rinko. One ship in view had heavy tackle off-loading heavy crates, one had lines of people rolling urns. It wasn't a smelly cattle yard like you find along the river. The table girl, who obviously knew Eleeson much better than she did, announced that, "There's a RuneMarth coming up in just a few minutes with two portions not spoken for, shall I run down and sign you up?"

"Yes, do that," Eleeson said, "and bring back two house cups of White Dawn."

"What is RuneMarth?" Kessil asked. If it was tongue, she wondered if she was going to be able to keep up. In Hdengragger she could usually keep up with whatever sex and drink was required in the average business setting, but Kyoith is known as the raunchiest principate in some circles.

"It is a relative of the klizhorn, steamed til flaky, with a thesh and spice stuffing. Hyverstrol adds a few finely chopped cottleshells or shredded theiropsoid to the stuffing if he has it."

"Sounds pretty rich for lunch." Kessil had to admit that ordering for her without consulting her hadn't been the best way to start off with her. Yes he was an upper executive in the company and she was a glorified field engineer, but she was not a fan of the 'dominant male' schtick. But if she wanted those connectors raked over the way the gaskets had been, she was going to have to swallow some silly pride and at least try to pretend she was impressed.

"A big leisurely lunch and light supper is healthier," he said.

"Yes, that's true, save me a couple pennies."

“You have to make a habit of it.”

“I never seem to have time for eating habits,” she said, “I’m more of an opportunistic feeder, like right now.”

He chuckled a little. They watched the bustle of the waterfront for a couple minutes. “Thanks to you we finally have a ring gasket to examine in our labs,”

“We should swap out the whole connector housing in the same installation and bring that back to the lab and try to find something in it. It might be nothing, but I think it’s worth doing.”

“It’s not a trivial job to swap that housing out,” he said. “I was the one who found that part you know.”

“That’s part of the reason I’ve come to you,” she said. “You have an interest in it already. I think it would be good for you to appear pro-active on this.”

He chuckled again. “You’re a surprisingly wise woman,” he said.

At least he didn’t call her a wiseass. “Thanks, I’m only trying to help.”

Their lunch came. She didn’t have to fake her praise for the RuneMarth, it was awesome. The yaag looked very light, but it kicked like a gold. Morningday lunch is usually her favorite part of the week. It hasn’t gotten hot yet, duskmeal is the next time it will be this cool. She felt more energetic and liked bouncier music at this time of the week. Like most people, Noonsleep was usually her poorest sleep of the week. But Morningday lunch wasn’t a part of the week she usually got stoned for.

That had to be the reason she asked him if he had time to stop in a room on the way to the office before she actually thought about it. She knew it wasn't real attraction, he was too slick for her taste. Not only that but she'd had enough with Dyoniss to last her a week and she wouldn't be able to keep her mind on Eleeson during the encounter. As soon as she said it she wished she hadn't, but the thought of going back to headquarters in this condition scared her.

"Now that's a very frightening question my dear," he said. "When you are here presenting a case. I might think you are very skilled and hoping to influence me in your case."

She could say nothing but the truth. "I'm sure I asked you more because of the yaag. I just thought it might be something to do for an hour or so until I'm straight enough to go back to the office." He looked at her like that was a soap opera line. "What? You've never met such a lightweight before?" she asked.

"You should have told me."

"Yeah, well, I've been known to go a whole week on one cup of yellow."

He looked at her like he'd never been to that universe, not even in a novel. If a couple cups of this was what he did for lunch, he might not have experienced her universe. Dyoniss didn't seem to be a big drinker either, but he was a regular at Zestin's. Eleeson might do as much as Yashmi, but Yashmi was worried about her consumption, while Eleeson didn't seem to notice his.

"In that case," he said, "I'd be glad to show you a nice little spot we could stop on the way back to the office."

It was called ‘Up on the roof’ and it was on the seventh floor in a big hangleaf right beside the tower. They had to walk up. It was outdoors among roof fronds and flowers. There were several beds along the hall, each with their own door. She was a little bothered by the fact that they were actually on the roof and someone well up in the great tower the office was in could look straight down and see over those roof fronds. They would have to have a telescope to see it was anything more than two people getting it on. There were many beds, there had to be a prettier, and/or kinkier couple than them in one of them. Still, voyeurs and their telescopes would certainly be drawn to this building.

While the public aspect had added to the excitement with Dyoniss, it detracted from the encounter with Eleeson. Maybe she thought about the media behind those telescopes, an expose on what the people who are supposed to be dealing with The Witch of Old Eleven are doing on their way back from lunch when they’re too stoned to go back to the office.

Other than that, it was a friendly little boink. A little short on foreplay but then Dyoniss was so good at that. He said he had to make up for her lack of size by spending more time fondling her. The last time he said that was Dawnsleep, when she realized she had fallen in love with him already. She remembered his reason for not doing Korshii, because his mind was on her. She had just done Eleeson while her mind was on Dyoniss. But she knew she wasn’t going to see Dyoniss very soon. To replace an agent could take a year or two. His boss might want him to head the Hardensburg office.

Would she chase Dyoniss to Hardensburg after two centuries with Mbeshna? She hoped she could be rational in such a decision if it came to that.

Eleeson made up some poetry for her to describe how much he had enjoyed himself, she tried to be appreciative but at one point she was ready to say ‘it’s just a fuck, get over it,’ because he got so flowery. She hoped she was able to act sufficiently appreciative of the encounter so as to avoid hurting her case.

Once they were out of there and back into the elevator, she thought she was through most of the effects of that cup. “Sorry I’m a lightweight,” she said.

“It was most enjoyable, you’ll have me singing thru the whole afternoon.”

“Enough to get that connector pulled?”

“I admire your dedication, I think I was right, you are very skilled and hoped to influence my decision.”

She wanted to say, ‘If you call that ‘very skilled’ you never watched a porno movie,’ but refrained. “I just went with whatever you brought out in me,” she said.

He laughed.

“No really, I don’t want you to think I used the situation for sexual advantage, nor was I trying to take advantage of you.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her, let go and said, “Stop worrying, and thank you. Please accept my thanks as me to you, man to woman for a rewarding encounter with no connection to who we are in this company.”

“And I thank you likewise, thank you, it was nice.” She

knew her smile was genuine at last.

When they got back to his office, before he even sat down, he went to a back shelf. “You’re talking about these fittings,” he said, and showed her a brochure from Jahnsn Plumbing. It was extremely glossy and very well printed but there were several misspellings and the characters were blocky and crudely formed, as if sketched by rusty robots. She saw the fitting in question and several others, she was glad none of the others were familiar. “They have found a way to crack the Kassidorian market by developing a metal everyone thinks is plastic.”

“Why would they...”

“It is so much cheaper for them, they don’t know how to work with biochemicals. It’s a high-silicon, aluminum-magnesium alloy. It isn’t just how much more metal there is on the surface of the planet Centorin, it’s all the metal out in space besides.”

“O.K. So what you’re telling me is these fittings are actually made on Centorin?”

“Actually no, they are made by Centorin robots in the vicinity of Cynd and dropped to a receiving point in the westernmost Lost Valley, where they are retrieved by a company out of Hardensburg. We buy from them.”

“A company from Hardensburg but the fittings are made in outer space by robots.”

“As I understand it,” Eleeson said.

Lizhine entered from the other door. “The man from Larsinektide is here and Adroitn wants a reply to his

message.”

“Yeah I know he does, but I’m waiting til the detective reports to me. Don’t tell him that, just tell him I’ll get to him soon.”

“What about Larsinektide’s guy?”

“He won’t take long,” he turned to Kessil, “would you mind waiting a few minutes?”

“No,” what else could she say. If this took the whole day, what of it?

“Send him in on your way out.”

Kessil followed Lizhine into the waiting room. She very warmly invited the waiting man to go in. He thanked her with even more warmth but went in before he got hard. When the door closed Kessil said, “You’d get a ‘yes’ from him.”

“If I ask,” she said, no doubt used to getting guys to say ‘yes.’ “but how was it?” she asked.

It took more time than the encounter had taken to satisfy Lizhine’s curiosity. There was plenty of time for them to compare notes because it was most of an hour before the man was out and Kessil went back in. Lizhine stopped him at least long enough to let Kessil get the door closed.

“Where were we?” he asked.

“We have two things that line up in this, one; package sorter, two; a fitting from that company with the space robots. I think there is something in those fittings and we should have them looked at in the lab. Lets take one from a machine that had a gasket failure and go over it with the electron microscope if we have to.”

“That’s a lot of expense,” Eleeson said.

“That’s why I asked for this appointment. I need someone in your position to OK the use of the lab and Tuuklon’s time. I think you are able to understand the importance of what I’m saying. We have many of those fittings in service, but the gaskets on only the package sorters are failing. The gaskets on older fittings are not failing. So that’s why I’m interested in looking at those fittings,” she explained.

Eleeson stared at the wall a few seconds, then got up, took the brochure from her hand and said only, “Come with me.”

They climbed two more flights of stairs. There was the smell of chemicals up here, even the smell of large amounts of electricity. She could hear bubbling, motors whirring and other sounds she could not even name from behind the walls.

The man they met was in a low-ceilinged room with storage underneath a raised floor. He could barely stand up in there. He was even taller than Dyoniss, all of six feet, maybe more. But he wasn’t Centorin, he looked to be half Plainsman, half Troll, with a huge head made bigger by a ball of curls inches deep that brushed the middle of the ceiling.

Eleeson made introductions.

“Kessil,” Tuuklon rumbled, “what a delight to meet you in person, you’re downright cute as well as perceptive and sassy.”

They had sent occasional messages back and forth in the last few decades, but the last time she had been to headquarters, she had not been to the labs and he had not been the manager. “Right,” she said, “those messages aren’t really written by a robot like you thought they were.”

“I figured you thought mine were from a robot,” Tuuklon said.

“You don’t look like your messages,” Kessil told him, “I figured you for five four and one oh nine.” She didn’t talk about the fantasy of picking him up in her arms. She sure couldn’t, he wasn’t just tall, it wasn’t all leg like a Centorin, if anything, his legs were no longer than hers. He was all body, mostly shoulder and upper body but with a generous gut also. He had such a big head she could probably fit her head in his mouth.

“You don’t look like your messages either,” he said, “I pictured a pixie, real sleek with long eyelashes and a slinky outer layer.”

“So we each have some imagination, sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m not disappointed. If it weren’t for your eyes I’d say your ancestors rode the Mid Basin Plains since the canal was young.”

“The eyes are from a Elvish man who came down the river in the 114th and swept my great grandmother away.” They had actually been stuck on a sandbar in the Ydlon during a spring. Her savior had a raft that lifted their wagons off, one at a time, and swung them to the far side of the river. A full third of the tribe was stuck on the far shore and didn’t get back to the home plains til the next year. She would save that story for Dyoniss however.

“When did your people come to the city?” he asked.

“I moved to Vnassvuur in the 120th, and to Hdengragger in the 121th. My mom is still out there.”

“Where?” he asked.

“The Mid Basin Plains.”

“So you grew up out there?” he asked.

“Rode bareback since I was a toddler, faced a pack of scrub hakens in the open with nothing but a knife.”

“Why’d you come to the cities?”

“Those were a couple of the reasons,” Kessil said, “but Eleeson is going to call for a round of cups and a musician if we do any more chatting.” Eleeson gave her a quick smile. “I want to look into that fitting, the one with the data pin in the same housing with the pressure line.”

“We’ve gone over them before, but not concentrating on gasket failure.”

“Mysrath of Yellgnoskn thinks that a microscopic bomb was injected into the ring,” she told him, guessing that he didn’t remember her message. “He thinks he has detected an entry point.” There was a blackboard handy so she quickly sketched the gasket ring and the point of entry Mysrath had suggested. “I think we should get this fitting off of at least one of the machines that failed and see if there is anything suspicious about it.”

“If this has happened on more than one machine,” he said, “we can take a look at any fitting, we have some in the lab we can look at right now. Too bad we don’t know how the gasket was oriented at the failure.”

“We do,” she said, “technician Haipon sketched it in his notes, I took a picture of it.” She got out her pocket eye, found the picture and transmitted it to one of the flat screens Tuuklon had on his table.

“Great,” he said, “that really narrows down the area we

can concentrate on.”

He went to his intercom, selected the parts crib, got a clerk, “Could someone please bring a 140004540034 up to microscopy lab B?”

“First thing, I’ve got two runners on seats right now.” They heard him start to call a name as Tuuklon cut the intercom.

Tuuklon loomed up over his desk again, “Shall we?” he waved toward the door.

“Before we go,” Eleeson said, not getting up from his seat. “We need to discuss budgets and priorities. Three man days is the most we can spare without results.”

“I think we can verify this in one,” Tuuklon said. “The Khyonidome is a seventh level customer, I understand that.” That was a separate case where the customer had made modifications to the software in the power distribution of their animatronics that they couldn’t seem to untangle. Half the club was out of service until it was fixed.

“This is more important than that, these fittings have been going in almost all quarter inch installations for the better part of two centuries now. If there is a defect in them that is causing this, we might want to be proactive in getting them out of there. I would give it a level two priority until the three man days, then we’ll re-assess.”

“Sounds good sir.”

“I’ll let you scientists go down to the microscopy lab, I’m going up to see that our payments to Jahnsn are suspended until this investigation is over.”

They all got up once again and filed out to the stairway.

“Thank you Kessil for noticing this and bringing it to our attention,” Eleeson said as they parted on the stairs. To both of them he said, “May you learn something that explains these failures.”

16. The Hardensburg Operation

“What do you mean which home office?” Betten asked.

“It seems you’ve been busy working for Yellgnoskn,” Dyoniss replied.

“I’ve been busy *because of* Yellgnoskn,” he said.

Dyoniss held up the papers he had not yet returned to their place in the cubbyhole. “I understand the importance of what you were investigating here, but I see the order was placed by the Yellgnoskn anti-thievery department.”

“Scary huh? But if you notice, that was who placed the order for that crate of blasters, not the order for this investigation.”

Dyoniss looked at the note again. The writing was almost illegible, the only word he could really read of it was ‘workorder’ but it could say ‘of target’ in what looked like an ingelethor stepped in some ink and tried to wipe it off on the paper. “You haven’t answered a message in two weeks.”

“Would you put that in an eyemessage?” he pointed at the picture of the blaster factory.

He had a point, if someone had his address and password, they could look in his output and see whatever he sent. He wasn’t willing to trust Betten with keeping his address and password secure. “You could have just sent a message that you needed a visit.”

“Even that gives too much away. I hope you came here under disguise, unless you really are Kyonmeere in disguise. I know we haven’t seen each other in a century, but you sure

don't look like him."

"Dyoniss, I sit to the left of Kyonmeere in the tower. I am the Centorin specialist of the agency."

"Then you should be busy because this is going to put blasters all over the place." He reached into the dunes of paper and folders on his desk, unerringly, to a battered, brownish-purple folder with only a few sheets in it. "I looked into them when this all started. Yellgnoskn is nothing, owns a two-bit gasket factory in Boomig of the Ydlontrostl Cities, fifty hundred thousand iron a year gross, fifteen men in anti-thievery, only one warehouse with round-the clock. What do they want with a case of blasters?"

"I have no idea, but I know of the company, I've met a women who's company buys their gaskets. They have been having trouble with their parts." Once again, Dyoniss would appear to take him at face value, but reserve final judgment until he knew more.

"Can we talk here?" Dyoniss asked.

"You tell me. Centorins have devices we can't see with the naked eye."

"Where's your phosphor disk?" Dyoniss asked.

"They're wise to that, they use pocket eye frequencies in their bugs now."

"That was what the disk was originally for," Dyoniss said. It picked up anything too long in wavelength for the human eye and changed color when it picked something up. It's color was an indication of the wavelength with long wave radio a deep red and near infrared a royal blue.

He had to let Betten get behind the desk. He fished in two

of the dustiest cubbies before finding it. “I wish I’d thought of this,” he said as he handed it over. Dyoniss wished he did too.

Dyoniss went over all the walls with it. The bug’s transmissions would be aimed at the motionless stars, so he had to only go over the top of things. He found one on the door frame between the two rooms of the office. It was nanotechnology, the disk shown brightly where it was, but the naked eye could see nothing there. Nonetheless, he rapped it with the hammer and it ceased transmitting. He was even more careful after that, but found no more.

“Do you have a pocket eye?” Dyoniss asked.

“Not here,” he said.

“Good, mine is shaded.” He passed the phosphor disk over it and showed that there was no transmission coming out of it. They sat across the desk, Betten was behind it now, but Dyoniss refused to acknowledge that as a position of power. “So who are you working for?” Dyoniss asked him.

“First and foremost, Karasis,” Betten said, but Dyoniss’ snifter said not to trust him. “It is something the Centorins don’t know and don’t care to know. For them it is all individual power, power they waste in their motor vehicles but power they worship in no more potent way than the blaster.”

“So why do they still have so much electronics around?” Dyoniss asked, “because the blaster is primarily a weapon against electronics.”

“All Centorin electronics is hardened now, only our photovoltaics are still vulnerable,” Betten said.

“Yeah, but you have to hit the chip itself.

“Blasters are really only used against people today.”

“Just like in the movies,” Dyoniss muttered. As much as he studied Centorins from a distance, these were his first few hours in a Centorin dominated area. And not entirely dominated, the Instinct was mostly holding, and Common Tongue was still heard in the background everywhere you went. On a real Centorin planet Common Tongue is extremely rare.

Dyoniss did give him a thorough grilling for company policy. They had to discuss where the money had gone, prices were extremely high here was the excuse. There were no records he could look thru to prove one thing or another. Dyoniss had to explain that that was a problem. He had to explain that he was authorized to hire a new agent to represent them in Hardensburg before Betten took it seriously enough.

He had to make him take down a list of minimum record keeping. He imposed a weekly report form that he would have to fill in using his pocket eye. He listened when Betten said he needed regular personal contact, preferably from Kyonmeere himself. Betten pleaded for the three aluminums he said it would take to buy decent office space in the center of town. Dyoniss had to explain how hard it was to keep from laughing. That was more than the apartment in the Tower of the Blue Kite that the three window offices had been made from.

They went to noonmeal after that, at a noisy and brightly-lit place called a ‘steak house’ back in the single-floor indoor

shopping area. It was getting even colder in here as noon approached. The place had a cafeteria line and served tough and gristly mrang steaks undercooked on charcoal with a salad buffet for soom. Centorins have no natural instinct for soom and often fall to malnutrition even though they are fat. They seemed to relish the tough meat and sawed at it with serrated blades and lathered it with sauces with big logos on the bottle. He lifted one of the bottles and smelled it, it smelled like composted leather, so he put the cap back on and left it there.

“You know they don’t wash the bottle and refill it,” Betten said, “they burn off the labels, smash the bottle and salvage about eighty percent of the glass to use in new bottles.”

Dyoniss felt a hole in his guts, tried not to believe him, but feared it was true. That was because the labels were glued-on paper rather than photographs cast into the glass of the bottle, the standard technology on this primitive and backward planet since the 50th century. Here bottles are used thousands of times over in their life, sold and resold many times. “We should have gone to a local place.”

“I wanted you to see what is happening,” Betten said. “I know you know Centish, you’re probably more fluent than I am, and I can get by pretty well, but you haven’t been here.”

“You’re right, this is my first time here.” Not that there aren’t neighborhoods in Hdengragger with a high concentration of Centorins, but the most that they’ve brought of Centorin culture is a few signs in Centish and a plank-up house, or just some white paint and plastiboard in a ruin

somewhere. You can get a steak there, but it'll be way better than this but smaller, and probably have an anosec and a crusty with it. The anosec jello itself was soom, all one needed in a day.

“Here the land looks like the Ydlontrostl Basin,” Betten said, “but they’ve brought almost all of Centorin culture here. The only thing that separates Hardensburg from Stebbensville is the vegetation and the Instinct.”

Dyoniss wasn’t sure how much he should tell him, especially here, but it was so noisy they could hardly hear each other, so unless there was a bug following them, no one else was going to hear. “So no doubt it’s occurred to you that having all these blasters is useless as long as the Instinct is in the air?”

“THAT’s why I was really hoping Kyonmere would come out.”

“Coming out here has interfered with my investigation of just that,” Dyoniss said.

“Of what?”

“Smuggling the antidote.”

“Then you should be here,” Betten said, “because that antidote is here.”

“I should be talking to the people at the needleboat courier office where antidote may have been picked up, not out here trying to find out what happened to our man in Hardensburg.”

“Six people have died out here under suspicious circumstances in the past year.”

“I’ve heard,” Dyoniss said, “and two have died in the

cities and one in Vnassvuur, the owner of a shipping company that competed with New West Trucking.”

“How ironic,” Betten said.

“That they hired us.”

“That, and there are probably fourteen employees in this room right now.”

Dyoniss couldn’t help looking around. He only saw two in company uniform, but most would be here when off duty, not on. This would be lunch for the people in uniform. They both looked like warehousemen, pullers and shovers. They looked like they had been sweating in a dirty environment.

“So what do you know about the antidote?” Dyoniss asked him. He had just put a chunk of steak in his mouth so he would have plenty of time to consider his answer. Dyoniss tried to give him a stare that would make him think he could read every nuance, while he was outwardly trying to appear warm.

“I’ve sat near guys in here that grumble about it, they don’t guess I know Centish so they go ahead and gab when they think there’s no one around but natives.”

“What do they say?”

“One of the bosses slapped him around, his wife was threatened, things like that. One talked about leaving, talked about a town fifteen hundred miles southwest. He said this was the Navorkensville of Kassidor and that was the Kex.”

It couldn’t be Kln, that was over two thousand miles south and it was more like the Ydlontrostl cities than Hardensburg, Kex looked more like Bordzvek, actually just upper Bordzvek, and Bordzvek was almost eight thousand miles as

a spacecraft flies.

If Dyoniss ever got to the Yakhana, it would be a shame not to see Kex, or at least a peek at it. It was so close in time from there, but so distant in cost, fourteen aluminums and something was the going rate. He understood something of what that Centorin meant by saying this was the Navorkensville of the planet. Of course he hadn't seen much of any of the great cities of this planet except maybe the Yakhana. Of course he might mean only the Centorin section of the planet, which was about half a percent of the habitable area. He remembered seeing a statistic that there are less than a hundred astronomical bodies in the Empire with more Centorins on them than this one. One he remembered was that there were more native-born Centorins on Kassidor than Alderan. But of course all of Alderan's inhabitants were of Centorin ancestry, while essentially none of Kassidor's inhabitants were of Centorin ancestry.

He had to get his mind back on the case at hand, "Do you know anything about who has it? How they get it? Anything like that."

"It's a pretty open rumor that the management of New West Trucking has it. Whoever is making and selling all those blasters must know something about it."

"Do you know who that is?" Dyoniss asked him.

"That is the big question isn't it? I'll bet that is the first question you asked when you saw the pictures, 'who's doing this?'"

"If you try to bargain for information that belongs to the agency, you've already failed the test I was sent to give you.

I've shared very confidential information with you as a member of the same team." He could have continued, he restrained himself.

"That's not what I'm saying at all, I'm trying to convince you how that's the big question, that's who we should be looking into."

"Who?"

"Have you ever heard of General Herman Patrick?" Betten asked.

"Of course," Dyoniss said. It had been a minor media event when he left the Empire's military and fled to this basin. "You think he's in on it?" Dyoniss once read an interview the general gave a reporter at his stop in the Ydlontrostl Cities. That was where most of his inside information on the Empire's political situation came from.

"As near as I can tell, he's the owner of that factory, and he's a good friend of the Mikal."

"Ah," Dyoniss said. "Well since we are pretty sure New West Trucking is using the antidote, and they hired us to find out what happened to their furball coils, I bet it would be interesting to pay a courtesy call on the head of New West Trucking."

"The Mikal?" Betten gulped. "Don't you think that might be a little stupid. We think he's got the antidote, his men certainly have blasters, and you want to go confront him?"

"No," Dyoniss said, "I want to go pay my respects and tell him that we are hard at work on his case and tell him that the package was stolen twice."

"But why?"

“To see how he takes it, to see what he says. I’m not going to mention the word ‘antidote’ unless he does and if I say anything about blasters I’ll hint that the agency might be interested in procuring a brace.”

“I understand he’s a true Alpha, that he’s telepathic, he can read minds.”

“He has conscious access to his pheromonal senses. He’ll have an acute sense of body language, he’ll have other instruments in the room or in his clothing that he can read. Abstract thoughts will be your own, but your moods and feelings he will know.”

“I’ve seen some literature...” Betten said.

“That proves that someone has a keyboard and can type on it.”

Betten pointedly went back to his steak, sawing another piece off with forceful strokes. Just before putting it in his mouth he asked, “Where are you staying?”

“I hadn’t picked a spot yet. I thought the office would be in a more urban area where I would find an inn.”

“There is nowhere in Hardensburg that’s walkable,” Betten told him. “It is very carefully designed to require motor vehicles for all movement. No markets are near residences, no businesses are near residences, no serving class residences are near Centorin residences.”

“That sucks,” Dyoniss said. The Temple should have objected to that. He never thought through what it meant that the Centorins opposed the Temple. It was for more than strictly religious grounds. The Temple would oppose exploitation and waste as well as the greed and haughtiness.

Betten went on, “Their culture punishes the poor and makes their lives as miserable as possible, apparently just out of pure meanness, they don’t gain anything by it.”

Dyoniss tried to decide how much he wanted to get into it. For some reason he saw what was happening here as a shortcoming in Karasis. This city and all its surrounding settlements had been taken from Karasis. They were operating under different rules, rules of an exploitative energy age instead of a sustainable way of life. He didn’t want to be heard talking about that here. These people might all be speaking Centish, but he was sure most of them could understand Common Tongue even if they couldn’t speak it correctly. He would get back to the subject. “Do you know a place I can stay?”

“Well, the city of Ragesse is still here. Hardensburg didn’t replace it, just grew up around it. Most of the Hardensburg river traffic actually goes thru Ragesse.”

“So I’ll need to take the tube back to there?”

“I’ve got a lev bike, that will be much cheaper,” he said.

Dyoniss didn’t know how to operate a lev bike. “Isn’t there a streetcar?”

“No, but it would be three hours if there was.”

“I can’t operate a lev bike.”

“I’ll take you. I live in Ragesse, it’s the only way to stay sane around here. We could even find some company there, no chance in here.”

“Where do Centorin women go out?” he asked, avoiding the issue of finding company for a while.

“On the network if at all. There’s five Centorin males

come thru the stargate for every female and that female is firstwife or daughter. Most of the firstwives in Hardensburg are native to this basin, the next most common is native to the Highlands.”

Dyoniss had seen that statistic, knew native to a Centorin planet was third and Kln was forth. He hadn't really pictured what it meant. Very few of these people could be very insulated from local culture. He wondered that the veneer of Centorin culture had been stamped so forcefully on the area.

“And the firstwives don't go out?”

“If the Alpha is anything at all, no, not without him or at least two bodyguards. Wives of Centorin Alphas do not get variety, if that's what you really want to know. He would much rather pay for pills than let her keep her youth naturally.”

Once again, he thought the Temple should play a more assertive roll in what was going on here. This culture was taking them not just out of Karasis, but out of Kassidor altogether. Wives who fell out of favor would be allowed to age and die wouldn't they? As they finished supper, Dyoniss keyed that all in on the pocket eye and sent a copy to the Temple, the local one and in Yuhai.

The lev rail line was on the far side of that artificially indoor market in the motor vehicle lot. His bike was pretty minimal, pretty much like riding a broomstick because the seat wasn't any more than three inches wide and there were no footpegs. There was nothing to hold onto but Betten and they went up to forty feet above the ground on the twenty

mile journey to the river. They were in a steady stream of traffic, mostly bikes but with enough sedans, trucks and buses to make it pretty scary.

If Betten meant him harm he could try to break his grip on his chest and fling him off, but he never wavered from his dedication to getting them thru the levrail traffic on the evening of noon in Hardensburg.

Ragess was almost invisible and nearly in the shadows of the towers of a Hardensburg financial park. There was quite an embankment down to the water, but it was only a thousand feet from the top of the embankment to the water. That embankment ran like that for nearly a hundred miles along the North Ydlon River as it made it sweeping turn from south to east. There were a few spots in it where the riverbank was up to a mile wide. For eleven miles that embankment and those few wider spots were filled in with apartment trees and river cargo companies, factories, offices, in short, the whole city of Ragess as it had always been. Much of the prairie around the old city had been transformed into Hardensburg, but Ragess, as it had existed for at least fifty centuries, was still there on the river. The ancient city had once served the plainsmen and the caravans, it now served the Centorins and their machines.

The North Ydlon carried mainly little three masted river rafts that could get thru the shallows to the north. Those rafts could work their way another thousand miles to the foothills of the West Durligars in another year, but most of them were unloading here. Much of it went up the embankment by conveyor and onto motor vehicles for delivery to all parts of

Hardensburg, as far as Hardensburg was concerned the whole city of Ragesse was a native slum over the docks.

They parked themselves at a tap room over those docks. Betten told him what rumors he had heard, things he could use on Mikal to see what he knew of them. While they sat there, Dyoniss was able to use the pocket-eye to look up the property records where Betten had found the blaster factory, confirming that it was registered to the general.

The river was less than half a mile wide at this point, there was a big beach resort on the far side with six floors of rooms for about a mile along the river. It was too far to see detail, but he could tell there were a lot of people strutting over there as noon built to summer-like heat.

People seemed to be a little smaller here than back in the Ydlontrostl cities, but in almost all ways the culture of Centorin had not penetrated into the riverbank at all. There were ensal flakes rolled in lon on the menu, all signs were in Common Tongue, business was cash and the change was in a little jar behind the counter. Bright colors and deep carving was the décor. Girls were flashing their stuff and Betten was eager to find one.

Dyoniss assumed he would feel like it sometime before this trip was over, but right now Kessil was too fresh in his mind, he would only try to find a copy and never even listen to her, whoever she might be. He wouldn't insult anyone with his inattention this sleep.

“You go,” Dyoniss said, “all I want a room for is sleep. I want to be rested when I see the Mikal tomorrow.”

“You think he'll see you because you're here from the

Kyonmeere agency on a courtesy call?”

“Of course not,” Dyoniss said. He’d never even get beyond the robot at the gate with that one, “he’ll see me because I’m his son.”

17. In the Lab

It was only one floor down to the microscopy lab, but there was quite a long corridor. Tuuklon offered his elbow and Kessil took advantage of the opportunity. “So you actually rode the plains,” he said. “It’s the name of our basin, but so few of us have done it.”

She knew the basin had many names before it was named Ydlontrostl in Common Tongue, but they all had the same meaning - total freedom of the vast prairie. “It’s nice to know it’s there,” she said, “and I have a good time every time I catch up with my mom, but once I saw settled life, I couldn’t live on the plains permanently again.”

“So you moved to the cities and became a maintenance engineer. How did that happen?”

“I’m afraid this corridor is nowhere near long enough for that tale,” she said.

“You’re right, it’s the door after this one,” he said.

There were four scopes in use, including the electron scope. There were three more optical scopes open, and one more operator, who was now at an Eye. Of the part there was as yet no sign, but that was not surprising because the parts room was four floors down from this but on the same elevator stop.

“I know you’re from Hdengragger, why’d you settle there?” Tuuklon asked.

“I hardly remember, sort of like a puffball seed I guess, it’s where I happened to land. Maybe because the canals ran

out?” She had been a nomad living in a kayak on daywork til then.

They pulled up stools in front of a couple vacant scopes. There was a suntower and fibers to provide lighting for all the scopes in the room. That apparatus was the bulk of each microscope station. She had to watch where she put her elbow as she leaned on the table.

“And what’s your place like?”

“I’m actually between addresses at the moment. A couple decades ago I shared a four story townhouse just down a canal from where I work, but when we split up we divided the townhouse and I got the top two floors. He sold the bottom two to a girl who has since had someone move in with her. The garden is with the lower floors, so I sold my half to them. So now I’m house sitting with option to buy a decent garden, but the house needs at least two more floors to suit me and I don’t know if I want to wait for two whole floors to grow.”

“Plank in and grow around,” he said.

“I could,” she said, “but I haven’t decided on it yet.” She wasn’t going to decide on anything before she found out how things would work with Dyoniss. Now she would have to wait for him to get back from the west, she might as well stay at Tarreck’s and start getting it sold.

“You must go to the Blue Kite often,” he asked, no doubt noticing she could get deeply distracted into her current state of technical homelessness, but might not have noticed it was really lovesickness. She had the money to pick up a kayak any afterlunch. Being born nomadic lets you live with homelessness a lot more easily than someone who is still

living in the house where he was born, as Dyoniss was. He would be a lot more rooted than she was. If she ever stayed with him, she would never have any claim to the house or property. She would leave with what she came with.

She was still acting distracted, she tried to get her head back to the conversation that was supposed to be going on. A conversation with a person she needed if she was going to get to the bottom of this problem. “A few times a year,” she said about the Blue Kite. She was guessing he might be hoping for an encounter by asking how often she was in a club. She might ask, if things went well, but she was a little intimidated by his size. At five five, her eyes were level with the chest hairs that curled out of the top of his wrap. She felt like asking him how he could walk around in a facility full of doors without a helmet on. With all the other techs in the room, it wouldn’t be appropriate to move in close.

“So you aren’t an avid club girl?”

“Not really. I used the eye rooms quite a bit before the company gave me this,” waving the pocket eye.

“And for company?”

“Occasionally, but the kind of people I need are not common there.”

“And what is it you need?” he asked.

No doubt he was hoping for something. She wondered if he knew that she had been with Eleeson. If so it was because of Eleeson’s demeanor and not anything that was said.

“Someone sensible and responsible who puts up with my rather mechanical social graces.”

“Mechanical?”

“That’s what they called me when I was a live-in at Sunrise Keep.” That was the top-rated tech school in Hdengragger. Located on floors seventeen thru twenty one of the Tower of the Blue Kite. That was in the early 121st.

“You don’t look mechanical.”

She had on her black lace nylon with a billowy light streetwrap over it, translucent enough to show her silhouette. Both of them washed since they were last worn, she wouldn’t have chanced a meeting with Eleeson, or anyone in headquarters, without that. “I bear a close enough resemblance to a female human that the casual observer doesn’t notice.”

He barked out a laugh that made everyone in the room but the girl on the electron microscope look up.

The part arrived and they began to examine it. The technician operating the scope was very skilled. He saw the sketch and in five minutes he had found the tiny hole in the part that lined up with the tiny hole in the gasket.

“We can assume they are all like that,” Tuuklon said. “We’ll check another to be sure. Can you call up a data model of this part?”

He brought it to a nearby flat screen. Mbeshna has a holoprojector somewhere in their labs, but that is only used for customer presentations so they would have to look at this in two-d. The info box told her it was dimensioned based on the average of five three-d microscanned parts. He added the new hole. It’s direction was an estimate at this point, but the tech put a four micron wire into a micro-manipulator and

checked the direction. It matched what was needed to get a microscopic explosive into the center of the gasket.

Kessil used the modeling software to find the spot that hole would enter the part. It was right on a casting boss. “We should look close in this area,” she pointed on the current projection of the part. “That hole had to be drilled with a ray, no mechanical tool that small would work. That means it probably goes all the way thru.”

The scope tech looked at Tuuklon, who nodded. It took a few minutes to re-position the part, then he began scanning the area. Tuuklon re-checked her trajectory and came close enough. They looked around the whole area, but did not find another tiny hole.

“But what’s this?” Tuuklon said about what might be taken as a burr on the casting boss.

The tech repositioned the part a little, tried the light from a few different angles. “It’s too regular to be a burr,” he said, “but it’s too small to be anything useful, too small to really see what it is.”

“Some grains and whiskers. Eleeson mentioned this is really metal.” Kessil said.

“What’s running on the electron scope right now?” Tuuklon asked.

“I’m doing surface stats on some ball valves,” that tech said.

“How’d you like to take a break from that and look at something more interesting.”

They went back to the stools in front of the unused scopes

for a few minutes while the electron microscope operator set that up. The guy who had set it up in the optical scope worked with her. While they sat there, Kessil typed a message to Eleeson telling what they had found so far. She added that this made it look like Yellgnoskn did not have the problem. Tuuklon also signed it.

“Yellgnoskn will be glad of that,” Tuuklon said, “He’s been here every week pleading to get payments started again. This will probably do it.”

“Fine with me,” Kessil said. “I think he fought the problem more with schmooze than science, but if they’re innocent, they’re innocent.”

“It sure doesn’t appear that that part is innocent,” Tuuklon tapped the three-d print on the screen.

The girl who operated the electron microscope called them over to look at what it showed them. There was a dome, a dome that looked like any old granule in the mold to the naked eye. Under this magnification, one could see it was a microscopic nut, a lot like a drainplug. Now all they needed was a ten micron socket and a microtenticloid to turn it.

“Nanotechnology,” Tuuklon said. “They’ve had that since YingolNeerie, since the 54th. It only has to inject a tiny explosive pellet into the gasket. The pellet could be blown in, the noise would be minimal and it would be covered by the seating latch.”

“How can I check for them in my machines?” Kessil asked.

“If you have this part number, you have them in your

machines.”

“So you agree, we have to change them all?”

“The guys are bringing up another from an older batch. We’ll know in only a few minutes, but until I find one of those parts that isn’t compromised, I’ve got to assume they all are.”

It seemed that the operator had indeed found a ten micron socket and a tiny cable to turn it, and they were able to watch her unscrewing the cap live on the electron microscope screen. As the manipulator started turning what must have been a tiny cap plug, the screen went dark and they heard a tiny tick. A diagnostic box came up that said ‘sensor malfunction’. With some curses that would make a canal dredge operator blush, the tech threw open the vacuum door and snatched up the part.

The optical scope tech took it and set it up on his rig. In moments they were ogling a ragged little crater.

“Ok, I hate to think what we’ve found here,” Tuuklon said.

Kessil had been there when Ragnar came for dinner, when the violent man ran into her, when Mysrath gave his warning. If there was that kind of evil at work in the land, why wouldn’t this be deliberate? “I see a store of explosive pellets and a microscopic cannon to fire them into the gasket. A means of detecting a control signal,” she pointed to the mold seam. All it took was a close look and they could all see a trace following that line, extending over the part to the data pin, placing that nanocannon on the network listen-only. It

couldn't respond to a ping if it wanted to on a trace that small, but it could hear everything that went by. "A perfect setup to take out any customer we have, any time they want."

Tuuklon stood up from the screen, looked straight at her. He didn't say anything about that theory. Instead he said, "There's been Centorins around since the mid 111th, we've been dealing with them since the 115th and we've been getting those fittings since 121st. There are hundreds of them in the field."

"I suggest we start swapping them out," she said. She was very much aware that, "We have to make sure they don't know we know until we have most of them out. No doubt they've got a guy over there with a button that will blow them all." She moved back to the closest of the two vacant chairs they had been using and thought about what that would mean. The whole company would be down for a week before they could get enough quarter inch rings replaced to bring the pressure back up. They didn't have enough in stock. Yellgnoskn would be very busy and they would buy what was on hand at any vendor that week. She would be changing gaskets all week, sleeping once in the closest open bed to where she was working at the time.

Tuuklon's expression was not pretty. "We don't have a suitable replacement fitting in stock, we don't even have one spec'd," he groaned as he squeezed into the other chair.

"You know," she said, "we should try just setting them off, maybe a tap with a hammer will trigger the self-destruct as much as taking the cover off."

"We'll look into it," Tuuklon said, and took out a note pad

to write it down. “We’ll try to find any way we can to make it self destruct.” He wrote ‘torch,’ ‘hammer,’ ‘spark,’ ‘etc.’ “I’ll message you immediately if we find something we can use in the field, I’ll need you to write up the instructions because you know what they have out there.”

She just noted that she would be doing the field instructions for the replacement or repair. She expected that, typing field alerts was at least half her keystrokes.

Tuuklon continued, “But I also have to line up a replacement and I don’t know who...”

She sighed, “You know, normally I take Afternoonday off, but I can go in tomorrow and slog thru some catalogs til I find one. I’ll keep an open mind about separate couplings, we don’t usually undo these so often that we really need the convenience. I’ll keep an open mind about the price also, if I see a direct replacement for forty penny, I’m buying, we can still swap them all for a couple coppers.”

“Wait til we see if we can repair them.”

“You should know that before I get home. Message me at breakfast if you still need me to find a replacement.

“You’ll have to talk to Eleeson about forty penny.”

“Over the eye, no one budgeted me staying over.”

“I’m sure you can find a place to stay.”

“Is that on offer?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t turn you away. Our bed is big enough for three.”

She laughed, “I don’t know that I’m up for that, I’d want to know her before agreeing to a three-way.” She wondered if she would ever be up for a three way with Dyoniss. She

wondered who the other girl would be, she would have to chose between Vailiss and Nembez. She couldn't imagine it. She wouldn't be able to pay sufficient attention to another guy right now to do it that way either.

This time he laughed, "Actually, I don't think Lesselle has ever been in a three way, she usually goes out if I bring someone home."

"Angry?"

"Often gladly, I'm not the clubber that she is."

"Actually Lizabeth invited me to go clubbing after work this noon."

"She's pretty hard core, how deep are you willing to go?"

"No more than nine inches," Kessil said, answering both question and hidden question.

A quick laugh and he warned, "You might not have fun."

"Thanks for telling me, I'll ask for more detail on her plans and let her know what's outside my comfort zone."

"She talk about the 'Deep Borlunth' yet?"

"No?"

"Be sure you ask about that," he said.

She stayed in the lab enduring that kind of gossip until they checked the next part. The girl with the electron microscope was already busy with repairs and had the vacuum chamber apart.

The part was the oldest one they had around, returned from spares held by the senior tech when the Terassadrán site was closed over a century ago. The tech knew exactly where to look and had it programmed in. "It's here," he said. "I bet it

was on the original print. Someone had a long-term plan.”

“I wonder if there are any records of failures like this in the distant past?” Tuuklon mused.

“There’s been blowouts, one or two a decade,” Kessil said, “until the last two years.”

“So it was nothing noticeable til now.”

“Right,” she said, “but now someone’s long term plan is coming to a head.”

18. Father Dearest

The room was stuffy, and the girl Dyoniss was under was sweating. There was snoring, but it wasn't hers. He looked and saw it was Betten. He was on top of a big girl with wide soft breasts and shiny, black, straight hair. He snorted as she struggled out from under him. Dyoniss was so embarrassed, he could not remember either girl's name.

He didn't know where he was and couldn't remember getting here, he hadn't picked a room before Betten got him too stoned and/or drunk to function. He wanted to look at his pouch as soon as possible because he was pretty sure that was where the fun originated.

The girl who was sleeping with her head on his chest had bangs like Yashmi, but her hair was bronze and her skin tone was a copper gold you seldom see outside the Highlands. Her shape and features were those of the plains. She might have the high hip bones of the Mountain Basins, but he wasn't ashamed to wake up with her. He just wished he could remember her name. He was able to slip out from under her and replace himself with the pillow without waking her.

He met the girl from Betten's side of the bed in the dressing area. "Sorry we barged in on you," she said. "Give him my apologies, I'll just be going."

"So this is Betten's place?" he asked.

"Well, I thought so, if it's not yours." She had a stretchy knit wrap that she pulled over herself as she said that. It fit very well and helped firm up those mounds. "Send Senje

home when you're done with her, she'll find the way," and she turned thru the door and was gone.

There was a kitchen in this place and he was hungry. He was half done cooking up some nleets when Senje woke up, he thanked her friend for telling him her name. It didn't ring a bell but he remembered it. She just asked, "Bathroom?" and he pointed to where he had found it a few minutes ago. It was somebody's house, there were toiletries in it. When she came out she was dressed and headed for the door. "Aren't you going to stay for..." but the door had slammed by then.

'I guess it was better for me than it was for you,' he thought. Of course he couldn't really remember it, he didn't think he puked on her, he probably just talked about Kessil incessantly, compared what she did to how Kessil did it or some stupid thing like that. He could sometimes get quite rude with excessive alcohol consumption and he could feel there had been excessive alcohol consumption last evening.

He had better wake Betten now and give him time to wake up before the nleets were done, so he stepped back into the bedroom and found it empty. The window was open, but there was nothing but the vine covered trunks of the house out there. It was five stories to the street, the street was the dockwalk, two stories above the docks themselves. The resort on the far shore of the North Ydlon stretched to the horizon in both directions, still with Noonsleep.

Betten had left his nightbag behind, but had taken his pouch and pocket-eye. He stood wondering how Betten had gotten out the window and down to the ground so fast. He knew he should snap out of it and start gathering evidence left

behind, but Betten could only have climbed into another window on these vines, he wondered if he had left a trail, and was looking for that when the door to the room burst open and four large men barged in.

He wasn't sure where they were taking him, they had taken the antidote, dragged him blatantly by force and were not forthcoming with their plans. He was pretty sure he would not be given the privilege of saying, 'No thanks boys, I don't really want to learn anything more about what's going on out here,' and find a way out of Hardensburg as soon as possible. They hadn't actually hurt him, because he hadn't violently resisted, and he wasn't being restrained, but he wasn't going to jump out of a lev-boat doing sixty miles per hour fifty feet above the ground and twenty feet above heavy traffic doing sixty miles per hour in the opposite direction.

He wondered why Hardensburg had favored lev-rails over tubes? Was it for the thrill of riding fast in the open air, or was it because they had so much energy it didn't matter? Three quarters of the fusion power generation capacity on the planet was in the Centorin settlement around Hardensburg.

Long before they got where they were going he had enough of riding in this thing. It was like being in a needleboat except that there was a man on each side of him as well as ahead and behind. It was moving five times as fast as a needleboat, so that the breeze was not a tease but a blast. It must have been even worse in the third row of seats because those guys were squinting.

The car came to a stop at a gate across the levrail path.

They were well out onto the prairie now, among herds of mrang too dense for the good of the land. There were a few Centorin animals also, they must have come thru the tube as babies or zygotes because they were too big for a tube car. They had bodies the size of a mrang, but four very long legs, a long neck and a long head more like a keda's than a mrang's, but with a narrow mouth and human-like teeth and ass. Men rode atop them, more upright than one rides a keda, and drove the mrang from that perch.

Their driver poked and spoke with his Centorin pocket eye to let them in, they proceeded across the prairie another couple miles to the house. They followed a tarstone motor vehicle path the last mile. The house was hidden by a small rise til they were only a half a mile from it. It was a pitched-roofed stone-built thing with only one main floor, raised four to ten feet above the ground. It was at least two hundred feet long altogether. There were many blank stone walls and many glass walls. There was a huge portico in front where the lev-boat pulled up, shading them from the sun of early Afternoonday, which can be intense even in the fall.

The house was in what he imagined was a classic Centorin style, stone and glass. He knew on their own worlds they would have aluminum or even titanium trim, or an alloy that looked like titanium. The grand front hallway went all the way thru the house to a large artificial pool where there were at least a half-dozen beautiful girls taking the sun. He was lead along a long hallway and into a wing of the house that wrapped around the pool.

He was lead to an office that overlooked the pool on one

side, a fancy barn and the plains on another. There were a few hangleaves shading the property, but they hadn't been touched, nothing was in them at all, as if they were wild, growing in a forest. The office was large and had several conversational groupings as well as a massive desk that dominated one corner of the room. The desk looked like it was cast iron, flat black with age, insanely ornate and inlaid with jewels in foci of the patterns. It was bare at the moment, Dyoniss figured such a piece of furniture would have everything projected holographically around it and never have to bother with physical items. If they hadn't taken his pocket eye he could probably project a picture from it onto that desk.

The ceiling seemed to hover over the room, with openings all around the top, a senseless waste of heat in this climate, though it was cold as Nightday in here already. There were bookcases, they were filled with identical sets of books, so Dyoniss recognized it as a form of wall covering, not reading matter. He checked to be sure the books were actually real and there was actually printing on the pages. There was, and it was in Centish. The books seemed to be some kind of reference, set in differing time periods.

Dyoniss had no need to tell any real lies, he thought his scent glands would remain out of the conversation. He knew such rooms as this in Centorin worlds were full of secret instruments and weapons, he had to assume that custom had been carried over into the Centorin colony on Kassidor. He had seen that the manufacture of military weapons with local materials was already under way. He wondered how the Instinct interacted with programmable weapons? It probably

only allowed them to be programmed for defense. But if one had the antidote available while programing the weapon, one needn't have the antidote when the weapon acted.

No doubt that alone was making him nervous enough to show up on the pheromone receptors in the room. He watched the girls at the pool for awhile to change his pheromone signal as much as for the fun of it. There were four Nordic girls, but none with the long chin that would mark them as Centorin. He would guess they were more likely from Kln than Plecerveet, judging by their pelvis size. He didn't see any that interested him as much as Kessil, though most men would rate all of them higher on physical assets alone.

He wondered how long he would be left alone in here. He wondered how many people were watching. He read novels set on Centorin, he knew the Houses had security staff who watched the hidden cameras and assessed the threat level of each visitor. He was sure that custom had also been imported, and felt more sure with each quarter hour that went by.

It was a brusque voice that entered the room first, speaking in harsh but understandable Common Tongue. "I regret that I have been detained by other matters and couldn't get back to the office promptly." In that time a big barrel-chested man with light brown hair, trimmed to stubble in back and on the sides, slid into the chair behind the huge desk. He was wearing a fitted khaki jacket with epaulettes and a chrome-look headband with drop-down eyepiece that was currently raised. He had a beard, but it was sheared off mechanically. "I understand you have been looking for me?"

Dyoniss didn't think The Mikal, as he was called here and

now, even recognized him as his son. Their appearance wasn't that close. Back in the cities some noticed he looked half Centorin, but among all the pureblood Centorins in this area, Dyoniss was indistinguishable from a born plains nomad. His eyes were much more of the prairie than the immigrants, his hair and skin were much darker. These people would call Kessil's hair black. He didn't give any sign that he knew, and Dyoniss looked to the snifter beads in his wrist band and saw no recognition sign in that either. He figured this man also had a snifter in the room, and probably a discreet read-out. "Your company has a request with the company I represent, to track down a stolen package. It was an order for a furball coil."

"We have about seventeen hundred some odd reactors of one size or another in the company, including the ones on our trucks. I have a half megawatt here at the house. I probably sign eight or ten orders for coils in a local year," he said.

"Your men have my pocket eye," Dyoniss said. "If I could show you the label, it would be the package your company asked us to investigate. You said it was stolen."

"Undoubtedly it was or we wouldn't have asked for help locating it."

"We currently believe the contents of this package were stolen twice."

His eyebrows went up a little bit, far too theatrically, "OK, but why not normal channels?" he asked, acting as innocent as a child.

"I thought I was going thru normal channels? I was going to ask at your front door but your men beat me to it."

He ignored that, asked, “I don’t understand what difference it makes to me if it was stolen twice?”

“Because I’ve come to believe that the furball coil was a ruse. I believe the first time it was stolen was before it left Centorin, in the originating shipper, when there was a power failure on the sorting line. The furball coil was replaced by a half gallon bottle, probably in a foil liner, the coded weight was changed and a personal note was attached.” Mikal was listening, trying to fain disinterest and impatience, but trying to hide real concern. A few beads on his wrist band were changing color. “The second time it was stolen was in the Ydlontrostl cities, probably during another power outage in the sorting line, and the half gallon bottle went missing.”

His face said something was unexpected in that line, but he faked dismissing it, because anger beads began to turn black in the pattern of his wristband. “Nice detective work, but you were contracted to recover the furball coil, and again, why come to me and not the staffer who contacted you? Not that he or any of us would care what happened to it after the coil was stolen.”

His instruments could probably detect how nervous Dyoniss was with the next statement, but he wasn’t getting thru this stonewall without a sledge hammer. He had lived with the Instinct all his life and just didn’t have the fear he should have, so his intellect allowed him to overcome his fear and swing that sledgehammer. “Both times it was stolen, I believe it was meant to be stolen, and the person who stole it worked for you.”

“Who? In what capacity?” Obvious bluster covering

obvious guilt. “If there’s any truth to that allegation that person will be terminated of course, but you’ll have to prove those allegations before we take action such as that.”

“We like having sources,” Dyoniss admitted, but would be glad to show him the images of the labels. He doubted the Centorins could gather the resources to have his memory read, but he was sure they didn’t have the scruples to resist doing so if they could. He would trust that they couldn’t and withhold any mention of Ragnar. He was worried enough about him already.

“Then why should I treat you as more than an idle crank? You won’t name your source so you can invent any tale you’d like.”

He could plead for his pocket eye again, to show him proof he didn’t want to see, or he could change the subject. If he wasn’t going to get his pocket-eye back, why dwell on his weakness, so he asked, “Do you know General Herman Patrick?”

His face flashed that he did, though he said, “I’ve never heard the name before,” as calmly as an award winning actor, not noticing all the green liar beads that appeared on Dyoniss’ wristband.

“You don’t read the news?” Dyoniss asked him.

“He was in the news?” Mikal asked blandly.

“He was the highest ranking defector from the Centorin military, his journey to Hardensburg was a media circus.”

“Oh that, I saw the article but didn’t remember the name. It caught my eye because his spread is only a few miles from here. What does that have to do with me?”

Dyoniss didn't answer that either, "What about the Repubik uva West'n Savahnn?" Dyoniss said the name in Centish, because everyone Betten overheard discussing it did so only in Centish.

Mikal's face and Dyoniss' wristband said he knew of it once again, but his mouth said, "That's a phrase in Centish, do you know what it means?"

"Republic of the Western Savannah," Dyoniss translated.

"Where and when was that?" Mikal asked as innocently as he could. His wristband had a lot of orange anxiety showing. "The history of this planet is too complex for me to get my head around, even though I've been here over four hundred standard years now, two centuries as you call it. But I thought this area was called the Western Savannah?"

"It is," Dyoniss said. About a million square miles of berry brush and meadows, threaded with plains of ribbonleaves to the horizon and thickets of dwarf hangleaf in the hollows. The plains were large enough for a few mrang-herding tribes to penetrate, there were some woodcutters where the hangleaves grew dense enough. There were a few settled areas and cities in the far south, but for the most part it was uninhabited. Hardensburg had grown to be the largest city in all of it, though it was near the northeast corner of the area.

"I don't understand?" Mikal said.

"I hope you're telling the truth," Dyoniss said.

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I be? I understand how many of the locals can get worked up over something like a furball coil. The raw copper is worth a life savings to a

peasant, I understand that, but surely you understand how a furball coil is of no consequence to me, this should have been handled by one of my staff.”

“There’s a handwritten note on the packing slip, for your personal attention. That note was in Centish, but not on the packing slip when it left the parts supplier on Centorin, I was wondering what that was about?”

“How can I tell you?”

“You could have your men give back the pocket-eye they stole from me...”

“We have to take precautions about possible weapons, it will be returned to you when you leave the property.”

“Why do you need to take such precautions on a world with the Instinct?”

“Old habits die hard.”

“After two centuries?” Dyoniss asked.

Mikal only grinned. He wasn’t going to be moved from his position.

“You must know the note I’m talking about?”

“If there was such a note and it was written to me on a package I hadn’t received, how would I know about it?”

“The shipment wasn’t received, but the package was. It was signed into your 107th street warehouse from Johnson Tube Carriers at thirty first hour of Morningday of Ekendosa, 123,22,44. I assume it was your inspector who noticed the note in Centish and brought it to his supervisor, who reads Centish, who brought it to the warehouse manager, who brought it to Kyonmeere’s attention.”

“And you work for Kyonmeere?”

“Yes sir. We’ve been on retainer for your shipping security since Kyonmeere was out here.” That was twenty decades ago, and this was only the second time they had been called.

“Did he tell you to worry about personal notes on the shipping labels?”

“He doesn’t read Centish.”

“And you do?”

“Yes,” he admitted. The gear he had in this room would know if he was lying, even if Mikal missed it.

“And you think I might know what it’s about?”

“You obviously go way back with the guy who wrote the note?”

“How do you know?”

Dyoniss knew that if this man did have an antidote for the Instinct, answering that question would be dangerous. Steeling himself he said, “He called you Starkey.”

19. To the Mansion Go

It was 30th hour and the end of the workday but they had just discovered that the nanotech microbomb launcher was common to all fittings from Jahnsn. A messenger came down and requested that Kessil come up to Eleeson's office before leaving. She said goodbye to Tuuklon, said she would be in her office tomorrow. Lizhine gave her quite a wink when she got up to Eleeson's and sent her right in. There was another man with him. He was tall and lanky with a wrap of curly hair around his head and the nose of an Elf or even a Goblin. He was dressed regally in a velvet worker with a light street cape over it, more appropriate for Nightday than late Morningday, but Yellgnoskn was always a vain man. He was the owner of the company who's gaskets she supposedly maligned, owner of the mansion where the presentation was held.

"I want to apologize for misjudging your motives last year," he said as he stood up and took her hand. It would have helped if she'd had a chance to say a word in her own defense, but what a good friend of his thought he overheard was the final authority. "I didn't know you at the time, I thought you were just trying to protect your own turf."

"I consider Mbeshna Power to be my turf, that's who I was trying to protect."

She took a seat across from him. They were sitting at one of Eleeson's tables, one that was nearly clear and with six nice chairs around it. He had only his ceiling panels on for light, all the flat screens in the room were dark. Eleeson had

one small desk-eye on this table, she could tell it was an ancient just from the intricate carvings and finish on it's base. Eleeson had been looking into that Eye when she entered, now he looked up.

"Thanks to you, we've begun his payments again."

"Hey, unless he hacked that nanostructure into Jahnsn's fabrication code, he's innocent."

"I'm glad you can say that," Eleeson said.

She wondered if he had heard what was said in the hall outside Yellgnoskn's kitchen last year. Kessil didn't let it bother her, one look at her and it was immediately obvious she didn't sleep her way to her position. Even if what was said was public, that was personal, his innocence appeared to be fact.

"I apologize to you also," Yellgnoskn said, "for things I said that day. You know we put a lot into that presentation and seminar, I felt we were being very open with you people."

Kessil was glad they had something more to talk about than who she had or hadn't taken to a bedroom at that party. It had been Hamthish saying, 'this is all just a presentation,' that had *really* started all the fireworks. If she hadn't defended him they probably couldn't have cared less who she took where.

"We're all sorry for things we said that day," Kessil said. "Personally I think if there had been more yaag and less ale that day, things might have taken a different route. I know some of my behavior would have been different." She hadn't been tipsy drunk, but had been looser-lipped than normal.

"You're probably right," Yellgnoskn said. "It's just the

image of yaag associated with the workplace...”

“I’d rather have my machines in the hands of a stoner than a drunk,” Kessil said.

“It would be nice if our people could come to work straight,” Yellgnoskn said.

“I do,” Kessil said, “but that don’t mean I am when off of work.”

“It’s those people who can’t stop for a few hours that I worry about,” Eleeson said.

She just looked at him, lunch was not quite four hours ago. She didn’t question him closely about it, but he might be one of those people to whom a good base buzz is normal, and he doesn’t consider himself stoned until he’s what she calls blithered, which she tries to avoid. Yellgnoskn was looking at him about the same way. Eleeson really hadn’t strayed far from the ale tap that day either. Neither had Hamthish for that matter. She shouldn’t complain because that camaraderie is probably how she got the appointment with Eleeson.

Yellgnoskn was the next to speak, “Do you have anything more you need to do here today?” he asked her.

“Not really, if left with time to fill I would key in some notes but that’s about it. We confirmed what we want to know, all the fi...” She shouldn’t be saying this here. Eleeson had a right to know, but it might not be good for Yellgnoskn to know everything they did right away, not til after the fittings were swapped or disarmed. She pretended she was choking on spit. After clearing her throat she continued, “all the fixes have to be documented, I’ll have to go in tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you use this eye and message anyone waiting for you,” Eleeson said, “I think Yellgnoskn wants to offer you a reward this evening.”

“I already said goodbye to Tuuklon,” she told Eleeson. “What kind of reward?” she asked Yellgnoskn.

“Nothing special, just noonmeal.”

“That I can accept,” she said, trying to keep the trepidation from her voice. She wished she didn’t have to, but to refuse would say she hadn’t accepted his apology for what happened in the spring. She couldn’t think of a convincing excuse to refuse since Tuuklon wouldn’t call her til the next day. She didn’t want to have to socialize with Yellgnoskn, but she didn’t want to cause an issue with the company. This is a case when her appearance was good enough to do her job and she wished it wasn’t. She wished she could wear one body for Dyoniss, and another for the office like the ghosts of Narrulla’s Tear.

“She joking,” Eleeson said.

“No, really, I can,” she said. He meant she was joking about their being any company policy about that.

While she had the eye and keyboard she pecked out a quick note to Lizhine saying she wouldn’t make it tonight, but asked what she thought of Deep Borlunth and why.

With little more small talk they picked up their things and headed toward the tube station. The tube routes don’t always go exactly where the people are because the speeds they travel call for gradual curves while all the old streets are crooked and narrow and the canals have to follow the slope of

the land.

While they rode down in the crowded elevator, she went over her misgivings. Mysrath wanted to make her fear Yellgnoskn, that was how she analyzed his behavior last week, but was there anything to it? To look at him in person, he wasn't one she would fear. Still anyone with the antidote and a weapon is dangerous to anyone unarmed and with the Instinct. But now he should have no reason to harm her, now that she had exonerated him. Besides, it was only noonmeal, he wouldn't do anything to her there.

As they were on the bridge across the canal he asked, "Would you be amenable to taking noonmeal at my home? As you know I employ a professional cook."

Kessil was quite aware that he spent a large share of his company's fortune on himself, she didn't need that, she'd be perfectly happy to cook for herself in his kitchen. She worried more about what Mysrath had said, going to his home wasn't quite as safe as a public place, but it was noonmeal, he would have plenty of staff around. If he had admitted it would be at his house while she was still in Eleeson's office, she would have been more comfortable saying no because she would have Eleeson there to intervene. Out here on the bridge she also had no polite way to refuse, no logical way to refuse but to say she feared the antidote, which would be a very serious accusation. She might say she didn't want the memories of last year resurfacing, but that would be saying she hadn't accepted his apology once again. She wished she was more skilled at the fine points of social graces so she could work her way out of this without a direct lie and without causing

political fallout. Before the silence stretched too long she sucked it up and said, “That’s fine, I’d be going home to an empty house.”

She was going to have to ask herself sooner rather than later how she felt about him personally. He certainly wouldn’t have allowed himself to remain inadequate, if he ever was. He wasn’t someone she would go out of her way for, but if he hadn’t insulted her last spring, as long as Dyoniss is away, she wouldn’t mind his body’s presence for the sleep.

But because of last year, just this spring actually, he did not start with the clean slate of someone she met in a club. He still had that ugly incident to answer for, and the ugly words that were said. It is one of his friends who really should pay the penalty, the one who had more-or-less made up a story about her.

There was no way she could deny that he would expect the sleep if she was to have noonmeal at his house. If she walked in without saying something, she was giving him a false message. She also had to see if she felt safe alone with him before she would agree. She had to say something soon, the tube ride was going to be less than four minutes, as long as the walk to the station.

“There is something I have to say, before I come to your home.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not ready to promise the sleep yet.”

“I hadn’t...” he started to say, then stopped himself and restarted. “I understand,” he said, “but I hadn’t been asked.”

“If I come to your house, I can’t invite myself to stay

over.”

“I see what you mean,” he admitted, “you might think it awkward to leave after dinner.”

“You see what I mean?” No doubt for someone as skilled at social interaction as he was, being at such a loss was a difficult thing to imagine, but there she was.

“Yes, and I understand why you feel that way, what happened this spring goes deeper than a simple apology can cover.”

“Your career, your business, means a lot to you,” she stated. “Well mine may be much smaller, but it still means a lot to me. I also don’t understand how you could think someone as plain as I am could have slept into my position.”

“I didn’t know you from Shiloah,” the legendary warrior woman who had freed the Kshoned Basin from the Fmak. “All I saw was a cute girl inviting one of my guys to the bedroom. I had a pseudo friend, a sniveling yes-man actually, who was looking for a scapegoat. I’ve since learned quite a bit more about you and learned just how wrong I was that dusk.”

“The main thing,” Kessil said, “then and now, we should have had those gaskets, or at least half of them. The way Mysrath got it away from Shermie was low. He tried the same thing with me...”

“But you are not Shermie, he was playing down to her and up to you.”

“Where are you coming from?” she asked. They made the turn and started down the wide steps to the tube level, two floors below the bridge. “I’m almost as ordinary as a girl gets,

I've got just enough of a figure to tell I'm female, the most average hair in the city, a very ordinary face, what are you talking about?"

"Last year, you were sitting on the couch at the hall to the bedroom wing talking with Mysrath with your feet up. You had the same underlayer on as today, but that was all at the time."

Right, he had walked by, right when she was flashing Mysrath an invite, which he turned down as it were, sending her back by the keg and setting up the whole mess. "If that was the first time you ever saw me, perhaps I can understand why you felt the way you did."

"I was intrigued actually, all I was told was that you were some girl on Mbeshna's engineering team."

So OK, she had a libido of a sort. Not like most of her friends that she knew from the Blue Kite, but enough to get her into trouble at the right place and time and state of intoxication. "I guess I understand a little more about how you felt that evening." She actually meant that. The incident was out of context, but looking from his point of view, she was rather drunk and disorderly.

"I hope this will be a very different evening."

"Couldn't help but be, we've already seen each other's worst."

Their turn came at the kiosk, he keyed in his station in Boomig. Theirs was the third car to appear. Once they were on their way he asked, "We could take a dip before dinner?" he asked, "or would that make dinner too late for you?"

“No, it’s rare when I get home by 33rd hour,” she said. She thought 34th was the normal dinner hour and was glad if she got it, called herself ‘on schedule’ if she started making dinner by then.

“Then why don’t we? The weather is great now, who knows what the full noon will bring.”

“Sure,” she said. It was possible that noon could bring clouds in the fall, but this didn’t seem like fall yet. She figured he was in a hurry to see her nude, but really didn’t mind. If he wanted to see a plain body like hers, more power to him. She had a little more color at the end of summer than early spring, but she hadn’t changed shape any and he’d seen all his eyes could hold of her that Afternoonday. She wasn’t used to the main meal till 35th hour some days so a drink by the pool before dinner would be welcome. It was quite warm for Morningday of Thlollala, Afternoonday would probably be more like mid summer than early fall. Still she would partake in more sun than water.

Boomig was a principate with no cities in antiquity, and has no large cities in it now. They got off in a plaza surrounded by fancy townhomes in hangleaf and coachwood with thick carvings and lots of stained glass thickly grown in with dark brown bark. Streets were big stone blocks, had curbing and plantings, with landscapers tending it. They soon turned onto a side street with only slightly smaller paving stones. There were wide lawns between the path and the front gardens of the homes and the karga that trimmed them had large, colorful tags. The side street meandered and in only a

couple blocks it was newer and lower homes of coachwood and gnarl, most with field hands cabins and at least an acre of crops. There was a lot more stone, brick and clay block. Front yards were flower gardens where neighbors often sat and chatted. Yellgnoskn was obliged to stop briefly twice. There were introductions, she didn't write them down.

Yellgnoskn's home was one of those, long and low, but with an upper floor in dormers. The convention hall was attached to the end but fronted on a different street and only had a single passageway connecting them. The connection did not show from this side of the house. The house was grown in gnarl and bigleaf-vine. Most of the front wall was stone block and stained glass, a short lane lined with firestick and shaded by lush purplevine on a crystal trellis lead to the front door. The bright orange and red blooms on the firestick were beginning to open and would be completely ripe by the week of Imnotn.

They were soon out by the pool with a Dawnsleep-cool beer. His pool was all cast and tiled, but it was up on a small knoll so the deck was a story above the ground. The house also had a lower level, open in the back because the land sloped. He had lots of fiber-plast furniture around on the pool deck. It was stylish a few decades ago, but not that comfortable.

He acted like he was glad to see her skin, glad to caress her, but didn't press it right now. He went right for the water, she only sat on the edge, that was cooling enough. Being nude was cooling enough and she had to stay in the sun. The homes here were on over an acre of land and usually had a

farm and servant family or two on the property. In his case they were in the same house, in the floor below, and had quarters that were probably more lavish than Yashmi's house. When he swam back over to where she was sitting she said, "It was nice of you to invite me back out here, and you know how grateful I am for the tube ride."

"I'm glad to get the time with you," he said. "Thank you for gracing my pool."

She knew there were bodies around somewhere who decorated it a lot better than she did. She couldn't tell him that, just said, "There's limps in the canal," as an explanation for why she was here. Limps are blood sucking worms that still hurt, even if they can't suck human blood.

"A shame, but there are those who protect the natural ecosystem from tampering," he said. He didn't say he blamed it on the Temple. Maybe she hoped it was the Temple in some cases, but she wouldn't want them to protect limps in the canals of the city. She would rather those canals had the water of his pool, which looked nearly as clean as the water from a faucet. "So what is your home situation?" he asked.

"Meaning, do I have anyone to go home to?"

"I didn't mean to be boorish," he said.

"No offense taken," she said. "I don't feel free to invite you to spend the sleep with me in the storage cellar I'm in at the moment, and I can't very well invite myself here."

"May I invite you?" he asked.

She understood better now, she should try and put it behind her. "I remain open to the idea, but I haven't made peace with it completely," she said. He was giving up a lot

more than her, she was barely more than a child of the streets compared to him. She swam in the Terminus Pool, where there are no limps. She wondered if she would learn anything other than how expensive his dinnerware was and how he was in bed. She wondered if he was enhanced. He didn't look it, but he hadn't gotten hard yet. He could see that she certainly wasn't enhanced. The only pill she could ever remember swallowing was for a sinus infection she got about fourteen decades ago.

“So what would you do if you had stayed on the tube and been home by now?” he asked.

“I wouldn't be home yet, I'm staying off the beaten path down in a little hollow beyond the modern canal in Hdengragger. I'd be about to Zestin's taps by now.”

“Would you stop there?” he asked.

“I probably would.” She got up and flopped into one of the swoopy lounge chairs he had on this second floor patio. She noticed him watching all the way, no doubt looking for any telltale signs of invitation from her opening. She would show it to him when she and it were ready. She was barely ready for him to examine her body as he did. She didn't know him well, and he was far too important a person to be caught in bed with the likes of her. Mbeshna Power probably purchased a tenth of the gaskets made by Yellgnoskn. Even if it was just lust, no one would believe that, they would be sure something of importance had passed between them. She doubted it was just lust on his part, she was sure he had many sleeker bodies on display by this pool any week of the year. There weren't any others here on Morningday, but she could

guess that Afternoonday this patio would be crowded.

“In that case, I’ll pour from one of mine,” he said, bringing her back to the last thing she’d actually said. He had a large set of stand-cups in a glass-front cabinet. They had long smoothly curved bases, narrow parabolic bowls and elliptical handles, all done to minimize the curvature change at any point, in a faintly pearl material that subtly changed color when seen from different angles.

What he poured was a very dark red in color, rather thin in consistency, and with quite a sharp aroma. “I have some friends out west who sent me this, though it actually came thru the stargate. No one has grown commercial quantities of grapes successfully on Kassidor since they need a six year cycle of seasons. They have adapted to a sixteen month cycle of seasons on the northeastern slopes of the Altaic Ocean on Centorin very well and House Valera is still increasing it’s renown among devoted connoisseurs.”

“So this is wine?” she asked, trying to keep the disappointment from showing.

“Not just wine, but Valera Lextromaire ‘78, a legendary batch in just three seasons.”

She didn’t want to play the farmyard trash, but the best she could do was say, “I’ll try and remember that.”

When Afternoonday began she woke by herself in Yellgnoskn’s huge ornate bed. The house was so big that it was hard enough finding the bathroom and figuring out how to use it. The appliances were clear crystal, but comfortable, the shower was as big as her old bedroom, which had taken

up the entire fourth floor of her townhouse, and had multiple sprays and temperature settings. If the sleep had been a little less sweaty, she wouldn't have bothered. He had a little more than she actually wanted, and only took the top, and was faster, quicker and more forceful than she liked, but then not everyone is Dyoniss, who was exactly what she liked in every way. She had successfully made it thru the encounter without using the name Dyoniss and that was harder than it should be because the wine had more alcohol effect than ale and she was rather wobbly by the time they went to bed.

Her fear seemed silly this morning, he hadn't shown her anything to make her suspect he would have the antidote. Yeah, he was a little too cocky and sure of himself to make the best bedmate, but that made him seem more like a silly playboy than a menace. He probably wasn't stronger than her, certainly not in the legs.

When she got dressed she wore only her inner sheath for the air in Boomig is moist as Kortrax passes noon, but she carried her street wrap along with everything else in her shoulder bag, leaving nothing in the room. The house was big enough that it was inconvenient to get from one part to another.

Yellgnoskn said he would meet her at breakfast, but she got lost on the way. The house is long and low, built of flat stone block and gnarl, very new and trendy, but actually three levels, with lots of curves and angles. It nodded a little toward Centorin styles and that put her off a little. She didn't realize there were two stairways from the bedroom level to the main level. The hallway at the bottom looked unfamiliar. She

opened a door and entered an office. There were two men in it, a desk eye and some cabinets and file racks. One man was looking at the desk eye, the other had some kind of device apart on a worktable. She was afraid that she recognized what it was.

“This is a private area, miss,” the guy at the desk eye said as he got up.” He was Nordic, probably from Passar because he was big boned and Trollish. He walked toward her purposefully.

“I was just looking for the kitchen...”

He pointed behind her and kept walking toward her. The other man threw an instruction sheet over the parts on the worktable. She backed out the door. The man came to the door and stood in it, pointed the opposite direction on the hall. In his deep Nordic voice he said, “Follow that to the front salon, it’s right thru the arch on the other side of that.”

She started backing away, then turned and tried to walk normally. She didn’t hear the door close, she knew he must be watching. When she turned at the next corner in the hallway, she couldn’t help looking back and confirmed that he was watching every move she made. She felt like bolting, but that would be extremely rude, instead she walked as normally as she could to the main salon. She got there, the room was empty. The front hall was right across, she had nothing to lose. She could send a message to Yellgnoskn, thanking him for a nice sleep and explaining that she got called away for an emergency.

She knew she was just being jumpy and paranoid. It is like the Temple says, all it takes is fear to break the bonds of

trust between us. Those bonds of trust are all our civilization really is, isn't it? Those bonds of trust are Karasis. We might not have the power and glory of the Centorins, or their military might, but we have each other, some contentment, some honor, some humor and enough comfort that the energy really doesn't matter.

"There you are," Yellngoskn said from the direction of the dining hall and kitchens. He was striding toward her and talking to his pocket eye. It looked like a Centorin model that was covered in display screen and made voice channels all the time, that didn't make her feel any more at ease. "No she's right here," he told it as he approached. The room was wide and he had time to listen to it, then say, "Very trustworthy," he told the pocket eye, "don't worry about a thing, I'll take care of it," he said and put the device away just as he reached Kessil. He took her arm, gently but firmly, "Come," he said, "Let's have brunch." She felt too much like the mrang must feel when the theirops invites it to brunch.

20. Escape From Hardensburg

“Starkey, you say,” Mikal said slowly. Dyoniss saw his eyes go down to the desk, saw his shoulder move just a little, like he was pressing a button. Dyoniss saw many beads on his wristband turn red, meaning Mikal was releasing adrenaline in quantity.

“‘Merry Christmas Starkey,’ was what the note said,” Dyoniss told him, “It was signed ‘Lubinka’.” Mikal reacted to that name but said nothing. “I wonder what that was about?”

“Why do you associate me with someone named Starkey?”

“My mother told me,” Dyoniss and Mikal were nearly face to face now and staring across the glossy flat expanse of his desk.

“Your mother? How would she know?” he tried to laugh it off.

“Pillow talk,” Dyoniss wasn’t laughing.

Mikal chuckled one more time. Then went back to staring, his mind working. He must have figured it out because a complex of emotions crossed his face. “So you wound up working for Kyonmeere Agency. I’ll have to find out who hired you guys.”

“I can look that up when I get back to the office,” he said, watching the corners of Mikal’s mouth for the twitch that told him he wasn’t getting back to the office. “But I do have a feeling they wouldn’t have called us if that package had only been stolen once. I’d guess your incoming inspection people

know not to open any packages that say ‘Merry Christmas’. My half-brother told me they’re not supposed to arrive thru normal channels”

The twitch of his lips confirmed that, but he kept up the banalities, “We don’t open Christmas presents til December 25th,” he said.

“By the trail of dead, I’d guess someone’s opened their presents early,” knowing that Christmas of the Empire calendar was during Voratainin of next year.

“Scary isn’t it?” Mikal tried to say calmly while he seemed to be pressing more buttons beneath the desk.

He was scared, according to his wristband. He didn’t understand that, “Yes, but there’s no need for you to be afraid, I haven’t got any of it.”

“That’s not what I think,” Mikal said, and brought a tablet to his mouth. Dyoniss had no idea how fast acting they were, and knew his time was running out before goons got here. They had probably dropped pills when Mikal pressed the first button. Dyoniss also didn’t know what weapons Mikal had in this room, or how fortified it was. He had noticed the glass was rigged so it couldn’t be opened from outside, but was easy to escape from this side. It was probably armored and he couldn’t break it, but he could dive for the handle and roll thru. “My men will kill you,” was the last thing he heard Mikal yell as he did that.

He figured it would be alarmed and it was, it triggered bells and klaxons and lights all over the compound before he even completed the long fall to the ground. There was a lev-

bike right in front of him but he hadn't developed the skills to ride one during the last sleep. He hadn't noticed how hung over he was until the klaxons started sounding and he started trying to run.

There was a hedge between the yard and the cropland, he was barely able to vault it, normally it would have been a low hurdle. There was a woman coming up the garden path. Luckily she screamed and ducked into a row so he could go clomping by without additional impediment. It was only thirty yards to the end of the garden, he should be able to sprint that, but his head was exploding by the time he was halfway there. There was a board fence, he couldn't jump it, he could barely get his arms on it and lever himself up to his waist.

He didn't mean to somersault over it, he just lost his balance and went over. It was tough to climb to his feet, he was dizzy, saw stars and almost blacked out. The three or four mrang he almost landed on top of skittered out of the way, provoking their neighbors. The herd was already skittish from the clamor at the house. Dyoniss staggered a few more steps and leapt onto the back of the biggest one, who bellowed and rippled, but took off running.

Riding a domestic mrang is relatively straightforward, cling to it's neck shell with your body on it's back, cover the eye on the side you want to turn away from. They have a wide back and if you stay in the middle it doesn't pound as much, especially when it hops and prances. They soon tire of that, if they do it, and just settle down and run. Luckily this one just ran. No doubt Dyoniss reeked enough that the mrang

knew it would be treated to the vomit of everything he drank the previous evening if it tried to throw him.

He wanted to turn the beast toward the river and that was quite a wide circle around the property. He heard voices, and saw people on the Earth animals coming after him. He changed his plan and steered his beast toward the center of the herd. When a mrang hears another running, it figures there's something dangerous around, and starts running also and asks questions later. Since they can't talk, they never do get around the the questions. Sometimes they all run in the same direction, but hornless mrang like these are likely to run in any direction and with all the noise from the house, that was what they were doing.

He heard one of the Earth animals make a very loud squeal when it went down in a tide of mrang, he barely heard shouts over the din. He heard the snap of a couple blaster bolts. He had never heard them in reality before, only thru the sound system of the movies. They were fainter, but maybe that was just the thunder of the herd. One of them must have hit a mrang for it's bellow shook the ground and the herd changed direction again. He was almost swung off the beast as it cut ninety degrees in a split second.

The two men remaining on those animals from Earth were running back toward the house as fast as those things could carry them. The milling mob of mrang fell behind, but kept the pursuit in the yard while Dyoniss finally turned the one he was on back toward the river.

The animal was tiring badly by the time they reached the

tarstone road. It had carried him miles beyond the stampede and was still ahead of the two men on Earth animals, though they were gaining on him rapidly. He could not get the animal to cross the tarstone. It smelled it from afar and would come no closer than about fourteen feet. He had no choice but to go ahead on foot, he knew it was only a few hundred yards to the river beyond the tarstone. Water was just about blaster proof, grounding them out if you are even a fraction of an inch below the surface. Of course you don't want to get caught standing in water that isn't deep enough to cover you.

He could hear the Centish in the shouts of the men who pursued him as he climbed the tarstone. It was piled almost nine feet deep here. New West Trucking piled it to whatever depth was required to level the course. As he approached the top he could hear the motor trucks. They roared by at the speed of levrails but carried the weight a river ship would carry, not a levboat. There was a line of them going by, and they were too close together to cross between them. Their wheels were more than twice as tall as his head, and they ran close enough to the edge of the tarstone runway that he didn't dare come up onto the surface.

He knew they were robotically driven but carried a crew of two, a motorman and a cargoman. That had been on the documentary he had seen ten years ago. The trucks could not do anything to avoid him if they wanted to, there was a nearby mintao carcass flattened to a stain that attested to that. But the men were approaching. Out here miles from humans, they probably had not been re-infected with the Instinct even after all the hours they had been riding. They were unslinging blasters, just like on a Centorin Horse Opera. That let him

remember that 'horse' was the name of that beast in Centish, 'horse' was not Centish for 'keda' as some taught.

There was no break in the caravan of trucks in time for him to get across before they got to him. The trucks were very high off the ground. He didn't have to get all the way across between trucks, he just had to get past the first set of wheels. He had to admit it was a stupid thing to try, but he didn't see any choice.

He had almost four seconds between trucks, but he had to go now because there was another line of trucks coming the other way. He couldn't remember ever being as numb with fear as he was when he jumped into that line of trucks. He made it past the wheels, but fell on a sticky spot made of rotten blood. He couldn't get to his feet in time to get out before the next truck. He was stuck there for the next and the next, trying to get in a position where he could make the jump. He didn't dare stand high enough, machinery hung from the bottoms of the trucks. Then the trucks from the other direction were upon them. They passed with their wheels only a few feet apart, he dared not get into the space between.

The men after him looked up over the tarstone, saw him and got down. They came up with blasters. They shot a truck tire once, then timed it. Dyoniss took it in the upper arm, it paralyzed his whole arm like the Instinct, at the same time it hurt like dunking that arm in a boiling cauldron as well as driving a nine inch spike thru his shoulder.

The trucks from the other way stopped. Dyoniss rolled, maybe more to just kill the pain than any hope of actually getting away. The pressure wave from the air being pushed by

the next tire blew him almost out of the way. The side of the tire actually brushed his ass as he tumbled out from under.

He lay on the roadbed in agony, he heard one man yell to the other in Centish, “finish him off,” as he brought up his blaster. The guy was a fraction of a second too slow and hit the rim of the next front wheel. Dyoniss was curled up like a dying klizhorn, but he kicked himself toward the side of the road. The wounded truck began to make noise. That distracted the men while the next gap went by so they missed a chance to shoot him. He crawled closer to the edge. He was sure his heart had stopped beating from the charge he had taken, he wondered that he had half a leg that wasn’t paralyzed.

He heard more noise from the truck as he went over the side. He heard another blaster pop after the next truck, but he was already falling down the side of the tarstone embankment. He was too numb from his other pain to notice the jagged chunks that he rolled over. He heard more noise from the other side of the road as he fell, crunching and shattering, huge booms, screaming mrang, horse and human.

He hit the bottom with a heavy thud right on his back, his head lucky enough to land on a tussock and not a boulder. He thought the impact re-started his heart, he lay there gasping, thanking the God of Unanswered Questions for his life. His whole left side was painfully numb, clenched, immobile. There was a burn like from a one-inch coal right thru his outer shirt and worker and then his skin.

His guts felt like they had been chopped, boiled and mashed, but he regained the use of his legs and some use of

his right arm. He was able to get up and stagger. He headed toward the river. This side wasn't grazed by mrang, it seemed to be thesh that had recently been harvested, and he worked his way across it.

He was getting close to the far side when the convoy finally ended and the men could cross the motorway. One was talking on his pocket eye, the other uselessly pointed his blaster in his direction but the bolt didn't reach a third of the distance before it dissipated in the branches that Centorins call 'snake tongues.'

Somehow he made his legs run again, dragging his locked arm. An ornithopter skimmed over the motorway and turned in his direction, his pursuers pointing him out to the pilot. The thesh field had a barn, then some sheds. He ducked between them as the ornithopter passed over. It did not fire on him however, he could assume the pilot had not taken the antidote. The pilot might be concerned with the motorway crash and only doing Mikal's goons a favor.

He got to a street, people asked him what was wrong, all he could do was grunt, "blaster." There were ooh's and ahh's, people scattered. He wondered if they had grown familiar with this already, he wondered how the Temple had prepared them. Another block and the path became a stairway, another block and he was above the docks. It was small scale here, just farm boats and a few yachts, a couple floors of commercial space and three or four of residential right along the waterfront, but it was the northern end of Ragesse.

He made his way south on the street as fast as he could. He heard the commotion from his pursuers before he saw

them. They were already on the street when a streetcar went by them. They didn't get on it but kept jogging after him. With the last of his strength he caught that streetcar. Everyone screamed when the blasters came up and the driver waved the keda to a bolt. He tried, but couldn't quite get up there, still the fast twine that he did get to was enough to soon leave them out of sight.

He had to tell everyone on the streetcar what had happened. He used the opportunity to spread the word about the general, New West Trucking, the antidote smuggling and the fact that the Temple would like to know anything you see or it could be the death of Karasis.

One of the passengers was a medical specialist and he got off and went to her place. She had some salve for the blaster wound and a wand that helped get his arm loosened up.

"I thought you guys came here to get away from this," Delsa said as she plied the wand up and down his arm.

"I was born on a little farm on the edge of Hdengragger in the Ydlontrostl cities."

"You look Centorin," she said.

"And you look Nordic," he replied, "Or Dwarf." She was tall and dark copper blond, very busty and with a plush and sturdy body.

"I am from Passar, and glad to be from it. The cold, I could never go back to it now." Passar was two miles higher than Yashmi's house and three thousand miles south of Hardensburg on the equator.

"How long has it been?" Dyoniss asked. The pain in his

voice was lessening.

“Not quite a century,” she said. “I’m ready to go down the river any time, like as soon as I find a traveling companion.”

“I’m going back to Hdengragger in the Ydlontrostl cities but I don’t know how much artillery he’s got tracking me.”

“Does he have enough men and pills to guard every station?” she asked.

“He might, I don’t know. Have you got a lev-boat?”

She looked at him funny. “I’ve got a bike,” she said.

“You don’t look like the type...” then he saw her helmet.

“This was what drew me to the Centorin lands,” she said.

“It’s tricked out with a few hacks into grid control that’ll carry us anywhere and zero the track sheet afterward so any humans that see us will have to argue with the system as to whether we went by or not.”

Before heading to a tube station, he talked her into checking out the blaster factory. He didn’t have to actually promise sexual favors to entice her, but he didn’t stop her imagination from thinking a little pleasant petting was a promise of more. One of the mods she had on her bike was the ability to call up additional levels on what was routed as single level. She popped up to the fourth level on the lev rail route in front of the factory, eighty feet above the ground. There were at least a hundred ground vehicles there, each with four big tires, parked on the poisoned gravel that surrounded the building. There were rows of men in the yard of the factory, all with blasters and practicing military action.

They quickly brought the bike down and bought time

slots ahead of them as they became available. Her bike easily moved up into the new time slot and he had to hold her tighter. He'd gotten used to her body by now, for a while he was afraid he was going to be compelled by his body to grant sexual favors, in spite of how much Kessil was on his mind.

There was no doubt they had been seen, he got a mind-picture of three men breaking formation and pointing. Someone ahead reached a station and the beep of new time slots was quick for awhile and they surged ahead, so fast it was hard to breathe, at least a hundred miles per hour. Aeroplankton felt like rain at this speed.

She had a rerouting app that was supposed to be for system engineers and maintenance people only. She used that to get a time slot on the river path as they crossed it. On that route the coherent magnetism coils are buried in the river and six lanes of traffic in each direction flies above the water. One switches routes by the frightening maneuver of flying off the bridge and into a hole in the traffic flying over the river.

"I zeroed our track sheet again so they won't know what slot we're in. They'll know we're on the river, but I'm going to change behavior now and not buy additional time slots to move up." She keyed something on the bike's control panel. "I'm putting us into a lot at the third to last station before the long line down river." I won't do the last one because they might think that we have to get a tube when the lev rails run out. It's about thirty miles and all but the last three are above the river, so lets just enjoy the ride.

Dyoniss did just that, enjoying the scenery of Ragess going by, sneaking under bridges of Hardensburg now and

then. It got towards lunch time as they flew above the river. Near one of the Hardensburg office parks there was a quiet bayou where a few rows of twenty story apartment trees stood in the water of the slough. That was the center of Ragess and if you looked close you could see three of the five main halls that fronted that slough along Ragess Old Docks. Ninety seven percent of the live music that the nine million Centorins of Hardensburg saw was in those five halls in Ragess. It was an easy walk from there to Southeast Hardensburg Commuter Lot B which was near the high-rise office park. The parking lot became the party and only thirty percent of the people in the lot actually made it to one of the shows. Which was a good thing because they were already sold out. There are still almost three million people in Ragess and they went to live music about one hundred times as often as the average Centorin.

There are several small rivers that meet the North Ydlon during the hundred mile stretch where the North Ydlon makes it's ninety degree turn to the east. At those rivers there was often a row of twenty story apartment trees, long docks into the water and lots of kayaks in the water and on the racks. In the distance, the bulldozed savannah and plasticrete plains of the outskirts of Hardensburg could be seen. Ragess snakes thru the heart of Hardensburg, almost unchanged and very much a separate city with a separate economy and culture.

She set the bike parking to the maximum time allowed. "You only need to drop me off," he said.

"Remember I said I was ready to get out of here?"

"You don't have anything with you?"

“I’ve got my pouch and my pocket eye, that’s more than you’ve got.”

He didn’t need to be reminded that he’d lost one of the company pocket eyes on this trip, but learned everything he wanted to know in exchange. “I’ve got a home I need to get to.”

“You’ve got a tube ticket. I gave you the lev-bike ride, now you give me the tube ride.”

“But where will you go?”

“Away,” she said. “They can find me here, I know they can look up who’s bike was in that time slot, there was no one else out on this track when we went by. I can’t go home after this, they’re probably there already. I’m afraid to go home and you brought this on me. You’re the one who showed up blasted, with this horror story about how the Temple needs our help.”

“We thank you.”

“Are you an acolyte?”

“Just a member,” he answered.

She was leading the way to the tube station at a brisk pace. “Shouldn’t we get some lunch first?” Dyoniss asked.

She turned to him and kept her voice down, “I know a place less than fifty minutes down river, they won’t have anyone there.”

That would be near one of the towns where the rivers joined. He didn’t even remember their names. She wound up almost jogging, his body couldn’t take it and he lagged back. He could follow the signs, even in Centish. She waited up for him. “I shouldn’t forget you just got blasted.”

“I think it’s the hangover that’s slowing me down more than the wound at this point, that and the fact that we’re missing lunch.”

“Some action hero you are,” she said and pulled him along.

21. Escape From Boomig

“I really need to get going,” Kessil said as he lead her across the formal dining room to the breakfast bar, which could seat eight in a bay window overlooking the flower gardens that were between the house and the vegetable garden.

“You need to eat anyway...” he started.

“I could grab a zhlindu roll at a street cook and eat it in the tube car.”

“There’s something I need to discuss with you,” he said.

She wondered what it was, a list of things ran thru her mind. “What’s that?” she asked. She hoped it wasn’t about the antidote because she was too suspicious he might be on the wrong side. He might threaten her if she withheld any more evidence from them, he might offer to make her his sex slave. She wouldn’t take a position as sex slave, not even to Dyoniss, even if it was mutual. They had to think rationally about their health even if their hearts wanted to do it.

He sat her at the table, signaled the serving staff. They brought out tea, a strong leathery one, thick with gloribard nectar. Vedn puffs were with it, lightly frosted and flaky. There was a set of dainty tongs to hold the puffs with. The home she wanted was closer to the camp the guys in her mother’s tribe made while out on a drive than this. She wasn’t going to use the silly things, but his servant would be washing them anyway so she went ahead and used them, just to prove that she could.

“You’re earning three coppers a year right now, am I right?”

“I’m not complaining,” she said. When she lived in her kayak, if she earned a whole copper in a year she saved half of it. She remembered living on an iron a week, week after week.

“You’re worth aluminum you know.”

She’d saved up for a century to get the aluminum and forty she had in her house fund, and thirty of that was from selling the top floors of the townhouse she used to call home. “Mbeshna’s not doing so well right now and it’s all supply side, we just don’t have the air to deliver.”

“You’ve been with Mbeshna a long time.”

“Yeah we go back. He had more energy himself then. He overhauled fifty one and sixty three himself and fifty one’s still running.”

“Do you do overhauls?” he asked.

“The grunt work, no,” she said. “I’m not too keen on going up the tower myself, especially those ancient things with the external stairways.”

He picked up a puff with the delicate tongs and nibbled on it. She put the whole thing in her mouth and chewed it up. It was mostly air and sugar powder, the dough was toasted flaky. When he finished one he asked, “Did you ever think of working for a manufacturer, say as Chief of Facilities or something like that?”

“Not really,” she said, “I’ve got enough stress for my liking already and the commute’s already too long.”

“The commute could be as little as four floors if you like

an urban life, or a quarter mile if you like an estate more like this.”

She guessed he was talking about their main plant which was just within the traditional boundary of Boomig Principate, but in a neighborhood called the ridges which was more like Hdengragger than Boomig. It was two and a half hours by needleboat from Dyoniss, and she wasn't going to consider it until her affair with him was over. “No, I wouldn't want to move. Just in case this conversation is more than hypothetical, I want you to know I'm happy with my life, I have the right mix of challenge, ease, excitement and peace.” It was too early to claim a relationship with Dyoniss, but even the hope of a relationship with Dyoniss was enough to make her stay in eastern Hdengragger. “Maybe some day I'll get tired of it, but I say that only because I need to keep an open mind, I can't actually imagine it happening.”

“You can have that and a lot more, you can be much more important...”

“My current importance fits my sense of responsibility. If I was more important I would feel more pressure because I would be responsible for more people. Right now I'm not really responsible for people, just things and things are much simpler to operate.”

“So you don't want to better yourself.”

She wondered if she should tell him how much ‘bettering’ she had already done, from sleeping in a kayak and working day jobs to a respected career and enough savings to buy a fine home of her own. But more important than that, she thought she had a real chance to share a life again. She

wouldn't tell him her most important reason for staying where she was, he'd just call her a lovesick dreamer. "I just don't measure 'better' by counting beads of any particular metal," she said. "I could have advanced, sometimes I wish I did so I could kick some butt and get some of those wheels working again, but I'm not up for the politics of it, for measuring every word."

The next course was crispy egg flats with slivers of butternut and nive in it. This came with another set of delicate tongs and a stiletto to cut it. It was more of the same set of plates, she idly wondered how many he had. At Tarreck's house there was a plate, a bowl, four knives (counting her kitchen knife and the plains knife her grandfather had given her), a tea kettle, two cook pots and a frying pan. She couldn't see the kitchen here, even though they were in it. All that could be seen from the breakfast table was a buffet counter and a wet bar.

They ate this in silence for awhile. It was pretty good, but she hoped there would be fruit soon. Often that was all she had at breakfast. "I understand you play khable?" he asked.

"Only picnic," she said.

"You could be on a league."

"If I was your chief of facilities and lived in Boomig."

"Aren't there leagues in Hdengragger?"

"Not like here, there's guys who get together and play often, and pastures they are allowed to play, but there are not manicured courses where the grazers are only there to manage the course and not the other way around, where all it

takes is money to get in.” She let him know how the stakes were higher to get on a ‘league’ in Hdengragger. In Hdengragger the keda was the one who *actually* controlled who played in his field, and some kedas are poor sports and won’t accept you on the league that plays in their field if you don’t let them win.

“Which do you prefer?” he asked.

“On the open prairie actually, no out of bounds and a tenth of a mile between wickets and it’s a two day game that ends when the light does.”

“Sounds romantic,” he said. She wondered if he knew that was how the sport originated. “Speaking of which, thank you so much for the sleep.” He squeezed her hand gently. “You are a true delight.”

“Thanks, I had fun too,” was as much as she could say without lying. She was actually a little sore, not still tingling with delight like she was after a sleep or even a brief encounter with Dyoniss. She was even more sure that a sexual superhero was not who she wanted to share a home bed with. Not that Yellgnoskn was a superhero, but he was enhanced over what nature intended and he pumped with more vigor than optimally pleasing.

“Another benefit of being in this area. Mysrath is nearby also.”

“Ah,” she said. “How intimate a relationship would the Chief of Facilities have with the other senior officers of the company?”

“As intimate as she wanted.”

“Would there be a certain minimum required?”

“Well, I don’t think we could be together often and refuse all contact without insulting each other.”

“An interesting policy,” she said. She knew ‘all contact’ would be defined as Yellgnoskn saw fit. No doubt the position included a stipulation that she would owe him all the sex he desired. “One that Mbeshna does not have.” She hardly ever saw him and had never gotten more from him than a polite squeeze now and then. Mbeshna granted the favor four or five times a year and Kessil had never even been considered.

“Are you monogamous?” he asked.

“Where were you last sleep? I didn’t even say I wasn’t in favor of your policy, I just asked what it was, pointed out that it was different from the life I have now. You’d have an easier time talking me into coming down here every year or two if somebody pays for the tube,” she said.

“You could pay for the tube.”

“I *could*, but I can walk to the Blue Kite.” She could be five hours getting home from here on streetcar and foot. “I live forty minutes from the nearest tube station.”

“There are professionals closer than the tube station.”

The tube station was a tenth of a mile from his house. “And as you know, the only thing professional about me is engineering.”

“None of the professionals in this neighborhood are as good as Noonsleep was,” he said and kissed the back of her hand. She couldn’t help laughing, she had to keep the food out of her nose. She couldn’t imagine professionals so pathetic. She swallowed then bent over bellowing. “What?” he pleaded, still holding her hand.

“Yellgnoskn, I was born in the 115th on the prairie. When I first ate solid food, it was cooked over an open fire on a grate over a ring of stones burning mrang pies.”

“You’ve come a long way,” he choked.

“I’ve come far enough. I’ve read stories with lines like that, seen them on the screen too but it was over the taps and the sound was off.”

“Maybe because of that you are better...”

“In that time I’ve never taken a genetic pill.”

“Maybe that is why you are better,” he said.

The same girl brought over some muffins, lightly toasted with fruit jelly on them. There were four each, each with a different jelly.

“After this I really have to get going. The tube station is straight down the main street? That’s not far beyond the end of the front path?”

“We still have a battered ensal flakes and a pastry coming out.”

“That’s far too much for me, I’d never be able to get up and about.”

“I still have a lot to talk to you about, and what do you have to do today?”

“I’ve got notes to enter and mail to check, stuff I should have done yesterday. I’m responsible for the garden at the place where I’m staying, so I need to get back before dark and I’m afraid I’m getting behind the weeds.”

“That’s fifteen hours from now, and you’ve still got the

miles on your tube pass.”

“What more do you have to talk about?”

“You’re making a big decision here,” Yellgnoskn told her.

“It’s not such a big decision for me, all you can offer me is money, and for that I have to give up my my life and become someone else. These are good by the way, and thanks for not having some kind of dainty little tongs to pick them up with.”

“I can offer you much more than money, I can offer you a future.”

“We live in the present,” as many of the Temple’s teachers had taught.

“Think of your future with Mbeshna, that witch is going to take Old Eleven out of production before this is over. He’s going to have to send someone in a floater with a grappling hook to re-take that tower after she seizes the wheel. Who knows if the whole tower comes down. Mark my words, when this is over Mbeshna will have only two wheels turning. Where is your future Kessil?”

“I can find work servicing automated irrigation equipment,” she said, “probably nearer to home than I am now.” She knew fifteen or sixteen customers she could sign up on her first walk-around. She might not make a copper some years, but she would make two some others.

“You would do that?”

“I could get by if I made one copper a year, I just wouldn’t go down to the river so often.”

“You could go as often as you like,” he said.

“Who makes these muffins?” she asked.

“This isn’t about the muffins.”

“Well I don’t want it to be about Chief of Facilities any more.”

“I could find a different place in the organization, not so stressful as all that. I couldn’t pay aluminum for that, but thirty coppers instead of three. You can go down to the river quite often on that, on the tubes.”

It was ten iron each way on the tubes to the river, it was four iron counting meals and rooms and two weeks on a coach, and she usually met the guy she spent the year with on the coach. “I’d feel like a kept woman with all of that. I don’t think you were listening when I said I already have the life I want and that right now is a not good time to make this offer. Maybe next year I’ll have a change of heart.”

“I need to know today, before you leave the house,” Yellgnoskn said.

“Today, it is no, thank you.” She picked up the last of the muffins and stared across it at him. He stared back at her, clearly losing his temper and trying to fight it. “You’re having a hard time understanding the word ‘no’ aren’t you?” she asked.

He looked slapped. “It’s not an answer I accept,” he said.

A chill of fear went thru her, she shouldn’t have watched Centorin movies. That line often introduced an action scene. “I’m sorry, I’m not ready to make a move now,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm. She bit into the last of the muffins.

“You should think about it and not be so hasty. I could make a big difference in your life.”

“My life is fine, I told you that. I don’t want any difference in my life.”

“Mbeshna will be gone by the end of the century, mark my words.”

“A lot can happen in that time.” She finished the muffin, she was not staying for the next course. She was getting quite uncomfortable here. She grabbed her bag and stood up.

He stood in the path to the main salon and the street, “Wait, Kessil, you don’t understand. Things are happening, things that are going to make a difference in your life, in all our lives. I have two more courses to tell you about it.”

She was sure it was things she didn’t want to know. She tried to duck by him, he moved to block her. It was happening right now wasn’t it? Things were falling apart just from the threat of the antidote. Why else would he have people taking apart a blaster in the other room? She should have bolted for the front door while she had the chance. They were now face to face, he was wider than her, but not much taller. He probably didn’t know that she knew Dyoniss, had heard the story from Ragnar, been run into by the Centorin hit man and knew what a blaster was and that there was antidote around. “I think I understand perfectly now,” she said, as calmly as she could with her heart going the way it was.

She turned and bolted. There was a hallway the other side of the breakfast bar. No doubt it went to the service entrance, at least she hoped it did. “Kessil, are you crazy?” he said as he ran after her, “I can make more than a positive difference in your life you know,” he shouted as he pulled out that Centorin pocket eye.

The service door led to a cart dock sheltered from the outside, she vaulted it and kept going. “I will make a difference in your life Kessil, you can’t just run away from me.” He pressed a button near the door into the loading dock and a big door like an oversized wall mat made of plastiboard started coming down, but it was slow. She sprinted and rolled under it while it was still almost three feet off the ground. A road ran around the mansion toward the front, she ran down that toward the street.

Those two men in the office she had blundered into came out of a door right in front of her at a dead run. She was glad to see they didn’t have a blaster with them, but their aggression made her worry that they might be under the antidote. They shouted as she darted the other way, picking up speed as she dashed across the garden. There was a woman out here working, Kessil vaulted her. One of the men after her tried to do the same and missed, knocking them both over and making the farm woman scream. The other went around thru the rows and tripped. She rolled over the trellis and fence easily to the neighbor’s garden, a spread with more garden and quite a bit less house.

No one pursued her beyond Yellgnoskn’s property, but she had run to the end of the next path by the time she noticed that. She was winded by now, she didn’t do a lot of running in normal life, just enough to catch the streetcar, or dancing around in the waves at the river. She was between some prosperous farms, all tended by tenants of course. The street had more tending than karga alone can provide, the front gardens were almost all flowers. The street was paved with big, well-cut stone blocks, of several different colors and laid

in patterns. The erosion was less than an inch deep on them, meaning they were laid a couple centuries ago at most. The names of the homes were cut in stone on plinths marking their front paths. Few in Hdengragger had any kind of sign at the path, not even a scrap of board with the name painted on. If they did have one, it just proclaimed what produce they sold.

The growth was low and well pruned, the street was sunny and lush. The sweet scent of blooms was thick on the breeze, and all the fall flowers were here and all were open. The flutter of butterflies almost drowned out the lumins. Stone facades in front of coachwood and gnarl homes were common. A fine private coach rumbled by, it's windows curtained, it's keda in fancy harness. Thru the curtains she saw the shadow of a woman who did not look up from her book. The keda himself was a fine maroon-vein with deep green eyes and manes. He was haughty as his passenger, with no driver, and gave her only a quick glance with one eye.

She wasn't familiar with the streets in Boomig at all so it took her a quarter hour to find her way to the tube line and follow that to a station. She composed a message describing the whole incident while riding a needleboat from the tube station to her office. She sent it to Mbeshna, Eleeson, Hamthish, the Blue Kite media office and an expanded version with more background info to the Temple.

It was hard to keep her mind on matters at hand while she checked messages and responded. People were complaining about the hold up in gasket wheel production. Seventeen

techs needed one, one for as long as four weeks. She keyed in a brief report, sent it to everyone. She sent additional notes to the people who needed to act to get production started again. She could not, in good conscious, resist citing the sermon on the Instinct and say she had reported an incident, and urged them all to report any incident they witnessed or were a part of. Word of mouth is the most effective advertising. Because Tuuklon actually had a positive impression of her emails, she hoped her personal message would do some good.

Actually she wanted to scream at them all about the Instinct and what Yellgnoskn had tried. She mentioned some of it to the guy who would be allocating materials for gasket wheels, someone she knew fairly well and had checked genes with at least once every two or three years. She wondered how much longer normal life would go on before everyone panicked and nothing worked any more. It couldn't be much. No doubt there would be fallout from this incident, this was clearly more serious than what had happened at the mansion in the spring. There had been no physical violence at that, just some hurtful name calling.

She should have declined his offer of noonmeal right at the beginning of all this. If Dyoniss wasn't away she certainly would have, well, assuming Dyoniss kept inviting her to his place. Her feeling was he would, that they would go at least a year, then see where it went. If nothing else, she should have declined Yellgnoskn because of what he said back in the spring. Mbeshna could fault her for for accepting his invitation in the first place, enough so he might not find a new supplier.

Tuuklon messaged her just before thirtieth hour, apologizing that the Afternoonday shift had been distracted when the light pipe from the suntower broke and plunged the labs into Nightday. Two virgin fittings had been fetched from stores and checked to be sure the nanocannon was there, but no further progress had been made toward methods to disable the nanocannon. Because lantern fuel had been used during the break in the light pipe, there was not enough to run a full schedule on Nightday and the fittings would wait til Morningday. This time was not coming off the time he was budgeted, and only four hours had been charged to the project since she left the building. She wondered if this was a hidden message, that she had to come back to headquarters and schmooze the project along if it was going to get anywhere.

It was quite late in the day, time to start thinking about starting duskmeal, when she finally got to go home. On her way by, Yashmi greeted her from Zestin's, "Never would have thought Dyoniss would be back from Hardensburg before you made it back from Kyoith."

"He's back?" she was astounded, "I thought he would be gone at least two weeks?" She was standing in the middle of Saseraik Walk looking under the lifted door looking at Yashmi, who was sitting next to the tap on a stool.

"He had to escape, wait til he tells you what happened."

Her pulse quickened, and she moved to the stool next to her, near where Zestin's other arm was. He had moved to fetch a house cup and pour her one. "I'm lucky I made it back, wait til I tell you what happened."

22. Safe at Home?

Dyoniss so so glad to wake up alive, in his own bed, well rested and comfortable, and with Kessil in his arms. Delsa was still with them but she slept in the guest cubby and hadn't pestered him for sex once she saw him with Kessil. He'd come damn close in the tube car, and did give her orgasm twice, one before they even stopped for lunch. She hadn't mentioned it since Kessil arrived, it was like she thought he and Kessil had been together for decades.

They had all stayed up too late for dusk, retelling everything and trying to think of something they could do. Dyoniss could pursue the case, try to find that bottle of the antidote. Kessil explained the nanocannon in the fittings and wondered if that could be part of the same plot. They compared notes.

Now that he knew how to use a pocket eye, Kessil let him use hers, even though they were already into dark rates. She had a list of track sheets from the sorters when the gaskets failed. One of the packages was addressed to the Hyonimus on the sixty seventh floor of the Blue Kite, another had a 'Merry Christmas Starkey' hand written label attached. There were seven furball coils ordered by New West Trucking altogether. He wondered if the others hadn't been stolen, or if they just hadn't reported them?

That was all the proof he needed to make the connection. Seven blown gaskets, seven thefts. He knew he had to get to Bintar's. If that was where the package was stolen again, they

probably were related and she was a major player in the battle against the antidote.

Now that it was Nightday, their speculations were only worse. They all sat around the breakfast table, afraid to have much light, afraid to make much noise because they were afraid to cover the sound of anyone approaching. He was on the end of the bench, Kessil was next to him and his arm was around her loosely, she was leaning into him a little. Yashmi was in the stool across from him, Delsa was behind her. They leaned over the table to keep their voices down. A single small candle burned in a low urn.

“I’m really worried about Ragnar,” Yashmi said.

“Tomorrow it will be two weeks since anyone has seen him.”

“What about all your stuff back in Rages?” Kessil asked Delsa.

“I have someone I can contact to watch my house, but I’m not going back there while there are blaster armies who know I’ve seen them.”

“About all we can do is tell it to the Temple,” Kessil said, “This isn’t something we can take on by ourselves.”

“There’s more I can do,” Dyoniss said. “I can go look into what happened in Bintar’s sorting room when the machine went down,” he looked at Kessil. “That was real close to the time the twice stolen package would have been there.”

“The Kassikan is going to have to catch it as it comes thru from Centorin,” Delsa said.

“We can’t rely on that,” Dyoniss said, “Though the Temple said they are going to do all they can to help. One of

the problems is there's no good way to make a detector for it."

"They'll have to open any liquids," Delsa said.

"They could start shipping tablets," Kessil said. "It would soon come down to opening every package."

"Soon the highliner will be here and the stargate will close," Dyoniss told them, "then only the Centorin military and the space-borne cargo of the great houses will move between stars. The Kassikan will have no control."

"How long until that highliner gets here?" Delsa asked.

"Half a century," Dyoniss answered.

"I think it's worth it to open them all now," Delsa said.

"There's too many," Dyoniss said, "there's tens of thousands every day."

"How much trouble is our way of life worth?" Kessil asked. "It's not just here, it's all the basins, well, except for maybe the Goblins and Orcs, but most basins don't want to live like Centorins."

"Most of the Centorins who come here don't want to live like Centorins," Delsa said. "Most of them love it here, even though we think they are living just like they are still in the Empire, to them Hardensburg is camping."

"I heard the same thing while I was out there," Dyoniss added.

"Well I still think we should tell it to the Temple," Yashmi said.

"I'll go with you," Kessil said.

"I'll go too," Dyoniss said, "but then I want to get down

to Bintar's sorting house."

"You really think your Temple can do anything?" Delsa asked. "This isn't really a religious issue."

"Anything that effects us all is a concern of the Temple," Kessil told her. As a Nordic from Passar who lived in Hardensburg as much as Ragess, Delsa might not have a lot of info on what the Temple did. "It is more like the Kassikan of this basin as well as our faith. Almost all the science in this basin is conducted by the Temple, about half the teaching in the basin is done by the Temple. They provide advisers and conferences for economics, environment, employment, housing and urban design, crops and plague management, almost everything that concerns everyone." Dyoniss also knew that the old Nordic religions had a problem with the fact that Karasis had nothing to do with the supernatural.

The four of them hiked up to the tower and climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. He could have used his elevator key, but the weight would have been way over the limit for a single passenger. It was acolyte Tombess who saw them, in a tiny cubicle that caused Kessil and Delsa to practically sit on Dyoniss's lap.

"Well," Tombess said when they were all squeezed in, "we *are* one."

Delsa was the only one who didn't get the humor in that.

They spent a half hour narrating their tales. Tombess wrote it all down on three separate sheets, one for Kessil's experience at Yellgnoskn's, one for the blaster manufacturing and another for Dyoniss's encounter with his father.

“How are you going to stop them?” Delsa asked when his notes were all together.

“That is a difficult question,” he answered. “The Centorins aren’t one with us, so we cannot get to them thru social means. They do not live in the moment, and they do not believe that we are all one. They are not tuned to nature, they do not see beauty as a reward. For some among them their only goal is power over others.”

“So what good does it do for us to come here?” she asked.

“Very much good. Information is what we need. Because we cannot influence them thru council, it is believed we will need a scientific solution. I can’t say what it will look like yet, because none of us knows. I do know the Kassikan and Brancetrabble have been contacted and are lending assistance.”

“What kind of scientific solution?” Delsa asked.

“We haven’t settled on a course of action yet, some avenues are being explored. We do know that whatever course of action is decided on, it will likely be more effective if the Centorins involved are not forewarned of our actions.”

“So you won’t tell us anyway?” she asked.

“I would not be informed if a course of action had been decided on,” he said.

“So how will I know when it’s safe to go home?” she asked.

“There was mention of Christmas in the Empire calendar,” Dyoniss said. “That will be next Voratainin. It’s a guess on my part, but I think whatever they’re planning will be over by then.”

“If you went by the river you’ll still be aboard ship at that time,” Kessil said.

“I’d have to work my way, I have a copper and four left.”

“You could go on one of the Shingharm boats,” Dyoniss said, “if they’re still running. But that reminds me,” He got out his clue sheet and relayed all the Elf girl in Vnassvuur told him.

As they left, Tombess said that this was important enough that they would pay dark rates to get it sent to Yuhai and on to the Temple in Ragess at first light. That was not a large Temple because the Centorins did not join and discouraged participation by their employees. The other immigrants to the area seldom joined, like the Elf girl he met in Vnassvuur and Delsa. Still they had a hundred thousand members and they were on the front lines.

Bintar’s sorting room was on the old canal about a mile and a half from the Eastern Terminus. That was just beyond the worst of the ruined section, but there was no good way to get there but to follow the canal. Within a mile of the Terminus are the meanest streets in Hdengragger, maybe in the whole Ydlontrostl cities. The neighborhood is ruins from as much as a hundred centuries ago, reclaimed with tarp and stick, inhabited by burn-outs and scrounges. Few did street duty in the area, so it was lined with festering trash, the back streets were worse. Dingy markets in stolen goods were common, but kept just out of sight behind an ancient stone wall or piles of old crates.

If there was one of his father’s men with the antidote

trailing him, this would be the place for him to strike. A dark and dreary Nighday would be the perfect time. Few were in Karasis in this neighborhood, few would lend a hand or even bear witness. Normally he wasn't nervous in this area, there would be panhandlers, probably more today because he dressed well enough to appear at the Temple and at Bintar's business office.

Instead people watched him with sullen eyes in the dim light of fitful candles in front of the legitimate businesses. No panhandlers approached, even the shills in front of the gambling holes were still. It could be the weather, it was raw and frost was likely by Dawnsleep, maybe even freezing rain. It was early in the year to be this cold, many considered Thlollala to be in the early fall.

Still it seemed like what he'd heard at Temple was coming true already. As soon as we can't trust our safety, we can't trust anything. People wouldn't come out, business would be down. Cultural events would lose attendance as people interacted with each other only the minimum needed to survive. Interaction would be reduced to eye messages and voice connections. He doubted these people knew how extensive the threat was, he doubted they had heard the sermon, but still they seemed to be reacting to it. This is the time when we should draw closer to each other, he worried that it would be the opposite.

At Bintar's sorting house there was a long dock. Drivers handed net bags full of packages to people on the docks and received other bags of packages in return, which they

immediately pulled out with. The sorting house is little more than a single room. There's cages in the front with incoming and outgoing bundles. The incoming bundles go to a guy who feeds them into the sorting machine. He puts them onto a conveyor at the front of the machine, it has cameras looking at the labels, it drops the packages into bags sorted by outgoing route.

The guy feeding the machine seemed to be the one in charge. "Who should I see about machine logs for Ekendosa Afternoonday?" Dyoniss asked him.

He got a questioning look and the answer, "Me, I'm Bintar, who are you, someone from Mbeshna power? Ekendosa Afternoonday was when we had the supply failure."

"That's what I'm here about, but I'm with the Kyonmeere agency, not Mbeshna."

"If you're investigating them, it's about time. But the gasket's nothing, Tolleck had it fixed in minutes, he happened to be here at the time. It's too bad about him."

"What about him?"

"He drowned in the canal a week later."

"Are you sure?"

"He was Recognized at the Terminus Temple, but we're getting off the subject. They need to get that witch under control is what they need to do. The pressure's low, I can tell."

"I'm here about a package that went thru here about the time the power went down."

"What about it?"

“I have reason to suspect the contents were stolen.”

“Here?” he said. “On a Morningday? Never happen.”

“I’d like to see the logs for the package, if I could, I have all the tracking numbers.”

He blew out a breath, called to a chubby guy who was inspecting a pile of the bags they used. “You get to sort for a few minutes.” He lead Dyoniss to a corner of the room where there was a worktable and lots of paper racks. He got a thick folder down from one of them and opened it on the worktable. “Let me see your labeling.”

Dyoniss still had copies of the photos in his shoulderpocket, he got those out. He began running his finger down the page, comparing numbers on some of the lines to the ones on the label. He noticed the log was very much like the ones from the tube systems.

“Here’s your package entering the machine,” Dyoniss saw there was a track sheet assigned, just like in a tube system log. Bintar scrolled a ways, “Here’s your package at imaging,” more scrolling, and a flip of the page “at sort actuation,” still more, “at bagging.” He flipped a few pages down the log with his finger on a different column. “Here’s bag unload by the operator.” He flipped a few more pages, “Here’s the power failure. Your package was in outgoing by then, might have even made it to a boat.”

“So what happened when the power went down?” he asked.

“The machine stopped moving,” the chubby one said, I was on Morningday that week also. “Most of us went to see what was wrong with the power. We use Mbeshna because

they used to be the most reliable.”

“Certainly not any more,” Bintar said, almost glaring at Dyoniss. They had probably all seen that Mbeshna power meant something to him.

“It’s those ancient windwheels,” a guy bringing out a few bags said. “They need to build some new ones.”

“Then their power won’t be cheap,” the chubby one said.

“But at least it will be reliable,” Bintar said.

He met total denial that the package weight had changed while in the possession of Bintar Express. All he really learned was that the package was shipped out to Relman’s for pickup. Relman’s is a little package office on the canal, probably the closest to the Varshan-Vrluuva. He hoped he could find someone there who remembered the weight of the box.

By the time he got to Relman’s, a numbing rain was falling and he was already chilled from the needleboat ride and needed to piss badly by the time he got off. Relman’s was smaller than small, just a booth near the canal with a faded sign and a skinny guy in it trying to read by the light of a naked candle.

“I need to inquire about a package that came thru here on Afternoondays of Ekendosa.”

“You’ll have to see Tulkon, he works Afternoondays. None of us leave our paperwork here in the booth, we bring it up to Relman’s house after every shift.”

“Where can I find Tulkon?”

“A foul Nightday like this, probably at home.”

“And where is that?”

“I think he’s got a place up the canal now, towards the terminus, I don’t know just where.”

“What about Relman?”

“You might find him in the Skyball,” one of the raciest clubs in Hdengragger, “or at the Flaming Nail,” a private freak club that Dyoniss would have to sneak into.

“Do you log the weight of the package?”

“No, just the tracking number, addressee and signature.”

“Who would know an address for Tulkon?”

“Some of his friends might, but I don’t know any of them.”

The icy rain soaked thru him once again as he rode the needleboat up the canal, he wondered if this was worth it. They knew where the antidote was coming from, they knew where it was going. How much profit was there in knowing every step in between? If they were to stop one sequence, how many more were there? Still this was what he did, and he didn’t really know how to end a case except by solving it.

He took lunch in an area he didn’t really want to eat in, but in the process he got to ask many people if they knew a guy named Tulkon. No one there did. He got to walk up and down both sides of the canal front, drinking thin yaag in places he’s rather not be in. One of the burn-outs in one of them happened to overhear him asking the keg man.

“I know a guy named Tulkon, what you want to see him for?”

“He works at Relman’s package drop. I need to ask him the weight of a certain package he handled.”

“And why is that?”

“I’m trying to determine when the contents were stolen the second time.”

The man thought awhile, then asked, “Would there be a reward in it for him?”

“A small one maybe.”

“What about for information leading you to Tulkon?”

“A small one maybe,” he said.

The guy held out his empty cup, “Big enough to fill that?” he asked.

Dyoniss passed it to the kegman, the kegman knew who it was for and didn’t have to ask what he wanted, alcohol pure enough to use for lantern fuel. Dyoniss got out his note paper. At least the shoulderpocket had kept it dry.

“He’s down the canal about half a mile, there’s an alley called It-Relig but I think the sign’s come down. It’s the second alley passed the Higgren Fish Market. It’s two turns down, a nice place for plank-up, with a door and a boarded roof. I think he’s even got a stove and bathroom in there.”

It took some time to find the place, and the rain had only gotten colder. His fingers were numb and lunch was churning, but partly that was from his shivering. The place was in a stone wall that had been a warehouse or factory ten or twenty centuries ago. The stone was eroded and everything else about the former use of the structure was gone. One of the former freight doors was planked in with two small barred

windows and a wooden door. The wood was all scrap wood and looked like it had been worked into shape with an ax. It was innocent of paint or other finish, and old enough that the moss on it was thick. There was a framed roof above, but it was just a frame for a tarp. The water ran off it right in front of the door so it splattered on the pavement.

He called at the door. He heard nothing, but thought he saw a face at the small window next to it. There were no lights inside and Dyoniss couldn't keep his torch going in this rain so it was black on black.

"Don't know you," came a voice from inside.

"Dyoniss, of the Kyonmeere agency, I want to ask you about a package that went thru Relman's on your shift."

"Eh? Better come in, weather's not fit for a dead mrang." The door opened and a candle sparked. Its light illuminated a man that might have been a Dwarf if it wasn't for his size, easily five ten and two hundred pounds with a long, wide body and short thick legs, thick bushy beard and hair, quite curly, and streaked with white. At least part Kinundan no doubt, quite a few of them got here in the late 112th.

"You're right it's not," Dyoniss agreed about the weather. The space planked in was about fifteen feet square. There were some bags on the floor, a few small shelves planked to the back wall and a small table. There was a water bowl with hose over it, a nice but used toilet and a single stool. Tulkon did not sit or invite Dyoniss to do so. Dyoniss tried to stay over bare floor and not drip on anything. There were so many bags around that it wasn't easy.

"So, a package at Relmans?" Tulkon said.

“It would have been late in third hour of Afternoonday of week Ekendosa.”

“Of this year?”

“Yes,” Dyoniss said.

“Ekendosa?”

Dyoniss tried to shake enough water off himself that he could handle the paper in his shoulderpocket without getting it soaked. His sleeves were so wet that he had to squeeze the water out of them. He tried to get it into the water bowl.

“That’s almost five weeks ago now,” he said, and looked like he was trying to remember.

“I’ve got a picture of the package,” Dyoniss said, “but I don’t want to ruin it.”

“I’ve been using that duskwrap on the peg right there as a towel.”

It wasn’t the most absorbent piece of cloth ever woven, but it helped enough and it was obviously scrounged. There were some in this neighborhood who would still wear it. He got out his folder, showed him the picture of the package.

“Yeah, I remember that, felt like it had a handle of whiskey in it, was tempted to open it.”

Dyoniss’s heart picked up, was this an admission? “Did you?”

“No sir I did not, I admit I was tempted, and if it had been later in the day and the tape job wasn’t so good, I might have opened it and took a little nip of it, but that package was intact when it was picked up.”

“Would you recognize the person who picked it up?”

Dyoniss asked.

“More or less, you’ve got a picture of her right there,” he said, pointing at the picture of Korshii sending it at Pictish-Pickam, “near as I can tell.”

On the way to Korshii’s Dyoniss stopped and bought a new denseknit darkworker and a rain slicker. He’d needed a new rain slicker for two years now, but never got stuck in weather like this so picking one up hadn’t been high on his priority list. He rolled up his wet clothes and had a strap on his shoulderpocket to tie the bundle on.

He didn’t want to be at a disadvantage when he confronted her. He wanted to pretend he didn’t know. He wanted to get samples of her handwriting, preferably enough to find the syllables ‘vem’ and ‘nya’ to compare with the signatures on the paperwork. At the very least, enough to get each phoneme.

Once he had that, he would mention that Tulkon recognized her picture and see where she took that. He didn’t think she herself had any use for a half gallon of the antidote to the Instinct. If it really was whiskey, he could believe she could take it. If it was the antidote, she handed it off to someone, and he wanted to find out who that was.

Korshii was not answering the speaking tube, he wondered if she was out. It wasn’t until he tried the door and found it unlatched that he really started to worry. It wasn’t unlocked, but was barely closed. He went into the house, saying a few words of greeting in case any neighbors were

watching. He found it in moderate disarray. It had been gone thru, the person going thru it had not been terribly careful, but had not gone out of his or her way to trash the place. He looked around and listened, the house was silent. He pictured someone leaving hastily and not taking care with the door.

His best guess was Korshii had bolted. Maybe she'd gotten word somehow while he was dallying buying new clothes. Maybe she hadn't bolted at all but just madly scrambled for her theater tickets and dashed out to Darkmeal and left the door ajar herself.

He went thru her papers, looking for something she had written. There was some poetry that he was pretty sure was hers, a whole notepad of it. It was erotic, but touching at the same time. There were plenty of examples of 'vem' and a couple of 'nya'. He couldn't take the whole notebook, but he could compare the syllables himself. When he did so, there was no doubt in his mind that Korshii had written both Vemnya signatures that were in his possession, and done so with no attempt to disguise her handwriting at all.

He wondered if he should wait for her to get back. If she had bolted, he would wait a long time, if she ran out for the evening, it would no doubt be an interesting scene when she got home. She would hardly be coming home alone. If the guy was someone she knew well, he would defend her, if it was someone she just met, he would probably leave. If she had kept some of the antidote for herself, there could be trouble.

Dyoniss decided to take a look around the house to determine if she had bolted or gone out for the evening. On

the second floor he found she had left the heater on. It wasn't about to run out either, there was two thirds of a bag of fuel left in it. This could mean she was in so much of a hurry she forgot it, or it could mean she was only going out for a couple hours and wanted the room to still be warm when she got back. There was a big mime-dance show in one of the bigger auditoriums of Hdengragger center this Nightday, she probably ran out to that.

It smelled like she'd eaten here and grilled some meat, even burned a bit of it. He looked around the kitchen and saw she had also cleaned up. But the smell seemed to be coming down the stairs. His snifter was a cuff band today, beadwork like the one he wore as a wrist band in the light. The glow told him he was right, it was stronger at the stairs. He got to the hallway on the third floor and didn't need the snifter to tell him it was coming from the fourth floor. He was really scared now and ran up the last flight of stairs.

She was sprawled in the middle of the bed, unmoving. In the center of her forehead, was the blackest and deepest burned hole, burn marks radiated from that all across her forehead. He knew this was the work of a big blaster, used execution style. At close range in the frontal lobe, death is instantaneous. What Centorin crime dramas call a 'merciful removal.'

23. Girls in the Dark

Once Dyoniss went off to Bintar's, Kessil was a little afraid to go out on the streets, and Yashmi and Delsa were no help. They got as far as the balcony of the Blue Kite. They each got a cup of yellow at a back-row tap and found a table in an out-of-the-way corner where they wouldn't be noticed. The place was thinly populated this time of day.

"Here's hoping the temple'll soon find an antidote to the antidote," Yashmi said and raised her cup.

They clinked, "I'm for that," Delsa said.

"As am I," Kessil said. "Thank you once again for saving Dyoniss," she said to Delsa.

"Oh he'd have lived, I just made him a little more comfortable."

"Even that," Yashmi said, "we owe you. You can stay on the landing as long as you want. We'll make shelf space for you in the bathroom too."

"Maybe I should get a place," Delsa said. "It might be awhile til this settles out."

"Til next Voratainin, Dyoniss thought," Kessil said.

"That's over a year, I can't stay in the cubby that long."

"Come on," Yashmi said, "it's not that bad, and it's big enough for company. You've got use of the kitchen and the steps to the bathroom are easy, and tell me you can plunk down for a place with a better bathroom than ours..."

"It's not that," Delsa said, "your guest cubby is better than

my place in Ragess. It's about mooching."

"So help out with the garden a little and fix up our injuries."

"Do you get lots of injuries?" Delsa asked.

"They're usually minor," Yashmi said. "Dyoniss can be clumsy at times. When he gets a hammer in his hand, there will be bruises."

Delsa winced. "He's never been on a lev-bike before has he?"

"I think he said the evening before," Kessil said, "but that you had much more to grab onto." Delsa was quite well equipped and quite good looking in a plush Nordic/Dwarf way.

"Yeah," she said, "he grabbed my handles well."

"He's good at that," Kessil said.

"And you're his mother?" Delsa asked Yashmi.

"Yep, and his father is the guy at the center of this storm."

"Aaa," Delsa said. "You guys are probably high on their target list."

"As innocent bystanders go," Kessil said.

"I jumped right into the fire. That's the main reason I shouldn't accept your hospitality."

"The man who's been doing the violence saw me," Kessil said, "but said he didn't have time for me."

"Because he was chasing Ragnar," Yashmi said, "who has been missing ever since."

Kessil took over, "the same guy who beat up seventeen people at a watering hole in Mefmun just because he had the

antidote and they didn't and he wanted to work out."

"That kind of thing is happening all the time in Hardensburg now. Muggings, beatings, murders, it's like I'm hearing the news from Centorin but instead it is all happening within twenty miles of my kitchen."

"And now it's coming here," Yashmi sighed. "I'm so afraid Ragnar's dead because I had him hungry, he would have been back. You know when you can tell a guy really wants more of you, you know when he's going to be back. Like you've got Dyoniss," she said to Kessil.

"I hope he feels that way," she said, "but I don't feel sure."

"Be sure. I know the look he's giving you, you've got the hook set." She felt something relax, deep in her soul, upon hearing those words. She felt something else tighten, because he knew Dyoniss was out there on the trail of the man who paid her attacker.

"I've had that feeling at times," Delsa said, "but that feeling's only been right about three quarters of the time."

"Mine's always right," Yashmi said. "I don't get it often but when I do, it's right."

"So you were sure Ragnar was coming back," Kessil asked her.

"Yes, very. Solid sure."

"Ladies," Delsa said, "I do thank you for your hospitality," she got to her feet, "but I'm glad I brought my things with me. I wish you lots of luck and I'll never tell where you live no matter how they torture me," she was walking away, downing her cup.

“She doesn’t like our chances,” Kessil said.

“And she’s from right near Hardensburg,” Yashmi added, “and has a lot more experience with Centorins.”

They were quiet awhile. There is no one on stage in the Blue Kite at this time of the week, but there were recordings being played and tech’s with meters doing sound checks. Right then there was an old haunt ballad on saying that ‘this is going to hurt like hell.’

“So the way I see it,” Yashmi said, “pretty soon those of us without the antidote will go extinct because we can’t defend ourselves.”

“Well, that can happen, but there’s actually a lot of history of human life without the Instinct. It seems to go in waves. It starts out with just a few small bands of hunter gatherers, and then they find if they cooperate they can make life easier, and for awhile that catches on until there is a whole civilization built up of people working together to make life better such as building toilet factories and recording studios and medical research labs. But as this is going on, more and more people take by force or trickery and don’t follow the rules of cooperation and are just parasites on the society. Eventually it gets to the point where the parasites have taken everything by force and the lesser people are treated with less respect than the garden pests are here. Once the ‘workers’ can’t survive, the people who take by force have nothing to take any more, and the only people that survive are those who have escaped into the remotest wilderness to become hunter gatherers.”

“I should have brought a notebook,” Yashmi said.

“I shouldn’t lecture,” Kessil said.

“You should be a teacher,” Yashmi said.

“There’s enough of those, I need to work on things, not people,” Kessil said.

There was another pause, then Yashmi asked, “What do you think we should do?”

“I think we should hide out til Dyoniss gets back.”

“Where?” Yashmi asked, “here?”

“Why not, it’s very anonymous.”

“So you don’t think we should seek refuge in the Temple?”

“If that guy I saw comes thru the door,” Kessil said, “perhaps we should.”

“What do you think will happen to Delsa?” Yashmi asked.

“She’ll go find some temp work to do and a room for rent, or meet a guy with space in his bed, or be back at the house waiting for us.”

“Where do you imagine Ragnar is?”

“On a riverboat somewhere downstream of Ninavek right now.”

“He would have been back to say goodbye.”

“If that guy was chasing me, I might not have been back to say goodbye to Dyoniss,” Kessil told her. “He might write to you once he gets to Norbin.” Now that the northern sixth of the Tuidain is all but cleared of wildhull, vagabond sailors are employed on the route from the Ydlon to the North Kshoned canal and on up the Kshoned to Norbin, a sail of over three thousand miles and at least two years.

She wondered how much she believed of that fable she’d

just made up. She hoped he was on a ship somewhere, even if it was back to Hardensburg. He wouldn't get there til after next Voratainin. She wanted Yashmi to stop worrying about him, but as she made up that story about him sailing to Norbin, it was as if she took responsibility for his fate on herself.

"What time do you figure Dyoniss will make it back to the house?" Yashmi asked.

"Probably in the thirties," Kessil said.

"It's after tenth now." Yashmi had an old ring timepiece from the 115th that still worked. "Is this still my first cup?"

"Yes it is."

"What if we sought refuge in the Temple?"

"I saw a blaster yesterday," Kessil said. "It was half apart but I've seen enough Centorin movies to know what it was."

"Our way of life is ending right now isn't it?"

"People are preparing for it. I shouldn't be surprised that Yellgnoskn is preparing for it, they responded to gasket failures with a presentation and party at the mansion."

"What should we do?" Yashmi asked.

"Like I said, wait til Dyoniss gets home."

"No, I mean look a little farther out, should we seek refuge in the Temple or flee to Norbin?"

"I think we could just go to Etendur, pick Lake Zhaistrene," the largest lake on the southern end of the plateau, a thousand miles from here. There were several large resort towns with inns of up to twelve floors, along with thousands of lakeside camps and cabins. "They'll never pick

us out of that crowd.”

“Should we have everything ready when Dyoniss gets home?”

“I want to wait until he gets home,” Kessil said. “The people smuggling the antidote can probably get Dyoniss’ address off the eye.”

Yashmi sighed and said, “If we stay here til then I’ll be so limp you’ll have to carry me home in a bucket.”

“There is that. You think we can go back to the house?”

“We’ll make it look empty,” Yashmi said, “we won’t turn on any lights or answer any calls.”

“What if the caller prowls in?”

“That’ll depend on the caller. If it’s that guy who ran into you, especially if it’s him with a blaster, I’d say we slip off the back porch as quietly as possible and melt into the bushes. If it’s one of the neighbors I say we fess up to hiding out and plead with him to keep quiet. If it’s Dyoniss we see what he wants to do.”

Kessil was sure that guy had no knowledge of Tarreck’s house, but she had no desire to go there alone. “I say we do that after lunch, can you hang here that long?”

Yashmi drew a deep breath, peered into her cup, pushed it away, let the breath out and said, “OK.”

From where they were, they could see onto the main floor. They were sheltered by a thin screen from the aisle at the back of this side of the balcony. The screen was printed with a pattern of little gnarled hills that had no perspective, she was sure they could not be seen thru it. She was glad of that,

because as she looked over the thin crowd on the main floor this beforelunch, she was quite sure she saw him, or at least someone who could be him. She knew he couldn't see them here, she had to remain calm.

“What is it?” Yashmi whispered.

“That could be him,” she pointed with her hand just above the table. Yashmi turned her head but did not move.

“Ugly sonofabitch ain't he,” Yashmi said. “He looks like the one on the news. Yeah, people are noticing, they're moving away.”

It was like a theirops moving among mrang, but on a smaller scale. The predator scanning the savannah, the prey skittery and keeping their distance. There was pointing and whispering. He ignored it, continued to prowl the crowd at a deliberate pace that just outdistanced the rumor. He went under the balcony they were on. There were four stairways in here, two of them they could see, the other two were on this side.

She knew they should move, get him back in view or get out of the building. Or they could go up the tower, she didn't want to be trapped there, but she was also conscious of the fact that outdoors it was twenty four hours til daylight. It was still a couple hours til lunchtime, there was not enough of a crowd in here that they could blend into it. A few people were passing by on the aisle, they had to hope he would take the second stairway on this side.

They made their way down the balcony to the first stairway, saw him from the back, talking to the kegman who filled their cups, already on their floor. They burst down the

stairs, spinning all the way to the ground floor and out of the building. It was so hard not to go at a dead run, but down here there was enough of a crowd to blend in. She didn't lead them toward home but toward the nearest alley right across from the tower door.

It was deserted, they broke into a quiet lope, not to make enough noise that anyone would note their passage. It was very dark, a cold drizzle was starting to fall and she wasn't very familiar with these streets. Once she got to a main street that she sometimes used on the way to the office, she slowed down and let Yashmi lead. She could tell Yashmi wasn't going straight home, but wandered widely in an area where she knew all the paths. Kessil recognized it when they came up by the pond and took the path to the back of the garden.

The keda was cooing faintly right along the path when they went by. His second eye was on duty but recognized them, probably more by smell than sight in this darkness, and went back to sleep.

At the edge of the garden they waited in silence for at least an hour. In Centorin dramas the stake-out man is given away within that time by his tobacco addiction and the flare of his lighter. There had been no connection between this man and tobacco.

“Let's go in,” Yashmi said at last, “it's starting to rain harder and I'm getting hungry.”

“You're going to cook lunch?”

“I can get a mignon out of the bin by feel. There's some little fruitcakes left too.” Kessil's stomach roared it's approval

of the plan. “Let’s keep it quiet. Lorry’s got his front lantern turned all the way up so we can see between us and the path.”

They silently approached the house, staying down between the plants of the garden. Her eyes were so dark adapted by now that the light from Lorry’s lantern was almost like Kunaë being out. She could see the silhouettes of the shrubs in the yard, but the only motion was the rain and the shadows of the birds that were fluttering around Lorry’s lantern.

All the mats in the house were down, so they couldn’t see anything inside. They silently made their way beside the garden sheds to the trunk, and then the stairs. It was impossible to go up these stairs silently, the best they could do was try to time their motions to the nearby lumins, and it was mostly grogroaks singing on a dark like this. The sound of the rain covered them a little, but it was only a gentle patter now, not sounding at all like it felt. They stayed close on the stairs, probably not a good idea, but they needed the contact just for the feeling of security it provided.

The door was unlatched, it creaked a little and they stayed perfectly still while Yashmi swung it slowly open. They both knew this was ominous. The lantern light from across the path shown in the front window behind the table and lit up the ceiling, which gave enough light for them to see the room. There were plenty of deep shadows he could be hiding in, but the front hallway and dining area looked clear. They closed and latched the door behind them, worried they could be locking themselves in with a violent man, but wanting something solid at their backs also.

She moved into the kitchen area. “Someone’s been in here,” Yashmi said. “It’s been searched but not trashed.” The pots and pans were all out on the worktables, the bins were open. Kessil slunk slowly up by the guest cubby, making sure it was empty, then up to the bedroom level with Yashmi right behind her. It was much darker in here, Lorry’s lantern faced the bathroom, only little dormers in each bedroom saw it. The end walls and their balconies were dark, she went out to each balcony, making sure no one was lurking, terrified to do it but needing to know. There were few enough limbs that the house wasn’t that easy to climb but a determined man could do it. By the time they came back down to the kitchen, they were confident enough that the man was no longer in the house, but Yashmi was sure someone had been in it.

Lorry’s lantern was enough for them to see to get mignon’s and fruitcakes out of the bins. They could see that no malicious damage had been done, but he had dug to the bottom of each to see if whatever he was looking for was there. They put it back as best they could, silently and without lighting another light. Lorry’s lantern was even enough light that they could sit at the counter on stools and wash their hands after.

“I wouldn’t stay here,” Kessil said. “When he doesn’t find us anywhere else, he’ll be back.” The fact that he knew of the place was proof enough.

“Yeah,” Yashmi said. “There is that little platform where I did the last grafting, that space should still be there if we can climb up to it. It will be out the shower window and there’ll be inglthors nesting up there.”

“They don’t have blasters,” Kessil said.

Climbing out the shower window is not as easy as it sounds. The window is small, it’s the highest gable in the house and the roof is steep there. The fronds are thinner than she wanted to trust her life to and the space above the center hall was cramped and open to the outdoors. The rain was pretty steady now so they were both wet when they got in there. The chill was numbing. They could sit up in the center of the space back to back once they got the vermin nests pushed out. The trunks that came together at the peak of the house were around them, and they were all quite thick now.

“It’s a lot more cramped in here than it was two centuries and something ago,” Yashmi said.

It was getting close to time for darkmeal when they heard someone. He came up the steps quietly but confidently. He didn’t stop long at the door, but broke the latch with a lot less noise than she would have thought possible. They heard him move quickly thru the kitchen and gathering room, out onto the back deck, then back inside. If it was Dyoniss he would have been calling. They heard him come upstairs, saw the light of a small torch and guessed he was looking around with that. He looked in closets and in the bathroom, even went thru the toiletries cabinet.

While he was in the shower, just a few inches from their butts, they scarcely dared breathe. They worried about the open window, but they never heard him put even a hand out. What was better, they didn’t hear him shut it, leaving them

with a very difficult climb to get back in the house. They soon heard him go quickly down the stairs and out of the house. Her heart started beating again.

“I wonder when he’ll check back the next time?” Yashmi said.

“You reckon we’ll have to figure out a pattern of when we can come down for food and water?”

“I’ve got to go down for water, both give and take, and seeing as he just left, we have the most time til he’ll be back right now.”

Kessil didn’t relish climbing down off here again, and the rain was getting heavier and colder. As soon as she was out on the roof, Yashmi slipped, slid, and hung crazily from a frond at the edge of the dormer. A few feet farther was the lip of the roof of the guest cubby, eighteen feet off the ground. “I think there’s ice,” she whispered. Then grunted as she dragged herself back to the shower window.

Kessil was extra careful, waited her turn at the toilet and then said, “It’s too dangerous to climb back up there. We can hide in the quilt chests.”

“I need to get dry first. I’ve got a dry bodyfur I can put on.”

“Don’t leave your wet clothes where he can notice them.”

“Run them all the way out on the line,” Yashmi said.

Kessil went to the porch on the first floor to hang the wet stuff out before putting on something warm and dry of Yashmi’s. There was a pulley to the tree at the far end of the farm sheds, the far end was hidden from plain view by the fronds of the farm sheds. She hoped he wouldn’t notice the

change next time he came back.

She was still out on the porch, naked and shivering, but under the overhang of the roof when she heard shouts, then running footsteps. More shouts came her way, the running footsteps went past them right on Yashmi's way. Four guys with torches came running after, shouting that it was the guy with the antidote. Torches lit, another voice yelled, "I heard him climbing this garden wall." People started relaying the calls, people were relaying it far in the distance. Someone else, a little farther away yelled 'over here,' and she heard more running feet on the next path over, shouts receding into the distance.

She breathed in, thanked Karasis. She breathed out and thanked herself for being in Karasis. Yashmi came out to the deck, she had heard some of that. They clung to each other in the oneness for minutes, but shed tears of joy for the chance that their world could strike back. After that they felt safe enough to sit up until time for darkmeal. They still didn't dare cook one up and ate bread and spreads, dried fruity lon and some freshly pickled panips. They stayed silent and watching, but they would start screaming as soon as that goon showed up. The rain was steady now so they could hear little.

They stayed up late waiting for Dyoniss, then worrying about him. They fell asleep on the cushions in the gathering room, knew that was even more vulnerable, and went up to their beds. Yashmi insisted Dyoniss would want her in his and not in the guest cubby. Once again sleep wouldn't come as she worried what was keeping Dyoniss.

It was more likely that guy was after Dyoniss than her,

and might have been coming here looking for him. He could have found him somewhere else in the city. She also wouldn't be surprised if Dyoniss had gone down to the center again to see Korshii. Kessil guessed he had a hard on for her, and it would be good to get out of this rain. She just hoped he was safe.

24. Case Closed

When the dawn light of week Kadezak streamed in their window, he woke in a blissful mood. In the sunlight, laying back to back with Kessil, he could really feel that all was right with the world, at least in the larger sense, the sense the planet and Kortrax would care about.

As he became more awake he remembered the horror of last Nightday and knew that on the microscopic scale, affecting things as tiny as single organisms, such as Korshii and himself, all was not right with the world. He had to tell Kyonmeere everything he'd learned in Hardensburg and everything he'd learned yesterday. The only place he could see him was the Morningday meeting. That meant he had to get his ass up and not ask for a wakeup romp with Kessil. He was up before Kessil, but she had been so worried that it probably took her hours to get to sleep, no doubt she was beat.

He didn't want to take the time to get breakfast from a cook, there was enough fruit and grain to give him enough nutrition to last until lunch. There was some dried fig lon also. He was still eating that when Kessil came down the stairs. She had wrapped the quilt around her but was otherwise still in bed.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I have to report all this to Kyonmeere."

"You need to report it to the Temple also."

"I did that already, when I brought her body down."

“Did you find anything about who did it?”

“A few fingermarks and the snifter didn’t tell me much. I found a few hairs, but we don’t have anyone to match them to. She must have known her killer, or at least opened the door, but she was a trusting person, she probably would have opened the door for anyone.”

“You know he was here, no doubt he’ll be back.”

“I wouldn’t stay here if I was you. He probably doesn’t know where you work. I don’t think he’s after you anyway, I’m the one who confronted Mikal.”

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“I found out what I wanted to know. It’s all true and he’s in the middle of it.”

“We should get away.”

“You can and should,” he said. “Your idea of going to Etendur is fine, I can afford it and you wouldn’t be in danger if it wasn’t for me.”

“You didn’t get me involved with Yellgnoskn and I felt as much danger there as I did when that hit man ran into me. I want to go with you, not alone,” Kessil said. “I don’t think you can just sit here in the house like a bluebird on a gloribard bush and expect to see next Voratainin. I’m surprised he didn’t come back last dark.”

“It was miserable out, look, there’s still ice on some of the shady spots.” The pink-tinted clouds were breaking up and the melting ice sparkled in the first rays. It was too bad the beauty of the dawn was misleading.

“He’ll be back soon,” Kessil said.

“He’ll have to find me at the office.”

“You don’t think we should get out of here right now?”

She had been all for leaving as soon as he got home. It had been very late, after fiftieth hour of Dawnsleep by the time he made it to the house. It had taken him time to process the scene, make notes and then find the nearest Temple and make arrangements for Korshii’s remains. At least she was Recognized at the Temple, he was assured she wouldn’t go unmourned.

He was glad of that, sad he knew so little about her. He didn’t know her friends, never went to where she worked, never met the mysterious Vemnya, but now he knew there was no such person. Still there was someone she delivered to, and someone the local cook had noticed, no doubt the same person. If she still had the stuff in her home, her assailant had taken it. He had a few hairs that weren’t Korshii’s from the scene, maybe the lab could match one. No doubt a couple of them were his, he had to expect that. No doubt the others were other sexual encounters, but they could get lucky.

He had a few fingermarks that weren’t Korshii’s, but there was less chance of matching them and Ralu was the only one on the staff who was any good at doing that. He was already working two full days a week so his would have to wait, even though Korshii had lost her life.

Dyoniss finally answered Kessil. “I agree, it isn’t safe to stay here at the house, you’ll be safer at your shop, there will be people there and people on the canal. With any luck people who see him will continue to shout.”

“He could be holding some genetics tech hostage til he changes his appearance.”

“That will take weeks, but I’d hate to think of what that tech could be going thru.”

“I’m surprised he’s not here now,” Kessil said again.

“You should get dressed. I’m going up to the office. You can walk with me.”

“Yes, wait up, and dig up some more of those lons.”

She was soon down, washed and dressed in sheer leggings and her yellow lace-knit. “We can’t just leave Yashmi here.”

“You’re right,” he realized. “He doesn’t know her, but he knows the house. If he sees her here, he will use her. But she will be safe in any public space.”

“I’ll get her up,” Kessil said, and scampered back upstairs. She came back down and had a breakfast of dried fig lon while he started tea for Yashmi, who wouldn’t be leaving without it.

When he got up he thought he would be in well before the meeting. He was hoping he would get lucky and find Kyonmeere already in so he could go over it all before the meeting. Now it was looking like he wasn’t going to make it to the meeting at all.

Yashmi came down quickly however, and slapped down the tea in one gulp. She put the cup down and left it and a note for the killer to wash the dishes the next time he came by, grabbed a few lons and started eating them on the way.

“Why aren’t you packed?” Yashmi asked once they were on a wide enough path. “I thought we were getting out of here?”

“I’ve got to report this to Kyonmeere. I hope he can help

us come up with a plan of action, but you can leave today if you want. You and Kessil can both head up to Etendur, you know where the aluminum is stashed, break one and head on down to the tube station. You'll probably have to go with Kessil back to her place..."

"Please, I'll wait for you," Kessil said. "Like you said, my office will be safe. I've got things I need to do, reports I need to make. In the light I'm not so paralyzed by fear. When those people yelled about the killer with the antidote, I decided it's time for me to stand up also."

"So we'll leave this noon?" he said.

"I can find somewhere to hide til then, come by with a pail for me when you're ready to go," Yashmi said and peeled off at Zestin's. She would be safer without their attention, so they kept going, but Dyoniss meandered slowly and discreetly watched until Yashmi was let inside. Zestin wouldn't really open for several more hours, but Yashmi would probably trap him in his bedroom for at least one of those.

"Where are you going?" Kessil asked when he took the turn towards the modern canal and not the tower. This street was only a couple blocks away, but the tower was three times that distance in height and bright with the easterly sun.

"I'll go on to your place and look around a little before I go up to the office."

"I think we shouldn't be seen together,"

"I couldn't deal with that," he said stopped to hold her.

"I couldn't either," she said and kissed him, "that's why we have to stop this antidote threat."

He turned into a smaller alley, then cut thru an alehouse to the alley behind it. He told Kessil to be silent, then took some steps to the third floor. It was mostly rooftops of a group of textile shops. There were planters up here where it was strong enough to take them, flimsy roofleaf in most areas. There was a maintenance walkway and ladders that they climbed. They came up on a roof that was on the street behind her building, two blocks away. There were a couple scrounge camps up here but they were unoccupied. There was only a thin line of fronds at the side wall of the building they were on, they parted them only enough to get a good look at her building and the buildings around it. They were a block from the modern canal here, but because of a turn, they could look right down the canal and see the street in front of her building.

There was no one lurking watching it, no one out on the balconies of the housing above it. "It looks clear to me," she said.

"As far as I can see. He probably doesn't know where you work. If he's only seen you that one time, if he didn't actually take a picture, he can't use any matching software, and I don't know that he would have an easy time finding your picture on the eyes."

"I'm hardly a celebrity," she said.

He kissed her goodbye, "You are to me," he said. "That plank right there leads to the residential hallway right above your shop. You don't want to be seen with me, so I'll go back the other way."

"I want to be seen with you when this is over," she said,

and clung to him again. “It’s a shame we didn’t have more Afternoondays to lay around and get acquainted, but we will, if I get any say in the matter.” Then she went to the plank, not giving him time to say the same thing to her. It was three stories up over a small alley, a bit wobbly and with no railing. His fear of heights came on him in force as she stood there. She was so precious to him already that he felt it in his guts, in the palms of his hands and up the inside of his arms, a lot like a blaster bolt. She was perfectly calm and just about jumped across, stepping on it only once in the middle, causing it to bounce quite a bit. That made more noise than was prudent, but at least that plank was tied in place.

The Morningday meeting was just breaking up when he finally got in. He and Kyonmeere told each other they wanted to meet in his office, chuckled, and went in.

His office was once the main room in the house. The kitchen area is now a wet bar, the dining area held a conference table and the gathering room is the office itself, now lined with bookshelves and featuring a big three-piece wrap-around desk in a pseudo-Centorin style. They went in there, but sat facing each other in fine guest chairs in front of the desk.

Dyoniss lit into his findings before they were even settled, beginning with Betten and his findings and covering the escape from antidote users. Kyonmeere joked that “You should have gotten video of that escape on the mrang, they could sell it as Centorin crime drama.”

“I think this is a little bigger than simple crime,” he said,

and proceeded on to talk about the blaster factory and the soldiers drilling in front of it. Kyonmeere was clearly concerned, but Dyoniss could tell he knew about that already. Betten must have been in touch with him. It seemed they were closer than he suspected.

“If large quantities of the antidote are involved, I guess this is bigger than a simple crime,” Kyonmeere agreed.

“It is murder,” Dyoniss said, “there’s still more about this I have to tell you.” Dyoniss narrated tracking the package and finding that Korshii had taken the contents of the package, which he was just about sure was a half gallon of the antidote.

“So I went over to confront her with it, and found her dead, blasted in the forehead with one of those blasters that General Herman Patrick is building out in the savannah on the truck route north of Hardensburg. The same ones Yellgnoskn ordered a crate of.”

Kyonmeere’s reaction was complex. It was too immediate to really be fake, but he tried to make it look like he was only faking sympathy. “It’s a shame, you say she was a witness in this case?”

“She tried to help with it, tried to find out something about Vemnya. She was playing me silly because there was no Vemnya. I did consider that she was lying to protect Vemnya, or whoever the guy is who she was with in week Ekendosa. He’s the one I think has the antidote.”

“There is someone with that half gallon, if it is antidote and not just scotch like it says.”

“We still need to find that guy,” Dyoniss said.

“Well, we really don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“This case is closed.”

“What do you mean?” Dyoniss asked again, astounded.

“What I need to talk to you about. I mean, this is all great information, and our society really needs to know all this and we really, as a people, should take action on it. The problem is, who is paying for all this information-gathering you’ve been doing? I’ll tell you who, New West Trucking, who’s owner is the man you accused of using the antidote to the Instinct, relating to a different investigation that you were pursuing, an investigation that, unfortunately, no one is paying for. Maybe we should try billing the Temple for that service?”

“You want to pull this all in now, just when we’re making progress on it?”

“You think?” Kyonmeere asked him. “I think we’re making progress consuming ever increasing amounts of manpower and processing power, as well as more miles of tube travel. What I don’t see is a recovered furball coil we can bill for.”

“We know the coil was missing before it got here, either in the Yakhan, or Centorin itself...”

“Why would they steal a furball coil? Centorin is where they come from.”

“Centorin is not all one monolithic Empire. There are dozens if not hundreds or thousands of Houses, something like the castles of Yondure. They are constantly warring for power, just like their movies show.”

“It can’t really be like that, they would all be dead.”

“Most of them are, ninety nine percent of their population is ephemeral. The population of Centorin itself is dropping, people are moving to Alderan, Caladan, Kiandutan and Kitane and many more.”

“And here,” Kyonmeere reminded him, “which is why we had this case.”

“Had?” Dyoniss said.

“It’s New West Trucking that’s pulling the plug, not me.”

“Over what I did in Hardensburg?”

“Not outside the realm of possibility,” he said sarcastically.

“And you want to let it happen?” Dyoniss said. By ‘it’ he meant the whole antidote plan, whatever it’s full scope was. By ‘it’ he meant the end of their way of life and the return of force and dominance, something that hadn’t been seen in forty centuries. Almost no one still alive remembered those times.

“This isn’t a charity operation.”

“I’m close,” Dyoniss said, “Once I find out who killed Korshii, I think I can put all the pieces together and find that bottle.”

“Good luck with that,” Kyonmeere said, “What have you got so far.”

“Betten documented a case of blasters being sent to Yellgnoskn last Kenduul,” the last week of last year. “I’ve studied Centorin technology enough to know that any one of the blasters in that case could have caused the wound that killed Korshii. Those blasters are useful against our photovoltaics, but they are useless against people without the

antidote. While most single blaster bolts don't kill, they certainly cause pain and injury," Dyoniss pushed up his sleeve to show the still-livid scab, "and the threat of death is real. A direct bolt to the forehead is almost invariably fatal, and takes out all higher functions if not."

"That's what she had?" he asked incredulously.

"Right here," Dyoniss put his finger in the center of his forehead and pulled his hair back with the other hand. "A quarter inch hole was burned thru to the bone."

"Uh," he said and shuddered. "It's so much different when it's here with us and not just on a screen somewhere light years or even thousands of miles away."

"Yes, that's why I think we should pursue this quarry to ground," Dyoniss said. "If you're worried about the budget, I'll do it on my time. I think I owe it to the Temple, but I think I can help the Temple better from this office than from theirs."

"Except for the matter of the elevator," Kyonmeere said.

"You will not donate anything to preserve our society?"

Kyonmeere took a mindful breath, let it out. He got up and served a tea. It was instant, heated in a gas faucet that took eighteen seconds to get to the one eighty five his powder dissolved in. "Our society has been in stasis for forty three centuries. Our society has introduced tubeways and data service to all households who need it in the twenty three centuries since the starships first got here. Almost halfway thru our stasis, Centorin was first settled. Twenty centuries ago they first contacted us, thirteen centuries ago they put a stargate here and today we are a helpless backwater in

their empire, a quaint curiosity because we are stuck in this endless loop.”

“This ‘loop’ is called ‘sustainability.’” Dyoniss said. “The Centorins want our planet because after four hundred centuries of human habitation, it is more fertile than theirs is after twenty.”

“It was more fertile to start with, but what do you say about lunch?”

It was a four floor climb to the nearest cook’s court in the tower. They didn’t bother with the elevator. There were several vent hoods on the 74th floor where cooks could set up. The gas they bought from any of the digester operators in this part of the tower was the main energy source for the air circulation in the tower. Dyoniss wanted to tear into him on the way, but Kyonmeere would only do small talk until they were seated in an alcove away from most ears. They sat with house plates of sauced thesh mats with sausage and cheeseapple in front of each of them.

“Centorin’s call this lasagna,” Dyoniss told them, “but they don’t have it any more.”

“I don’t think they will change what we eat,” Kyonmeere said, “their cuisine is boring.”

“How do you know?”

“I was there in the 115th, I don’t think I ever told you.”

“It’s some time ago,” Dyoniss said.

“It’s very exciting in some ways,” Kyonmeere said, “The lev bikes, the danger, but it’s dirty and noisy too. The poor are very poor and they’re mean, not like the poor here who are

happy and simple.”

“If we don’t stop this antidote it will be like that here.”

Kyonmeere breathed slowly again, “I know,” he blew, “It is a sad thing, and I certainly would like to slow it down as much as possible.”

“Then why stop now?”

“I need you on something that will generate revenue. I was counting on the payday from New West, there were twenty coppers on it.”

“We’ll get by,” Dyoniss said, “I can go short for awhile, we’ve got enough garden to feed us.”

“It’s not just you,” Kyonmeere said.

“None of us is that close to the edge except for maybe Kalthar.”

“It’s not just that. I borrowed against that,” he looked as contrite as he could, “I’ve already spent those coppers that won’t be coming in.”

“I see,” Dyoniss said. He had to take a mindful breath, then another. There had been problems with this before. Kyonmeere spent lavishly at the clubs, up to a copper in a single party. He wowed the girls with it, he gambled, he threw lavish parties at his home on the seventy second floor and paid for everyone’s elevator. This was the third time he’d put the agency in trouble with it since Dyoniss had been here. Gaicher said it had been happening for centuries. He’d had to sell dwellings before. “I hope you don’t have to sell your place again.”

“I wish I didn’t have to, but you’ve lost that twenty coppers.”

“Were you going to send me to the Yakhan or even Centorin after it? Besides, I don’t think it was the furball coil Mikal was worried about. I’ll bet he knew that furball coil was missing, I bet he planned that. I bet the reason he called us is because the bottle of antidote is missing.”

Kyonmeere had to stop himself before he said, “I doubt if he’d pay for that, even if you can recover it.”

“I think you could lean on him for more if you threaten to publicize him.”

“If he could do that to Korshii, and kill Shingharm, I don’t think I’d live long if I threatened that.”

“What do you know about Christmas?” Dyoniss asked.

He looked mystified. “It is the date they celebrate the birth of their most important prophet,” Kyonmeere told him. “They eat big birds and bring in the biggest shaftwood they can get in the house and hang silly baubles and lights on it.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with the birth of a prophet?” Dyoniss said.

Kyonmeere shrugged and added, “The holiday’s also got something to do with Elves but there’s never been any Elvish settlement of Centorin or Earth.” Dyoniss had established that Kyonmeere knew of the holiday, but he probably didn’t know of any plot or event that was supposed to happen.

The fact that Kyonmeere was resigned to the end of the Instinct was disturbing. He hoped that’s all he was, resigned to it. He had taken the death of Korshii harder than he let on. “Did you know Korshii?” he asked.

He thought awhile, “I think I actually did. I like Hendroon’s Fountain,” a club in Hdengragger center known

for horny women. No doubt Korshii had been there, “and I might have met her there. It was decades ago but the name rings a bell and your description of her place is like a dozen or two that I’ve been in down there. I’d hate to think that someone I’d known could have gone that way. It’s got more impact than a total stranger on the news.”

“We are all one,” Dyoniss said, “we need that even more at a time like this.”

“I hate to say this, but I think Karasis will be one of the first things to go. We’ll still grow and cook the same foods, but we won’t be cuddling strangers at the sermons any more.”

Dyoniss had to take breaths again. He took a big mouthful of saucemat so his mouth wouldn’t be put to hurtful use. Kyonmeere didn’t go to sermons. He wasn’t hostile to Karasis and cooperated with most proclamations, but he didn’t believe, Dyoniss knew that. Kyonmeere didn’t feel other souls mesh with his own. He’d never had a long-term relationship, few of even a year, and never shared his soul with a bed partner. He was closer to no one than the people in his business and a few of his informants.

They said nothing more of significance. They both knew they were strained, they chose to put aside the discussion. Dyoniss knew he would start interrogating him like a suspect, Kyonmeere was probably afraid he would alienate his only operative fluent in Centish. They parted at the food court, Kyonmeere to the stairs, Dyoniss to the down elevator, where his weight would put a penny in the agency account.

The geneticist was already done with the hairs. “I feel for

that poor girl,” she said as Dyoniss followed to her office. “I put aside everything else in case I can be of some assistance.”

“That is very kind of you,” Dyoniss said.

“Anyway, the victim accounts for two of the hairs you found. She’s originally Enurate,” a race from the Lumpral highlands, “did you know that? She’s also centuries older than we are, probably born in the late forties, so she could be forty centuries old. I know that sounds cold but it’s not like a just grown girl.

“These hairs,” she continued, “we have no match, not even in the Kassikan’s data. They are all average local people, almost all of them male, but none are in our records.

“This hair,” she held up a sticky film with the hair on it,” is one of yours, and these two are from your boss.”

“Kyonmeere?” Dyoniss gasped.

“He wasn’t on the scene with you?” she asked, wide eyed.

“No, he said he might have met her at Hendroon’s Fountain decades ago.”

“He must have been back since then because these would have dried out if they were lying around all that time.”

Korshii was a much better housekeeper than that.

25. Field Repairs

Once at the shop, Kessil found it hard to keep her mind on work. No one else was here because the shop was not open on Morningday before lunch because most people worked their gardens then and Vailiss was at the regional meeting. Kessil made sure everything was where it should be and that everything was locked before she could get to anything related to Mbeshna business. She looked around to see if she could find any of those fittings here. There were only two in the place, one was installed on the test bench, and one was in stores. Kessil took the part and went upstairs to the microscope.

It wasn't easy to find that tiny cap with this scope, and there was absolutely no detail, it was almost a matter of faith whether it was the ring sabotage system or the grain of the metal. But she found the dot that could be the breech of that micro cannon.

If she could detonate it with a prick punch under the microscope, that would be interesting, but not terribly helpful to the company. If she could detonate it with a ball-peen hammer on a workbench, that would be even more interesting because they could be recovered at reasonable cost if that was true.

She figured she shouldn't be any better swinging this hammer than the average mechanic, so if she could hit it, he could too. She hit pretty close to the right place. It looked like there was now a tiny nick there, but she brought it up to the

microscope anyway. Sure enough, like the microscope in the main lab had shown, only four times larger and four times brighter than her little scope, there was a tiny crevice there now where there had been a tiny grain before.

Discovering this had taken less than an hour so far. The next step was going to take longer. It is great that all the connectors in stock could be salvaged this way, but what about the ones already installed?

Vailiss came back from the regional meeting and stopped to see what she was up to. She didn't have enough work to have the shop open this Morningday, she would probably wait til Nightday again. They wound up talking about Dyoniss's adventures in Hardensburg and her adventures with Yellgnoskn. Vailiss had heard about that at the meeting, and heard there would be a new supplier announced shortly. Mbeshna was pretty horrified over the allegations and had talked to people at the Temple about it. She thought it was likely Yellgnoskn would be blacklisted thruout the basin if the bishops thought him guilty. Kessil thought it would serve him right, she was glad people thought what happened was important, then thought about the fact that she would have to come back here to testify.

Kessil told her about their plans to go away and showed her where everything was that anyone might need while she was away. Vailiss agreed that getting away was a good idea, so good that she should have done it already.

Vailiss didn't stay, and Kessil went back to work on the fitting. She found that to hit the right spot while it was

installed, she would have to use a punch. She got it all set and photographed it with the pocket eye just before tapping it. She tapped a few times around it, but really wanted to know if that worked. Since the shop was idle, she could take the machine down and swap out the connector. It took her an hour to do it and she was pretty practiced at this kind of thing. She could even still do it without getting glue on her.

She brought the machine back up and tested it to make sure she'd swapped it out correctly and that the triggered fitting still worked. She took careful pressure measurements for seepage in case there was actually a connecting hole inside the part. There did not seem to be.

She took the field-triggered part to the scope and was rewarded with another view of a tiny crater, actually nothing but a dot at this magnification. She made up a report for this, including more pictures from the microscope showing how to locate the nanocannon. She included the picture from the main lab's scope as the closeup of the area. She included the big warning about how this must remain confidential until all the repairs are carried out. She hoped that could be done by the end of the week because it was unlikely it would remain confidential that long.

She sent it off as quickly as possible. There was actually quite a bit of activity at other offices on Morningday. Regional headquarters was fully staffed, and the main office was also. She decided she might as well remain til thirtieth hour anyway. She had odds and ends she could do with the desk eye, not all of it work related. She wanted to look up the Etendur Lakes. She had always wanted to see at least one of

them, and that was now an attainable dream and a place their pursuer would not look for her. She was planning it as a celebration when and if they decided to share a home bed. She was hoping for a special that would give them a discount on the tube so they could go on a single copper. Those discounts did come up every now and then, but she didn't want to have to stay at just one place thru the whole stay, and all the current ones required a year's booking.

She got a note back from Eleeson just before twenty fourth hour.

- Kessil

You have duplicated the results of the main lab in finding a way to make the connectors in stock usable, but your method to fix machines in the field is much easier than swapping connectors. Your instructions are on the way to all field techs now, the threat should be neutralized by dusk.

Mbeshna has personally urged us to make this information and repair known to all users of Jahnsn fittings. He feels we would be engaging in unfair competition and working contrary to Karasis if we did not.

As for the allegations against Yellgnoskn, he denies categorically that he made you an offer, counter-charges that you were snooping around his house and denies all knowledge of blasters. Mbeshna doesn't believe him and is seeking a new vendor, and will advise the Temple and everyone on the power board about the allegations. I don't know Yellgnoskn personally and don't know what he is

capable of, but I invite you to spend the time until this threat is neutralized here at headquarters. Your key has been credited with the tube fare to get here.

Please be careful, I would really hate to see you get hurt.

- Eleeson

She wasn't really tempted to take him up on his offer. The main office was not really that secure, and it was a place the killer would be likely to look for her. There was also the fact that she would have to room with someone in the tower, and she would not go without Dyoniss. She didn't want to just blow him off, and someone had to know that she might not be around for a while.

Eleeson -

Thank you so much for the update and thanks for your concern. I already have plans for my safety. Let me take this opportunity to inform you that I may not be available for some weeks. I'm sorry that my life is more important to me than my career and if this situation is not resolved and I have to change my life to save it, I will.

I will try to stay in contact and for that reason I will keep the pocket eye and hope this will be cleared up soon. If it is not, I will make arrangements to get it back to you. I know that I am stuck in the middle of this problem, but it will certainly affect all of us, so you also take care. Please pass this note on to anyone else you think should know.

- Kessil

She sent a similar note to Hamthish since he was actually her direct administrative supervisor. By then it was too late for lunch and too early for noonmeal. They had agreed to meet at Zestin's sometime in the afterlunch, Yashmi was probably still there and probably quite liquified by now. She thought about waiting a little longer, but couldn't think of anything more to do. She didn't want to actually reserve an inn in the Etendur without talking to Dyoniss first, they hadn't actually agreed that they were going there, he said she and Yashmi should go but Kessil wasn't going without him.

"Kessil," she heard Tamton's voice at the bottom of the stairs, "Are you in?"

"Yes, but I'm just leaving."

"Good, there's something you'll probably want to see. It's at the Terminus Temple." That was a small building on the far side of the terminus pond, a surprising distance out of the way.

"What is it?"

"Someone I think you know," he said.

She knew immediately that it would be someone dead. Why else would some one she might know have stayed at the Temple instead of walking here with him. She got a little numb and tingly and cold inside. That Temple served the ruins and got more than its share of deaths. "You're not talking about a sermon I should hear are you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Do you know who it is?"

"No, but I think I saw you talking to him a couple weeks

ago.”

“Ragnar, the guy who took off running.”

“I didn’t see that, I saw him come to your table and you seemed to know him.”

“Just a little.”

“I’m not sure it’s him, he’s not a pretty sight,” Tamton warned her.

She told him briefly about Korshii and about what had happened to her and Dyoniss while they climbed up to the bridge over the modern canal. He understood why she kept looking around. He had seen the picture of the antidote man and stayed on the alert.

“He was found in the pond,” Tamton said while they were on the bridge. She felt exposed out here and kept looking around. She didn’t think about what that all meant until they were back on the ground and between buildings again. He was not a pretty sight and he had been in the pond. The guy who ran into her had killed him that day. He had lain in the water two weeks. No doubt he was dead when he went in but that was horrible. She was one of the last people to see him alive. She came that close to dying herself.

She didn’t know she was crying until Tamton tried to comfort her. The fact that it might attract attention made her stop. She would have to stop thinking about him. She brought herself to this moment, looked at the signs of the shops along this street, looked at the front porches of the homes above them. There are mainly small merchants along here, she read each of their signs to keep her mind off Ragnar. She focused on all the people around for that reason, and on the porches

just above the commercial space. She focused on the people to be sure they weren't the killer. Her vision seemed to have narrowed.

"Was he a close friend?" he asked quietly.

"Dyoniss's half brother. We'd only met him the previous dusk. He was the first one to warn us about the antidote."

"I see."

She wished she could have been there for Dyoniss when he found Korshii, she wished Dyoniss was here for this. She had known Tamton much longer, since she slept in her kayak. She had slept in her kayak with him. They held each other, she took comfort in that, but after a while they only held hands.

They walked in silence for quite a while. There is no bridge over the old canal for over a mile, so they had to walk all the way around the Terminus Pond, three quarters of a mile from where they reached it. In one quarter of a mile they crossed the other modern canal on a bridge on the third floor, all done in elegant crystal netting, then continued on around the pond a half block back but on that level til they reached the Temple.

It took her a long time to go into the viewing room. When she saw him, she vomited, but they had a basin handy because they knew what condition he was in. She recognized him more from the clothes than the face. He hadn't changed them in the time she'd known him.

"Was he blasted?" she asked.

"Drowned," the acolyte told her. "Kids found him while

swimming underwater.”

She went into hysterical tears. She could imagine all too vividly what that was like. She wondered if he would have been safe if he hadn't come here. If he had just gotten on a tube... but he didn't have money. He must have worked his way on a riverboat. It could have been one of Shingharm's. The same guy could have killed him and followed Ragnar. No, there wasn't time, it was a year from Vnassvuur by ship, if he left by ship after Shingharm's murder, he would still be on the Tveidor, not even to the Ydlon yet.

She knew so little about his life, and now he was gone. He was younger than Dyoniss, who was two centuries, but only by a few decades. Still that is enough time to have a lot of soul built up. It was all gone now. She could not remember two centuries in the past. She had her records, her diploma from Sunrise Tech and notes to refer to, but most actual memories were gone, faded into nothing.

To her mind, he gave his life to alert us to the danger. When she filled out the Recognition form in the acolyte's cubicle, she wrote a long paragraph on his heroism in service to Karasis. She couldn't put down much else, father's name, birth sometime in the 121st in one of the Ydlontrostl cities, been to Hardensburg for some time. Not much of a testament to a life of two centuries.

Dyoniss had been assured that there would be a big enough pile of paper attesting to Korshii's life that they wouldn't need kindling for her pyre. This would be the only Recognition Ragnar ever got unless Dyoniss and Yashmi came down to view him. She almost got tears on the

Recognition form when she saw how pitiful his remembrance was. “For the service he has given, he should have a pile of paper eight feet high.” she put on the form. Still it was pitiful and brought more tears from her eyes.

Tamton walked with her all the way to Zestin’s. He wasn’t going to come in but Yashmi lured him. She was stark naked once again and dancing in and out of the front of the place, more or less to the music. She was more cups in than Kessil wanted to go on a noon like this, but she did take a stool next to the one Yashmi’s sheath was on and order one penny of house yellow. It’s very tasty and strong enough to let you know you’ve got a buzz but not enough to get you to dance naked in the street.

Zestin’s is right on Saseraik Walk just before it gets to the paved street at Avenue Nemo. It’s open all across the front with the lift panels up and a few tables get carried out. That was that area where Yashmi was spinning. She was bumping into the guys at the surrounding tables who turned around to face her and they were all having quite a bit of fun with her modest but friendly bosom.

She was halfway thru that house cup before Yashmi was too tired to play any more and came weaving back to the stool her clothes were on.

“How long have you been here?” Yashmi asked.

“Since ‘Night Ride’ was on.” Zestin had the Blue Kite caravan network on, but at little more than background level. That song took her back to that evening almost a decade ago at MkenetWind when she first met Dyoniss.

“You look like something’s wrong,” Yashmi said.

“I saw Ragnar.”

“Yeah,” she brightened, “where?”

“At the Terminus Temple.”

“At this time of day? What were you doing there, I thought you always went to the one in...” Her eyes went wide and she wound down. “No?” Tears tumbled from her eyes.

“I’m afraid so, he was found in the pond by some kids diving. He’d been there since Chezhervizhod; since that killer didn’t have time for me.”

26. Escape to Hardensburg

Dyoniss was careful as he approached the house, looking in every tree and any other lurking place along the way. He hadn't taken his usual route back from the tower, but went around on the smaller paths and came up the back way. It was a little longer but it was less likely the killer was waiting for him there. He knew these paths well, and hoped the killer didn't.

He tried to get his mind around Kyonmeere lying about Korshii. He had seen her recently, how recently? There was no way Kyonmeere's hair was on the clothes Dyoniss was wearing the previous Nightday, Yashmi had washed everything while he was in Hardensburg. There was some possibility the hair had gotten there some other way, or there was a mix-up in the lab, but neither of those had a high probability.

He was thinking about it too much, he had to keep his mind on his own safety right now. What he learned about Kyonmeere had made him more worried about a killer with the antidote. He looked in every path, behind every garden fence, in the branches of all the houses. Most were ground-hugging gnarl that were easy to get onto. Most people were behind the house in the main garden this time of the week, some were already in making Noonmeal because he smelled cooking.

Yashmi has only a trellis along the path to mark their property, the remaining land up to the trunk of the house and

the stairs is a wider shady patch of karga graze along the path. All appeared calm. He took the stairs and saw the corner of leaf he had caught in the door was still there and undisturbed unless this guy was so good he noticed the leaf caught in the door and counted veins to put it back just as he found it. He entered the house, inside seemed undisturbed. Yashmi's note was still there, along with the dishes.

He could have climbed up the garden sheds to get to the gathering room porch, so Dyoniss didn't let down his guard until he had gone thru the whole house twice. He thought they should probably have Noonmeal at their first stop on the tube, probably an hour up the East Nina. He still thought they would be safer if they just took the back path and kept walking. They could get ten miles before they slept, well into farmland where they could find a keda who would let them share his field for the dark.

A lot of what they were taking would be the same wherever they went. Since no one else was home, he would start getting their duffel together. Kessil had her pack that she had brought here, he knew where his was, he shook it out good before it was ready to use. He knew Yashmi had three different ones, a large for serious camping, and a small for overnight at a friend's, and one she forgot she had which was about the size of Kessil's. Since that was the sturdiest, he used that. He got together everything he knew they would need, and then waited for them to get back.

Inaction made him nervous so he set about making sure the area was clear. From the branches above the roof he could see the whole neighborhood. There were only two other big

hangleaves in the area, most homes were low and some were sunken around central courts with no tall vegetation on their lots.

While up here, he had too much time to think. He had information, and he had the ability to gather more. Mikal was his father, there was no one to drop this on. It was his duty to the world to do what he could to thwart his father's plans, whatever they were. Thus he came to the conclusion that he couldn't run away to Etendur. He couldn't ask Kessil and Yashmi to expose themselves to the danger either. He knew their holiday in Etendur would be diminished because he wouldn't be there, but with what he tried not to suspect about Kyonmeere, he was doubly involved.

From up here he saw many people out and about, but he knew them all. There was rarely anyone this side of Saseraik Walk that he wasn't acquainted with. He saw Kessil and Yashmi as soon as they came onto their path. It looked like Yashmi was crying and Kessil was holding her hand with her other hand on her shoulder. Dyoniss climbed down to their bedroom balcony and then down into the house as they came in the front door.

"You don't have to worry about what you're looking up for Ragnar any more," Kessil told him.

As he came down the reading alcove stairs, he could see she was distressed. "What is it?" he asked.

"He was found in Terminus Pond today. Tamton heard about it and he told me."

"No," was all he could say. He knew how scared she had

been ever since that guy bumped into her by the Eastern Terminus pool. He knew how scared Yashmi was for Ragnar, and knew she cared for him more than she should.

“They took him to the Terminus Temple for viewing. I was the first to Recognize him and I could put so little on the page.” She took a big, choking breath, “He was so rotted I had to say yes but it was more his clothes, I wasn’t really sure.”

She started to cry, he took her in his arms. “Dyoniss, that guy must have killed him right after he bumped into me, it just took a couple weeks for someone to find him. That guy saw me, he knows I can identify him.”

He patted her back. Yashmi was standing in the door, also crying, he put his other arm around her. “Is he sent by your father?” she asked.

“Yes,” Dyoniss told her, “I think so, and Kessil saw him.”

“His picture was on the news, other people saw him.”

“We have to get away from here,” Kessil said, grabbing his arms, “both of us.”

“Both of you,” Dyoniss said, “I can’t. I’m involved in this in so many ways.”

“I’m as involved as you are,” she said.

“I was investigating that stolen package.”

“And he’s sabotaging my company’s machinery.”

“He’s not your father,” Dyoniss said.

“His goon didn’t have time for me.”

To calm her down he asked, “How do you know that goon remembers you well enough to pick you out in a crowd?” She

was a cute girl but not unusual for the streets of Hdengragger. “If you’re not in what you were wearing that day, and not at Tamton’s, you could walk by him and as long as you don’t give yourself away, he’d never even notice.”

“He’s the kind of guy who looks in every eye. He took a picture of me with his eyes when he slammed into me.”

Dyoniss would not argue with that but said, “If we were in immediate personal danger don’t you think he would have done something by now?”

“He’s been in this house twice and would have been here again if the neighbors hadn’t started yelling.”

“He’s had plenty of time to come after us since then. Once he saw people were onto him he probably used the time to get on a tube car and go to some far-off place, he’s had time to get back to the Highlands by now. And we’d be much harder to find if we put packs on our backs and paid cash at out-of-the-way places and didn’t stop anywhere til we got to some flop in Heesneeropvek where we stay til three coppers run out.”

“You would pick the boring route,” Yashmi said.

“Spending aluminum on tube passage is something they can track, hiking and camping rough to Heesneeropvek is something they can’t.”

“You’re right,” Kessil said.

“Shall I get out the camping gear?” Yashmi asked with a bit of resignation. “Do you think I have to go?”

“He knows the house, so he will find you sooner or later,” Dyoniss said.

“Of course you have to go,” Kessil added, “we can

recover the garden when we get back.”

He could hear the shivers in her voice and he hugged her tighter. “I think if you just stay away from Tamton for awhile it would be the appropriate response.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said, “do you want me to starve?”

“See, you can make light of this.”

“It wasn’t easy,” she said.

“Anyway, I know where I’m going on the tube. It’s one place I know they wouldn’t be looking for us,” he said.

“Where’s that?” she asked.

“Hardensburg.”

The quickest way to the closest tube station is to take Saseraik Walk, pass just north of the tower, cross the Modern Canal just a few blocks from Kessil’s office on Howling Chorus Avenue and follow that straight to the station. He could be hiding among any of the crowds on there, waiting for them, figuring they would head for the tubes. Instead they took back paths thru the smallholds.

“I understand why continuing to investigate and keeping the Temple informed is the right thing to do, I just don’t think we should drag your mother into this,” Kessil said as they hurried along.

“We’re not, I’m sending you both off to Etendur on that tour you told me about.”

“You...” she couldn’t seem to think of the right word. He saw her take a mindful breath. “Yashmi, yes, I insist, but me

no. We're both going."

"He's not your father."

"No, but this is my homeland, I'm in Karasis too, maybe not as enfolded as you, but certainly in and not just for the sexuality of it."

"I know that."

"So I have a duty to help you," Kessil said.

"So do I," Yashmi said. "I don't go to Temple much, but I think I'm a member of civilization."

"Personally, I think I should go alone, and you girls should go to the lake and lay low. I don't think you need to hide in the inn, but just enjoy being tourists."

"I can't do that," Kessil said.

"I won't give you the choice," Dyoniss said. "There is too much danger and he's already seen you. Mikal has seen me but the assassin in the cities hasn't."

"I'm sure he has a pocket eye," Kessil said.

She was right, he could have watched the recording of Dyoniss fidgeting in Mikal's office for fifty minutes, from at least four different views. "Still, it's too dangerous..."

"You've watched too much Centorin romance," she said. "We're still in the Ydlontrostl, on the planet Kassidor, like it or not. If I happen to want to go to Hardensburg, you can't prevent it unless you've got some of the antidote."

"Same for me," Yashmi said.

"We can't all fit in the same car, and the one paying the fare chooses the destination," Dyoniss told her. "Kessil has her own account and can program your car to Hardensburg if

you can convince her to, but I know the same compulsion in Kessil that forces her to get in the tube to Hardensburg, forces her to program your car to Etendur.”

Yashmi’s face said she knew that was true.

“You’ll meet someone interesting I’m sure,” Kessil told her.

There was shouting in the distance, Dyoniss heard it just before Yashmi, Kessil was concentrating on convincing Yashmi she would like Lake Zhaistrene. She should be concentrating on convincing her that was the best way she could help. The shouting was behind them. He thought he heard the words ‘killer’ and ‘antidote’ in the noise.

“He’s coming this way!” Yashmi said, “Run!” and she took off.

Dyoniss was pretty sure she knew where she was on these streets, and as long as she didn’t take a turn that would get them farther from their destination, he followed, holding Kessil’s hand. They ran, surprising most people they passed on this small residential path very much like Yashmi’s Walk. The shouting seemed to keep up with them.

It was less than half a mile from the Modern Canal to Terminus Pool, but this street would get them to the pool several blocks from the tubeway station. They should take a left here, but as he was about to shout to Yashmi, she darted that way, looking back over her shoulder. “I saw his picture,” she said, no doubt reacting to his questioning look as to why she was looking back.

The homes were on the path here, only a little karga graze

and a layer of vines separating them from the flagstones. They had trellises and sheds beside them, so the land was fenced off like crop thieves had once been a problem in the neighborhood. It left them very enclosed however, almost like they were in a deep city hallway. There was less shouting behind them as they ran down this way, he hoped that meant the assassin had continued directly toward the pool, thinking they might hop a needlboat.

But the shouting got louder at they approached Howling Chorus and the tube station. In seconds they could hear the words ‘antidote’ and ‘killer’ in the screams. There was a small plank-up of second floor residential back street in the area, just before they got to the businesses along the avenue. Dyoniss shouted to Yashmi to get up into there and was glad to see that she heard him, she was thirty feet ahead of them by now.

The plankway was noisy as they pounded along it and people came out to see what was happening. Yashmi was shouting, ‘killer’ and ‘antidote’ as they ran. Others took it up behind them. The footpath passed over Howling Chorus on a third floor bridge, they charged across that and took the stairs to the station.

“Your responsibility to us is to stay safe,” Dyoniss said as he put Yashmi in a tube car programmed to the address Kessil gave him at Lake Zhaistrene. They hugged and kissed as he closed the hatch and she went off.

Kessil was already hopping into the next car in line. Dyoniss hopped in with her, not even seeing where she addressed it. He reached across the car, took her face in his

hands as it moved off. “My love, I wish you wouldn’t do this. I wish that we could have a nice noonmeal and then go our separate ways. Worrying about you will just make this harder.”

“Worrying about you will make it harder for me.”

“It’s my case.”

“Mine too,” she said, “the problems we have been working on just happen to be parts of the same problem. If I hadn’t told them I was going to be off for a few weeks they probably would have sent me out here to look into Jahnsn Fittings.”

“They might have hired us,” he said, “after all, I’m the investigator here. I’m supposed to be ready to take on problems like this and I don’t want to have to be worrying about keeping you safe while I’m doing it.”

“You pulled that line by the roots, right from Centorin cinema. Don’t worry about keeping me safe, I’d rather face a squad of Imperial storm troopers with blasters than a hungry pack of scrub hakkens any day. Please stop thinking like a Centorin. Unless we have the antidote, neither one of us can fight anyway. I’m the one who knows the wilds, and from listening to Delsa, I know that could come in handy around Hardensburg.”

“Kessil, I want you to be safe.”

She took his face in her hands and said, “Dyoniss, I want you to be safe.”

They both had to laugh. “OK, so I’m being too melodramatic.”

“You watch too much Centorin cinema, you forget what

planet you're on." He didn't reply right away. "I care for you a lot already, you're saying you care for me, I think we can be on the same team and we will think that *we* are safer if we are there together working together, than either of us could be by ourselves. I think if we were there together we would each worry the least, and would be the most effective."

He took a few mindful breaths. She leaned back to her side of the car and gave him space. He did study the Centorin way of life pretty hard, it could all be a sex role problem in his mind. He was still uneasy with it, but resigned. He didn't formally concede, but said, "You've got your pocket eye so we can keep reporting whatever we find?"

"Yeah," she said, "for as long as we can."

27. The Blaster Factory

Kessil addressed them to a stop for noonmeal at a station just north of the ruined wall of Karasis Yuhal. “I was here only four decades ago,” Kessil told Dyoniss as they got out, “hopefully the nice little grill I found at the time is still here.”

It was quite a walk, she gave him plenty of time to look at the ancient Temple wall. After more than fifty centuries, the wall looked almost as much like a natural cliff as a man-made structure. It’s bleak stone face was heavily eroded, and hundreds of ropes reached from the top, many with climbers working their way up. It was noisy along here, the ropemen hawked their climbs for almost two miles along the great wall, anywhere there was enough of the wall still standing to make a worthy climb. She had done a rope about another half mile along where it was still well over four hundred feet high. The tallest part standing was before they turned, it was a little over five hundred feet and the shills were the loudest and the prices the highest along there.

A few tried to make the climb on their own using the window openings and grappling hooks. Such stunts were the leading cause of death in the city and one of the daredevils looked like he intended to add to the stats. The wall was still property of the Temple in some sense, and some thought they shouldn’t allow this use of their ruins in this way, but the Ninth Tenet says we cannot make an individual safer than they want to be.

Kessil turned away from the wall on a wide avenue that

lead thru a sprawling bazaar toward the second of a pair of sixty story towers that were no more than twenty centuries old. Not even a third of the way to the tower, which was probably a mile from the Temple wall, she turned into the bazaar and to a large tent of plastic patched so many times it looked like a mosaic. It was held up on ancient poles, the middle one flew a tattered flag with the sign of the plains over it. The sign is a circle with a horizontal line thru it, what Centorins call an 'edge-on Saturn.'

The tent was hung with skins of all kinds for partitions and had tied stickwork furniture. Under the smokehole was a big stone firepit with searing flames and black crystal grills. But there were very good speakers on all the tentpoles and they were playing the current Haunted Windchime feed. She knew he would appreciate that. The girl who greeted them was dressed in a supple and shaped fur skirt with a leather thong for a belt. She was a dark mahogany in color and her eyes and nipples were as dark as Kessil's hair. Her hair was shiny bronze, her features thin and long, marking her as belonging to the people of the Etendur.

"Would you like to join us for Noonmeal?" she asked, like she was a hospitality girl from a plains tribe. "What we have tonight is on the boards that you see posted on every other pole. We're asking a twenty penny donation per person. See me to purchase a tribal plate, which we will buy back when you leave unless you would like to keep it."

"We'll take a couple plates now," Kessil said. They were thirty penny each, but beautiful with finely detailed edges in blues, purples and golds, with beautiful photos of prairie

scenes in the middle and around the flute. With another ten pennies for bottomless house cups that could be turned back in for three, they handed over two irons.

Kessil took a plate with a yellow mrang brood-parent curled around a new hatchling in the flower-circle of it's nest, delicately licking the last fragments of egg shell from the squirming infant's skin.

Dyoniss chose one that showed a pack of gleeps howling at Kortrax, who was setting with Narrulla in transit. There were three of them silhouetted on a small rise, with pincers and fangs raised, while vast herds thundered into the distance.

"How safe do you think we are here?" Kessil asked.

"Probably as safe as we'll be til this is over, one way or the other. This is pretty fancy, does it take you back?"

"Our band had a feast like this about once a year, other than that it was whatever we came across and some mrang and wild rinko cooked in the big pot for the main meal of the day. It's buffet here, we don't need to look at the menu on the poles, just pick from the tables near the firepit. As long as we're using these plates and cups, we're going to be good."

The tables were laden with more karga than mrang, and even some gleep. There were bite sized rolls of vegetables wrapped in bacon strips that had been cooked on the grill. There were even some fish stuffed with various vegetables. Dyoniss was pleasantly surprised at the buffet, he was probably afraid it would be just mrang steaks and baked tubers with a big bin of weekleaves for soom, something else the VersM'lOry ate when it wasn't a feast day.

“What are we going to do?” she asked once they were at a table.

“Keep tabs on my father and/or General Herman Patrick. He’s the owner of the blaster factory and another one of the most extreme. If anything starts to happen, they’ll be involved.”

“You do believe that they have large supplies of the antidote?”

“I’m convinced his security personnel are under the antidote whenever they’re on duty. They might have to punch someone every hour to be sure they still can.”

“And how are we going to keep an eye on them?”

“I was thinking of a stake out, we can get close to their properties on the plains.”

If this was his plan, she wondered why he tried to convince her to go to Etendur? It was long ago, but this had been her world. It was old, but she still owned her plains knife. The sheath from two centuries ago was nothing but mold, but the blade was still as keen as ever. She didn’t know why sneaking off on a tube to Hardensburg felt like going out on a drive, but it did, and she had it taped to her back between her shoulder blades. Normally two centuries is too much for a memory to reach, so she didn’t know how she knew this feeling was triggering that memory, but it did. She remembered the whistle of the dawn wind in the first grey, the coiling eye-stalks of the kedas in silhouette against the sky, their smell, the taste of the tea they had with that early dawn breakfast and the creak of the leather of straps and saddles.

She felt like they should be doing this in the first grey of

dawn, not the evening of noon, and not in this parody of a powwow tent. She was glad Dyoniss was enjoying the décor, but if she was to lead him out onto the plains, which she hardly remembered, it would be much bleaker than this. The music of the wind, the dawn lumins and the laleets was really nothing like the music here, which was clear and detailed, though it was in the background.

“Do you want me to lead you to them thru the wilds?”

“The map is on the pocket eye.”

He had told her of his suspicions regarding Kyonmeere while they were in the car. The fact that they couldn't trust one of the people she thought could be their strongest ally didn't help her feel better about their mission. She understood the necessity of keeping the Temple informed.

“I think we should get you a pocket-eye of your own.”

“We're going thru copper like it's iron,” he said. A pocket eye cost most of a copper, a years pay for many on contract.

“We never know what could happen,” she said. “What if we get separated? I'm not getting separated from you without a way to communicate.” He still looked dubious. “We should get it while we're still in the cities, it will be half again as much once we get to Ragess.”

“OK,” he said in a puff, “but let's not get distracted by that now.”

She brought her pocket eye out, the service in Yuhal was actually as good as anywhere in the cities, it had been centuries since it was really a lot poorer than the others. She projected the map on the table between them so they could both see it. This company pocket-eye didn't have a

holographic projector, but it worked well enough with something two dimensional.

She found Hardensburg, it was tall but tenuous, with stretches of wilderness between inhabited zones and isolated islands of urban land separated from the main part of the city but connected by motorway and/or lev-rail. The city of Ragess was a slim but dense serpent winding thru the middle of it along the banks of the North Ydlon served by one tube line with a few dozen stops and one large lev-rail line out above the river.

He pointed to a dot in a square of prairie along one of the straight motorways that webbed the city. “This is the General’s blaster factory. The lev rails are this skinny line alongside the motorway,” the motorway showed plainly on the picture. “It looks like it’s wild all the way to here,” he showed the northeast of the area. “We should ride out of Ragess to the east, get on the plains here and come down one of these washes to the north of the factory.” She had to scroll the map for him and zoom it to get that all in, but she was able to follow.

“The part where you say, ‘ride out of Ragess’ needs a bit more detail,” Kessil said. “Like where and what on?”

“I figured kedas. The Centorins are on horses, which are slower and dumber. Lev bikes can’t get where we want to go and an ornithopter draws too much attention, especially since we’d have to steal it.”

“I was just going to ask...” since her entire worth wouldn’t get them a ride in an ornithopter.

“Kedas, do you think you could still ride?” he asked.

“I was on one last decade, and you?”

“I was on Sleepingfour just last year.”

“Was he moving at the time?” she asked. If he was a lazy keda, just sitting on him was not enough to make him move.

“I took him down the dell and out to the Vebben pasture and let him get a year’s worth of exercise.”

“You still better use a saddle,” she told him. “I will too but just to keep our duffel on. And I better take the lead keda too. It will just be getting dark when we get to that factory.” She was afraid it was going to be like this, she was glad she packed warmly, sorry she brought any street clothes, they were just going to be weight. “You know we didn’t bring the camping gear.”

“We’ll have to find something we can eat on the ride.”

“So we’re spending Noonsleep in the tube car?”

“Even so we’ll have to make a stop along the Eldadn somewhere for air.”

“And breakfast?” she asked.

“In Ragess, while we look up kedas for hire.”

It was good that kedas understood some human gestures, because a waving hand resembles all five eyes straight up and waving side to side in unison which actually means ‘may I have your attention please’ in the language of kedas of the Ishmarmee conclave. The smile means, ‘thank you for the food’ in their language, but they make allowances for people like Dyoniss who know little more about kedas than how to distinguish one from a mrang or threirops.

Kessil knew enough of their dialect to tell them long walk in the wilds, but couldn't give them much more than the map. Even projected, only the lead keda seemed to grasp it at all. Kessil drew their planned route on it. The keda seemed to get it and waved his eyes for paragraphs at the other. Kessil picked out a saddle for Dyoniss but the keda said no and pointed to the spot on his back that it hurt. The keda then picked him a saddle, which was really too small for Dyoniss, but as long as it gave him something to hang on to he would be safe. She picked one that would let them tie their duffle. The keda approved and they were off.

They rode with farmers going across one of the great and ancient bridges out of the city of Rages. It was mortared stone, patched with limewort for fifty centuries, twice as long as Centorin history. On the far shore they rode between two distant arms of Hardensburg, then under a tarstone road connecting them. Most of the farmers lived on the land between those arms, some bottom land along a small brook. As they reached more open roads, it was easy to get these beasts to open up into a twine.

She was glad breakfast was light, because a keda at twine is bouncy. Dyoniss was grimly hanging on, too rigid to last, but the twine didn't last because they encountered more traffic. "Relax with it, don't stay so tight and go with the rhythm of it," she was able to tell him before the kedas bounded ahead again.

Once they were beyond the tendrils of Hardensburg, the smallholds soon ran out and soon there were only ranches and then wildherders on the open range. Miles of ribbonleaves,

hundreds of breeds of both edgeflower and centerflower, many blooming in autumn. She realized she would be outdoors this dark, and this is usually the first week with frost in Hdengragger.

The tough part was crossing the North Ydlon the second time. What looked like a good fording spot from the eye in the sky turned out to be rocks and rapids with a deep gap in the middle with a strong current in it. There was a tow operation getting boats thru it. The kedas waved eyes at each other and then turned around without giving their humans a say in the matter.

A little farther up, the riverbank became a beach for the numerous smallholds that came into the area. The river got wide and slow, there were lots of people out paddling and quite a bit of lon. Kedas don't like to wade or swim in lon. About a mile upstream there was a guy with a raft operating a swing tow. It looked like he had his two decade son as a paddler.

They waited on a small lawn, the kedas took the time to trim it, they took the time to get off and stretch. There was a kegman here, and an outhouse. The outhouse turned out to be a pretty nice all-in-one in a good state of cleanliness. They got a cup while waiting. They had only their trail bottles, but they were empty already.

It was a little early for lunch, but decided they might as well have that anyway since the guy was also selling tacos. Records of this food have been found at YingolNeerie at a time long prior to any known contact. As this food was not

known to the Elves of the time, there was no way any expedition from the Elven Energy Age could have brought it there, so it had to be parallel evolution. She knew thesh was not native to YingolNeerie, but figured they must have some substitute.

“I’ll have to go into the wild’s with you more often,” Dyoniss said. The big ferry was just swinging to the dock behind him, but he said, “These are pretty good.”

“Too bad we don’t have time for a few more,” she said as he looked toward the raft. The ferryman was lowering the gate and the kid was stroking hard for the far shore. There was no boat going up or down the river close enough to go over the rope.

“I’m getting another to go,” he told the kegman.

“Make that two,” Kessil said and slid four more pennies across, “and thanks for the water.”

They downed the yaag and filled the bottles with water. He quickly put the tacos together and they were up and moving before the last of the raft’s passengers filed off. A keda and rider was as much as a keda and family on a cart. Everyone had to help pull the raft up the rope. Once into the current it moves rather rapidly across the river, which is less than three hundred yards at this point, and swifter than back near the center of Ragess. It’s too deep to see the bottom, and clear enough to see fish big enough that she was glad she wasn’t swimming with them.

On the far side, there was another beach with kayaks and smallholds, the trail from the ferry crossed a larger trail that followed the river. There were more smallholds around but

less than a mile from the riverbank they went thru the ranchers and wildherders again, and within five miles were into wild savannah of tribreaks and quibreaks, carpeted with kneefronds and tussocks. Dangerous country, home to large packs of feral karga (nowhere near as cuddly as pet ones) and the hyadune and hakken that hunt them. This close to habitation, the predators were likely to be rare because humans would hunt them even more than the karga. Still, she was nervous riding thru here, as were the kedas.

It was rather tangled country, hard to keep on track. The kedas were hard to control so she finally let them just go to high ground and would double back from there. They went quite a few miles out of the way, she knew Dyoniss was getting very sore. It was getting pretty late, Kortrax was only a few diameters off the ground and they still had ten miles to cover.

“Can you take riding at a twine again?” she asked.

“I think I’m getting the knack,” he said. “It would be nice to have a week to recover before getting on one again, but go ahead.

She gave them the sign and they stepped it up. A twine uses every other leg on every other step, going inside and out and bending their backs a lot more. Kedas don’t have backbones, but four pelvises connected by link bones that give them quite a bit of flexibility. The whole phylum has variations on that skeletal structure. A rider has to rock to the rhythm as the animal runs. You have to keep as much of your weight as you can on your shins and forearms, and try to let

the pit of your stomach ride the top of the second pelvis, which stays a little steadier.

They passed wild herds on their way, including an endless line of mangle on migration. They come back to the river valley for the winter, go to the Ishmaree Hills for the summer. They were skittish of the kedas and stampeded away from them. She worried about that attracting attention since they charged off in the direction of the lev rail tracks, now only five miles away. They were each small, no more than sixty pounds apiece, but there were a lot of them and their stampede raised a vast cloud of dust. Still, there must be various theiropsoids that cause stampedes out here all the time.

Kortrax was down when they approached the area. There was a fence of nylon lattice holding crystal shards on what looked for all the world like aluminum poles.

“Don’t go near it,” Dyoniss said, “It’s probably alarmed.”

“What?”

“They have fields that can detect human presence. There will be a security room, you’ve seen the movies.”

“Those are movies,” Kessil said, wishing she hadn’t packed the spyglass away in her duffel, they could use it here.

“They have robots in the asteroids doing the mining, they have all kinds of wiring and power equipment. It’s just like Centorin here in Hardensburg. They’re treating it like they’re settling Naiho or Yellowstone.”

“So now what?” she asked.

“We see what we can see.”

They dismounted. She made the sign for ‘stay near’, which is arms in a horizontal circle. She knew the language of this conclave was different from the Ydlontrostl conclave, but she knew they traded for many millions of years before humans arrived. No human has ever completely decoded any keda language, nor learned to make their fingers move in such a way that they can be understood. Human fingers can never convey the full spiral and half spiral positions that are used in almost all keda static languages, which the languages of both conclaves were.

They went up a couple small quibreaks. Dyoniss had the IR glasses, but he really didn’t need them yet. It was mid twilight, the kedas partook of a little snack and would wait til later before sinking a scrape into the ground. Beyond the fence the ground was cleared. An Earth vegetation called grass was planted, pointy little leaves that were greenish yellow or light brown. Some kind of wild vedn was invading, a much darker green with wider leaves, pushed up on the stalks of the grass.

It was two hundred yards to the building, which looked like a huge packing box. It was made of wood-shaving plastiboard. The rise they were on was just high enough to see that the roof was flat and made of tar. The windows were full sheets of plexiglass, screwed into the plastiboard and sealed with squirt-foam. There were big external sheds with rumbling machinery in them. Like the worst slap-trap camp, it was surrounded by poisoned gravel.

“Not exactly a welcoming place to visit,” Kessil said.

“We better hope they don’t have microphones on that

fence if we're going to talk between these trees."

"You think..." "it's that bad?" she didn't say. It could be, most likely it was. She was afraid that what was going on here was more than just a population that couldn't give up their old way of life.

It was uncomfortable in this small tree. Not bad for a tree but compared to an easy chair by the fire, it was miserable. After an hour it was dark enough to see there were lights on in the building, but the plexiglass was translucent, not transparent, and they couldn't tell if there was anyone moving around inside. Dyoniss said the inside is probably one big open floor and the lights are probably hanging at the level of the bottom of the windows.

In spite of the awkward position, she was about to try getting the spyglasses out when she heard something moving on the far side of the fence. It was dark enough that the goggles did some good and Dyoniss looked that way. He immediately motioned for her to get down, and dropped thru the tree he was in, barely controlling his fall. In this dark, she was a little more careful than that, but bumped and jostled and almost fell part of the way.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Two guys with blasters on ATV's."

"What?"

"Mechanical things you can ride, they have wheels so they aren't limited to the lev rail tracks. They've got goggles and no doubt they've seen us."

"Huh?" was about all she knew how to say.

“Get the kedas up and get them to bolt as soon as we’re on their backs.”

They hadn’t gotten into scrapes yet, but they were laying still so they didn’t just get right up. Dyoniss got on his anyway, something you really shouldn’t do, but these rental kedas were used to rude humans so he didn’t do anything more than chuff. It was a good thing he did get on and get settled early, because they were nervous with the snarling machines approaching and as soon as Kessil was on and gave the bolt command, they sprung with all eight and were at the bolt instantly. With five eyes and infrared vision, kedas can see well enough in what looks like near total darkness to a human, to miss the worst of the brush. Kessil motioned for Dyoniss to get down and protect his head, because the kedas would run under anything they could fit under in a full bolt.

The ride is rougher in a bolt than any other gait, and staying plastered to the animal made it worse, but thick fronds were whizzing by just inches above her head.

Dyoniss yelled.

“What?” she asked in fear.

“Whacked my ass on that last frond. They hurt at this speed.”

“Hitting a bug hurts at this speed,” she told him, the words coming out fluttery as the pace pounded her chest. This was another occasion where more padding would help.

They broke thru into the open and the kedas pulled up. They dropped into a slow twine, which felt like a meander

after the bolt. “Now I know what a goulash feels like,” he said. “I think all my bones are broken.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but renting kedas was your idea.”

“I know, and we aren’t done yet. We have to find a herd of mrang or thongaa, something keda sized.”

“Why?”

“The motionless stars. I’m sure the general or my father has an instrument mounted there, or can get time on one. They can track our IR. Those guys will go to the nearest access gate and come after us. They have us on their pocket eyes right now. If we get into a herd they will lose us, when we disperse the herd, they won’t know which signal to track.”

“Where do we find a herd?”

“That way, toward my father’s place.”

28. A New Centorin

Dyoniss had to explain to Kessil how the motionless stars could track their infrared. They found a herd of thongga to run with. Introduced in modern times, thongga did well in the most open parts of the plains. They're smarter and faster than mrang, but not as tough. The thongga eventually saw they were not going to take one of them, and the stampede slowed and dispersed. As long as they wandered like a dark-feeding thongga under the light of Narrulla, there would be no way to tell which of the dots of IR was them.

They eventually wandered into a camp and spent the dark with a herdswoman and her adolescent son in their very large and snug tent, huddled around a firestick stove and swapping stories. Kessil seemed to remember a lot more of her time on the plains than he would have thought. Two centuries is a lot for human memory, his own had a half life of forty decades. Her incident with the Hakken pack was very scary. The herdswoman brewed a potent gold that was also fiery with alcohol. She reminded him of his mother in a lot of ways, so much so that they didn't do a swap, but they partied thru most of Nightday. The chances that they would be found out here were as close to zero as the laws of physics allowed.

The woman told them she had seen Centorins on ATV's in the area, and heard their ornithopters overhead. So far they hadn't bothered her, but she had not tried to interact with them. She had heard of people who opposed them having their possessions damaged, but hadn't heard of the antidote to

the Instinct. She was worried enough when they got there, that worried her more. She was thinking of moving another few hundred miles southwest. That would be within the republic they sought to launch. He encouraged her to move that distance northeast where she would be outside it.

With the light, they boarded their rental kedas and set out to get them back home. All they could do was give the woman an iron for her hospitality. They agreed not to exchange names so they couldn't lead any Centorin pursuit to each other. In minutes they were on the open savannah and her dwelling was invisible.

“So what's the next plan?” Kessil asked.

“Well, I think we know we can't sneak in the back, so we'll have to walk in the front.”

“How do you think you'll get away with that?”

“Sign up in the militia.”

“They'll ray you down on the doorstep,” she said, knowing that he only looked like a Centorin to someone who had never seen a Centorin before.

“I'm sure I can buy fake Centorin papers in Rages. I'll have to shave and cut my hair, but I'll go to a Centorin hair salon to touch it up. I'll have to get an implant scar, but they have spray-ons in Rages. Then I'll go have lunch where his drivers do and see if I can get invited.”

“And what do I do?” Kessil asked.

“Find out where his household help goes to lunch and get a job there, don't try to get a job on his staff, it would be too dangerous. If he captured you I would be too likely to do

something stupid to rescue you, so don't put us in that situation."

"So I should chat up his help when they come in for lunch?"

"You'll find out plenty I'm sure, especially if you look all eager and say, 'What's going on up there?' like you think there might be celebrities involved.

"No, me, you're talking about someone with the social skills of a scamp."

"You're much better than that, just be yourself and keep your ears open. They want to talk, just listen."

"Message often," she said. She had talked him into getting a pocket eye of his own, it was a cheap one, the only option it had was a strap to hang it from, two-d projection was standard now.

They took such a roundabout way that they couldn't make it in one day and took Noonsleep of Imnotn rough soon after crossing the river once again. They made a mattress of vedn straw in the shade of a wild hangleaf far from a water hole. Imnotn is the middle of fall but still nice and warm for noon. They'd found plenty of water and a skin of yaag in the last village.

The kedas stayed near and spent the time filling their bellies, slowly and carefully, with this summer's leaves. This vedn had been picked, but it was pretty much wild otherwise, and no doubt much of it went to wildlife. The vedn picker probably hunted the herbivores instead of the carnivores in the area. His house might have been any of the trees in sight,

but they saw no sign of anyone. They found the straw mattress was comfortable enough to have quite a bit of fun on. Fun they didn't think would be polite in a tent with a woman and her son.

The remaining ride back to Ragesse was pretty uneventful. They got an inn under false names and bought a pair of scissors and pre-cut his hair and beard. On the street markets of Ragesse, Centorin shaving devices are available at much lower prices than advertised in Hardensburg media, and a Centish hair salon finished the transformation.

"It's a damn good thing these Centorin devices don't take it off permanently," Kessil told him as they were walking to meet a contact Kyonmeere had in Ragesse.

"You don't like it?"

"I will admit it makes you look like one of them."

"They say it attracts women, makes them think you're more masculine."

"The beard is a male cue in our culture, yours was good. The sheared look always made me think of some kind of branding or uniform."

"To Centorin women, short hair is a male cue."

"That's cultural, I can assure you there's no genes for it."

It took awhile to convince Kyonmeere's contact to help them, and it took him a lot of digging to find someone who could give him Centorin papers. He had to personally introduce them, and they had to wait til his print shop was empty before he would speak.

"Let me hear your Centish," was the first thing he asked.

“I don’t speak it like a native,” he said in that language, “but I can get around and follow most conversations except those with real thick accents.”

“Your accent’s not real thick, but you’re definitely not Centorin Landborn. You think in Centish at least, you’re not just translating Common Tongue word for word the best you can.”

“That’s barely understandable,” Dyoniss told him.

“Right. So I’m placing your file on the planet Blutherington. It’s a gas mining moon, but you can go outdoors there with an oxygen feed. Auroras are constantly in their skies, the gas giant is constantly on the horizon. The red dwarf star crosses the sky five times a year, but it’s ninety seven hours instead of eighty four. Your father was a lawyer, your mother was a shift supervisor in the mine’s political influence office. I’m putting the file on your pocket eye also,” he said. “Your mother was in charge of the sexy, young, disposable operatives the mining House used in their political plots. House Blutherington is the only significant House on the planet, because they named the planet after their Alpha. Your secret reason for coming to Kassidor is because you became involved with one of the lesser women of the House and were found out. There is a bounty of twenty thousand credits on your head, back on Blutherington.”

“That’s as dangerous as my own identity. Somebody could easily whip me back there for that.”

“Good luck with that. There are seventeen hundred unlisted planets, like Blutherington, basically private planets, and very few people outside the gatekeepers guild and the

Kassikan can tell which are real, and which are not.”

“And Blutherington is not.”

“Precisely, no reward is actually offered, you only offer that story as a last resort to ‘what are you doing here?’ but take this pill, you know he had copies of your fingerprints, you have to change those. To the best of your knowledge neither your father nor the General have hair or blood samples?”

“I left skin on my father’s property,” Dyoniss said before he pushed the fingerprint pill down, “not just hair.”

“Then you can’t pass a finger prick. Your prints will be different enough by next week and match the paperwork the week after.”

Kessil sat with them examining his file on her pocket eye while the identity merchant sprayed the implant scar behind Dyoniss’s right ear. She projected it and made him sign it in erasable marker on the table where she was projecting it. She poked a couple more buttons and showed him the form with his signature. He made the circle of the Temple over it.

“I think I know what you’re doing,” he said to Dyoniss as they were about to leave. “What you’re doing is dangerous. They have informants and they may not require solid proof to act. I’m guessing you already know they have antidote to the Instinct available, think thru what that means. I don’t know how precious your life is to you...”

“Almost as precious as Karasis,” he said.

He would assume it would take a few days to build up enough rapport with anyone to get invited into the militia, so

as duskmeal approached he left Kessil at their inn and went into the tourist district where people from Hardensburg come to mingle. He would have been happy if Kessil just stayed at the inn, but she intended to at least try and find where his help went for lunch. She promised to be careful, he tried not to worry, at least he tried not to worry so much that he would get careless with his own investigation.

He was soon watching the crowd beside a barrel-chested Nordic who spoke only Centish. “Been here long?” he asked.

“Here this evening or here on this planet?”

“On this planet,” Dyoniss asked.

“Long enough,” he said, “I don’t even know the Empire year.”

“5881,” Dyoniss said, “We had just started October when I came thru to that dome.”

“Yeah, I still remember that, that is something isn’t it?”

“For it’s age,” Dyoniss said. He had never actually seen the dome, except on a screen or poster. He’d never actually been closer to the Highlands than the beaches north of Ninavek, thirteen thousand miles short of the Yakhan.

“Billy Pressman,” he said and extended his hand.

“Jake Hargrove,” Dyoniss replied.

“I can’t place your accent,” Billy said.

“Blutherington, it’s a gas mining moon in the Gedi system.”

“Never been there.”

“Didn’t miss much, a lot of big pipes, steel grate decking, company cafeterias with plastic food. I can’t believe the food

here.”

“You’re not putting much of it away,” he said.

“Are you kidding? This is my third helping.”

“So what brought you here?”

“Ah, wanted to get away, you know how things get sometimes. Job gets old, women get old, not that there are enough women on Blutherington to go around and even the skinny things with no tits want a hundred credits for a short time. I heard the native girls are free, and I’ve seen a few of them, wow.”

“Yeah they’re hot, but totally independent and there’s no such thing as faithful.”

“Still, looks like fun,” Dyoniss said.

“Sounds like you like it here so far?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, pretty much. I’m having a hard time getting used to this ‘Instinct’ thing. I don’t know about you but when I want to throw a punch, I want to throw a punch. It takes a lot to get me steamed but if it happens, I like to know it’s there and not have to take insults with my arm hanging like used spaghetti.”

“I know what you mean,” he said. “I mean don’t get me wrong either, I like the way it’s peaceful here, but I miss that excitement about a Saturday night, you know what I mean. I liked to try and figure out what made the tough guys tick, how they picked their victims, how they groomed their image.”

“Where were you from?” Dyoniss asked.

“Stebbensville; toughest town on the upper Navorken.”

“Centorin itself?”

“Born and bred.”

“What brought you here?”

“I imagine it’s a lot like yourself, things got old, some things got sticky.” He looked closely at Dyoniss while he said that. His eyes were hooded.

Dyoniss gave a quick bark of laughter out loud and stifled it. “Sticky,” he smiled.

“What do you know about sticky?”

“Like I had to use my nephew’s finger to route the car to that dome.”

“Ah, that kind of sticky. No, it was just a paternity claim because I never did pay her, she lay there like a sack of feed the whole time. She should have been reading.”

“So you have no proof of prostitution,” Dyoniss said.

“And no lawyer to get a paternity analysis. What about you?”

“It was also a woman. She didn’t tell me she was from the House, seventh wife of fourthson of thirdwife, but a House woman all the same. I didn’t know til we were caught.”

“How’d you get out of that?”

“There was a little action. They blamed me for taking down a couple of their security operatives.”

“Did you?”

“Some of the guys down must not have been theirs,” Dyoniss said. He didn’t think those lines were directly from a movie, but that plot had been used so often it must be pretty common out in the Empire.

Billy looked at him a little critically and said, “Not much of that kind of action around here.”

“Ah,” Dyoniss said, “I guess that’s good. I can do without these,” he said and pushed up his sleeve to show the blaster scar. He might be the only surviving native of this whole planet with one, and he hoped he was the last. “I wouldn’t mind keeping up with my training though.”

“Yeah? Lot of people feel that way around here. I’ll ask around and see if there’s any more than wishing. If you come here often I’ll see you.”

Dyoniss made notes as soon as they separated. He would be able to find Billy Pressman again. It was often easier to look up residents of Hardensburg on the Centorin system. It wouldn’t have a local address, but he could check criminal records. No doubt Billy Pressman would check him on the Centorin system and that was one of the best parts of the fake ID, all the inquiries regarding the planet Blutherington were actually fielded right in Ragess, on his server. There were seven planets in his database, all fake, but all with plenty of data supporting the ID’s he created.

He wandered to a nearby tap, a few doors from the eatery they were at. This one had girls undressing for entertainment. Centorin men will pay money just to watch a girl undress. They seem to like them to move to music as they do, very much like in Norbin, but it’s in a room with an admission price, and using music that was pure lectroshock, not a popular genre in Norbin. Most of the girls were enhanced in some way, unlike Norbin where most are relatively pretty

girls looking for a date.

The guys were cheering them on as if this was a real sex show. The beaches of Ragess are not the basin's prettiest, but they're as good as any river beach until the north shore of Ninavek, but nowhere near as crowded. There are more and prettier naked girls on the beaches of Ragess than in this sweaty little room this dusk. What makes any beach better and Ragess is no exception is that most of them are of normal proportions. The other difference is that the guys would also be naked on the beach, but here they were dressed in denim and flannel or leather.

They crowded the stage. There was a stage manager who assigned girls from his crew to get on the stage. Anyone who wanted to get on the stage had to negotiate with him. He would pay more for more extreme girls, but there weren't enough of them, so he let the prettiest of the normal girls on, but wouldn't pay very much. He was paid by the kegmen in the room, so this was very much run as a local business, even though it was providing a Centorin custom.

He suddenly realized how out-of-character he was being. Anyone who had recently come to this planet from a gas mining moon would probably be astounded at the beauty on display. Except that he had spent weeks getting here and would have seen plenty of samples of the asses, breasts and genitals of a people of whom the common folk can afford to have whatever look they want for the last forty centuries, six thousand Empire standard years.

In the Empire, the Landborn women could afford to have whatever look they want for the last twenty centuries, since

they got the technology from the Kassikan. The Landborn women would never be on one of these stages, or ever be seen by one of the common people. The common people of the Empire have as much medical technology as the beasts of the plains in this basin. He knew they were still ephemeral, but so many died of violence that there were few elderly.

“You’ve seen this before,” the guy next to him at the tap rail asked. He was a Earth native no doubt, very dark with tightly curled hair. He knew there were Enurates and even a few Nordics remaining on Earth, but this look was associated with Earth itself and not the Empire.

“Yeah, on the way here I stopped for air in a place called Norbin. I think the girls were even prettier there, but not so enhanced. I’ve been here a few days and I know these are not average girls in this area, but they were in Norbin. Any girl in the audience might get up and it was right on the plaza, no admission.”

“Norbin you say, I stopped there on the way here also, but there were these big manual factories in buildings made out of living trees. I didn’t see any tittie bars, but it was all so weird to me at the time.”

“The stage was right on a food court,” Dyoniss said. “The main walkway was between stage and tables. There was a sugarpop band behind them and the band picked the girls. The girls went and sat with who they liked after their show. It was all very quiet and decorous with guys raising their hands and the girl leaving the stage to go sit at the table of her choice.”

“Don’t sound natural.”

“I guess it was for them,” Dyoniss said. He’d never been to Norbin and seen it himself, but it was used in almost all cinema from Norbin.

“Did any girls come sit with you?”

“One tried, but she didn’t know one single word of Centish, and wasn’t at all interested in conversing thru a cheap translator app.”

“You haven’t learned Kassidorin yet?”

“Not then,” he said, “but it’s starting to come in. Now that I’ve lost my comm, I’m going to have quite a bit more immersion.”

“I’ll say, especially down here in Muskrat Town.”

“That’s the slang here?”

“Yeah, there’s hundreds of thousands of them, maybe even millions, just on the sand bars and mud flats along the riverbank. They live in the trees, you noticed that right?”

“Yeah, I stayed in Kassidor City a day,” he said. That would explain the fact that he had no implant. He hoped he could fake his way because he had no idea what other significance ‘Muskrat Town,’ had. Ragess translates to ‘Big Bend’ in Centish so it wasn’t a simple commonization of the name. “There is a little of that on a few planets now,” Dyoniss said, “but that was the first I saw of it in person. It’s all over here.”

He went thru more talk about the journey from the Yakhan to Ydlontrostl and about the technology in use in the girl’s figures. He knew the most advanced labial enhancements were from the city of Kshoned, somewhere Jackson Fleece had missed on his way, since it was only two

and half hours from Norbin by tube. They conversed for some time before conversation got around to ‘what brought you here’ and the Instinct. He used the ‘want to keep up my training’ excuse again.

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you this but there’s a retired General out the Northwest Road who feels the same way and has some gear to play with.”

“Yeah, I’d hate to get soft, you know.”

“You can get very soft here,” Jackson said. “I don’t even remember the last time I was in a fight. I haven’t had a weapon in my hands since I was here.”

“I was told there aren’t any here.”

“That’s the propaganda, but that same General has a blaster factory, you ought to go out looking for work, it’s out on Northwest Motorway about seventeen miles.”

It was getting rather late. Jackson was drinking ale, but by the flaggon, Dyoniss had probably had too much himself. It was worth it, as Jackson drank he told more tales that he had heard of the General. There wasn’t a lot of specific things, just how there was a lot more activity there as time went on, how a lot of guys who were used to trouble were spending a lot of time out there. But now Jackson was trying to make arrangements with a couple of the big-titted wenches using a translator. “That’s both of us right?” he asked Dyoniss.

“Ah, I’m not sure,” he said.

“Why not, where else you going with it?”

Dyoniss wasn’t totally confident the girls didn’t know any Centish, but it would be out of character for him to

suspect that. "I heard it was free here."

"I don't know if I'm ready for that, I don't need one of these pretty monkeys latching on to me. But where are you going to get tits like these out there?"

There were any number of them at the Blue Kite, but to know that would be out of character. "Well, I don't know, I might want to stumble on down the street. It's my first time here you know, I don't want to just jump at the first deal."

"You won't find one better anywhere along this strip, take it from one who's been here many times."

'I can find one better anywhere off this strip,' he wanted to say, but that would also be out of character. The better of the two was tall with straight, light brown hair, a lithe muscular body and serious big knockers, a lot like Shreihin. But hers were nothing compared to the other girl, who was huge, but with short hair and Centorin lingerie and face paint. "You go ahead," he said.

He spoke with the painted girl in broken Kassidorian, after a short conversation between the girls in Kassidorian Jackson told him, "One won't go without the other."

He knew damn well what had been said between the two girls, the friend just knew that her friend was hurt and the tall girl was telling her to go ahead. Dyoniss certainly didn't want to reject the girl, she was actually one of the most normal ones and he was afraid to let her feel rejected because of it. He pretended he didn't know better and said, "For you my new found friend, and because this lovely lady is so beautiful that there can hardly be prettier," he said as he stepped to her and slid his arm around her, "I'll do it."

The girl seemed to cheer up a little bit, but her smile was wry. The place had three floors of suites upstairs, and they made their way in that direction. They were pretty sumptuous spaces, but since he was paying the girl an iron, he would expect that. They had windows, and the dusk was progressing much faster than he'd thought, Kortrax was gone and there were only a few pink puffballs in the sky. If he was going to get any messages to Kessil, he had to do it now. He wasn't going to be able to stay in character doing this. He gave the pidgin hand sign for 'give me a minute' and hung his pocket eye out the window.

She came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder, pressed her generous and firm curve just below his shoulder blade and said, "What are you doing with a Crystalogic pocket eye? You must know written common tongue."

He took a deep breath and turned to her. He really didn't have time to explain. "Have any Centorin's tried to hurt you?" he asked.

"A couple times, and sometimes they try to squeeze my tits so hard it hurts, but why didn't you speak Common Tongue before?"

"Let me send a message and then I'll explain, but if you value our way of life, you had better keep this secret."

She had a hard time stifling it, but she lay back on the bed. It was getting alarmingly dark. There was enough light to let him see there was a message. He opened it, it was from Kessil.

Love-

I've gone to the nearest tube station to Mikal's ranch to find a place to work as a cook where his workers might happen by. The station is in a tarstone field, there is nothing here but motor vehicles. The Centorins have left enough scraps of aluminum foil around to pay for this whole trip however, and I've picked that up. I went up near the fence and followed it to the left, away from the motorway. At the third wash I've found a pretty well-worn path and a hole in the...

Darling I got interrupted as I was typing that. Listen, I'm with freeherders inside Mikal's property, right up that path, the sensors are disabled there. They say there's a big meeting...

And then his pocket eye cut out.

29. A Job as a Cook

Kessil spent the dusk looking for the area the help from Mikal's would go for meals. She tried to find streetcars here, but they only went up and down the riverbank in Rages. There were some motorbuses in Hardensburg, but they stopped and started only at designated areas. 'Natives' could only ride them with a work permit, so she was left with no choice but the tubes to get to his area.

She got off in an area so unlike anything she was ever exposed to before. The tube station was out on the prairie in an area covered with tarstone where motor vehicles sat. There was only one tarstone path leading from that to a large motorway that went over the nearest rise in both directions. She recognized this from Centorin video as a 'parking lot' where motor vehicles are abandoned while their occupants do something else.

Many of the motor vehicles abandoned here were relatively small and meant only for passengers, with no cargo space. One of them was a streetcar made by Hyeesahr in Mefmun. It had been modified with a larger motor and reactor than any streetcars in use in the Ydlontrostl cities, but it was clearly a Hyeesahr. All the others looked like they must have come from Centorin.

Motor vehicles came by on the motorway frequently enough that there was almost always one in sight. They moved as fast as a tube car in an urban ring, about a third the speed of a long line. It would be suicide to try to walk the

tarstone, and very unnecessary because the savannah was almost prairie here, and grazed smooth by the local herds except right along the motorway itself which was bordered by a loose fringe of colorful tribreaks.

The 'parking lot' itself and some of the surrounding prairie was covered with a thin layer of rubbish. There were scraps of paper, some of them big enough to still use. There were bits of cellophane, empty plastic bottles and bags, food scraps, even what looked like scraps of aluminum leaf. Sure enough, she found one piece crammed between the pebbles of the tarstone actually was aluminum and not a plastic imitation. It was at least a third of an inch long and an eighth of an inch wide, almost as thick as a piece of paper. She searched the lot and found thirteen more in an less than a quarter hour, easily enough to pay for their trip to Hardensburg and all they'd spent so far. She cleaned it and rolled it into the best ball she could by hand and put it in her pouch. It was almost the size of an aluminum. No one would take it like that, but she could turn it in at a financier and get at least twenty coppers.

During the time she was doing that, three people emerged from the tube and got into motor vehicles, not one of them said anything to her. Another vehicle came up and three people got out and went to the station. The driver and one other waited in the vehicle til the others were off in the tubes, then left. They also took almost no notice of her, even though she tried to work her way toward them as she scanned the tarstone.

With that done, Kortrax was near the horizon. She had to

remember her purpose here was to find information about what Mikal was doing and not harvest aluminum. It was clear that wherever Mikal's help went, it wasn't near this tube station. She set out walking toward Mikal's ranch, hoping she could get there with enough light left to actually see it.

His property was fenced, much like the factory grounds. There was no sign of a house from anywhere she could see. She decided to follow the fence in the direction opposite the motorway. It went over open savannah, but the land inside the fence was prairie and there was a dense population of mrang just like Dyoniss said. She followed the fence toward the nearest wash, which was quite dense in tribreak and other brush.

The shadows were long and it had been a long time since she did tracking in the wild, but Kessil spotted a little used path that ran along the wash. She followed it toward the fence. She could see that the path went right up to the fence where it went over the wash. She could see that the path ducked under the fence, and that a few squares of the fence had been opened.

She still didn't trust it, there were sensors, as well as the fence. She wouldn't learn anything out here, but she wouldn't be able to report anything if she went thru the fence and got captured. She would have to at least message the Temple about where she was and what she was doing before she got the spyglass out and tried to tackle that fence. There was less than two hours left before dark rates went into effect. She was still composing the message when someone came up behind her.

She heard him before she saw him, the brush was that thick and he was following the path in the stream bed of the wash. That would keep him invisible to the motionless stars. She put the pocket-eye away and thought about slipping out of sight. She didn't have time.

The man was a plainsman, not a Centorin. He was carrying a small cask in a shoulder sling and whistling a caravan tune. He was relatively good looking with a cute face and good arms, a little ragged but nothing worse than her mother's tribe. He stopped abruptly when he noticed her, but his eye was friendly and his smile looked genuine when he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Ah, would you believe I was looking for work as a cook?"

"Out here?"

"I heard there was a big ranch with a lot going on. The 'Mikal' ranch, have you heard of it?"

"That's the fence right there. I'm one of the freehands on it and we can certainly use a cook. We've been living on steak and roots and whatever soom we can chew on the drives. You're way too pretty to cook up at the house, the Mikal would take you into his harem."

"Oh I don't want to be in his harem, I was just looking for a cooking job."

He had kept walking, "come on then, you can cook for us."

"But the fence," she said as she started after him.

"It's disabled here. No mrang get out at our camp, so they never think there is a problem with the fence. Since all we

really bring in this way is the yaag, he never worried about it.”

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I don’t know really, Nightday there’s some big meeting of the Centorinists. I’m just one of the free hands so they don’t tell me much.”

“What are freehands?” she asked.

“We ride daywork on the ranch for a meal and ten pennies, and he lets us camp down here. There’s eight of us and none of us can cook very well. Watch the fence coming thru, the edges are harder and sharper than they look.”

She did catch a few strands of hair on it, but that was all. “What have you got to cook?” She could tell that this job would get her inside the fence and as much gossip as the best conventional cooking job she had imagined.

“We take a beast a year, he never misses it, it’s dried strips mainly, we put up the sticks near other washes miles from here, he never catches on. Him and his men never really care as long as they’re getting cheap labor. We’ve got the whole ranch to forage, but we do that, you won’t have to. You can cook camp can’t you?”

“I was born to the VerseM’lOry,” she said. “It’s in the east, but I can cook in the saddle if I need to. Do you have any cookware?” She worried that sticks and stones and a knife would be their only utensils, as it had been for her on drives.

“Oh yeah, all you want, and water. It’s hand-pump and we need to run it thru a filter, but there’s plenty. He doesn’t know we have it because we don’t have electricity.”

They continued to walk up the wash under thick fronds and branches. The pink of sunset was on the clouds already, she should find a way to stop and get a message off to Dyoniss, but she didn't want to do it with this guy watching. "So what does this job pay?"

"All you can eat and I'm sure all the sex you want. There's only two women with us today. One of them isn't very womanlike and the other is her lover. And you're cute enough that no one will turn you down."

"Thank you, but I don't need more than a little variety, no more than once a week."

By the word 'variety,' he knew she had a steady. At least she hoped she did, who knows what would happen when this was all over. "I don't know if we can afford to feed your guy too."

"He's got food this dusk, I could have too, these wages don't sound like what I was looking for. I was thinking more like an iron a shift..."

"The house staff doesn't get that."

"I'm here because I thought Centorins paid extravagantly?" she said.

"They used to, but now it's bare survival. Ragess handles the river cargo for Hardensburg, but makes little off it. Ragess is now even poorer than it was before the Centorins got here."

"Then why are you riding for them?"

"Because they have claimed all the land around here. Any free range we start to work, they 'buy' from us. We'd have to go to the northern plains or the mid basin plains to get away from them."

“Sounds bad.”

“I don’t like it, but we’re still living a lot of the same life we used to have, except we’re riding on horses instead of kedas.”

“Uh?” she couldn’t imagine riding herd without kedas. Your keda is your partner.

“Yeah, the ranch is run using horses and ATV’s. Centorins get the ATV’s, us locals get horses. They’re dumber and more skittish than a garden pest, higher and rougher riding than a keda.”

She could still feel the saddle on her shins and wrists so she wouldn’t care for that. She realized that to remain in character, she would have to turn around and say their job offer wasn’t lucrative enough, but it might be in information. “You said there is a big meeting going on tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that’s all I know for sure, but the house staff told Weekie that they’re getting the full VIP treatment and that Security has been training hard.”

“Security?” Kessil asked.

“Yeah, we’re not supposed to tell anyone, but they have blasters, and lately some of the house staff have told us they fear they have antidote to the Instinct. Please don’t tell anyone, a guy we know was talking it up. Well a few weeks ago his kayak was found crushed under a motor barge along the waterfront.”

She only grunted. This was one of the people Ragnar had told them about on the dusk he showed up. She could hardly believe that was only four weeks ago.

Suddenly they were in a rather nice camp. A turn in the path, a few steps up and there was a courtyard paved with natural stone, surrounded by planked platforms covered by tents hanging in a clump of taller trees. In the court was a stand-up fireplace with grate and cauldron, two lanterns and the hand pump. The court was small, but in four sections at different levels, each but the one with the fireplace with a plank table on it. The paving was really a minimal rearrangement to level the natural setting, most of the steps were natural. The tents were leaf-pattern green, the lanterns were on the clipped trunks of small tribreaks that had died in the shade of the multibreaks that shaded this wider spot in the wash.

Jardra introduced her to Fimlee, Parkhart and Jenim, the three who were in camp at the present time. Parkhart must have been the girlfriend of the butch because she was at least as attractive as Kessil. They were getting a fire going for duskmeal and had a small gleple gutted and ready for the grill.

“This is Kessil, she says she knows how to cook.”

“Great!” Parkhart said, “maybe you won’t keep asking me what to do.”

“This isn’t quite the job I was looking for, but I’ll cook duskmeal for a share in that and the cask. What have you got for spices? We should probably stuff this with soom, is there any wild rinko around?” she knew there was and it was in season.

Parkhart looked at Jenim, “I’ll get it,” he said, “You don’t mind if it’s fresh do you?” he asked both of them.

Parkhart looked to her. “No,” Kesssil answered, “we were glad when we could get it.”

He went off, climbing up out of the wash. It would be growing right on the edge where it would catch a little shade from the hangleaves down here.

Parkhart put a few small jars of seeds and a few herbs in front of her. “This is what we’ve got for spices.”

“Any flour?”

“Rough ground wild vedn.”

“Let me have a half cup of that, we’ll start the sauce in this small bowl here.”

She pulled it onto the fire. They were going to need the lantern soon. She also noticed there was no outhouse in sight. There was no smell, so there must be something, and in an hour or less, she was going to have to ask. Before full darkness for sure.

Hemzhai and Toolic came in while duskmeal was cooking, the others would not be at camp this dusk. Toolic was obviously the butch, she had Centorin-short hair, augmented muscles, a square chin and big thick hands.

When it was almost ready, she had to ask where the facilities were, it was getting late enough that it was now or never to get a message out. Parkhart told her, “There’s a water jug and clean rags there, and that low spot in the embankment leads to the next wash.”

She really didn’t need the rag and jug, but that would be a convenient excuse. She hoped there was enough light to run the pocket eye, her lighter wasn’t enough to run it. The next

wash did stink. There were a few bent over saplings to sit over. She took one of them, but quickly continued her message. She told Dyoniss how to find the camp, that there was a big important meeting going on. She told him she was going to stay at the camp for Dusksleep and Nightday if possible, but wasn't going to go into the house unless an extremely safe opportunity presented itself. There was enough light to key it in, but sending it was iffy. Kortrax was already below the horizon, but there were bright pink puffballs all over the sky. She knew it was less than one percent the light of direct sunlight, but they say if you can read, it should be enough light. She wondered if it was the pocket eye Dyoniss was carrying that was hard to get to. It should have enough power stored inside to receive unless he had run it completely down. Just before the message completely transmitted, the network shut down. The message didn't say dark rates would apply, it said it was shutting down for the dark.

She tried not to show her distress. She had no way of telling how much of the message made it to Dyoniss. She didn't know if he would have light to check his messages. He probably hadn't received the part about her plans, so if he saw the partial message he might worry unnecessarily.

She tried to enjoy the remainder of the evening with these guys and even had quite a bit of fun once the cask started pouring. The meal came out decent. Her mother could do a better job of it, but these guys were duly impressed.

There was an embarrassing amount of pleading over

which tent she would grace. While this would be just a casual romp, she worried about how Dyoniss would feel if he found the camp during dusk sleep and found her with someone. With relatively little to differentiate these herdsmen, she picked Jardra simply because she met him first and he fetched the cask.

The cask was drained before anyone but Kessil turned in. She left them speculating about the blaster factory, they really hated the idea of it and were trying to think of something they could do to stop it. They seemed much more yaag-proof than she was, and she was concerned about Dyoniss. In fact she was already asleep by the time Jardra crawled in, and wasn't really exciting company. That probably didn't matter because he was too relaxed from the keg to need really exciting company. She fell asleep on top of him and hoped it was after they finished.

30. Mikal's Roof

After his pocket eye shut down, Dyoniss had to be sure he understood the message. Kessil was on Mikal's property with some people called freeherders. There was a brief description of the route there. He couldn't leave her there, but he'd already paid for an encounter with this girl. He had to explain his presence to her. She wouldn't promise anyone but a lover, especially now that she knew he was in Karasis. It was nearly an hour delay including the explanation and the encounter.

A quarter of the way thru that time, but while they were already joined, Jackson said good night thru the door. Dyoniss was afraid he might have been caught speaking Common Tongue, Jackson certainly caught the girl talking to him. They were both silent til his footsteps died away. Then the other girl said, "I'm going downstairs once more, should I wait for you?"

"No, go ahead, I'll catch up with you after your next round," this girl said.

Once that girl's footsteps receded down the stairs he said, "Please don't say anything to her, a lot of these guys know a lot more Common Tongue than they let on."

"Like you, I've never heard a Centorin speak it better."

He had to explain his origins and more about the situation. She had heard of the antidote and it worried her. She'd had the Instinct protect her twice already, and hated to think what would happen if that wasn't working. Meanwhile her body continued to do what it was doing, and he found his

was also. She came suddenly and seemingly unexpectedly, and he had to concentrate to finish in time.

He hoped she understood that he had to be on his way, but as he got dressed, she kept asking more questions like, “What can I do?”

“Any rumors you hear regarding the Instinct, blasters, troops, people using blasters or using the antidote, report it to the Temple, any way you can. Keep your ears open for that kind of thing.”

“We’d have to learn Centish.”

“Probably not a bad thing to do, you can get a pill for half of that iron.”

“I see ten penny of that iron.”

“Here,” he took another iron from his pouch, “If you promise Karasis you will use it only for that, I will buy pills for you and your friend to know Centish. You don’t need to let the guys know you know it,” he said, “you’ll learn a lot more if they think you don’t.” He buckled his sandals and stood up. “You are a fine girl, you should make your fortune from these Centorins, but please be careful. Without the Instinct, some of them can be very cruel. You’ve seen the movies right?”

“A few, those that have been translated.”

The ones she needed to see had subtitles at best, “Go watch a couple after you take that pill, see if you want to live like the people in the backgrounds of those movies.”

“I want that pill, but I know someone better to have the other one. The friend you met is too into Centorins, too into the money she’s making, she gets twenty penny because of

the pills she's taken. I don't trust her with Karasis."

"Use this for the good of Karsis," he said, and pressed it into her hand. He wondered what the odds were that it would be used as promised. Somehow he thought they were pretty good. The Centorins feel casual sex is fine as long as someone pays money and the big men make most of it. To this girl sex is still about her self-image and the money is not felt in her soul. That is something the Centorins don't understand about Kassidor, sex is not about power here, it's about acceptance and being in the same species with someone.

It wasn't easy following Kessil's directions, especially since he couldn't look them up again once he got out of the light of the tubeway car. There were no dark rates here, the suntowers were inert til dawn. Only Centorin comms talking to the motionless stars would work.

He found the camp when he was almost in it. He climbed up on a rock and saw a torch almost burnt down. The tribreak and multibreak fronds let just enough of Kunae's and Narrulla's light into the camp for him to detect the tents. He found Kessil in the third one, asleep on top of one of the herdsman. He couldn't really be sure it was her til he touched her hair.

She woke up and asked, "Dyoniss?"

"Yeah, I got part of your message, up to the part about some big meeting?"

She got up and exchanged a few mumbles with the guy she had been on top of, then took Dyoniss to the cooking area

of the camp. There was still a bit of warmth in the coals and she was naked under the short quilt she brought from the tent. He had to understand that as he had to use sex in the line of duty, so did she. She told him all she knew and all the rumors the guys had heard. There was nothing to do but go up to the house. Now that he was inside the perimeter, it should be a lot easier.

He was sorry he brought no camping gear. Kessil spent the remainder of the sleep with him on the kindling pile next to the firepit with a few layers of tarp for a mattress. This would never work for Dawnsleep, but they stayed close and kept warm enough til it was late enough to call it Nightday.

As they had a cold breakfast of greens and fruit before there was much stirring in the remainder of the camp, he had to tell her he intended to get the house and meeting under surveillance.

“Is there any way that can be safe?” she asked with subtle sarcasm.

“I’ll be as careful as I can, but they can’t have a lot of motion sensors around because there will be plenty of other people moving around.”

“I think their cameras have had face recognition for centuries, they should be tracking every guest at all times.”

“I don’t think they have that out here, the gatekeepers are trying to keep that for the military.”

“You’ll bet you life on it?” she asked.

“What are we doing here?” ‘but betting our lives.’

“Take this,” She took a small cloth from her pouch and

unwrapped a small round lens with a plastic ring around it as a handle. “Look thru this everywhere you go. If you see something thru it that glows, there’s a field there.”

“What kind?”

“Anything, I/R, radar, comms transmit. It’s better than the phosphor disk because you can see the field before you get in it.”

“Thanks,” he said, “where did this come from?”

“A conference I attended a few years ago. It was meant for people working on the pocket eye system, but the guy giving them out was willing to give them to me.”

“I’m glad you brought it.”

“I was thinking it could come in handy.”

“We should have been using it when we first came up on that blaster factory,” he said.

“True, but we were on it before I thought of it.”

By then a couple of the others were up, a guy named Jenim, and the guy Kessil had been sleeping on who was introduced as Jardra. They fueled one of the lanterns and drew some detailed layouts of the house and barns. The house was to one side of the grounds, toward the motorway and lev rail entries, the barn was to the other side. The property included six thousand acres of grazing land with the house and grounds in the middle of the small side toward Hardensburg, almost half a mile from where they were camped.

“Follow this wash all the way up,” Jardra told him, “you’ll be right behind the horse paddock and about three

hundred yards out. There'll always be a herd bed down around there because of the horse feed, you can come up behind them that way. Follow around the barn on the downwind side. Horses don't have the sense of smell of a keda, but they have more than we do, and they aren't sound sleepers." Unlike kedas, some of whom you can walk over without waking up more than one eye.

"The meeting is going to be in the house," Jardra told him, "and from these sheds," he pointed to some small boxes next to pool and on the barn side of the house, "a tall guy like you can probably get onto the roof. I don't know if they have anything watching the roof, but there are cameras at these three corners. You'll have to climb right over this one, but you'll be so close to it you should be able to dodge it."

He could tell Kessil was worried for him, and she held him tight and started to sob as he started to get his things together for the hike. She had been quite distressed at his plan to observe the meeting. She had been upset that he didn't want her with him but he couldn't bear to think of her being in that much danger. She hadn't studied Centorins like he had and would have no feel for the amount of danger she could be in. She couldn't speak the language, didn't know the customs or the technology, he just couldn't let her come along. He would have to say, it was their first real spat. After that, he couldn't find her. He hoped she hadn't gone off crying.

He spent too long looking for her, with no success, and was very worried. He was ready to scrap the plan and turn the whole area upside down, but the herdsman promised they

would find her and take care of her. With some argument and many misgivings, they persuaded him to go on his way. He knew he shouldn't go off like this, he was too distracted to go on such a dangerous mission. Not knowing where she was, was almost as bad as having her with him.

As he made his way up the wash, he kept his eyes open for any sign of Kessil as well as any sign of Centorin presence. He had to use a torch in a few spots, Narrulla was now quite low already and gave little light and Kunae was dim and distant in the 123rd. He found no sign of her, either by footprint or scanning with the spyglass for her IR.

When he was near the house, he brought out the spyglass and looked around. The place was loaded with cameras and motion sensors and in most places the fields overlapped. He saw that the barn was even worse than the house, that was a little suspicious. He was glad the meeting wasn't in the barn, the house looked easy compared to that. He had to skirt them all, moving between sheds, plantings and parked motor vehicles. With a phosphor disk alone he could have never made it, but the spyglass showed him a way between all the IR and radar beams. He wished Kessil had given this to him earlier, he could have used it years ago in fact. He would have bought one if he knew they existed.

It was tedious climbing onto the roof silently. Not only was he higher than he liked to fall from, but the constantly scanning cameras kept him moving to places he nearly fell from. In a way it was stupid that he was more afraid of falling off this roof than he was of the blasters and the security men, even with the antidote. That fear was intellectual, his mind

knew they could hurt or kill him and he bore the scar to prove it. Still the fear of falling was instinctual. Humans evolved in gravity only eighty seven percent of this, some layer of our reflexes isn't prepared for how fast the ground comes up. The height was probably between twelve and fifteen feet, his chance of survival was good, but there was nothing rational about his fear of heights. He knew his irrational fear put him in more danger, and still the fear would not back down.

At one point he had to step on the camera housing to climb up, and he was sure that was going to shake it. He tried to be careful, but felt himself slipping and had no choice but to let the camera wiggle. He lay still on the roof. This was a dark corner, hidden behind floodlights that were illuminating the yard.

He lay there til his heartbeat was regular again. He was on the roof safely. He would worry about getting down later. He used the spyglass once again to see if anything had been turned his way and didn't see anything. His next goal was to move silently. For that he would go on all fours, moving only one limb at a time. He might cause a creak, but no thumps that would make anyone think of footsteps. It was already tenth hour, and the meeting probably wouldn't begin til twentieth hour at the earliest.

Dyoniss had been told the structure was meant to resemble a Centorin ranch house, if so, it had a lot of roof. It was two stories in height only at the far end, and it was completely built, nothing was grown. The roof was open, sloped, and covered with some sort of textured plastic, it was easy enough for him to move around without slipping. Much

easier than a grown roof where he would be tangled in and climbing thru the upper branches.

The roof was an elongated pyramid, what Centorins call a 'hip' roof, but it had three dormers on this end as if there was a suite up there. He climbed to the peak of the roof, he could still see anyone approaching from the public direction, and he was hidden by dormers on both sides. There was a corner of the yard where one could still see him, if using infra red.

He took a good look around with the spyglass, but it showed him that all the instrumentation on the house was looking out, he was within the inner perimeter. He had another stroke of good luck, he heard Mikal talking on a comm. The Centorin motionless stars do not go down for darkness, they have enough power storage to get thru the eclipse they each go thru every week.

"Good," Mikal was saying, "I'm glad you have him alive, but don't take any chances on him getting away, it's not that important that we make an example of him. Let's say it's worth an extra ten thousand to get him here alive. Did you recover the merchandise?"

There was the three second delay in using a voice channel over any distance on a Centorin comm. There was no chance that Dyoniss was going to hear the reply. He was surprised that Mikal had a window open, most Centorins say that any structure where you can open the windows is a camp. Mikal must have adapted more to this culture than he realized.

"Good," Mikal said, "it's even more important you bring that in, we've had to move the plans up. But when can I expect you in?" There was the pause again. "Some detective's

been snooping around, don't let it worry you, we just go this dawn instead of Christmas. We need that product to proceed, there's no time to order a replacement if we're to launch at full strength.

“And it sounds like you're in the city called Dlochken, I know it looks big, but Yidlontrostel (Centorin's had no hope of pronouncing it correctly) only seems as big as Dlon dai because the tubes are so slow here, it's barely fifty million and Dlochken is actually smaller than Hardensburg. You should be here in four hours, so it'll be after twentieth hour when you get out to the house.”

While the three seconds transpired he heard Mikal mutter something about the senseless headlines in Mefmun. Then he said, “The planet turns at a different speed, there's nothing I can do about it. You better get used to it unless you want to take that long tube ride back out of here.”

There was the three seconds again, then, “Take care, see you in a few hours.”

He no sooner ended that call than he placed another. “Stan, yes, that alternative we discussed,” there was no delay in this conversation, therefore it was local. “Yes, exactly, I'd like you to carry it out. He'll be bringing the subject in sometime after twentieth hour, have him met at the tube station, he's coming into the one on the lev line so take a six man boat. Take your medicine before you meet him, you can be sure he will.” something from the other side, “Thanks, and be careful with him Stan, he trains hard and isn't afraid of a little pain.” “Yes, thanks,” and he ended that.

Dyoniss heard him moving around in the room at the next

dormer, but he did not talk to his comm any more. Dyoniss got bored after awhile, but it was well before twentieth hour when someone came up to the front on a lev bike. Dyoniss could look over the ridge of the roof and see a great deal of the front yard very clearly because it was very well lit. This man had a helmet and riding suit like he had been doing some speed runs. He pulled off the helmet and Dyoniss almost gasped aloud when he saw that it was Betten.

Betten was looking around, as if he was checking for watchers, but not checking the roof of the house above him. Not only did this give him a clear view of Betten's movements, but it allowed him to remain within earshot of Mikal's suite right below him. Betten had to know he would be greeted, and he was. It seemed tensely cordial. He handed over his helmet, and might have been searched, but moved closer to the house where Dyoniss could not see. He could tell that Betten was lead into the house without any sounds of struggle.

It was not long until he heard Mikal's voice, "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I need your protection," he heard Betten say. "The agency knows," he said. "They're reporting it to the Temple."

"We can manage them."

"How?"

"My business," Mikal said.

"You don't trust me? After all I've done for you?"

"Kyonmeere's man is still out there," Mikal said.

"That's not my fault," Betten replied, "you lost him."

"He's been out to the factory."

“He would, he found my files on it.”

“You were supposed to destroy those,” Mikal said thickly.

“I had them hidden very well.”

“Not good enough,” Mikal said. Betten said nothing. He imagined Betten looking at the floor and Mikal staring at the top of Betten’s head. He kept it in his imagination, he did not move and try to peek in the dormer window. There was some muttering too low for him to hear, it sounded like Mikal on a palmed comm.

He heard Betten start to plead, but he was keeping his voice low, once in awhile he would hear a ‘not my fault’ or a ‘lots of help’ or something like that. Mikal’s voice was too powerful to be hushed, but his replies were more like ‘had your chance,’ and, ‘who do you think you’re dealing with?’ and ‘little shit.’ Betten’s Centish was atrocious, but Mikal would not use Common Tongue unless he had no choice. When he did use it his accent was thick and brutal.

He heard booted feet enter the room. “Shackle him in the hayloft,” Mikal said, “make sure he can’t reach to scratch the fleas.”

“Sir:” and then the sound of booted feet leaving with sneakered feet in tow.

Dyoniss had to move very carefully to somewhere where he could not be seen from the barn. Both the guys who took Betten off would have a heads-up with IR on it.

He was starting to notice the chill of dark building up by the time the first in a procession of sleek levboats pulled up and liveried chauffeurs opened hatches for men in the most

extreme business attire. Most of them had heads-ups, some on their gleaming chrome-look helmets. A couple got out with implants in place of one eye and both ears. They were both impossibly tall and thin and had to walk with canes in this gravity. Most were with a security detachment, their suitcoats bulging with versapistols, their heads-up on a thin band with an in-ear visible only by it's extraction thread. No hair, anywhere but eyebrows and eyelashes, some with visible tattoos.

Dyoniss wished he could take pictures because he saw several owners of important Centorin companies that had been accused of dishonesty and false claims in the media. With armed men on lev-bikes before and aft, a big, black, low-slung levboat arrived and General Herman Patrick got out. Dyoniss would have recognized that uniform before he started this case, he had made a name for himself as the highest ranking defector from the Centorin military to come to this basin. He had given interviews to several media outlets in all the cities he passed thru on his way to Hardensburg. He didn't actually criticize the military's policies, but objected to his personal treatment. That was ten decades ago now, but still fresh in many memories.

Few in the media associated the General with weapons manufacture until Dyoniss reported it to the Temple and a Temple spokesman disseminated it to the media. Betten's pictures of the factory and the general were all over the media this week. This whole meeting might be a damage control meeting.

He saw a big lev boat with four big men in it head out on

the lev-rails. It must be close to twentieth hour. Actually if these guys had data men as sharp as Engsahr they would already have the track sheet of the incoming tube car and know it's arrival time to the millisecond. It couldn't be more than ten minutes in that lev boat to the tube station.

Another lev boat pulled up, the man who got out was a serious celebrity back in the Empire. He had been the star of a series of video dramas, illegally sexy and set in upscale locales like the private moons of Tau b and d. There were eight moons in the Tau system that were now habitable, and they had the fleets of both Novo Grosso and New Heartland to deal with, as well as their own intrigues and a heavy Empire presence. Tau had been an action-packed system in recent centuries. He also shot several movies on Kiandutan, which had regained it's status as a paradise planet now that it had been won from the Aldebs by the peasants. He also did a blockbuster hit on the planet Myoon, a modern Kiandutan without the Aldebs where a lot of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering, and more than a few duels, between the heads of great Houses took place during the mechanoid wars.

Now he was taking his heroic Nordic looks into Dyoniss' father's house. It seemed that everyone was down on the main floor now. The master suite was all that was on the third floor. None of the dormers were visible from the front, but there were at least two large rooms and a bathroom which had only a skylight. There was a night light on in there and a vast stonework shower was visible under the skylight.

While nothing was happening, he got out the spyglass again and looked around with that. The windows and skylight

were protected with sensor fields, so any thoughts he might have entertained of slipping in and tossing the rooms was out of the question, at least not without Engsahr on the team. He saw the lamps and cameras looking out from the house. The barn was across a wide yard from here. Someone with a simple IR scope could see him on this roof if they were in the hayloft of the barn. That is where Mikal had ordered Betten taken, but they wouldn't have left an IR scope with him. If there was someone looking he would have been taken down hours ago. He didn't see anything from the barn thru this lens, nothing but a little residual heat and the shape of a horse's head when it looked out the window of it's stall. There were motion-sensitive cameras on the barn as well, the lens picked up their antennae as bright flickering orange lights like Kunae seen thru the trees when paddling the canal on a summer Dusksleep.

As he did that, he saw someone else approaching the house under guard. The lev boat had returned with Mikal's men and one other. They parked a healthy distance from the house. The man they were bringing in looked familiar and that seemed odd since Dyoniss knew so few people in Hardensburg. The man's face was down and he had a billed cap, and from a roof is not a normal viewing angle, but he was in expensive clothes. He looked around also but approached the dormer to Mikal's suite so he could silently slip out of sight. The man was being lead toward the house, a man on each side. The other two men were carrying what appeared to be a half-gallon of whiskey toward the barn. He didn't think he was jumping to conclusions in thinking that that was the antidote. It was exactly the size that would fit in

the box that had entered the basin with Gegais.

Because he was convinced the man being lead into the house was someone he knew, he had to get him to look up. Dyoniss can do a pretty good job at imitating the coo of a lorisaur, so he did that. He knew he was against a black sky, the man was in the electric light of the front door. He looked up.

Dyoniss certainly hoped he was invisible up here. As soon as he looked up and saw it was a built roof and not the upper branches of a house, he would know it was no lorisaur that cooed and caught him off guard. Dyoniss wished he had never demonstrated how realistically he could imitate the coo of a lorisaur because it was Kyonmeere who's face was under that hat.

31. The General Before the President

“I understand the brilliance in your plan Starkey,” the general said, “but without that last half gallon we don’t have the doses your own calculations say we will need in the second phase.”

“We haven’t taken the intimidation factor into account,” Mikal said. “As long as these people think we have the antidote, they will fear us.”

“Until one makes us prove it and we can’t,” Colonel Rakeman said.

“We still have three half-gallons in there,” Mikal said.

General Patrick said, “Then we should be making tablets, not waiting around like a bunch of pretty monkeys for one of their soda-straw tubes to finally deliver up the thief from a distance that really isn’t much farther than across town in Dlundai.”

“Nice speech, General,” Herman Hector said, “How would you like me to present that to the populace?” He was the former movie star who was going to be the press secretary of the new republic.

“That we are going to lift them out of their backwardness and let them take their rightful place as one of the great planets of the empire,” Mikal said.

“They will think we are a comedy show,” the former actor said.

“It’s true. If those wizards hadn’t kept this planet backwards for so long...” the general started to say. Over forty

billion people, a labor pool bigger and cheaper than anywhere.

“Remember that Centorin law didn’t allow silicon as advanced as that on this planet until the last thousand years,” Herman said. “We still don’t have the biomedical technology that the local pill pusher in nearest native village has.”

“They move over half their produce under muscle or sail,” Mikal said, “more than half their economy is outside the money economy. Return on investment is a foreign concept to them, their medium of exchange is physical metal beads.”

“They have their own ways,” Hector said, “But they have watched civilizations come and go. They are surprised we have lasted this long, but Centorin is fading and we all know it.”

“The gatekeepers,” the general muttered. When the Emperor sat in the Kensendum, Centorin would always be great, no matter if the mines of Dlon dai were played out and the factories of Navorkensville practically in ruins. But with the gatekeepers on their highliners, and the whereabouts of the Supreme Navigator unknown, and the Emperor in sole command of the OverMarshall, all the governing power of the Empire was in space, concentrated in the OverMarshall’s deathstar, where the Emperor was rumored to be sitting. As long as that deathstar could move at will thru the highliners, any planet with a highliner in it’s system was vulnerable, and General Herman Patrick knew there was a highliner headed this way a little more than a hundred years out. He had to make his rule of the planet a done deal by the time it got here. He needed to get the robots constructing a defense force as

soon as possible. There was nothing in this system that could stand against a deathstar today and he would have no negotiating position at all if he couldn't neutralize it.

But that was a distraction from the first objective, to declare the Republic this dawn. He was just about to give the order to start making tablets with the bottles already in hand when Mikal came down from his suite. "I've just received notification that they are here with the last bottle. They're in a lev-boat at the gate, they just have to dump off Columba's body, they'll be here in minutes."

He wouldn't have offed that soldier because of the notice he attracted. He might be useless in the Ydlontrostl Cities for the time being, but he could use him on the ground forces out here. But that or Starkey's play with the thief was no reason to butt heads with his president. Still he was nervous about the timing. Mikal didn't understand the logistics. There were nine hundred odd vials that had to be filled, nine hundred odd men who had to receive one. There were only so many hours left before dawn, even on this planet. Should the troops have to march with only what they had on them, the whole operation would be a sham.

"We should get started," he said to Mikal.

"I need some time with the traitor," Mikal said, "Just a few minutes. No one takes my money and double crosses me."

They were just wrestling the man into the house. He was a local pretty boy, one of the type with smooth skin, long sleek hair and stylish clothes. He was buff, but for show, there was no toughness to him at all.

“Take him upstairs,” Mikal said, and followed. “Wait for me,” he said to the general, “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

The colonel and Jake Binton came over to him. Everyone else was at the bar while the general stayed near the window that looked out toward the barn. “We should be out there,” the colonel said as soon as he was close enough to hear him.

“A few minutes won’t matter,” General Patrick said, “and showing what we can do might keep some of the others in line. I know Jahnithin and Melburn don’t take this as seriously as they should.”

“They’ve been here too long,” Jake said. “I told you it was a bad idea to include anyone who has been here a lifetime already.”

“Jahnithin has a native wife,” the colonel said. “She’s going to be a thorn in our side thru all of this. She still goes down to Ragess to attend that Temple.”

“He shouldn’t allow that,” General Patrick said. “I think Mikal has been too permissive in who he allows into this organization.”

“Herman Hector especially,” the colonel said. “If there was ever an apologist for native ways...”

“He’s not as bad as some,” Jake said, “and a lot of what he says is true and we have to account for it or we will fail. Half the people who come here have gone native all the way. Native women, native housing, native food. They go to native clubs and some have even taken native jobs. There are some who can hardly speak Centish any more.”

“When we take power, a lot of that will stop,” the general said. “The native way of life won’t seem so appealing when

we reveal it for what it is.”

Herman Hector drifted over with them, “What’s that?” he asked.

“A dead end,” the general said. “A powerless, leaderless, directionless dead end that has been sitting here going nowhere for four thousand years.”

“Six thousand,” Hector said. “They achieved this stasis about the time Rome was founded. The ‘Instinct’ is five thousand years old.”

“I stand corrected,” the general said, “they are even more stagnant than I thought.”

“Things move slowly here,” Hector said.

“That’s about to change,” the colonel said. “It has to change, it must be us and not the Kassikan that greets the highliner when it gets here.”

“We have a century,” the colonel said. “We’ll have this basin under our control within ten years.”

“That’s going to be tough, this basin is as big as the largest Empires ever assembled on Earth, with as many people as Dlundai,” Herman said.

“I know the geography,” General Patrick said, “that info has been available since the year began with a two. We can’t be stopped, resistance is impossible.”

“You don’t understand, there is no power structure to take over, other than the Temple.”

“We’ll start there in that case.”

“But they need only one dose of the antidote to release a bioweapon that will exterminate all of us,” Herman said. “A

plague that could kill every human being not born here, they could find a gene we have that they don't, I guarantee it."

"I don't believe you," the general said, "and I don't believe they have a dose of the antidote. The only shipment that was lost has been recovered."

"Not one of your men or Mikal's men has dropped a pill?" Hector asked. "If any native finds it, he could very well send it to the Temple. And if you think not one single pill has fallen into native hands, you are in serious denial."

"I think they are so conditioned that even if they had the antidote, they wouldn't know how to use force," the general said.

"I assure you there are people in the Temple who do," Hector said.

"We know the Kassikan can produce all the antidote they want," the colonel said, "we know that the Kassikan and the Temple cooperate."

"We have to assume we are going to meet some armed resistance," Jake said. "We will meet resistance from a lot of our own people."

"That's what we will accomplish Morningday," the general said, "securing the city of Hardensburg." It was a third of the Empire-born residents of the planet, the only electric grid on the planet, the only Centish-language media on the planet. Taking this city would be like taking Marsalis on Naiho. He knew it was a tiny fraction of the population and area, but it was a huge fraction of the power on this world.

"We are declaring the government at dawn? Is that

correct?” Jake asked.

“It’s been moved up to this dawn,” the general said. “We can’t allow knowledge of the antidote to become widespread in the population, we will lose a lot of the advantage. By Christmas the news media will be picking us apart, they’re going to be around in droves and we’ll have to use the antidote to control them, which will confirm what they’re trying to prove.”

“Oh I agree,” Jake said. “I was all for a four stage plan where we set up the city government at the beginning of the year.”

Of course he would, it would give him some time as the highest governmental official on the planet. Who knows, he might even harbor fantasies of being the one to greet the highliner.

The guys over by the bar were pretending they were talking military strategy for phase one, the Republic. The best they had going for them was a few place names. He had actually been all over the Western Savannah by ornithopter in the past year, identifying the real strategic points and determining how many troops it was going to take to control each. The others saw the natives as a sea of minnows, but he knew they did have an economy, and that were strategic locks, caravan routes, ports, industrial centers, media centers that controlled the whole basin. Once the Ydlontrostl Cities were taken, the basin was taken, it was only a matter of mopping up after that, if it takes another generation of recruits, that is no big deal, if he took control of those cities,

he took control of the basin, or at least the majority of it.

He'd been to those cites, and it was daunting. There are many of them, not one major center. He really had to take the tubes, the canals and some of the main avenues. Then he had to go and take each individual one of the great towers, the ancient crystal edifices that were cities in themselves. It was going to take an Earth year, but it could be done. He had a generation to consolidate control of the basin, when he must challenge and subdue the Kassikan itself to be the one who greeted the highliner.

In a way, he was loath to be the one who greeted them because he would be acknowledging their sovereignty over him. He didn't want to do that, he acknowledged their monopoly on interstellar transportation from this planet. That was really the deal the Kassikan had struck with the Empire, as had Novo Grosso, and the nations of Tibet, Amazonas, Patagonia, and Nordia on Earth. In general, even the failed states on Earth were sovereign because only Centorin special forces would dare go to Earth in uniform as a rule, except in Siberia, Northwest Territories and Antarctica.

He had let the others carry on their conversation while he was lost in thought looking at that barn. He knew Mikal had put in advanced security in that barn, fields that would repel all the little hand-held blasters his factory had built so far.

No one but his troops knew yet that Mikal's mrang pastures were about to become the bivouac site from which the occupation of Hardensburg would begin. None of the thickly settled spots in the south of the savannah were being notified, they would be just outside the boundary of the new

nation. We would claim all the uninhabited, or nearly uninhabited territory. A million square miles, a hundred fifty million people, twenty five million of them born in the Empire and not on this planet, fifty million more born to Empire citizens.

Mikal came down the stairs with the traitor in tow. At least he wasn't bleeding and had no obvious broken bones. "Give me just a few more minutes for a pill to take effect, and I will stage a little demonstration of what the antidote can do, and what we will do to those who betray us."

"Don't go alone," General Patrick said.

"Don't be silly, I have this," he waved a blaster, one of the thousand his factory had made so far. It was a modernized lightweight, incorporating the best features of several on a knock-off McAllister 720 frame, but cast in local crystal. It could be charged in a day in the field with a roll-out solar panel a third of a square yard in area and tuned to the wavelength of 61 Cygni. It was light and nimble enough that a woman could use it, but packed lethal punch in close combat. "And it's my place, my men take my orders," Mikal said, and they stepped into sight at a couple doors, also with blasters and vials of antidote rattling on their belts.

"Very well," the general said. It wasn't the first time he wondered if Mikal contemplated civilian control of the military under the new government. That wouldn't go well with the Overmarshall. Over time Mikal would come to understand that the function of the civilian government was the control of the civilian population for the military, but he wouldn't get into that now. He would wait until the

government was in place before he had that little conversation with Mikal about his real role in the government.

“Give me ten more minutes,” Mikal said, “it takes effect pretty quickly in a virile man. Wait ten minutes for me to get ready, and then lead everyone out to the barn. Make sure they all know they’re going to be making a few hundred thousand tablets once this little demonstration is over.”

“I trust you’ll put on a show that will satisfy their lust,” the general said.

“Just so they’re ready to cast pills,” Mikal said.

“Yes, but it’s getting late in the day, the troops are already starting to set up camp. We need to have it distributed before light’s out or we will have to delay moving out with the dawn.”

“Some men can work thru the sleep, the vial’s will be in the men’s kits in the morning,” Mikal said. “I’ll do it myself if I have to, but I’m sure we can find some volunteers in the encampment.”

“I’m sure we could, if I could get an officer on that,” Herman Patrick said.

“We’ll figure it out as we cast the pills, I’m going to the barn now, give me ten minutes and then come out.”

“Ok, ten mintues, not ten and,” he pulled his comm to get the exact time. He still kept a satellite capable here, the native system went down in the dark.

Mikal turned and went thru the door.

“Civilian control of the military is a dangerous precedent to set,” the colonel said, “Especially with that highliner on the

way.”

“This is not a good time to break ranks,” the general said.

“He did,” the colonel said.

“And I didn’t.” There was a pause. “He will come to understand the truth, but I will get more out of him now if I let him think he is working for himself.”

“It’s all moot when that highliner gets here,” Jake said.

“He who contacts the highliner will be considered the planet’s government until they decide otherwise. As long as we don’t disappoint them, they will leave us alone.”

“As the Empire has left the Kassikan alone.”

“Exactly.”

“The Kassikan will attempt to contact that highliner.”

“Let them, they can’t get anything but photons up to them.”

“I don’t know about that, they brought up the wreck of a shuttlecraft built in 2173 out of Kassidor City’s harbor.”

“When?”

“About 2451 or so,” Herman said, “They could reproduce that if they thought they had to. It is technically possible to put the magnetic containment for the fusion inside the motor windings for the fans, so they could do it with the metal at hand, and keep it secret in their deep labs.”

“We should have appointed you their spokesperson instead of ours,” Colonel Rakeman said bitterly.

“I don’t think you should underestimate them sir.”

“I am the one who has spent time there scouting,” the general said. “I know exactly how serious an objective the

Kassikan would be. I fully understand that all my troops will have to be breathing canned air thru the whole seizure. I will make sure that they all know they could be martyrs.”

“That’s very kind of you sir,” Herman Hector said.

“You’ve never been around a military operation before have you?” the general said. He knew he hadn’t, especially a serious one. Make-believe for the holo screen is far from the real thing. “You’ve never had to sit with the men who know they’re not coming back.” ‘Thru the night many times,’ he thought but didn’t say aloud, listening to each one’s story of why he doesn’t want to come back. Whether it be supreme dedication to the cause, a need to make up for perceived shortcomings, a love affair gone bad, they all had a reason, few of them were really valid. It was tough, sitting with those men and listening to their stories and knowing they just needed a few words to make them reconsider and give life a chance. But because he needed them to volunteer for the mission, he couldn’t say those words, but agreed with them that it was a valiant and worthy gesture and whoever they wanted to impress would see what a hero they really were. That was the tough duty, but he had done it all his life, and he wasn’t afraid to do it now.

“I don’t see how anyone could,” Hector said.

Ironical that they had the same first name when they were so different in opinion. “I’ve had to do it. I hope I don’t have to do it again, but I know that night will come when we need to take the Kassikan. That will be the most difficult objective til the highliner comes,” he said.

“Let’s just make sure we take Hardensburg before we

count our basins and planets,” Jake said.

“That’s good advice for today,” the general said. “We need to get those pills made and get them distributed. We’ll have to do as Mikal suggested, find a crew to distribute them during the sleep.”

“We’ll need three men,” the colonel said.

“Something’s going on in the barn,” one of the security men shouted, and all conversation stopped. As soon as they heard running feet, they were all out of there in seconds. He was surprised to see at least three of Mikal’s men carrying blasters. General Herman Patrick was glad that the anti-aging technology on this planet was so effective, because he was in prime athletic condition even though he was now twelve hundred and thirty one years old. He pounded across the yard toward the barn. Mikal and his prisoner were struggling over the blaster. He could see a native girl at the control panel of the barn’s security system. At least one of Mikal’s men saw her too. He must have been under the antidote because he raised his blaster.

32. In the Barn

Kessil could see that the hayloft window would be the best place to keep an eye on Dyoniss as he tried to get onto the house, but getting into the barn wasn't going to be easy. Thru the spyglass it looked like the stage in a power club, with enough beams and rays and fields to make an impressive light show. No animals were nearby to hide behind, just a few motor vehicles and none of them were close enough to the barn to get her thru the fields.

There was a little drainage ditch leading from the downspout in one corner. There was enough dwarf tumor grown up around it that she might crawl thru there to the barn. She had to make her way completely around it, all the way around the back paddock, to get near that ditch. She didn't know how much time she had so she scampered on tiptoe, it was far enough that she was winded again by the time she got to the start of the tumor at the end of the paddock. She had to start crawling along one fence of the paddock, and then slither into the ditch slowly so she didn't make the brush move.

It was a long crawl and a careful one, the ditch wasn't wide enough to low-crawl, she had to inch-worm. It reminded her of sneaking up on a three-horned mrang nest hoping to make off with an egg ready to hatch. She was very aware that her daughter had died in such a stunt. She kept checking the spy glass often to see if anything was aimed her way. She had to be careful to keep her IR-emitting skin out of sight of the

cameras on the house as well as the barn. It wasn't til she could touch the barn wall that she could crawl up out of the ditch, and there were only a few inches of space along the wall that were clear of coverage by one camera or another.

These animals called 'horses' had enough sense of smell that Kessil couldn't hide from them and they sure were a lot more skittish than kedas. They certainly must have smelled humans before, but knowing Centorins, they might not have smelled a female human before. She couldn't use any of the doors, they were all protected by fields and sensors. She couldn't move anywhere but flat along this side wall, and all there was besides one door were the windows into the horse stalls. They were all armored with sensor fields and locked.

She cursed the Centorins for being so paranoid, but if you come from a planet where there is no Instinct, she could see that happening. She wondered how much they thought these horses were worth? Obviously she was stuck now, she couldn't get any farther unless someone turned off the fields on the door.

The barn was made out of plank, and some were rotted on the bottom where they met the gravel. One looked like it might make a hole almost big enough to squeeze thru. She had to dig some gravel out of the way, and some straw on the other side. She tried to pull the gravel back into position once she was in. The horses sensed her and moved about, making some snuffling noises.

She found herself in an empty stall, still filled with dirty straw and a scratchy blanket, a couple buckets and a couple piles of dung. She quickly climbed to the upper floor in this

barn, a space filled mostly with bales of a very rough but long thesh that didn't look native to this basin, maybe not even this planet. In a couple minutes the beasts quieted down.

She went to the opening that faced the house. She got the spyglass out. She had never really had a use for them until this trip, she was very glad she had remembered them. She had managed to snag four on the day of that conference, two from company promoters and two from guys who won them earlier, and got quite a bit of fun and a darkmeal out of it. She was going to give three to Dyoniss and one she was going to keep for herself. That would be this one. They were selling these now for a copper and thirty, and this one was telling her Dyoniss was still safe but cutting it close.

She knew he would be concerned if he found her gone, but they had said goodbye at the start of his final prep. If he was worried, it served him right, he should have let her help him openly, as a team. The fact that he wouldn't allow it was the most negative aspect of their relationship so far. She knew he sought to protect her from danger. She knew he had trained for this and she had not so he didn't know her skills. But mainly she thought it was because he had studied Centorin entertainment and picked up attitudes from that.

He hoped he took her wandering off toward the latrine as grief or anger, she meant to let a couple of them hear a sob or two, but wasn't sure she pulled it off. If she did, they would tell Dyoniss to go on, she would be fine. Once she was in the next ravine she scrambled to the top and then jogged along the edge of the wash where Kunae and the low Narrulla provided just enough light to see her footing.

She was never very good at conveying her feelings, it's tough on the plains, you have to trust each other. She and Dyoniss had never faced a situation like this before, together or apart. When this was over, if it ended well, Dyoniss would know a lot more about the team they could be. She would too. In spite of their differences about who should do what on this mission, she still hoped to share life with him, if he could see her as a partner and not a toy.

She had lost so much time on that crawl that she got to the hayloft opening just as he was starting his climb from the shed roof to the house. She saw him step on the camera and wiggle it. It responded by panning in all directions, and the fact that it could do so freely must have satisfied the operator, because no one came to look at it. She knew Dyoniss hated heights because he had told her how he was scared when climbing the house for maintenance chores.

When he settled on the roof to watch and listen, he seemed safe enough for the moment. She better do something, like explore this barn. There was actually quite a bit of light in here, an electric lamp at each end that weren't enough to read by, but enough to move around without stumbling over things. First she made sure there were no surveillance fields in here, and found that there were, fields protecting the horses from the workers in the center aisle of the barn, or maybe keeping the horses in their stalls. There was no protection from the loft, so it was probably what was keeping the horses in their stalls, they didn't look like they could climb.

It meant she could explore the interesting part of the barn

at will. Most of it was filled with fittings for harnessing these animals. The horses were tall and narrow, more like a gleep than a mrang, though they were entirely herbivorous. They had no shells or horns, just a single mane, and big nostrils over their mouths that they obviously breathed thru, like humans, sending the air up thru their head instead of directly in and out of their chests like all animals in the lentos class. That must mean that these animals were in the same class of Yingolian life as humans. They certainly looked it.

There was a sack with some big letters in Centish on it, her best guess was 'soom' and it was cracked groundberry seed, which would be soom for a grain eating animal. That meant that horses were of the same evolution as humans and needed soom to survive on this planet.

There were some bottles, glass or even plastic, she couldn't read the Centish, there was no Common Tongue on the containers, but on the front of the shelf the help had scratched, 'exilir,' and 'liniment' in common tongue. They were chemical, not extracts of anything from this planet. With them on the shelf, but stacked a little separate, were three large glass bottles, square, with handles, and obviously all cast from the same mold.

This size container is probably what Dyoniss had talked about, the half gallon, going by the Centorin slang 'handle,' a bottle just a bit smaller than the standard jug. She didn't care if it was the antidote or whiskey, she poured it down the sink, being careful not to disturb the thin layer of dust on the bottles. She refilled the bottles with water and some of that horse liniment for color. It was a little more reddish brown

than it had been when she was done, but the light wasn't good out here and they might not notice it right away. She put the bottles back exactly as they had been on the shelf, making sure to put them exactly in the dust holes so anyone could see it was not disturbed.

Also in the room was a desk full of papers full of writing in Centish. You might as well ink the feet of inglethors and scatter them across the paper with a nyobba for all it meant to her. She wished Dyoniss was here, he could tell if this was the bill for the electricity or a list of people to kill with each pill of the antidote. She knew only a few words, and guessed that one of the papers was a long note, another was a table of some kind. Most of them were probably short notes.

At the far end of the room, behind a rack full of sacks of ground groundberry, were some sacks of a much finer white powder. If forced to guess what it was, she would have said it was freak. This much freak would supply the Ydlontrostl Cities for a year at least, maybe even half a decade. She knew a lot of people who did it, but like her, they did it annually at most, very wary of the possibility of addiction. She also knew Nembez did it at least weekly, but functioned reasonably well the rest of the week. Kessil sniffed a tiny puff off her knuckle and didn't feel any rush at all. She only did freak on the Dawnsleeps before Hareenduul if she was at the Blue Kite because boost just wasn't enough to get her to miss a whole sleep and still be bright and busy. This was not that, but looked like it.

On a shelf behind those bags of powder she found a water

tap, trays, molds, a lot like the molds Vailiss managed, but power pumped instead of gravity-fed. These were molds for mass-produced tablets. No doubt the meeting that was going on was a get-together of everyone who was in the antidote conspiracy to mass produce thousands of tablets, and she guessed they would be made by combining the powder in the sacks with the active ingredient in those bottles. That would be enough to make this area into a Centorin city, ruled by those with the biggest blasters and the most troops, where non-combatants are used as target practice and their bodies piled like sandbags. She knew of a Centorin video game where you actually get to detail how you pile your dead bodies to protect your final stand.

She heard noise just in time and made it to the ladder to the loft before the door on the house side of the barn was thrown open and two guys came in hustling another between them. She scampered up as quietly as possible to the second floor. The horses were more nervous about the new arrivals than they ever were about her, so she knew they weren't going to reveal her presence unless she tried to escape on one.

She went back to the end of the loft near the opening. She scanned them with the spyglass, they had the usual radar and IR on their heads-up but nothing really new. If she stayed as out-of-sight as she would have in the light, she would be fine.

Unfortunately they came straight to the stairs, still frog-marching their captive, and on up into the loft. She squeezed behind the bales at the end of the row. There wasn't even any floor here, she had to climb out on the beams. Luckily this

prefab used numerous small beams, close enough together that she could spread her weight over three of them and strong enough that she could perch on one just as easily as perching on a small branch when trying to pounce on a tender half-decade mrang cub. She was blown away that her memory could get her that random moment from centuries ago. This was the first time she thought of that since she first got to a city.

They went to the other end of the loft, one of the dark ends away from the house. The man they brought had his hands in cuffs behind him. At first glance she was instinctively sure that the men handling him must have the antidote to the Instinct, but as she watched closer, she wasn't so sure. What they had was an attitude and a swagger and a gruffness that made you believe they were protected by an antidote, but they hadn't actually hurt him, just made him believe they could.

She saw that as another part of the spectrum of danger the antidote held. Just the knowledge that the antidote was possible could make people afraid. Even if they never met anyone who even acted like they had the antidote, it would change people's behavior. People would threaten each other with the antidote. The Instinct is as much a modification to people's mental attitude as a modification to their capabilities. It is the feeling of security that we have because we know the Instinct is there that lets us live the way we do. If we lose that feeling of security, we lose our way of life, whether there is any antidote in the basin or not.

They shackled him in an uncomfortable position. He

would have to do a dislocate to get out of that position. He didn't try, he whimpered in broken Centish, his captors insulted him in native street Centish, she knew the cadence if not the translation. They left, absolutely no thought given to the possibility that a former plainswoman could be lurking behind these bales.

She watched them leave the building, and watched them at the building security control panel. She dropped down between the beams to the floor and was at it before they were halfway across the yard to the house. She used one of the barn cameras to spot Dyoniss and saw that he was still safe. She turned the camera on the yard of the house. She wished she could set it to alarm if any Centorins came from the house and disable if natives of All of Lands showed up.

Unfortunately the user interface was all in Centish. Centish she would see on control panels was what she knew the most because they had a few Centorin devices in the lab. She could see a big knob that she thought said 'open' 'friends' '&%%' '#?&&%' and 'lock%\$#'. It was now set on '&%%' which she did not know the meaning of. To give Dyoniss a place to run to, should he need it, she set it to open, hoping she was right about the meaning of the words.

Things happened in front of the house, she couldn't see what they were, but Dyoniss remained on this end of the ridge of the house. He was obvious to the passive IR cameras, and the user interface on them was a virtual joystick, which didn't require detailed knowledge of Centish to master. She turned the camera away again. She thought it would be a good idea to interview the captive on the second floor. It could be that

the enemy of her enemy was her friend, but she wouldn't assume too much.

“So it seems you pissed Mikal off?” she asked as she walked up to him.

“Who are you?”

“Just some chick off the plains,” she said. “That position looks uncomfortable.”

“It's killing me, and there are fleas in this hay.”

“It's relatively simple to get out of that.”

“Get me out of it then.”

“Answer a few questions first,” Kessil said.

“The Instinct protects me,” he said.

“The Instinct doesn't force me to take action to improve your well being. Karasis asks me to, if you deserve it. Who are you?”

“My name is Betten, I took a wrong turn on my lev bike and came up this driveway, I have no idea where I am, they took my lev-bike, shackled me, and threw me in here. I only came in to ask directions.”

Kessil had heard the name ‘Betten’ and knew he was the agent who had set Dyoniss up the last time he was in Hardensburg. She wasn't going to let him know that. “What were you doing out this way?” she asked.

“Just a joy-ride really, I didn't get the lev-bike that long ago. There's a track above the Northwest Motorway that's unlimited and I was jumping freight crawlers every second or two.”

“So did you steal the bike?”

“No, of course not,” he said indignantly, “I earned it.”

“You must have a good career?” Kessil asked.

“I’m an investigator.”

“On anything big?” she asked.

“Nothing really.”

“Oh, nothing like a blaster factory and a case of them bound for Yellgnoskn gaskets in the Cities?”

He had to react, “Who are you? You don’t look Centorin.”

“I’m of the VerseM’lOry. My name wouldn’t do anything for you.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It might make us allies,” Kessil said. “I’m very concerned about those blasters. The back of that cubbyhole wasn’t that great a hiding place for those papers.”

“You were in my office?”

“They were in the back of the cubbyhole just to the right of center,” she said.

“Who are you working with?” he asked.

“Karasis.”

“The Temple? You’re a Temple operative?”

“I guess you could say that,” she said. “So are we allies?”

“Of course,” he said.

“Then walk backward up the wall until you flip over, I’ll catch you.”

“What?”

“You’ll have your hands in front of you.”

“I’ll dislocate my shoulders,” he whined.

“Not if you bend your elbows.”

“Can’t you unlock these cuffs?”

“There’s a pair of bolt cutters down there, I can cut them off you when I’m ready.” He had finally flipped over, she caught his ass and gave him time to turn his wrists around before she let him down. He was heavier than he looked.

“Why aren’t you ready, I’m on your side, against the Centorins with blasters.”

“You say that, but lets have a truth test. You don’t know how much I already know, we have more information than yours. Tell me the truth and I’ll get the bolt cutters. Tell me what you found out?”

“I found blasters, cases of them. A factory just a few miles from here, run by General Herman Patrick. It’s on the Northwest Motorway about eleven miles from the edge of town. I intercepted a case at the shipping house, it was going over the docks of Ragess down the river to a tube station at a little river town who’s name I forget but it was on the paperwork in that desk.” He stopped after that, hoping he had told what he knew.

“Who did you report this too?”

“Well;” he said, “I was in his office...”

“Who’s office?”

“Mikal’s, about a stolen furball coil, just waving the flag actually, telling him that we were working on it. We started chatting, I mentioned the blasters before I knew what I was doing.”

“With what we know now, we know that was a bad thing

to do, but I perceive your opinion of Mikal was not the same then as it is now.”

“No, Mikal double crossed me. I hid the evidence and I didn’t tell anyone, but some detective found it, posted it to his agency and the Temple. Mikal knew it was me.”

“So you are an enemy of Karasis after all?” Kessil said, pacing in front of him now. He had to turn his head to watch her.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, clearly worried.

She stared at him like he was really dense, but it could be that he was a total non believer and had no knowledge of Karasis at all. “Second Tenet, harming the good of others for personal gain.”

He blushed. She came closer to him. “Who are you?”

“I’m a volunteer agent of Karasis at the moment because I am in Karasis and given the opportunity. My cover persona is an air handling engineer from Hdengragger Principate in the Ydlontrostl Cites.”

“Sure,” he said sarcastically.

“Like you took a wrong turn to get here and only stopped to ask directions. I bet you were here about the discovery of that blaster factory and your failure to destroy the evidence, probably because you meant to blackmail the General with it later.”

“You think I am that low? I was going to report it as soon as he paid me, and when he did, I was jumping on a tube car and not getting off til Yondure.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“The Second Tenet is quite a serious sin,” she said. “What would you do to atone for it?”

“What do you ask?”

“That you do what’s right when the time comes.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Do you know those are the cheapest words in the human language?”

“Sorry.”

She made a face and turned toward the bolt cutters, then stopped. “Come to think of it, it might help to have them know you are still secure. I’ll see if you tell them I’m here, next time they come in.”

“That might not be for hours.”

It wasn’t for hours. She spent the time watching Dyoniss thru the skyglass and watching the cameras on the security panel. She figured out a few more Centish words like ‘threat assessment’ and ‘clearance level.’ Betten made himself useful by telling her the names of all Mikal’s people that he knew, and everything he knew about them. She found paper and pen in the desk to write them down. Almost all the sheets of paper in the desk were blank on one side, she folded it in eighths with the used side innermost. She covered three sides with his rambling as the dark wore on.

It was probably about twentieth hour when someone else came in. She was already behind the bales. One of these guys had a fourth handle of an amber liquid and tossed it up on the shelf with the others. She could see the difference in color from here, but she was looking for it. The guys were speaking

in Centish with occasional bursts of laughter. One climbed the stairs enough to see that Betten was still shackled to a post in the far end of the straw loft and went right back down.

As soon as they were gone she put the building back on ‘open’ and brought the bolt cutters up. She was amused to see that these were Hgokstessn’s made in Mefmun and not something from Centorin. These cast diamond blades would take on anything but collapsed metal, and these cuffs were made of nylon, which slipped in half easier than most mrang steaks.

“Thanks, thanks so much,” he said. “Now let’s get out of here,” he said and started to bolt.

“Not so fast,” she said, and grabbed his arm. She noticed there was no control on how hard she could grab his arm. Normally she knew how much force she could exert and when she would feel the first tingling of the Instinct coming on her. One learns that at powwows. She didn’t feel that now, and pulled him a little harder just to test it. That told her that those jugs really were the antidote, and that she had caught it from the fumes.

“Hey!” he said, “I get it. You think I’ve still got some debt to the Temple. I didn’t tell them you were here, what more do you want?”

“That you work on the side of Karasis until this is over. You should sniff from that bottle they just brought in so you can fight them if you have to. If I’m right about how they get this stuff in, there is that bottle there and three others I haven’t accounted for. We can assume the others have been made into pills in that little pill shop behind the sacks of

groundberry seed meal. We can assume their security people already have little bottles of those pills with them, but we don't need to assume they are under the influence at all times. Those guys who brought you in clearly wanted you to believe they were under the antidote, but they didn't actually do anything that would trigger the Instinct. That may mean that they didn't need to, that they want to conserve their supplies, or that they have actually run out. If they have run out, we win, but we have to be sure they have run out, and I don't think they have. I think it is safe to assume their security people have adequate supplies. These bottles represent something much bigger, pills for all the guys who were undergoing militia training at that factory," she guessed. "I wish Dyoniss was here."

"Dyoniss?" he gasped, "You're working with Dyoniss? You said you were working for Karasis, for the Temple."

"You *truly* don't understand even the first Tenet. 'We are in god, god is in us. We are god, god is us. We are one, one is us,'" she told him. "Everyone who understands and believes in the first Tenet is an operative of Karasis."

"I never took that literally," he said.

"You shirked your responsibility as an operative of Karasis when you withheld that information from the people who needed it."

"I repent."

"It takes more than words," she said.

She went back to the opening in the loft toward the front of the house and checked on Dyoniss with the spyglass. He

was between the dormers again, and there were lights on upstairs again. Dyoniss was suddenly moving quietly but deliberately down the roof toward the place where he climbed up. If someone looked out one of those dormer windows they could definitely see him. He nearly jumped from the roof and headed around the back of the sheds and then charged in her direction.

As he was halfway across the yard, she saw two men come out the other side of the house, one of them covering the other with a blaster. After the cinema she had seen from Centorin, she should have been ready for this, but it seemed she had never really believed it before. Now that she saw it in real life, she was scared. She was quickly down the ladder to the security panel. The double front door of the barn opened by itself, making her visible to them and anyone looking out the windows of the house. The bigger one started shouting in Centorin, and started running straight at her, raising his blaster.

They didn't see Dyoniss, he made it into a side door of the barn just as the other two made it to the front door. As soon as Dyoniss was inside, she switched the security system to 'lock %\$#' but it was too late to keep the other two out. The one who had been the captive lunged for the blaster. At the same time the barn was plunged into darkness and the horses started going crazy. They hit the fields that were on and got even more crazy. The flashes showed the prisoner and the captor still struggling over the blaster.

A couple blaster bolts searched for her at the security panel, one of them sent wide by the prisoner struggling for it.

She dived behind a roll of fencing and crawled toward the room at the end of the barn. There were a few things in her way, but she went carefully by feel. The horses were making so much noise she didn't have to worry about being silent. The men from the house reached the security fields and distracted everyone and everything with even more commotion. It seemed like it took hours, but it was really only minutes.

During that, she was able to sneak into that back room. There was a window in here and a tiny bit of light, it must have been an office at one time, but now it seemed abandoned, judging by the tangle of junk she felt in front of her. It wasn't easy getting beyond the door. As she did, she noticed, too late, that she was not alone in this room and a black on black shadow shut and latched the door, locking her in with him.

33. Not Comparing Notes

Dyoniss saw the lights come on in the dormers and heard people come up the stairs. It seemed that Mikal had Kyonmeere brought to the master suite. The guards stayed with him.

“So you thought you could use our contract to penetrate our records and intercept my shipments?” he asked. There was a mumble, Dyoniss couldn’t hear it, but Mikal probably did. “I had backup if Tolleck missed it, I’d never rely on anyone from Mbeshna power. I found out how your man edited the track sheet in that sorter, my men can push a data bit or two also you know.” Mikal then asked one of the goons, “How many pills you got left?” The man didn’t answer, but presumably held up a vial. “That’s it? It’s a good thing we’re making them today. Let me have one.”

“Sir?”

“I want to handle him personally.”

Dyoniss heard the rattle of a pill bottle, heard the water in the bathroom, and heard a cabinet open and something thump to the floor.

“You don’t seriously mean to kill me?” Kyonmeere said.

“Did you think you were playing a round of kahble?” Mikal asked. “You double cross me, you pay the price.”

“I can explain,” Kyonmeere pleaded.

“Don’t bother.” He addressed the guards. “Give me ten minutes, then bring everyone out to the barn. We’ll have a little demonstration before we get to work.”

“Sir:”

Dyoniss was already moving as quickly as he could down toward the sheds where he got on this roof. He slid backwards over the edge, ignoring the height. He slid until his foot found the camera housing. He jumped down, making more of a thump than he wanted to. He bounded across the shed roof where he would be silhouetted against the sky, and jumped to the ground on the far side of some plantings, landing on the run and heading for cover.

A few motor vehicles had been parked here, he went behind them. He waited there til Mikal and Kyonmeere came out of the house and started toward the front of the barn. He ducked around the vehicles and behind the barn. He saw a side door. It was stupid to even try it, it would be alarmed, especially with valuable horses inside, but luck was with him and it was unarmed and unlocked.

As soon as he got inside, he heard the barn's security system come on. It was a pretty hefty system just to protect some cowboy ponies, repulsor fields popped over the doors and windows, sensors came on, rays and sensor fields sprang up. At the same time, blaster bolts split the air, and he saw it was Kessil at the control panel of that security system that they were searching for. He felt that as hard as a blaster bolt to the pit of his stomach, like the current arced across his whole body.

At the same time that she jumped in the general direction of the barn office, he noticed that he was right beside the barn's power panel, so he reached up and pulled the main. He would have to get over his shock at seeing her here, he was

nearly incapacitated, hyperventilating, tingling in all limbs. No doubt she followed him, thinking that he was a city kid and needed a plainswoman to watch over him. He was numb in the fingertips thinking about her putting herself in this much danger, but there wasn't anything he could do about it now. Paralyzing fear would put them both in more danger. He would wait til they were out of this before telling her off.

He leaned a rack of brushes and bottles against the power panel so he'd have warning if the lights were coming back on. Now that the power was out, they couldn't use the controls of the security system and get the building out of lockdown. Til then it was just the four of them in here. He hoped the dark and the ruckus the horses were making would keep them from getting to the panel. He noticed that there was also a field preventing the horses from getting out of their stalls. That was good for now, but as soon as he made it to the office, he would want them released.

He didn't run straight to the office, he didn't want them to hear him. They would probably be moving this way trying to get to the power panel. No doubt Kyonmeere would do what he could to interfere with Mikal's plans, and as he slunk in that direction, he could hear a struggle. He was only a couple feet away when a blaster bolt arced and lighted the barn. Kessil was working her way toward the office, crawling behind anything she could find. Kyonmeere screamed with pain and Mikal lurched away from him and nearly into Dyoniss.

He used the noise and confusion to jump into the office, and plastered himself against the wall behind the door. Kessil

came in only a few seconds later and he immediately shut and bolted the door. As he did that Kessil lunged for a horse whip that was close by and started to swing it at him. He almost caught it, but she was too fast and connected with him.

“Hey, it’s me,” he whispered harshly.

“Uh! Oh darling I’m freaked out I’m so sorry,” and tried to kiss the spot she’d hit, “thank Karasis it’s you.”

“It’s me and this isn’t the time to ask what you’re doing here.”

“No, it’s time to tell you what I found. They had three bottles of the antidote, big bottles. I dumped them out and it affected me, but they brought in another only a few minutes ago, I didn’t get a chance to dump that out yet.”

They could hear shouting outside the building, people sparking on the lockdown fields. The horses were kicking at their stalls, Mikal was shouting at them. They heard the blaster again.

“They could be running low on pills, maybe we can dispose of their supply of the antidote,” Dyoniss said, “where is it?”

“I figure they probably have seven half gallons, one for every gasket that failed. At least that’s what we know about,” she said. “Who knows how many tabs they have made out of that.”

“Ten milligrams per dose is what I think you need, I looked it up last week. A hundred thousand per liter, thirteen and something liters, one for every eight people in Hardensburg.”

“It would be like going to Centorin,” she gasped, “and

there are three bottles that might have been made into pills already.”

“Over half a million doses,” Dyoniss said.

“But what could they do with all that?”

“While I was out here before I saw a military force training, I saw blasters in use by that military force. I’ve heard rumors they mean to set up a kingdom or a state, some form of coercive unit, in the Great Western Savannah.” There had not been a coercive government on this planet since the fortieth century, except for some backward and outlying areas.

“In that case they would need ten times as many doses of the antidote.”

“They probably figure on killing more than one person per dose.”

“Do they mean to just exterminate us all?” she gasped.

“No, but there are a few individuals who have some of that attitude. They call us ‘primates’ or ‘pretty monkeys’. They are few, but they are loud if given a graffiti can and a wall where they won’t be seen til the light. Of course the most extreme are the ones who keep the most servants.”

“What are we getting into?” she asked.

“Gotten into,” he said. “We were in it since Ragnar showed up.”

“We need another way out of this room,” Kessil whispered when she heard someone try the door.

“What’s in that corner?” he asked, looking toward the part

of the room that was nearest the stalls. The horses were still making enough noise to drown them out if they didn't have their ears in front of each other. Someone was approaching the window to this room from outside and would have come thru, but they were knocked to the ground when they came up to the shield field, giving them a flash of light to see more of the room.

“I don't know, just the desk I think.”

Of course the whole barn smelled of horse, but it seemed a little stronger in that corner. He slid quickly under the desk, someone was slamming into the office door. He found a loose board that he was able to wrench off. With it out of the way he was able to squeeze thru into the stall, and was glad to find it empty. He heard the office door splinter as he dragged Kessil thru.

“We need to get out of here,” he whispered.

“There's no fields across the top of the stalls.”

He was already climbing the stall rails. The next stall had a horse in it, it started coming for him as soon as it sensed his presence, clopping it's front feet on the boards. Since the darkness was total here, it was going completely by sound or smell, and didn't hit him. He knew the animals were big and their toes were even harder than a keda's. If it hit him, he would be incapacitated. He scampered up, and extended his hand to Kessil but she had climbed the other corner of the stall and slithered thru the sixteen inch space between the roof and the loft floor.

Whoever had come into the office had not crawled thru after them, he hoped that he thought the room was empty, but

that made little sense because they must have seen him jump for it. Maybe, because there was antidote in the room, Mikal was wary that they had used it and were waiting for him in the stall? Whatever the reason, he was glad there was no pursuit.

While he was straightening up, his hand found a cable. With any luck this was the power to the field that kept the horses contained in their stalls. He followed it in the direction of the control panel. He had to shimmy across an open beam, in total darkness, but he found it had a junction box here on the beam, a cable lead to the center of each row of stalls, another down to the control panel. The lead to the panel was wired in, but the other two plugged in, he pulled them.

The horses started to come into the open area, shrieking and stomping. He heard a scream, heard a pile of something go over and get splintered by panicked horses. He shimmied back to the loft where Kessil was. He heard a pile of sacks go over.

“Where’s that bottle?” he asked.

“There’s a rack by the sink, the ‘handles’ are up on top of there. The one farthest from the sink is the antidote,” she said.

“Where’s the sink?”

“Across from the side door where you came in, it might be right below us.”

He began working in that direction. It was hard because the bales of tough thesh-like straw were piled right to the edge. He had to make his way along the top rail of the stall. While he did a horse slammed into it and he was nearly knocked off when the pile of bales he was holding tilted

alarmingly toward the center of the barn and went over just as he got out from in front of them. He was surprised the wall didn't break after bending so much, the stalls must be made of archwood.

He heard something, saw a blaster bolt across the room, and heard a horse scream as the bolt found it. The horse crashed thru the rack he had placed in front of the power panel, frightening it more. The flash of light let him see the shelf Kessil was talking about. It was high and the sink almost under it was mortared, so the horses weren't knocking it over. He moved toward it along this top rail, even though a blaster bolt came his way.

Suddenly the lights were on again. Mikal stood at the power panel, blood on his left arm and hand, which hung limply, but still held the blaster. His right slammed the power panel shut again and reached for the blaster. He raised it toward Dyoniss, but a horse flashed between them and charged Mikal, taking the blast instead.

That gave Dyoniss time to dive onto the shelf with the bottles on it. Mindless of the fall on the shelf and the masonry counter below, he reached the ground on his feet with the bottle still in his hand. With a mighty swing he brought what looked like a half gallon of fine whiskey down on the concrete floor. The bottle shattered, he ducked the flying glass. Mikal bellowed, and tried to find him with the blaster again. Massive amounts of the fluid ran out over the floor and began evaporating. There went thousands of doses, representing thousands of people hurt or killed.

“You'll pay for this,” Mikal bellowed. “With that much

spilled, it's in the air. We'll all be free of that damned Instinct in minutes, but I'm the one that's free of it now and I'm armed," he lifted the blaster.

Dyoniss bolted, hoping to get behind the horses and to the security control panel. If Mikal was right, soon he would also be free of the Instinct and able to fight back against his father. The Instinct virus was fast acting, but still, with all this antidote in the air, Mikal would have hours to bring him down and there were very few places to hide in here.

34. Unexpected Encounter

Kessil dove behind some bales when the blaster fire began. When she looked up, Dyoniss was gone, and Mikal was running away also, presumably after Dyoniss. They both had to dodge in and out of stalls with the panicked horses still charging about. Her heart was pounding and she was more afraid for Dyoniss than for herself. At the same time she scolded herself for hiding behind these bales and not doing something to try to stop his father. Somehow it seemed that survival had dominated her reflexes when the dung hit the table. She couldn't even use the Instinct as an excuse, she was still free of it from what she'd inhaled as she poured three jugs down the sink.

She heard firing a couple more times, she heard a big crash, then all was silent. She couldn't see either one of them. She waited a long time, until the horses calmed down. She found that the fetal position isn't as comfortable for an adult. She looked around. The place was a shambles, the security control panel was smashed, she guessed they were stuck in here until it's backup power ran down. A couple piles of bales from up here had been thrown down, the bags of soom and the other powder were overturned, many were broken. She made her way cautiously toward the crash, keeping to the shadows and making no sound. Using her hands to steady herself, she moved one limb at a time. There was one of the stall walls down on the floor, making the loft sag in that area and dumping its contents. The wall was on the floor in a heap,

it's ends torn from the outside wall.

She found the person who Mikal had brought in behind the next bale with a big burn on the side of his face and shoulder.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Kyonmeere,” he grunted, “and who are you?”

“Kyonmeere? Of the Kyonmeere agency?” she asked without answering him, “What are you doing here?”

“How do you know me?” he asked.

“It looks like you need my help more than I need yours, so tell me what you’re doing here?”

He clearly didn’t like that, but knew he didn’t have a choice. Maybe he understood that she didn’t have the Instinct, but did he know she had the plains knife at her back? “It wasn’t my choice to come here, there was a big guy on the antidote, Columba, the one who’s been on the news. He’s Mikal’s muscle in the Cities. He popped a pill fifteen minutes before he got to my place. He dragged me to the tube station and brought me all the way out here only to drag me before Mikal.”

“Why?” Kessil asked, “What was that about?”

“I have no idea,” he said.

She doubted Mikal would have brought him out here at blaster point for a reason he didn’t know and wasn’t going to accept that. “You were working a case for him, the stolen package, a furball coil I was told. You sent Dyoniss out here about it only a couple weeks ago.”

“You know Dyoniss? How are you involved?”

“Because I’m in Karasis and I want to be. If you want our help, you should answer questions, not ask them.”

“Yes, it was an interesting case, but the customer discontinued our service.”

She knew Mikal’s company was the customer, but didn’t need to belabor it. “I would think it had to be something about that,” Kessil said, hoping to prod him on without calling him a liar. He might not know what Dyoniss had found out about him, and she didn’t want to give that away by seeming suspicious.

“No doubt, if not for that we would have no connection in the world.”

“I would think not, unless it was a previous case.”

“He wouldn’t have been the principal, there is a routine file search done with every client, one of the things is to see if we have any history with them or their people.”

“The case could have been a long time ago,” she said.

“I would say it was about the latest case.”

At least he wasn’t going to try and fabricate a fairy tale. “Why did he discontinue your services?” Kessil asked, admitting that she knew Mikal was the client.

Kyonmeere scowled but didn’t argue since he knew that she could very well know anything Dyoniss did. He would not know if Dyoniss had a partner, or at least a would-be partner in his life, other than Karasis. Instead he sighed and said, “Personally, I think it was because we were getting too close to what was really going on and what he was really shipping. He wasn’t expecting decorative glass baubles, but

he wasn't expecting furball coils either, I'm pretty sure of that."

"The antidote," she said. What Ragnar had accused him of at the very beginning of this. The spate of gasket failures, the nanotechnology bomb shooters in the fittings, secret webs stealing from secret webs, all of that was part of Mikal's plot. A plot that went a lot farther than using force to take over the produce shipping in the western basin.

"What do you know about General Herman Patrick?" she asked.

"The highest ranking person in the Centorin military to ever chose to hide out here."

"Did you ever think that there is damn little anyone could have done about it if the Centorin Military really wanted to come get him?"

"That did seem a little fishy," he admitted.

Suddenly the room was plunged into darkness again. The horses started screaming again, but not as badly as they did before. Some were still milling around in the center of the room, but most of them had returned to their stalls.

The people outside were starting a concerted assault on the building, and the fields started flashing brightly outside, sending more horses back into the center of the room. Blasts sprung from the corner nearest the security control panel, maybe Mikal was trying to get that working again. Instead he had to back off toward the office as the horses panicked again.

"How bad are you hurt?" Kessil asked.

"My face is on fire and I can't move this arm. But it could

have been worse.”

“Yeah, a blast to the skull can kill, Dyoniss told you about Korshii right?”

His reaction was noticeable, but he said, “Yes, I heard, this was inches from leaving me the same way.”

“Too bad; about Korshii I mean. I never met her but Dyoniss liked her.”

“I knew her, from some time ago, but she was a nice person. She was lively but a little scatterbrained if I remember. I’m sorry she’s gone.”

“You know she stole the antidote don’t you?”

“That was the conclusion Dyoniss came to,” he said. “She really shouldn’t have gotten involved if she did.”

“Do you figure Mikal did it?”

“Stole the antidote?”

“Killed Korshii.” Kessil clarified.

She guessed that Mikal had made it to the office, she had no idea where Dyoniss was. The horses were still making enough noise that they could talk without attracting notice.

“One of his men no doubt, probably Columba, the same one who dragged me here.”

“So they took the antidote from her?”

“No doubt.”

“It was here, Dyoniss just smashed it.”

“He did? That will give it to everyone in here, it’s very volatile.”

“How do you know that?”

“We researched it for the case,” he said.

“But the case was a missing furball coil?”

“Dyoniss thought they were related, I read up on it just last week.” He grunted as he tried to get into a sitting position.

Mikal had found a hand-light and was probing the building with that, blaster dangling from his left hand. He was clearly in a lot of pain. Kessil guessed he had gotten into a fist fight with a horse. His eyes were glazed and his jaw was clenched. As it's light came on she caught sight of Dyoniss ducking behind bales on the other side of the loft. Mikal did not see him, he was paying more attention to the horses.

She hadn't seen Betten since this all began, when he was in the center of the loft which went over the office, the saddle room and the entryway where all the harnessing gear was hanging. There was an extension of the loft over each row of stalls, of which there were a dozen. She and Kyonmeere were on the left side, Dyoniss was near the back side looking toward the open plains.

“You say we should all be free of the Instinct?” Kessil asked.

“Soon, it takes some time to act,” Kyonmeere grunted.

“So we can think about getting that blaster away from Mikal.”

“Not easy while he's got it.”

“You ever fire one?” Kessil said.

“Just the toys in video games. I've got Bushwar VII,” he said. It was set in one of the ‘border skirmishes’ between Novo Grosso and New Heartland that occasionally left a few thousand dead and a few more thousand square miles of

Naiho lifeless during the 110's.

“So you know how to use one?”

“I could figure it out,” he said, “but we have to get it first.”

“He’s scared of the horses,” Kessil said, “but if one just broke my arm I might be too.”

There was a big, black, shiny one with white feet that was pacing back and forth across the center of the room. There was so much smashed junk there now that it was prancing and jumping and smashing everything to smaller bits that wouldn’t get in it’s way. Mikal tried to keep it back with the handlight, while stealing glances into stalls and under heaps of canvas or sackcloth or cardboard. The waving of the handlight spooked the horse even more. Mikal stopped at a desk at the other end of the sink and pulled a bottle of pills from it, downed a palmful of them, dry. If they were the antidote, he would probably not get the Instinct again for days. If they were painkillers, he undoubtedly needed them, but that many would make him throw up pretty soon.

She used what little light reflected up here to check the scratch a board had made across her hip and thigh at some point in all this. There was a few lesions to the skin but not enough to get many bloodstains on her shift. The rip it made in her shift gave anyone to her left a clear view of her muff, but this wasn’t really a business setting here today, so she wasn’t going to worry about that.

If she could grab hold of the blaster, his broken arm couldn’t exert much force, and the pain would prevent him from wanting to. If he had just taken painkillers, he would be

more vulnerable now than after they took effect, but he was on the far side of the room. She could hope that Dyoniss would have the same idea, but she hated to put him in that much danger. Of course he would be just as bothered by seeing her in that much danger, especially if he hadn't thought of it and didn't know what she was doing. Since the antidote had already taken effect in her, the knife strapped between her shoulder blades might come in handy.

“What is Dyoniss doing?” Kyonmeere asked.

“At this moment, I don't know.”

“Who's he working for? I didn't send him out here.”

“Karasis,” she said. “This is important for our way of life.”

“So you believe like he does?”

“We wouldn't be compatible if he didn't.”

“Change is inevitable,” he said. “There are a thousand planets without the Instinct, how long do you think we can hold out? So you destroy one shipment here, how many more will there be?”

“A least a billion people are in Karasis, in this basin alone. Now that we are alert to the danger, do you think we can't stop more than a single shipment?”

“You think you can get away with this, there are dozens of security men out there, as soon as they break this lockdown, we're dead.”

“If they have enough antidote left, and if we are, this shipment is destroyed. I am in Karasis, Karasis is in me, but Karasis goes on if anyone with Karasis in them survives.”

“A quaint old church,” Kyonmeere said.

“Karasis, in one form or another, is old. Maybe a hundred and twenty centuries, older than the Instinct, older than the antidote. Older than Centorin, older than Earth. Karasis has seen energy ages come and go on one planet after another. We will be here long after this one.”

“We are a grain of dust at a pinprick star in the rim of the galaxy. Most starcharts don’t even show us any more.”

“All the better,” Kessil said.

“This whole planet will be overwhelmed in a heartbeat.”

“Are you in favor of that?”

“I’m a realist,” Kyonmeere said, “you’ll see.”

Then she heard Dyoniss jump Mikal, she heard shouts, screams, curses and the sounds of a struggle. Suddenly Kyonmeere was in motion, flying around the bales and down the stairs. Kessil was caught off guard, but was only steps behind him.

35. The Betrayal

The Instinct was really and truly gone, Dyoniss was able to launch himself from the loft onto Mikal's back, landing feet first on his shoulder blades. The blaster flew, he cursed, his shoulder crunched, the one with the broken arm. They landed, Mikal's face was planted on the concrete, but he rolled with it.

Dyoniss immediately knew how stupid this was. This man had trained for fighting, Dyoniss had lived two centuries in a society where it was impossible. Dyoniss tried to tackle him, prevent him from getting to the blaster, Mikal, blood streaming from his nose, was belaboring him with a piece of board.

The pain was unbelievable, but the only combat Dyoniss had ever even heard of was wrestling, so his response was to grab the arm with the board and try to pin it. Mikal reached out with his foot and drew the blaster closer. Dyoniss heaved Mikal over his back with his broken arm, he might have heard his shoulder pop. Mikal screamed like a dying horse but came down on top of him and started raining blows from his good arm.

With a mighty flop, something more like a sandfish than a man, his fingertips touched the blaster. Mikal reached out and touched the point, attempting to pivot it away. Instead it spun, and Dyoniss got his hand on the butt. He drew it in. Mikal made a desperate grab for it and got his hand on the barrel.

Dyoniss was no blaster expert, but he'd seen enough

Centorin movies to know that once it's powered up and ready, as the read-out clearly stated to anyone who could read even a little Centish, all he had to do was touch the big button at the top of the hand grip. The fact that the ready message is red is obvious even on Centorin kids shows because the masses need to learn survival skills early. Both their hands battled for it, as they both tried to twist the blaster toward each other. Dyoniss was the first to get his hand over the button, and pressed it, singing his father's left shoulder. He tried once more to twist the weapon toward Dyoniss, but Dyoniss grew up in ten percent more gravity than Mikal, and the barrel was shaking farther and farther his way as they grunted. Suddenly Mikal broke free, jumped up and bolted. Before he could think about it, he just reacted like any number of actors he had watched, and he was firing blaster bolts on all sides of Mikal's retreating form.

He had never done this before, of course, so his bolts went way wide, or was it something stronger than the Instinct that was pulling them aside, something that went back to when DNA first evolved? He lowered the weapon, listened to his father's retreating footsteps and wondered at what he had just done.

Dyoniss couldn't stop retching. He had tried to kill his own father, that struck him to his core. But Mikal had gotten away, that scared him even more. The fact that he had nearly killed, that he had been able to fire that blaster, was unreal to him. He hadn't shot well enough to kill, but well enough to convince Mikal he could do it if he had to, in defense of his life, of his partner and of his whole civilization. He wasn't easy with that fact. In normal life it is so easy to trust in the

Instinct. You can have mean thoughts because you know you are safe from acting them out. That was not true here and now, there was no control on him but himself. He was free to kill his own father if he could only aim a blaster well enough.

The blaster slipped from his hand. He thought of the scene in Elvish history where the High Witch of the Westwood was offered the key to the weaponry of the Energy Age. That blaster felt like the key, and that he had failed his test with god. He backed away from it, then back the way he had come, back to where Kessil was hiding.

But as it slipped from his hand, Kyonmeere came charging down the stairs, across the floor, and fell on it. Kessil jumped on top of Kyonmeere and they began struggling for it as he and Mikal had fought over it moments before. Dyoniss jumped in and grabbed Kyonmeere, his right arm was still weak. Kessil jumped up with the blaster and heaved it up into the loft, then picked up the hand-light. Dyoniss had Kyonmeere in a full nelson, a tight and high one.

“What were you doing with the antidote?”

“I was hoping to use it for the agency, to give us a little edge when we needed it.”

“Surely you know where that path leads,” Dyoniss said, “to this,” he pulled his arms a little farther behind him, hoping it showed him that he could inflict pain. “For thirty three centuries we’ve been able to do without this,” Dyoniss grunted with the effort of holding him. “And what about Korshii?”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen, I was only trying to

scare her.”

“With a blaster?” Dyoniss said. “A mindune would have been sufficient. She was not a tough old operative.”

“Yellgnoskn gave it to me with instructions to distract Kessil from her investigation of his gaskets.”

“You killed her,” Dyoniss said about Korshii. If it had been Kessil who had died, since he was free of the Instinct he would be killing Kyonmeere now with his bare hands. He apologized to Korshii’s soul that she hadn’t caused him to be that irrational.

“It was an accident,” Kyonmeere said, “I didn’t mean to touch the firing stud, I hadn’t even taken the antidote, I couldn’t have done it if I actually meant to. I didn’t actually have a single tablet of the antidote in fact, but I didn’t tell her that. She was getting cold feet about the deal, she didn’t want to hand it over. She threatened to smash it.”

“He told me he didn’t know why Mikal’s men brought him here,” Kessil said.

“The bottle arrived with him,” Dyoniss told her, “they know he stole it. He has no hope of using that lie with me here. Mikal was going to make an example of him.”

“So that’s why his hair was in her home,” Kessil said, looking at Kyonmeere.

“You’re a good agent, I should have known you’d get to the bottom of this.”

“You know what I don’t understand?” Dyoniss said, twisting him a little tighter, “is why they even hired us?”

“We’ve been on retainer for the security of their smuggling routes since the 121st. It was a flunky who didn’t

get the message about Christmas who called us up. He actually thought it should have contained a furball coil. He got the message later on, just after he canceled our contract.” That brought the number of murders out here to at least seven.

“They’ve been using up quite a bit of that antidote.”

“It’s what’s coming Dyoniss,” Kyonmeere said, “survival of the fittest, it’s a law of nature, a bigger god than Karasis.”

“And look what it’s doing for you,” he said, and twisted his arm til he winced again. It was hard not to be afraid the Instinct was going to kick in any second. “I didn’t know Korshii well but...” Just in time he saw that Kyonmeere was reaching for a piece of staging lumber leaning against the wall. He yanked him back just in time to let an ax bite deep into his head instead of Dyoniss’s.

Kessil screamed and Dyoniss gasped, Kyonmeere slumped down dead without a sound. Looking like a zombie from a horror movie, Mikal stood over them with the ax, chest heaving, jaw clenched, dripping blood and eyes full of such evil as Kassidor hadn’t known since the Troubled Times.

Mikal was strong enough to wield an ax one handed, and waved it over them. “It’s not just blasters we can use on this antidote. He had a lot to pay for and now you, son, have even more to pay for.” He advanced, swinging the ax. Kessil screamed, Dyoniss scrambled to run but he was backed up on the wall of a stall. “We were going to declare the Republic of the Western Savannah this dawn. We would have taken control of this basin by Christmas. We would have brought some sanity to these troops of pretty monkeys you’re stuck

among, you could have had a place in that.”

“I have a place in Karasis and I’d rather have the smallest part of Karasis than first son in an evil empire.”

“You’ll die for that!” Mikal shouted and raised the ax again as Kessil screamed again, partly because she knew she had backed too far away to interfere in time.

Arcing out of the loft, the ray hit Mikal right in the whorl of his hair, at least as vulnerable a spot as the middle of the forehead. The ax fell harmlessly and Mikal fell on top of it, already dead before he hit the ground.

They all looked to the balcony, Dyoniss astounded because he didn’t know anyone else was in the building. Betten lowered the blaster, let it drag from his hand. “He killed Kyonmeere,” he said weakly.

“Welcome back to Karasis,” Kessil told him.

“You knew he was here?” he said.

“Yeah, and you knew Kyonmeere had the antidote.”

“We should have told each other more.”

“We were a little short of time,” she said.

Betten had come to the floor. “I want to apologize to both of you and all the people of Karasis for letting this happen.”

“It’s over now,” Kessil said.

“Oh no it’s not,” Dyoniss said, and pointed to the front of the barn. The lockdown field had been breached and a dozen troops with blasters were storming down the front hall straight at them.

36. The New World Order

They were shackled, standing in the main room of Mikal's mansion. Kessil was starting to think about peeing on the full-floor carpet, it had been awhile that they were kept here. She still had on only the ripped shift, she still had the spyglass and her plains knife strapped between her shoulder blades under the shift. The general had been talking on his pocket eye half the afterlunch, not that they had had any lunch. His conversations had been in Centish, so she was sure Dyoniss knew what was said, but she didn't want to give anything away by asking him. Let them assume they both understood or be naïve enough to think neither of them understood.

She had a really hard time with all the deaths, perhaps Betten's had been the hardest. He hadn't raised the blaster to them, he dropped it as soon as they entered the building. It didn't matter, they had seen it in his hands. They had blasted him point blank, coldly. The general dressed down the man who did it, no doubt saying that Betten's death was too quick and clean for someone who had murdered their dominant man. She tried not to dwell on it, but coupled with Ragnar, Shingharm, Kyonmeere and who knows, maybe even Tolleck killed in their mad lust for power, it was too much and she teared and sobbed again every few minutes thru the afterlunch of Nightday.

Finally the general came over to them. He paced up and down a little. She could see that he hated to use it, but he had decent Common Tongue. "I should have you put to death

also, but it seems you have not actually lead to the deaths of any of our officers, so I'm not honor bound to do so. It seems that you two have some notion you are going to report on our activities to your people or church or whatever, though neither of you are actually newsmen. No matter, you want to report, you'll have something to report. Trust me, you have not stopped our plans. With the dawn you can watch them put into effect. You can record for your people their new world order."

They didn't get to spend Dawnsleep together, but they did get fed. Their captors were not overly rough with them, meaning that they were probably not under the antidote at the time. That meant Dyoniss was probably right that they were getting low. If they meant to launch something big with the dawn, they needed some or their threats would be entirely hollow. They had to conserve whatever they had. The Instinct was back with them by the time they were fed.

The ranch was a beehive of activity. There were at least a thousand men here, the fields behind the barn had been cleared of mrang and the men were bedding down in rows, they were sorting gear, checking and topping off their blaster's charge from a portable fusion unit, sharpening knives, inventorying other ammo. She had seen these scenes on too many movies, preparing for battle. Preparing for an urban operation.

Who did they think they would battle? There was certainly no matching set of soldiers on the other side preparing their weapons for battle. And where would the

other side be? Did they mean to attack the Kassikan? The Temple at Karasis Yuhal? Ragesse? There was no one in any of those places to fight. People would simply scream and run, escape them any way they could. They might blast a few, what good would it do them? Did they mean to loot Ragesse? Unless they were traveling by tube or airship, there was nothing but Ragesse for a day or more in all directions. The motorways of New West Trucking went for hours in all directions, but the very farthest ones reached the inland delta of the Ydlon itself, not a quarter as far as Vnassvuur. If this pack of troops were to roam the bluffs of the Ydlontrostl Cities, the news would report which neighborhoods they had pillaged in the last week and nine out of ten people would go about their lives seeing nothing of it but what they saw on a screen.

Still they had thousands of doses from the previous three bottles, over half a million if they were right and every bottle required a broken sorter to intercept it. What if they usually used the normal smuggling routes and really had hundreds of bottles? If that was true, they wouldn't have been so distressed over the loss of these four. Or what if a couple of those gasket failures had just been tests of the nanocannon system and hadn't delivered a half gallon of the antidote? They might have one half gallon, a hundred thousand doses. They may have used a few percent of that already. Maybe they were down to only a few pills. If so, what she was about to see was all bluff. It was as she observed yesterday, they can intimidate us by just making us think they have the antidote.

With the dawn, they were even given breakfast and allowed to sit together. Guards flanked them both on each side, their conversation couldn't be too meaningful, but it could be heartfelt. She was afraid to get into that, afraid it meant that life was over. They tried to make light of it, said their lives were usually pretty boring. She couldn't tell him how she really felt with anything but her gaze. In a way she was glad because it would sound like she didn't think they were getting out of it. They knew most of these people must have picked up Common Tongue by now, but because they were the only ones using it, she felt a bit more private. The general said he was going to have them report on the new world order. To do so they would have to be alive, she took hope from that.

They were tied together and lead by four men to a stage. The general stood at a podium in front of them, There was a small bleacher of other well-dressed Centorins between them and the podium. The soldiers were all standing in ranks facing them. There had to be hundreds of them, but it was hundreds, not thousands, not millions. They were all big, tough-looking men. Dyoniss would have had some trouble if he had hoped to fit in among these people. It wasn't just their size and strength, Dyoniss had a good helping of that himself, it was their meanness. All had tattoos, many had implants. The whole front row had their heads-up screwed to their skulls right above their eyebrows, with a visible wire leading into their skull. All had them flipped up as they faced the general.

“Good Morning Men!” he shouted into the mic. They let Dyoniss translate for her.

“Good Morning Sir!” they shouted back.

“This is the morning we’ve all been waiting for.”

There was a bunch of loud cheering.

“Yes this is a momentous morning, a morning that marks a new beginning. A morning that begins the task of moving this immense but backward old planet into the modern age. A morning where we show the ancient wizards that their tyranny over what is still the Empire’s most fertile and populous planet cannot continue.”

He paused for adulation again. She wondered what he thought he was doing. Did he just say he intended to conquer the planet? With a few hundred men? He needed to see if he could take over Hardensburg before he thought about trying to occupy Ragess. He had enough men to take over the main club district in Ragess.

“So now, without further ado, let me proclaim the birth of The Republic of the Western Savannah!” he shouted and unsheathed a banner on a pole. The bottom half was red, the top half was blue and white. On the blue quarter, nearest the pole, was a single white five pointed star. The pole was tall and two guards hauled the banner to the top on a lanyard.

The troops all saluted the banner. Some speakers played a brassy march sung in Centorin. The sound was atrocious and so was the song. Not quite as bad as fmak ‘music’ but bad enough to be annoying.

“And now, sadly, I regret that I am unable to introduce the first president of the Republic because he was tragically killed last Nightday when the horses panicked in his barn.”

They showed a collage of Mikal’s pictures on the sky

behind them while a much too fnak-like horn honked a clumsy dirge. All the pictures showed him triumphant and smiling, some went back to his former life on Centorin. The soldiers stood in their ranks and wiped their eyes with their shoulders as they stood at attention.

“Mikal will lie in state in a stasis mausoleum in the new government plaza which will be built near the long-lines ring on the Hardensburg plateau. He will be available for viewing as soon as we have secured the first objective.”

He let the dirge wind down. “A committee will be formed to chose a successor, til then, in the present emergency, I will assume the duties of chief executive as well as chairman of the armed forces.”

She noticed how open-ended the time frame of choosing a successor was. “I can tell you now that once our government is secure, we will be instituting a draft, so you will each be a platoon leader in the armed forces of the Republic soon after the first objective is secured.”

He went on to introduce the other officers in the new republic. The new chairman of the political party took the microphone and introduced lesser officers in the new government. They paraded across the stage in front of him like string-puppets and waved to the troops. Kessil had never heard any of the Centish names before or since. They were all males. Out of curiosity she looked around for a Centorin female and couldn't come up with one. It seemed that everyone on the reviewing stand was getting introduced and she didn't want to walk across the stage in front of these soldiers because she still had only her ripped shift for clothing

and they were on the side with the best view. If they weren't soldiers with weapons it probably wouldn't bother her, but this would.

While those introductions went on, the general met at the back of the stage with his military officers. There was a lot of concerned jabbering that she caught only rare words of, but she could see Dyoniss was having trouble keeping from laughing. The one they called kernl had a piece of paper in his hand that she recognized. It was a hard-copy of her field instructions for disabling the nano-cannon. She allowed herself to dream that some sabotage of the local power systems was an essential part of their plan, and that Mbeshna had passed on the alert to all users of Jahnsn fittings in the basin like he said he would.

Dyoniss and Kessil and their guards did not get introduced, when the applause for the last of the politicians died down, the general took the mic again. "There is a further complication to our plans. I regret to inform you that the resupply of the antidote was also lost in that horse panic, and the pills you have with you are what you will have for the first objective."

There was a lot of muttering and groaning about this. He paused to let them do so, then held up his hand. "You should have eleven doses left. You should need no more than three to achieve the objective. Once we do, we will have re-supply, and one of the first laws passed will be a draft so you will each have a platoon of your own trainees when we move out to secure this basin. Until then you must refrain from using the antidote recreationally."

She was incredulous that this fool seriously thought he was going to do that. He couldn't take over the basin but he could ruin it. He couldn't occupy a million square miles of wilderness in the western savannah, but they might be able to take over Hardensburg. It sounded like he was preparing to get down to specifics about the first objective of just capturing the city when their guards pulled them away.

They were dragged into a large tent behind the platform, a couple of the politicians were there already, they were pushed into chairs facing them. They were given back their pocket eyes, and they seemed to be intact. Kessil 'tested' it by setting up a one way voice channel to the Ragess Temple tip line. She neglected to turn it off.

"My name is Jake Binton," the scruffier one said in Centish, then said something she didn't understand. "This is Herman Hector," who looked like a Centorin supermale, he said something about him also, and continued with something that sounded like instructions. She had left her pocket eye on the table between them, she picked it up while Dyoniss replied to him and pissed them both off. There were a few insults traded while Kessil opened a video link to the tip line and put the pocket-eye in the small shoulder-pocket on the left strap of this shift, that way it would see everything. When the shouting got heated, one of the guards clubbed Dyoniss on the back of the head with his blaster and he slumped in his chair.

Kessil's anger rose like a dactyl from the Tuidain. She was nearly ignored by them, maybe because she didn't speak

Centish, but probably because she was female. The guard right next to her was looking at Dyoniss and yelling something. Kessil noticed the small vial hanging from his belt, in it were five tablets like the ones the molds in the barn would make. As he reached over to help pull Dyoniss up in his chair, she was able to snatch the vial from his belt and get one into her mouth and another in her palm before flinging the rest of them into the dirt in front of the tent.

Dyoniss was acting like he was unconscious, but she didn't think he really was. She jumped up hysterically like a grieving spouse. The one who had clubbed him tried to shove her roughly away but not before she managed to slip a tablet between his lips. He continued to act like he was unconscious, but his lips took the tablet. The first one pulled her off and slapped her across the face, then pushed her into the corner of the tent.

The other two men, the politicians, tried to get out of the way but Dyoniss slumped to the floor in a way that knocked over the table on top of them. They started yelling also. The stage was close enough to hear the commotion, but the general was still barking thru the sound system so they might not know what it was about.

The second one started yelling, noticing his vial gone and the contents scattered outside the door to the tent. He went to get it, then spoke, urgently, to the first who was now training his blaster on Kessil. The first barked something back to him, they began to argue. The politicians joined the argument, the one called Jake made a grab for the pill vial on the first guard's belt. The guard pushed him off. The pretty boy

jumped on him also and the guard punched him.

In so doing he lost his footing and fell on top of Dyoniss and the table. Dyoniss ripped the vial from his belt and threw the contents out the door with the other. The guy tried to hit him again because of it, but Kessil was able to jump in and grab his arm. She didn't do anything the Instinct would have prevented, but the guy looked at her in shock just the same.

Everyone was screaming in Centish, two more people came in the door of the tent, blasters ready, aiming at Dyoniss. Everyone yelled and pointed to her. The blasters swung around and Kessil didn't wait to find out whether they had really taken the antidote or not, she dived under the edge of the tent. Bolts reached for her, sparking a fire on the tent cloth but missing her as she rolled out.

The general was still haranguing, but the others on the stage were starting to watch the action in the tent. One of them, the one who was in military garb almost as gaudy as the general's, was trying to get his attention. The two guys with blasters were coming thru the door of the tent. She sprinted for the stage, everything else was open ground. She knew the people on the stage were not under the antidote themselves, but were important to the others. She dived in among them before the two people chasing her could get off a shot.

The general stopped his speech and they all turned to look at her. The guards were pounding across the ground. She crawled behind as many people as she could, trying to keep them between her and those blasters. The other military man barked into the microphone, all the troops reached for their

vials.

The other three came out of the tent, walking Dyoniss at blaster point. All went quiet as they marched him to the stage. So far she knew the two guys that had come into the tent, and the one who had clubbed Dyoniss were under the antidote. As of now, they probably did not know that they had both taken it.

The second most gaudy military man yelled at her in Common Tongue. “Don’t move or your lover’s a dead man!”

Kessil stopped and stood up. Everyone moved away from her. She wondered if the antidote had taken effect yet. From all she breathed the day before, it shouldn’t take much.

She heard one of the politicians put away a pocket eye and yell something of which she recognized two words, ‘tube’ and ‘closed’. She didn’t know if it was the tubes in and out of Hardensburg, the nearest station, or what.

Dyoniss yelled in Common Tongue, he knew they all knew it. “So now the only organization on this planet with a supply of the antidote is the Kassikan,” he yelled.

“I’m sure Brancettrabble has found the formula,” Kessil yelled over the hubbub in Centish. She picked up her pocket eye and focused it on the nearest faces, there was yelling, all of them reached for her and were paralyzed, so she was right, none of the pretty birds was under the antidote.

The general barked an order at the guys holding Dyoniss, they turned from him to fire at her, now that she was in the open.

“Kessil no!” Dyoniss yelled as he snatched the blaster from the last man guarding him. When being charged by the

Greater Three Horned Mrang, the best thing to do is jump out of the way but leave something in your place. The beasts eyesight is sharp enough, but slow to process the scene and will thunder on thru your saddle blanket or whatever you throw into your place. Thinking goons as mean as these couldn't be much smarter than a three-horned mrang, she snatched off her shift as she dropped, leaving it hanging in the air to absorb both blaster bolts.

The second closest man was the general, and he was too big to turn around fast enough. She had the added advantage that Centorin men are extremely distracted by a naked woman and though she was way too small in the chest for them, she was still pretty sure she looked better than whoever they were going home to. By this time the two who fired at her had heard what happened behind them. They turned in time to take two bolts in rapid succession in the chest.

In one leap she was on the general's back as he tried to flee. She whipped the plain's knife from its sheath and held it at his throat. "You're going to the microphone," she said and pulled him roughly just to make sure she could. Both his arms went limp as he tried to fight her. Once the Instinct kicks in, motion in that extremity is painful, so she pulled him with one arm while keeping the knife at his throat with the other.

The others on the stage had scattered. Dyoniss had his pocket eye out and open also. He disarmed the two he had just shot and ground the contents of their vials into the ground, then came up on stage with her.

Kessil handed him her pocket eye, he focused both of them on anyone who came near. She picked up the

microphone in the hand that wasn't holding the knife. "I need each of you to take out your little vial of pills. I'm sure you know that Karasis, the Kassikan, and maybe more are watching. Those of you in the back who are running are probably smartest. Those of you who will be recognized had better do as I say."

There was an uproar, many of them tried to raise their blasters but they dropped from their paralyzed arms because the antidote hadn't taken effect yet. Kessil was under the antidote however, and to her, now, this was just like that knife fight she'd had with those hakkens. She slipped the tip into his carotid artery and let a little spout start pumping out. "We do mean business," she said.

"Let me talk," Dyoniss said as he got up there. She held the microphone to him and he continued to talk to them in Centish. He told them quite a long tale, pointing to her and her knife many times. Just about all the vials got dumped as he did.

There was a flash and a massive explosion shook the ground. A fireball slowly rose above the horizon about five miles away. "I don't think you'll be making any more blasters," she said to the general. He was fading.

"Time to go," Dyoniss said, and touched her arm.

She let the general slump to the ground. The panicked politicians were sneaking back toward the stage. Many of the soldiers were surrounding the stage, but they still weren't under the antidote and the first one who tried to point his blaster at her, dropped it.

"Thanks," she said and picked it up.

They made their way toward the path out of there. They had a half-mile to go. The troops would certainly be under the antidote before they got there. “We’ve got to steal a lev-boat,” Dyoniss said, and fired a few times to keep the still-impotent troops back.

“What good will that do, we don’t even know how to operate it.”

“We’ll have to steal an operator too.”

37. The Old World Order

“That one,” Dyoniss said, pointing at a sleek lev boat with a portly chauffeur who looked like he had been a tribal chieftain at one time. They started sprinting. Quite a few of the troops started sprinting with them and they both fired at them to keep them out of range. Two parking area security men started firing at them. He found he was much more accurate with the blaster when it was aimed at a stranger who was firing at him and not his own father trying to flee.

He saw that Kessil didn’t hesitate either, but did not connect. Her man turned to fire at her, he couldn’t help himself, he jumped in front of her, took it in the thigh, but took the other security man down before he went down. He tried to walk, he couldn’t, his leg was frozen worse than the Instinct, much more painful, like a maximum cramp plus a stab. He almost fell on top of her but she got under him.

“That was so *stupid*,” she yelled. “It would be much easier for you to carry me to that lev boat than me carrying you.” She got her back under his belly. “You’ve been watching too much Centorin cinema,” she said. He could almost help them along with his good leg. “It’s a good thing there’s no one else close.” He was sure he would be the only native born Kassidorian to have two blaster scars. If they made it.

He was counting on the chauffeur and he was rewarded. This man knew the conspiracy was doomed. He’d heard the general tell his troops that the resupply of the antidote had

been lost. He came out to help them the last fifty feet. People were running for them, a few of the troops were coming under the antidote now and they fired. Dyoniss wasn't fully in the boat when it lurched up and away. He was so scared she would lose him, but her strength surprised him. With unbelievable strain he got his good leg in and helped pull. Two bolts hit the car and it free-fell five feet before the chauffeur got it reset. That fraction of a second of free fall was what it took to get Dyoniss all the way into the car.

He tumbled into her lap, the door still waved open until their chauffeur gave a voice command to the little microphone that came out in front of his face. "I'm going to lose my job over this you know," he said over his shoulder.

"I bet it was a boring job anyway," Dyoniss hissed thru the pain.

He was trying to sit up in the car but Kessil pulled him down onto her lap. "Lay down, you're wounded," she said.

He was on his back looking up at the clouds, still with a bit of color from the last of dawn. "I couldn't let you have this much pain."

"That's very romantic," she said, and leaned over and kissed him, using what little she had as well as she could, "but not at all practical."

"Love isn't always the most practical thing," he said, and kissed her back. "take us to the nicest honeymoon resort in Ragess," he said to the driver.

"I'd feel a lot safer if we made it to the nearest tube station."

"This ain't over yet," he said, "there are still nine hundred

and seventeen men with up to eleven doses each.”

“And they’re still after us,” the driver yelled.

“I think she’s right about the tube station,” Dyoniss said, looking at the snake tongues just behind their car. The lev-rail scheduler wouldn’t let them get within blaster range, that was good.

The lev-rails actually came about sixty feet from the tube station kiosk. The driver left the boat levitated, effectively blocking the line, while they ran to the kiosk. The first lev boat of troops landed just up the line and came running. Kessil carried him over her shoulder as they ran, he could use the other leg by now. The leg that was hit was still locked in agony.

In spite of being Centorins, who should be used to military people running thru the local square with blasters, everyone was screaming and running. It was the same reaction you would get if five theirops came running thru a square in the cities. Everyone had disappeared in seconds and the guys in the big nine-man boat that chased them opened fire as soon as they had any chance of being in range. The whole population ran screaming even farther away. They covered their driver while he dialed up a destination. It was just like a Centorin movie except the population had disappeared instead of standing by gawking and getting hit. These people were mainly Centorin, but most of them would have picked up the peace plague as well as the Instinct. The general might find it a lot harder to control even his own people than he anticipated.

The big boat exploded as soon as everyone was clear.

That brought all of them to a stop. They ducked for cover and looked around at the empty buildings. It was likely that the people in the residential floors were hiding in their bathrooms instead of running, but they weren't visible. These guys were now stuck here on foot. Their pocket eyes were still transmitting, the world knew where they were. No doubt someone in the lev-rail administration was still loyal to Karasis and caused that boat to self destruct.

The driver got off, Kessil jumped to the kiosk and keyed in their destination. The troops were staying just out of range, trying to work their way around them, but not wanting to be delayed by walls in the buildings. While they waited for the car, he was reminded once again of how like Centorin this was, except for the fact that the innocent had fled. He wondered if it was really like this on Centorin and the movies only showed bystanders standing around and getting shot because they were movie extras being paid.

The car came quickly, he jumped in one-legged and the thugs charged as the door was closing. They might have shorted out the kiosk, but the tubes themselves are shielded very well. At least the car was moving, accelerating out of Hardensburg and its taste of old Centorin. "Where are we going?" Dyoniss asked as the station fell out of sight.

"I figured we'd go meet up with Yashmi."

They would come in contact with the three largest lakes on the Etendur escarpment on that trip. They took the southern route up the mid basin escarpment, had breakfast in the inland delta, lunch in a little hill town on the west end of

the escarpment, and Noonmeal on the second floor above the dance band on the plaza on the westernmost of those lakes. They spent noonsleep in a shaftwood inn on that plaza, its balcony branches hung four stories above that water, where kayaks and flatboats were tied up. The airy bed was well shaded from the light. They had a great time on it in spite of his leg. He thanked her as well as he was able, the pain was just of a scabbed over burn by now and nothing compared to the joy of being with her.

But when it was over he lay awake listening to the laping of the waves rocking the boats moored below. This tree was full of charrasspas and they were loud. His head was full of the events in that barn and the stage, and at the tube station. If he got near sleep, he found himself seeing blaster bolts, rearing horses, a bloody ax and an exploding levrail car.

If he was to miss a sleep, it would always be Noonsleep. Kessil snuggled against him in spite of this being Noonsleep. It wasn't as hot or humid as down deeper in the basin, they were over a mile above the cities in elevation here, and some say Garibivlast is a winter week in these hills, not the end of autumn.

After he'd lain there about an hour, she stirred. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I can't sleep."

"Looks that way. Does it still hurt?"

"A little," he said.

"You see the images of the action as soon as you're half asleep don't you?"

"Do you? I thought you were asleep."

“I tried,” she said. “I get as close as that half state, then I see blaster bolts, especially the one that hit you. I’ve been doing pretty good at not twitching every time that plays over.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If you hadn’t done that, we could have had matching scars.”

“You would have probably got hit in the calf or ankle, not the upper arm.”

“Matching number,” she said. “I hope you understand now that when we encounter these kinds of problems, we should work as a team and not let Centorin cinema determine what our roles need to be.”

“You’re the action hero among us, you’ve proven that. Now I believe that story you told that woman and her son about the hacken pack.”

“You didn’t believe me?”

“Not absolutely completely, until you pricked that general in the jugular with that plains knife. Then I was sure.”

“Life ain’t easy out there,” she said.

They lay there and just held each other for long moments. It would do no good to say once again that the disturbing images held them. He wished he could think of some way to move the conversation to something that would sooth them. Talking of their life together would soothe him, but he wished he knew a good way to introduce the subject of sharing their lives.

Maybe from the pause, she sensed his roadblock and decided to nudge him on. “What are we going to do when we

get back?" she asked.

Was this the conversation he longed to have? He hoped she was asking more than about the next few days. "I don't care as long as we do it together," he said as honestly as he could.

"I'd like that," she said and put her arm over him, drew him close. He felt her gentle curves and it warmed him. He put his hand in her beautiful hair, he loved the curl and texture of it. "I'll be around," she said. "I know I'm not going to take Tarreck's place, but I'll find someplace close."

"Would you consider staying with me?" he asked. "I know we haven't known each other that long..." He didn't know how to finish that, didn't need to.

"The events we've just been thru together make it seem like the time before I knew you was a former life, and like you said, we've known each other almost a decade." She gave him an impish smile.

"Does that mean you will?"

"I'd be delighted to try it," she said. He pulled her up onto his chest a little more, kissed her soundly and long. It could have turned to more, but she drew back. "I'll need a little space of my own but I'm sure we can find that."

"You can use the guest cubby if you need to bring someone home."

"It's not that, I need somewhere I can spread out prints, study manuals, things like that. We need to discuss how Yashmi and I will get along in the garden. I won't need to bring anyone home. I'm not saying I won't take variety, but they have their own place or I can get a room. I usually just

go to the Blue Kite when I need that, ten penny doesn't kill me. And I'll be gone any time you need variety."

Talking about the space she would need made the possibility that she would share his life seem very real. It made him tingle like there was still some residual charge from the blaster bolt. He could scarcely believe his good fortune. "With you around I'd have to force myself to take enough to stay healthy."

"I probably would too if I didn't hate to be standoffish."

"No doubt many hunger for you," he said. How little of her could he get and still let her share his home? A third had seemed to be his limit in the past, he remembered breaking up with two women because he felt they were just using the house as a storage site for their bulky items.

"I tend to try and help out those who need it," she said.

"Always the heroine."

"As long as I'm not a martyr."

Maybe this was the time to tell her how terrifying it had been when she put herself in danger. "You could have been," he said, "back in that barn."

"I like to think I was of some help."

"You were, you were so capable I hope I was of some help to you. But what you don't understand is how much it scared me that you were in danger. I care about you so much that it physically affected me, it could have affected the mission."

"So now you know how I feel," she said.

He had to be objective. Though he met her at the Blue Kite, she wasn't a club girl. Though it had been centuries, she

was used to action, maybe more than he was. He couldn't let all the Centorin media he had seen dictate his thought patterns. She was not a precious resource to be protected, she was another soul in Karasis, a vigorous, capable, responsible, intelligent and resourceful teammate. How did he begin to make amends for underestimating her so badly?

"I guess we we're sort of like a team," she said, seeing that he was at a loss for words. She slid down off him and seemed to be ready to try and get back to sleep. He held her, but did not roll over onto his side.

"Thanks for being on my team," he said with wet eyes. "Thanks for sharing my life, or agreeing to try. I'm not eloquent enough to tell you how happy it makes me."

"So now you know how I feel," she said and cuddled a little closer to him.

After a few minutes she asked, "It still hurts doesn't it?"

"I guess I just want to be conscious for the pleasure of being with you."

"Me too," she said, "but I can feel the tension in you."

She knew him too well already, "What else hurts, besides the violence we were in, is that with all the vials that were spilled today, there are probably a thousand doses of the antidote still out there. That's still enough to cause enough fear to end Karasis."

"Karasis survived the Elves Energy Age, YingolNeerie's Starship Age and now Centorin's Stargate Age." From the news they'd seen, it was touch and go when the gate would be re-opened, if ever, and under what conditions. "Karasis

lived for centuries before the Instinct when we had only the kindness of our hearts to keep us from hurting each other. Even if the Instinct fails, I still have enough faith in you, humanity, in Karasis to face that fear. I'm not going to be like Kyonmeere and give up on Karasis. Like you had to jump in front of me, I would do for Karasis, and for you."

"But the fear?" he said. "You are strong and you've proven yourself, but we have both known others without your strength."

"We must be rational," she said, "one dose for every million people in Karasis is pretty good odds in our favor."

"It's going to have an effect," he said.

"Do you think you should find them all?"

"I think we should find them all."

"You and I?" she asked. "I'm not sure I'm up for that much adventure. Staying here for Noonsleep is the kind of adventure I'm up for. What went on in that barn is something I never want to face again."

"We, Karasis. We should all not stop until we've found them all."

"We don't know how many there are."

"So maybe when it's been a century since the last one turned up, we can conclude that they are gone."

"They will still turn up," she said. "In lesser and lesser numbers as the decades go by."

"And each will be harder to find."